

# Love For God And Earth: Ecospirituality In The Theologies Of Sallie Mcfague And Leonardo Boff

Rebecca A. Meier-Rao  
*Marquette University*

---

## Recommended Citation

Meier-Rao, Rebecca A., "Love For God And Earth: Ecospirituality In The Theologies Of Sallie Mcfague And Leonardo Boff" (2014).  
*Dissertations (2009 -)*. Paper 352.  
[http://epublications.marquette.edu/dissertations\\_mu/352](http://epublications.marquette.edu/dissertations_mu/352)

LOVE FOR GOD AND EARTH:  
ECOSPIRITUALITY IN THE THEOLOGIES OF  
SALLIE MCFAGUE AND LEONARDO BOFF

by

Rebecca A. Meier-Rao, B.A., M.A.

Dissertation submitted to the Faculty of the Graduate School,  
Marquette University,  
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for  
the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

Milwaukee, Wisconsin

May 2014

ABSTRACT  
LOVE FOR GOD AND EARTH:  
ECOSPIRITUALITY IN THE THEOLOGIES OF  
SALLIE MCFAGUE AND LEONARDO BOFF

Rebecca A. Meier-Rao

Marquette University, 2013

This dissertation examines the theologies of North American Ecofeminist Sallie McFague and Latin American liberation theologian Leonardo Boff in order to answer the question – What are the features of a Christian spirituality capable of helping people to clear vision, transformation and hope in this time of socio-ecological crisis? In the sixth chapter I also briefly engage the work of Carmelite contemplative Constance FitzGerald, as she both reinforces and deepens the theologians’ answer to the above question.

The dissertation begins with a short explanation of the interlocking ecological and social crises, and offers a basic understanding of Christian spirituality as powerfully transformative of human assumptions and actions in the world. In Chapter One I argue that a study of McFague’s metaphorical theology indicates that authentic Christian spirituality must challenge false social constructions. Investigating McFague’s model of the world as God’s body, Chapter Two then illustrates how to live by a spirituality that loves God while caring deeply for the needs of the world. In Chapters Three and Four I show that an examination of Boff’s theological corpus elucidates how people can and must live in the experience of God through their every experience of the world. In this way, his theology explicates why and how God must be experienced for individual and collective fulfillment, as well as for producing a marked global and historical transformation.

After summarizing and evaluating, in chapter five, the theologians’ contributions to contemporary Christian spirituality, chapter six briefly explores FitzGerald’s call to a contemplative yielding to God in this time of crisis so that God’s own vision and imagination may transform human consciousness. Thus, with all three authors I indicate that Christian spirituality is capable of producing clear vision, transformation and hope inasmuch as (1) it challenges false social constructions; (2) orients people to loving God while caring for the wellbeing of the world; (3) shows them how to experience God’s presence in their lives and understands the power of this experience to transform the course of history; and, most radically, (4) teaches people to yield to God so that God’s own vision for the future may arise in human consciousness. Such a Christian spirituality is well equipped for birthing a new humanity through the present socio-ecological crisis.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Rebecca A. Meier-Rao

I would like to thank my dissertation director, Fr. Bryan Massingale, for his wise counsel and incredible support through the arduous process of writing my dissertation. I would also like to thank the members of my board, Dr. Danielle Nussberger, Dr. Jame Schaefer and Fr. Philip Rossi, for their work helping me shape and refine this project, and the Marquette University Theology Department for all the resources they provided me with to help me complete this process. Last but not least, I would like to thank all my family and friends, especially my husband Sunil, our parents Richard and Helen Meier and Ramachandra and Diana Rao, our siblings Jen and Andy, Richard and Ina, Carlos, Arun and Lidka, and my dear friends Kate, Gretchen, Asha, Nicholas and Courtney, for their ongoing patience, love and care through this time of research and writing. I could not have completed this project without all of you.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS .....	i
INTRODUCTION .....	1
A. The Interlocking Crisis .....	2
(i) Ecological Crisis .....	2
(ii) Social Crisis .....	4
(iii) Interlocking Crisis .....	6
(iv) Conclusion .....	8
B. Spirituality .....	9
(i) Spirituality as Basic to Human Existence .....	10
(ii) Spirituality as Directed to God .....	12
(iii) Spirituality as Experiential .....	14
(iv) Conclusion .....	16
C. McFague, Boff and FitzGerald .....	17
D. Dissertation Procedure .....	21
CHAPTER 1: MCFAGUE'S METAPHORICAL THEOLOGY .....	23
A. Metaphorical Theology .....	25
(i) Definition of Metaphor .....	27
(ii) Definition of Model .....	30
(iii) Religious Language As Always Metaphorical .....	33
(iv) Conclusion .....	35
B. Methodological and Theological Development .....	37
(i) Hermeneutical Stage .....	38

(ii)	Heuristic Stage .....	40
(iii)	Constructivist Stage .....	44
	a. Interconnectedness of Social and Ecological Problems .....	45
	b. The Common Creation Story .....	46
	c. Theology of Nature .....	48
	d. Functionality .....	51
(iv)	Conclusion .....	52
C.	An (Intentional) Ambiguity in McFague’s Theology .....	55
(i)	The Impossibility of Making Ontological Statements About Reality .....	56
(ii)	Reality as Something We Create (Metaphor as Redescription) ...	59
(iii)	McFague’s “Slight” Ontological Claims .....	62
	a. “Shy” or “Slight” Ontological Claims .....	62
	b. Bold Language .....	64
(iv)	Conclusion .....	69
D.	Chapter Summary and Assessment .....	70
(i)	Summary .....	71
(ii)	Assessment and Conclusion .....	73
CHAPTER 2: MCFAGUE’S BODY SPIRITUALITY .....		77
A.	Body Theology .....	79
(i)	Preliminary Observations .....	80
(ii)	Anthropology .....	81
	a. Sin .....	84
	b. Salvation .....	85

c.	Summary .....	85
(iii)	God and The Relationship Between God and Creation .....	86
a.	The Body Model as Organic .....	87
b.	The Body Model as Agential .....	89
c.	Summary .....	93
(iv)	Christology .....	94
a.	Christ as Paradigmatic, Not Unique .....	95
b.	The Shape of God's Body (Christology Relativized) .....	97
c.	The Scope of God's Body (Christology Maximized) .....	99
d.	Summary .....	99
(v)	Conclusion .....	100
B.	Body Meditation .....	102
(i)	McFague's Explanation of the Body Meditation .....	103
a.	Panentheistic Meditation .....	103
b.	Mediated Meditation .....	104
c.	Meditation Based on Metaphor .....	106
(ii)	The Impact of the Body Meditation on McFague .....	108
(iii)	Conclusion .....	114
C.	Body Spirituality .....	115
(i)	Nature Spirituality .....	117
a.	Pay Attention to the Particular Body Before You .....	120
b.	Subject-Subjects Model .....	122
c.	Loving Eye (Touch as the Way to Know) .....	124

d.	Sacramental and Prophetic .....	126
(1)	“Catholic” Sacramentality .....	126
(2)	“Protestant” Prophetic .....	128
e.	Summary .....	130
(ii)	Spirituality of Restraint .....	131
a.	Self-Sacrifice .....	133
b.	Abundant Life .....	136
c.	Exuberance in God’s Body .....	139
d.	Summary .....	141
(iii)	Conclusion .....	142
D.	Chapter Summary and Assessment .....	143
(i)	Summary .....	144
(ii)	Assessment and Conclusion .....	146
CHAPTER 3: BOFF’S SPIRITUAL THEOLOGY .....		148
A.	The Evolution of Boff’s Thought .....	149
(i)	Liberal Christian Humanism .....	152
(ii)	Liberation Theology .....	156
a.	Marx and St. Francis .....	159
b.	First Phase .....	161
c.	Second Phase .....	164
d.	Third Phase .....	168
e.	Summary .....	169
(iii)	Ecological Theology .....	169



(iv)	Conclusion .....	174
B.	The Spirituality that Unifies Boff's Theology .....	175
(i)	Experience .....	176
a.	The God Experienced Is a God of Mystery .....	179
b.	The Experience of God is an Everyday Affair .....	180
c.	It is Through Experience That God Becomes Palpable in History .....	181
(ii)	Transparence .....	183
(iii)	Sacramentality .....	185
a.	Sacramentality Perceived Through Emotion and Proximity .....	187
b.	Sacramentality as Horizontal and Vertical .....	188
c.	Sacramentality Requires Poverty .....	190
(iv)	Conclusion .....	193
C.	Anthropology in Boff's Spirituality .....	194
(i)	Knot of Relations .....	195
(ii)	Open-Ended .....	197
a.	Transcendence .....	197
b.	Divinization .....	198
c.	Evolution .....	199
(iii)	Dialectical .....	200
(iv)	Conclusion .....	204
D.	Chapter Summary and Assessment .....	206
(i)	Summary .....	206

(ii)	Assessment .....	208
(iii)	Conclusion .....	208
CHAPTER 4: BOFF'S LIBERATION AND ECOLOGICAL SPIRITUALITIES .....		210
A.	Liberation Theology and Spirituality .....	211
(i)	Latin American Liberation Theology .....	212
(ii)	Liberation Spirituality .....	216
a.	The Poor as Sacraments of God's Self-Revelation .....	217
b.	Contemplativus In Liberationis .....	219
(iii)	Conclusion .....	223
B.	Ecological Theology .....	224
(i)	Ecology .....	226
a.	Environmental Ecology .....	227
b.	Social Ecology .....	228
c.	Mental Ecology .....	229
d.	Integral Ecology .....	231
e.	Ecology and Spirituality .....	233
f.	Summary .....	235
(ii)	The New Cosmology .....	236
a.	The New Cosmology and the Earth .....	237
b.	The New Cosmology and Humans .....	239
c.	Summary .....	241
(iii)	The Paradigm Shift .....	242
a.	Paradigm of Modernity in Crisis .....	244

b. The New Paradigm .....	248
(1) The New Cosmology .....	249
(2) Globalization .....	250
(3) Ecologico-Social Democracy .....	252
c. Summary .....	253
(iv) Conclusion .....	255
C. Ecological Spirituality .....	256
(i) Spirituality as That Which Re-Connects .....	256
a. Humans with their Interior .....	256
b. Humans with the World .....	258
c. Humans with their Inner Ethic .....	259
d. Summary .....	261
(ii) Religion as the Vehicle for Spirituality .....	262
(iii) The Poor as Guides .....	267
(iv) Conclusion .....	268
D. Chapter Summary and Assessment .....	269
(i) Summary .....	270
(ii) Assessment and Conclusion .....	272
CHAPTER 5: MCFAGUE AND BOFF .....	274
A. Crisis and Spirituality Today .....	274
B. Sallie McFague .....	276
C. Leonardo Boff .....	281
D. Comparison and Contrast .....	286

(i) Similarities .....	286
(ii) Differences .....	289
E. Further Questions .....	294
CHAPTER 6: FITZGERALD AND THE CONTEMPLATIVE YIELDING TO GOD .....	297
A. The Impasse of Dark Night .....	300
B. Societal Impasse .....	302
C. Contemplation .....	304
D. Societal Contemplation .....	306
E. Assessment .....	308
CONCLUSION .....	311
A. Process .....	311
B. Contributions .....	315
C. Future Questions .....	316
BIBLIOGRAPHY .....	319

## INTRODUCTION

This dissertation begins with the assumption that we are at a point of crisis on this Earth.<sup>1</sup> This crisis is composed of two interlocking crises: an ecological one and a social one, both which originate from human action and culminate in extraordinary injustice. As difficult as this situation may seem, however, my dissertation proceeds on the faith that this moment of crisis is not only a sobering warning of what could happen if we persist as we have done, but is most especially a moment of profound opportunity to proceed in an entirely different way. By definition, a crisis is a decisive moment, “an unstable or crucial time or state of affairs in which a decisive change is impending.”<sup>2</sup> A decisive change is possible. The basic argument of my dissertation is that a very important source for enacting this change, or for opening the possibility of humans living differently on the earth, is a spirituality that refuses to flee from the crisis at hand.

In part A of this chapter I briefly examine the interlocking ecological and social crises, along with the system of material consumption that has enticed people throughout the globe to desire and live (often blindly) in ways that are neither beneficial for the Earth nor for the majority of the human population. Arguing that spirituality is a key source of clear vision and transformation in this time of crisis, and looking at the contribution of Christian spirituality in particular, in part B I explain three starting premises about Christian spirituality for this time. These premises are, first, that in its most basic sense, spirituality is that innate human drive to seek more and more; second, that in order for it to be healthy and life-giving, spirituality must be directed to God who can fulfill us

---

<sup>1</sup> In this dissertation I capitalize the word Earth whenever possible. The only time I do not capitalize it is when quoting and summarizing Sallie McFague’s or Constance FitzGerald’s work, since neither of them tend to capitalize the word.

<sup>2</sup> See <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/crisis>.

(though not at the neglect of the world); and third, that the movement toward fullness in God is experiential, that is, it is lived in the ongoing experience of communion with God in the world. I indicate that the primary interlocutors of my dissertation abide by these three premises and, though in different ways and to different degrees, expound on them in their articulations of Christian spirituality.

In part C, then, I introduce North American Ecofeminist Sallie McFague and Brazilian liberation theologian Leonardo Boff, the two authors whose work I examine at length in my dissertation in order to further answer the question: What are the features of a Christian spirituality capable of helping people to clear vision, transformation and hope in this time of socio-ecological crisis? I also introduce North American Carmelite Constance FitzGerald, whose work I briefly engage in chapter six to answer the same question from a Christian contemplative perspective. I end my introductory chapter with an explanation of the dissertation's procedure as it engages McFague and Boff, and to a lesser degree FitzGerald, on the question of Christian spirituality in this time of crisis.

## **A. The Interlocking Crisis**

### **(i) Ecological Crisis**

Leonardo Boff and Mark Hathaway write that we have already destroyed nearly half of the Earth's great forests (the lungs of our planet), created a gigantic hole in the ozone layer, seriously undermined the fertility of the soil to such an extent that 65 percent of once-arable land is now lost, and, among many other human-caused problems, we destroyed thousands of plant and animal species. They write, moreover, that we are on the path to destroy many more species in the years to come (20 to 50 percent in the next

thirty years).<sup>3</sup> Citing the finding of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), Sallie McFague writes that greenhouse gases (carbon dioxide, methane, and nitrous oxide) have increased substantially since the Industrial Revolution, that carbon dioxide in the earth's atmosphere – caused mainly by our use of fossil fuels – “exceeds by far the natural carbon range” of the last 650,000 years, and that as a consequence, hotter temperatures and rises in sea levels will “continue for centuries,” regardless of how much we reduce our carbon emissions now. The IPCC, which McFague says is conservative in its estimates (offering the “lowest common denominator science”), projects a possible temperature rise of up to 6°C by 2100, the effects of which we will see, and are in fact already seeing, in the melting of Arctic ice, the loss of coastlines, changing weather patterns and increasing natural disasters.<sup>4</sup>

McFague calls climate change *the* issue of the twenty-first century. She writes: “It is not one issue among many, but, like the canary in the mine, it is warning us that the way we are living on our planet is causing us to head for disaster. We must change.”<sup>5</sup> Boff points out that “[w]e have reached a point in our history where we perceive the possibility of self-destruction. Our capacity to intervene in nature over the past few

---

<sup>3</sup> Mark Hathaway and Leonardo Boff, *The Tao of Liberation: Exploring the Ecology of Transformation* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2009), 5-6. The recently published *Sustainable World Sourcebook*, compiled by the Sustainable World Coalition (Hiawatha: J&A Printing, Inc., 2010), is even more concrete: 60% of the ozone layer has been lost in the last 50 years; 70% of the world's original forests have been eliminated; 30% of the world's arable land has been lost in the last 40 years alone; 90% of large fish are gone from the ocean. “In short, we are using 30% more of nature than can regenerate, and, with our increased production of Greenhouse gases and our use (and careless disposal) of chemical pollutants, we are further destroying the Earth” (2).

<sup>4</sup> Sallie McFague, *A New Climate for Theology: God, World, and Global Warming* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2008), 10-12.

<sup>5</sup> McFague, *A New Climate for Theology*, 15.

decades has been so profound that it has disequibrated the balance of the eco-system itself.” Like McFague, he concludes: “We either change or die.”<sup>6</sup>

## (ii) Social Crisis

Moreover, with the ecological crisis there is the aggravation of a more longstanding problem: the hugely unjust situation of two-thirds of humanity. Ivan Petrella has clearly illustrated that it is no coincidence that, “[t]he 20% of the world’s population that resides in the affluent Northern hemisphere receives 60% of the world’s income, engages in 80% of the world’s trade, four-fifths of the world’s health spending and consumes 86% of the world’s goods.”<sup>7</sup> He shows, for example, how world economic organizations such as the WTO ensure that the wealthiest nations remain so at the expense of poor or “developing” ones. As a consequence, the economic disparity among nations and peoples is severe.<sup>8</sup>

Not only is the income gap large and growing between nations, but this is also the case *within* wealthy nations such as the United States. Petrella notes, for example, that the total pay of the top 100 CEOs in this country went up from 39 times the average worker’s salary in 1970, to more than 1,000 times that amount in 2004. From 1990 to 2002 the uppermost 0.01% of income earners (around 14,000 households) made \$18,000 for every dollar made by the bottom 90% (between 1950 and 1970 this amount was

---

<sup>6</sup> Leonardo Boff, “The Poor, the New Cosmology and Liberation,” trans. C. Brisset and Berma Klein Goldewijk, in *Religion, International Relations and Development Cooperation*, ed. Berma Klein Goldewijk (Wageningen: Wageningen Academic Publishers, 2007), 115, 117.

<sup>7</sup> Ivan Petrella, *Beyond Liberation Theology: A Polemic* (London: SCM Press, 2008), 41.

<sup>8</sup> Petrella writes: “It would take \$6 billion of additional yearly investment to ensure basic education in all developing countries; \$8 billion a year are spent on cosmetics in the United States. It would take \$9 billion to insure clean water and sanitation for all; \$11 billion are spent on ice cream in Europe. It would take \$13 billion to guarantee basic health care and nutrition for every person in the developing world; \$17 billion are spent on pet food in Europe and the United States combined” (*Beyond Liberation Theology*, 44).



\$162).<sup>9</sup> The latest Census results show that U.S. income inequality is now at its highest level since it began tracking household income in 1967,<sup>10</sup> and that poverty has been increasing especially among people of color and single mother-led families.<sup>11</sup>

Jon Sobrino writes that “[o]ne hundred thousand people die of hunger, or its immediate consequences, every day. A child aged under two dies every seven seconds, and every four minutes another goes blind for lack of Vitamin A.”<sup>12</sup> The *Sustainable World Sourcebook* asserts that “[i]f you have food in a refrigerator, clothes in your closet, a bed to sleep in, and a roof over your head, you are better off, materially, than 75% of people on this planet.”<sup>13</sup> Over two-thirds of the human world population suffers under the yoke of dehumanizing poverty while the wealthiest grow wealthier. As Gustavo Gutiérrez has pointed out, there can be no real peace where such disparity exists, or where such disparity in fact increases.<sup>14</sup>

---

<sup>9</sup> Thus, Petrella says: “It’s not surprising, therefore, that the United States’ GINI coefficient – a simple measure economists use to express inequality – is approaching that of Latin America, the most unequal region of the world. Indeed, income inequality in the United States, the proportion of the richest tenth to the poorest tenth, is greater than income inequality in India. This is a nation literally pulling apart” (*Beyond Liberation Theology*, 58-59).

<sup>10</sup> “Income Gap Between Rich, Poor the Widest Ever,” CBS News (Sept. 28, 2010). The article goes on to say that the U.S. “also has the greatest disparity among Western industrialized nations.” See [www.cbsnews.com/stories/2010/09/28/national/main6907321.shtml](http://www.cbsnews.com/stories/2010/09/28/national/main6907321.shtml).

<sup>11</sup> In 2007 Petrella wrote that in the United States “African Americans are almost three times as likely to live in poverty as whites and almost one million black children live in extreme poverty” (*Beyond Liberation Theology*, 59). Furthermore, “[p]overty rates for Hispanic/Latino(as) are almost twice the national average at 21.9% and child poverty rates are 10 percentage points above the national average – 27.8% versus 16.6%” (Ibid., 61-62). He explained that gender comes into play because poverty is prevalent among single mother-led families, particularly if they are Hispanic or African American (Ibid., 64). The latest Census report shows that poverty rates have only increased in the U.S. along racial lines: “Though the poverty rate increased for all ethnic groups, the increase was greatest among Blacks” (Christian Morrow, “Census Shows Lingering Racial Income Gap,” *Black Voice News* (Monday, 11 Oct., 2010) – see [www.blackvoicenews.com/news/news-wire/45111-census-shows-lingering-racial-income-gap.html](http://www.blackvoicenews.com/news/news-wire/45111-census-shows-lingering-racial-income-gap.html)).

<sup>12</sup> Jon Sobrino, *No Salvation outside of the Poor: Prophetic-Utopian Essays* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2007), 37; as quoted in Bryan Massingale, “The Scandal of Poverty; ‘Cultured Indifference’ and the Option for the Poor Post-Katrina,” *Journal of Religion and Society* Supplement Series 4 (2008): 56.

<sup>13</sup> *Sustainable World Sourcebook*, 2.

<sup>14</sup> Gutiérrez made this point in a lecture series which I attended, entitled “Option for the Poor, Spirituality and Biblical Foundations,” July 11-15, 2005, at Notre Dame University, IN.

### (iii) Interlocking Crises

McFague and Boff indicate that as the ecological crisis worsens, it is the poor of the Earth who are bound to suffer its greatest consequences. “As more of the earth becomes desert, water scarcer, air more polluted, food less plentiful,” McFague writes, “the lines between the ‘haves’ and ‘have nots’ will become even more sharply drawn.”<sup>15</sup> Under this situation, the economic gap between people and nations can only increase further. To make matters worse, the ecological crisis is already affecting people along class, race, and gender lines to such an extent that, “a third-world woman of color (as well as her first-world sister in the ghettos of major cities) is the most impacted person on the planet.”<sup>16</sup> Therefore, Boff writes that the two major questions that must occupy the minds and hearts of humankind from now on are: “what is the destiny and future of planet Earth if the logic of pillage to which the present type of development and consumption have accustomed us continues? What hope is there for the poor two-thirds of humankind?”<sup>17</sup>

We are at a point of crisis; we cannot continue as we have done. Ecologically speaking, not only is it impossible for one-third of the world’s population to continue in its trajectory of consumption and exploitation without serious consequence to the Earth (we already use 30% more of nature than can regenerate), but if the other two-thirds of the population should find the means to live as the prosperous one-third has done, it

---

<sup>15</sup> Sallie McFague, *The Body of God: An Ecological Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), 4. See also McFague, *A New Climate for Theology*, 21.

<sup>16</sup> McFague, *The Body of God*, 4. See also Shamara Shantu Riley, “Ecology is a Sistah’s Issue Too: The Politics of Emergent Afrocentric Ecowomanism,” in *This Sacred Earth: Religion, Nature, Environment*, ed. Roger S. Gottlieb (New York: Routledge, 2004), 412-427; and Aruna Gnanadason, *Listen to the Women! Listen to the Earth!* (Geneva: WCC Publications, 2005), 34-37.

<sup>17</sup> Leonardo Boff, *Cry of the Earth; Cry of the Poor*, trans. Phillip Berryman (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1997), 113. Note that Boff has chosen to capitalize the word Earth in his ecological theology.

would take at least three planet Earths to sustain us all.<sup>18</sup> Socially speaking, then, we have created a situation in which it would be ecologically catastrophic for the other two-thirds of the world's population to rise out of poverty.

The problem is further accentuated by the fact that the paradigm of consumption, which is grounded in objectifying dualisms that enable the exploitation of nature and persons, has now found wide appeal throughout the world. That is, not only does the current capitalistic process of accumulation produce “deep social and ecological problems,” but at the same time “it fascinate[s] and trap[s] people the world around.”<sup>19</sup> Patrick Curry writes that the “cult of material consumption, now spread by the billion-dollar advertising and entertainment media industries worldwide,” has resulted in some bitter ironies. He explains:

It seems universally true that after a certain level of income, further increases do not lead to any more happiness. What does create discontent is the gap between the relatively poor and the rich, as perceived by the former. As a result of neo-liberal economic globalization, that is exactly what is happening: the income gap between the wealthy (who are getting richer) and the poor (who are getting poorer) is steadily increasing too. So the world is dividing into the self-indulgent wealthy, who can afford to consume irresponsibly, and do, and those who are unhappy because they would like to – and who, we are driven to hope, will not be able to.<sup>20</sup>

---

<sup>18</sup> *World Sourcebook*, 2. If everyone lived as Americans do, it would in fact take five planet Earths; as Europeans do, it would take three. See also Patrick Curry, *Ecological Ethic: An Introduction* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2006), 15.

<sup>19</sup> Jung Mo Sung, “Theology, Spirituality and the Market,” In *Another Possible World*, ed. Marcella Althaus Reid, Ivan Petrella and Luiz Carlos Susin (London: SCM Press, 2007), 71. To illustrate this fascination, Sung gives the example of “the Bashudara City Shopping Centre, in Bangladesh, one of the poorest countries in the world. This gigantic and luxurious shopping centre, which cost over 80 million dollars to build and is presented as one of the best of South Asia, is a sign of the fascination that Western consumerism exercises in a poor country with totally different traditions. It is also a sign of the increase in the gap between rich and poor. Meanwhile this shopping centre is a matter of pride for the millions of poor people who visit it without being able to buy anything. ‘Abdus Samad, a 70 year old illiterate farmer, travelled from far to visit the *shopping centre*. Looking up to the great crystal dome at the entrance is for him proof of how much Bangladesh has improved” (70-71). Here Sung is quoting David Rohde, “A Lot of Cash in a Very Poor Nation: Welcome to the Mall,” *The New York Times* (19 July), 2005. (The italics are original to the text).

<sup>20</sup> Curry, *Ecological Ethics*, 15.

The consumerist model is ecologically unsustainable and it is socially unjust. It may still be effective in pacifying the poor majority with the promise that if they can only work hard enough and efficiently enough, they may some day live the “American dream.” But as the gap between rich and poor increases, and as the ecological consequences (to the Earth and its life-systems) of living the “American lifestyle” becomes more apparent, the dream of economic growth and material abundance has begun to look more like a nightmare of injustice. Indeed, Boff writes that “the dream of unlimited growth has brought about the underdevelopment of two-thirds of humankind, and our delight in optimally using the Earth’s resources has led to the exhaustion of vital systems and to the breakdown of environmental balance.”<sup>21</sup> Thus, they agree, we cannot continue this way.

#### **(iv) Conclusion**

The Earth is now pushed to its limits by one-third of the human population while the other two-thirds is subjugated to dehumanizing poverty. Yet even as the socio-ecological crisis comes to a head, most people continue to live by (if they are wealthy) and desire (the only thing available to the majority of the human population) a system of never-ending consumption and economic growth that absolutely requires the exploitation of nature and persons.

Bolstered by an often blind privileging of economic growth over two-thirds of the human population and the Earth with its many life forms, the intrinsic dignity of God’s creation is continuously sacrificed for the sake of profit and consumption. Marred in a strong assumed dualism which, simply expressed, “divides reality into two poles: one to

---

<sup>21</sup> Boff, *Cry of the Earth*, 8.

be dominated by the other,”<sup>22</sup> inequalities are allowed to persist as though no other option were available. The privileging of economic growth and the dualistic conceptions of the world are so deeply held, and are often so blindly assumed, that for many people, living differently on this Earth appears like little more than a wishful dream.

However, is the life of consumption and unlimited growth not also a dream (or a nightmare) that “has led to the exhaustion of vital systems and to the breakdown of environmental balance”? How realistic is a dream that adamantly refuses to recognize the limits of this organic body we call Earth? How desirable is this dream that insists on dividing and codifying all things until only a few can thrive? And if this dream is neither realistic nor desirable, how will people wake up to a different way of being on this Earth? How will we begin to see the assumptions that have blindly guided us to this moment of crisis, to shift our imagination so that new possibilities for the future may arise, and from where will we find the strength for the transformation this crisis necessitates?

In this dissertation I point to spirituality as a key source for bringing people to transformation, clear vision and hope in this time of socio-ecological crisis. What is spirituality? What makes authentic spirituality such a powerful source for transformation? To these matters we now turn.

## **B. Spirituality**

The term “spirituality” is notoriously difficult to define. Indeed, Bernard McGinn has written that “spirituality is one of those terms where exploration will never yield a

---

<sup>22</sup> George K. Zachariah, “Towards a Theology of Life: Ecological Perspectives in Latin American Liberation Theology with Special Reference to the Theology of Leonardo Boff,” *Theologies and Cultures* 4 no. 1 (2007): 109.

clear and universally acceptable definition.”<sup>23</sup> Nonetheless, in the pages ahead I identify three interlocking premises that authors of Christian spirituality tend to agree upon.

These premises are (a) that spirituality is, in the most basic sense, a fundamental human drive, (b) that spirituality is most fulfilling when directed to God (though not at the neglect of the world), and (c) that spirituality is *experiential*; it involves a lived experience of communion with God. With these three premises in mind, I argue that Christian spirituality, which is directed to God and lived in the ongoing experience of communion with God, is powerfully transformative of the human person.

### **(i) Spirituality as Basic to Human Existence**

First, then, spirituality is a basic phenomenon of human life, so much so that it can be said that everyone lives by a form of spirituality. Such authors as Ronald Rolheiser, Elizabeth Johnson and Wendy Wright have argued along these lines. Describing spirituality in terms of desire, Rolheiser has written that every human being is born with a deep desire, an “unquenchable fire” that lies in the very marrow of our bones; he holds that what people do with this desire, this “eros,” is their spirituality.<sup>24</sup> Describing spirituality in terms of the human tendency to ever question, love, and hope, which she thinks indicates that we have an infinite capacity for truth, love, and life, Johnson concludes that being human means that we “are not closed-off, limited reality, but open out into depth that goes all the way down to the infinite itself.”<sup>25</sup> Whether it is because of our inbuilt desire or because of our tendency to question, love, and hope,

---

<sup>23</sup> Bernard McGinn, “The Letter and the Spirit: Spirituality as an Academic Discipline,” in *Minding the Spirit: The Study of Christian Spirituality*, ed. Elizabeth Dreyer and Mark S. Burrows (Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 2004), 34-35.

<sup>24</sup> Ronald Rolheiser, *The Holy Longing: The Search for a Christian Spirituality* (New York: Doubleday, 1999), 3-7.

<sup>25</sup> Elizabeth Johnson, *Consider Jesus: Waves of Renewal in Christology* (New York, Crossroad, 2004), 24.

Wright explains that these conceptions of spirituality point to “the fact that human beings possess a restless spirit that urges them forward to fullness and potentiality.”<sup>26</sup> Human beings are so created that they cannot help but pursue, in one way or another, the satiation of their restless spirit. This pursuit is spirituality.

This is not to say that all spiritual pursuits are healthy or even desirable. For example, Jung Mo Sung has argued that people pursue material consumption so ardently today that it has become, for many, the *de facto* spirituality by which they live. He describes it as a “spirituality in which the human being seeks to satisfy its thirst for being more and more human through a process of never-ending consumption.”<sup>27</sup> Thus, the pursuit for the infinite self has become compromised by the pursuit of *stuff*.<sup>28</sup>

Arguing along these lines, McFague has written that the consumerism model in fact functions as a religion, “not only *a* religion, but surely one of the most successful.” It is so successful that it has actually become “invisible” to most people in that it “is generally not considered to be *one* way to live, but the *only* way.”<sup>29</sup> Agreeing with McFague, Boff states that this consumerist religion is especially problematic because it is idolatrous – it “gives origin to gestures and attitudes that human beings have until now

---

<sup>26</sup> Wendy M. Wright, *The Essential Spirituality Handbook* (Liguori: Liguori Publications, 2009), 9. This is the definition of what Wright calls the anthropological side of spirituality.

<sup>27</sup> Sung, “Spirituality and the Market,” 77.

<sup>28</sup> I am referring here of Annie Leonard’s short but poignant film, “The Story of Stuff,” which covers the life of the things we continuously buy, from extraction of the materials for their production, to their disposal after they have been used. See <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9GorqroiqqM>.

<sup>29</sup> McFague, *Life Abundant*, 84. All italics in quotes correspond to the original text.

Sung agrees that consumerism today functions as a religion. He says it is a religion replete with a god (the market economic system), places of worship (malls, media), a call to faith (“that the market is the source of human freedom”), an understanding of salvation (that the value of things, whether bananas or human beings, will properly be determined by the market), an ethic (if you want to help the poor, pursue your self-interest and let the market take care of the rest), a conception of sin (being poor), and, as we have seen, a spirituality (“Spirituality and the Market,” 71-78).

reserved only for the Divine and for no other creature”<sup>30</sup> – and because it demands sacrificial victims – two-thirds of humanity and the wellbeing of the Earth with its many life forms.<sup>31</sup> Moreover, speaking in terms of spirituality, he writes that one of the most grievous consequences of material consumption (which he says is bolstered by a constant bombardment of advertisement and entertainment media “drugs”) is that it leads people to a “pseudo-transcendence.”<sup>32</sup> It feeds them the illusion that their “infinite desire” can be satisfied with “finite objects.”<sup>33</sup> Consequently, the consumerist drive “powerfully stimulates the human being’s need to have and to subsist, and thwarts more basic needs such as the need to be and to grow.”<sup>34</sup>

With the first premise, then, I indicate that spirituality, as the urge to move toward fullness and potentiality, is always present in human life. However, spirituality is not always directed toward ends that can fulfill us, nor does it necessarily lead to life-giving results. If we all must and do live by a form of spirituality, then, we should in the very least be vigilant lest we blindly fall into a spiritual path that will not bring forth life.

## **(ii) Spirituality as Directed to God**

The second premise in this dissertation about spirituality is that in order for it to be healthy or life-giving, the human spiritual drive must be fundamentally directed to that Mystery which in the Christian tradition we call God. Human beings have an unquenchable desire and a capacity for the infinite precisely so that we may seek God.

As Johnson writes, “we are so made that we are dynamically structured toward the

---

<sup>30</sup> “A fetichização da mercadoria dá origem a gestos e a atitudes que o ser humano até hoje só reservava à Divinidade e a nenhuma outra criatura. Por isso o mercado é idolátrico” (Leonardo Boff, *Ética da vida* (Brasília: Letraviva, 1999), 87).

<sup>31</sup> See Leonardo Boff, *A voz do arco-íris* (Brasília: Letraviva, 2000), 56.

<sup>32</sup> See Leonardo Boff, *Tempo de transcendência* (Rio de Janeiro: Sextante, 2000), 54.

<sup>33</sup> Boff, *Tempo de transcendência*, 61.

<sup>34</sup> Boff, *Cry of the Earth*, 138.



infinite and will only be satisfied by the infinite God.”<sup>35</sup> Therefore, spirituality means “respond[ing] throughout one’s life ever more totally to a God who gives himself unconditionally as love and as the final destiny of every person.”<sup>36</sup>

That spirituality is directed to the God who can fulfill us does not mean, however, that the world is neglected in the process. Thus, Boff writes that “[t]he conventional spirituality of the churches and of most historic religions” has often gone wrong in their tendency to “leave the universe, nature, and daily life outside the realm of spiritual existence.”<sup>37</sup> Likewise, McFague argues that by overstating the distinction between God and creation, Christian spirituality has tended toward “an understanding of salvation as the escape of individuals to the spiritual world, [which] justifies lack of attention to the flourishing of this world.” In the process, “creation itself, that is, ‘the neighborhood,’ the lowly, concrete, particular – and fascinating, wonderful – details of physical reality” become unimportant and neglected.<sup>38</sup> Both theologians express the conviction that such a dualistic conception of spirituality only contributes to dualisms between humans, and between humans and nature, which as we saw in part A, has resulted in the privileging of the few and the exploitation of the rest.

Therefore, for Boff and McFague, to be directed to God does not mean to bypass creation. Rather, there is the conviction and the hope that movement to God is a movement toward a more loving and prophetic stance with respect to the world. With my second premise, then, I indicate that in order for it to be life-giving, spirituality must be

---

<sup>35</sup> Johnson, *Consider Jesus*, 24. This (the God part) is what Wendy Wright calls the theological side of spirituality (see *The Essential Spirituality Handbook*, 4-6).

<sup>36</sup> Harvey Egan, *Christian Mysticism: The Future of a Tradition* (New York: Pueblo Publishing Company, 1984), 8.

<sup>37</sup> Boff, *Cry of the Earth*, 189.

<sup>38</sup> Sallie McFague, “Intimate Creation; God’s Body, Our Home,” *Christian Century* 119 no. 6 (Mr. 13-20, 2002): 37-38.

directed to God who is the final destiny of every person. Even where withdrawal for contemplation or meditation is needed, however, such a spirituality is incapable of neglecting the world because God does not neglect it. Thus, in directing our attention to the presence of God, we come to know God's "presence in others, in the social and natural world."<sup>39</sup>

### **(iii) Spirituality as Experiential**

The third premise concerning Christian spirituality is that it is experiential; it has to do with the actual experience of God. To say that spirituality is experiential means, as Sandra Schneiders has pointed out, "that spirituality is not an abstract idea, a theory, an ideology, or a movement of some kind. It is a personal lived reality."<sup>40</sup> Thus she argues, for example, that the spirituality from which the Gospel of John originates is "a particular *lived experience* of God in the risen Jesus through his gift of the Spirit/Paraclete within the believing community."<sup>41</sup> Similarly, Evelyn Underhill writes that the Christian mystic "is one for whom God and Christ are not merely objects of belief, but living facts experimentally known at first-hand; and mysticism for him becomes, in so far as he responds to its demands, a life based on this conscious communion with God."<sup>42</sup> Spirituality as experiential, then, is a life based on conscious communion with God; it is not accidental or episodic, but rather "an ongoing and coherent approach to life as a

---

<sup>39</sup> Mario I. Aguilar, *Contemplating God, Changing the World* (London: SPCK, 2008), ix.

<sup>40</sup> Sandra Schneiders, "Religion vs. Spirituality: A Contemporary Conundrum," *Spiritus* 3 (2003): 167. Schneiders' standard definition of spirituality is as follows: "Spirituality as lived experience can be defined as conscious involvement in the project of life integration through self-transcendence toward the ultimate value one perceives" ("Christian Spirituality: Definitions, Methods and Types," in *The New Westminster Dictionary of Christian Spirituality*, ed. Philip Sheldrake (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005), 1).

<sup>41</sup> Sandra Schneiders, *Written That You May Believe: Encountering Jesus in the Fourth Gospel* (New York: Crossroad, 2003), 48. The italics are hers.

<sup>42</sup> Evelyn Underhill, *The Mystics of the Church* (New York: Schocken Books, 1964), 10.

consciously pursued and ongoing enterprise.”<sup>43</sup> Spirituality, as the conscious movement toward fullness and potentiality in God, is lived day by day in the actual experience of communion with God.

To a certain degree, we could say that all forms of spirituality – whether geared to consumerism or to God, or to the exclusion or inclusion of creation – are experiential. However, to live an experiential spirituality authentically requires a certain intentionality – which in deeper moments becomes more a “yielding” or an “allowing”<sup>44</sup> – that continuously foregoes blind complacency. In fact, several authors explain that the God experience, far from allowing blind complacency, has a way of shattering all human constructions.

For example, Robert Egan has argued that in the lived experience of God, a person’s eyes eventually become open to “the provisional and constructed character of culture” and to the “understanding that social institutions are never merely *given*.”<sup>45</sup> Moreover, Boff points out that when the person enters into the experience of God who is ultimately Mystery, “the most impeccably traditional doctrines waver, the most precise formulations fade to nothingness, and the most profound symbols dissolve.”<sup>46</sup> A faith that was once formative must be allowed to falter in light of the lived experience of communion with God. Finally, even the constructed notions of the self fall away. Constance FitzGerald indicates that through contemplation – which she describes as a

---

<sup>43</sup> Schneiders, “Religion vs. Spirituality,” 167. Schneiders stresses the ongoing, as opposed to the episodic, character of the God experience, not because she wants to dismiss the various episodes of the spiritual life but rather because she wants to highlight the fact that spirituality is lived throughout one’s life and not merely in those moments when the spiritual experience appears extraordinary.

<sup>44</sup> See, for example, Constance FitzGerald, “From Impasse to Prophetic Hope: Crisis of Memory” *CTSA Proceedings* 64 (2009): 21-42.

<sup>45</sup> Robert Egan, Forward to Janet Ruffing, ed., *Mysticism and Social Transformation* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2001), x.

<sup>46</sup> Leonardo Boff, *Ecology and Liberation: A New Paradigm*, trans. J. Cumming (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1995), 146.

continuous yielding or “waiting upon God”<sup>47</sup> – the person comes to enter a “*prayer of no experience*,”<sup>48</sup> when “a radically new ‘self’ is being worked on and shaped.”<sup>49</sup> The experience of conscious communion with God makes way for a no-experience in which the only thing the person can do is “yield to the unknown Mystery.”<sup>50</sup> In that yielding, a new self is born.

With my third premise, then, I indicate that authentic spirituality is a consciously lived experience (or no-experience) in God that, far from leading people into blind complacency – exposes and transforms all human constructions, whether in society, religion, or the self. This is not a path we take alone; we often do so within religious or spiritual (e.g. meditation) communities, which do affect our experience of God in positive and negative ways. Nor do we experience communion with God in a vacuum; indeed, the experience is shaped by our socio-economic, cultural, racial, geographical, gendered and intellectual perspectives. Nonetheless, the argument I make here is that ultimately the experience of communion with God is itself transformative of all these circumstances. In God it becomes impossible to remain blind to the constructed nature of reality, and in this realization – which, those writing on Christian spirituality insist, is born in love – is the power to change even our most destructive tendencies.

#### **(iv) Conclusion**

In its anthropological sense, spirituality is that drive that humans have to move toward fullness and potentiality. Pursued in blindness or greed for things lesser than that

---

<sup>47</sup> Constance FitzGerald, “The Desire for God and the Transformative Power of Contemplation,” in *Light Burdens, Heavy Blessings: Challenges of Church and Culture in the Post Vatican II Era*, ed. Mary Heather MacKinnon, Moni McIntyre and Mary Ellen Sheehan (Quincy: Franciscan Press, 2000), 216.

<sup>48</sup> FitzGerald, “From Impasse to Prophetic Hope,” 37.

<sup>49</sup> FitzGerald, “From Impasse to Prophetic Hope,” 22.

<sup>50</sup> FitzGerald, “From Impasse to Prophetic Hope,” 35.

for which we were intended, spirituality in this sense can lead down destructive paths, as we saw with the spirituality of consumerism. In its theological sense, a healthy or life-giving spirituality is directed to God who can fulfill us. In channeling the spiritual drive to fullness in God, however, a life-giving spirituality does not neglect the world just as God does not neglect it. Thus, there is a way in which we come to know God's presence in the presence of others, in the social and natural world. Finally, spirituality, as the movement toward fullness and potentiality in God, is lived in the ongoing experience of communion with God. Spirituality in this sense is experiential. It is a conscious, intentional way of life<sup>51</sup> that results in exposing ever deeper constructions of reality while opening, in love, the possibility for a better future.

With these three premises, then, my operative definition of Christian spirituality is as follows: Christian spirituality is the innate human drive, directed to God (though not at the neglect of the world), and consciously sought in the ongoing experience of communion with God. This three-fold understanding of spirituality is present to different degrees in the work of each of the authors examined in this dissertation.

### **C. McFague, Boff and FitzGerald**

With this three-fold understanding of spirituality in place, what else does an authentic Christian spirituality entail in this time of socio-ecological crisis? In order to answer this question, I investigate the work of two theologians who have squarely faced the crisis at hand, and who have spent their careers advocating for justice and wellbeing

---

<sup>51</sup> Even the yielding of no-experience requires conscious consent.

on this Earth. I chose to examine the work of North American Ecofeminist<sup>52</sup> theologian Sallie McFague and Brazilian liberation theologian Leonardo Boff in particular because spirituality plays an important role in their theological work. Spirituality plays an important role not only in their ecological theologies, but also in their theological development. Furthermore, they have both alluded to their own spirituality in autobiographical statements, making it possible to discern both their words on the subject and their lived experiences of it.

Moreover, in narrowing down the central features of a spirituality capable of facing today's global crisis, I thought it important to draw from Christian sources that were diverse from each other, so that whatever I discovered would be able to speak across – to the extent this is possible – cultural, geographical, gender, and denominational lines. Thus, McFague is “a white, middle-class, American Christian woman writing to first-world, privileged, mainstream Christians (and other interested persons)” who must change their ways for the Earth to survive.<sup>53</sup> She is also a feminist,<sup>54</sup> a “Protestant and erstwhile Barthian”<sup>55</sup> who came to experience God's transcendent presence in the immanent bodies of this world very hesitantly and only after years of talking about God as embodied.<sup>56</sup> On the other hand, Boff is a former Franciscan priest working with the oppressed in Latin America, shaped by Franciscan charism and the work of Pierre

---

<sup>52</sup> Though McFague does not use this title to talk about herself, others have assigned this title to her. See, for example, Mary Judith Ress, *Ecofeminism in Latin America* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2006), chapter 4.

<sup>53</sup> McFague, *The Body of God*, viii. Thus, she writes that privileged North American Christians fit in the “uncomfortable center” of her theology, uncomfortable in that it is they who most need to change if the earth is to survive this present crisis (see McFague, *Life Abundant*, 33-34).

<sup>54</sup> McFague identifies herself as such in *Metaphorical Theology: Models of God in Religious Language* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1982), 152-153.

<sup>55</sup> McFague, *The Body of God*, 208.

<sup>56</sup> See McFague's “Brief Credo” in *Life Abundant*, 1-9.

Teilhard de Chardin to such an extent that he embraces the diaphanous presence of God in the world without hesitation throughout his theological career.

McFague's work is explicitly postmodern; consequently, she is very careful not to make unqualified truth-statements.<sup>57</sup> For as much as Boff criticizes modernity, his primary interlocutors – e.g. Teilhard, Heidegger, Carl Jung – are modern thinkers; consequently (and perhaps also due to his grounding in Catholic sacramentality) he is comfortable making bold truth-claims about human beings, the world and God. These differences make for two distinct theological systems and spiritualities.

Nonetheless, it is worth stressing that the theologians do share a central concern for building a better humanity. This means that even as they turn to the subject of spirituality, they have explicit ethical and political outcomes in mind. In this sense, we might say that they proceed on the understanding that spirituality is valid or authentic only inasmuch as it produces the desired socio-ethical result. Given this tendency, I wondered whether the power of spirituality is limited in trying to conform it to what we think it *should* produce. Do we limit God's own power in the world if we do not allow spirituality, as the conscious experience of communion with God, to produce what it must and not what we think it should?

Given this question, I decided to engage the work of Constance FitzGerald in the fifth chapter of the dissertation. FitzGerald is a North American Carmelite contemplative who has lived in the Baltimore Carmel community for over fifty years. Like McFague and Boff, she is deeply concerned with the interlocking social and ecological crisis we now face, and like these theologians, she proposes a form of spirituality that will help people toward clear vision and transformation in this time of crisis. However, writing as

---

<sup>57</sup> See, for example, McFague, *Life Abundant*, 26-27.

a contemplative, she repeatedly emphasizes that this crisis – which she calls a societal impasse of dark night – above all necessitates an unconditional and uncompromised yielding to God so that God’s own vision and hope may take over. Her argument does not undermine McFague’s and Boff’s articulations of spirituality, but rather radicalizes them by proposing that in “surrender[ing] in faith and trust to the unfathomable Mystery that beckons onward and inward beyond calculation, order, self-justification, and fear,”<sup>58</sup> God may initiate a future more amazing than anything we can imagine “this side of darkness.”<sup>59</sup> Her desired outcomes are not unlike McFague’s and Boff’s, but her argument is more radical in the extent to which it calls people to surrender in faith and trust to God who can effect transformations far greater than what people can of themselves fabricate.

None of the arguments in the chapters ahead are meant to cancel each other out. Both McFague and Boff offer important insights about what spirituality in this time of crisis involves; this is true for FitzGerald as well. To a certain extent, then, I wish to hold their insights in tension, believing that the tension may produce deeper insights about what forms of Christian spirituality the current crisis necessitates. However, there is also a progression to my argument inasmuch as it moves from the tentative metaphorical approach of McFague in which God is never unqualifiedly known; to the bold metaphysical approach of Boff in which God is known in every experience of the world; to the contemplative approach of FitzGerald in which, through contemplation, God is not merely known but rather becomes the One through whom the person knows, or stated differently, the person becomes so united with God that “[o]ne’s basic perspective

---

<sup>58</sup> Constance FitzGerald, “Impasse and Dark Night,” in *Living With Apocalypse: Spiritual Resources for Social Compassion*, ed. Tilden H. Edwards (San Francisco, Harper & Row, 1984), 103.

<sup>59</sup> FitzGerald, “Impasse and Dark Night,” 102.



changes. One ‘has God’s view of things’ (LF 1.32).”<sup>60</sup> I argue that this progression marks a radicalization of Christian spirituality, and consequently, of its transformative power for human consciousness and living today.

#### **D. Dissertation Procedure**

The dissertation is divided into six chapters, each which answers the basic question: What does an authentic Christian spirituality entail in this time of socio-ecological crisis? – Or – What are the features of a Christian spirituality capable of helping people to clear vision, transformation and hope today?

In the case of McFague and Boff, I answer this question by examining not only their explicit words about spirituality in the face of socio-ecological injustice, but also more basically what their theological system and development illuminate on the subject. Thus, I dedicate two chapters to each theologian, tracing the primary characteristics of their respective theologies and developments in the first of each pair, and explaining their particular articulation of ecological spirituality in the second.

In chapter one I explicate McFague’s metaphorical approach to theology, as well as her methodological development from her hermeneutical to her constructivist stage. I argue that, inasmuch as her reliance on metaphor challenges people to continuous renewal and growth, she pushes people today toward a spirituality that, in the words of Mark McIntosh, is unable to “languish in the prison of false social construction[s]” and is instead oriented toward discovery and growth.<sup>61</sup> In chapter two I elucidate the meditation and spirituality that she develops from her model of the world as God’s body in her

---

<sup>60</sup> FitzGerald, “The Desire for God,” 220.

<sup>61</sup> Mark McIntosh, *A Mystical Theology: The Integrity of Spirituality and Theology* (Malden: Blackwell Publishers, 1998), 5-6.

ecological theology, and argue that this meditation and spirituality offers very clear guidelines for those wanting to love both God and world today, or to love God by paying attention to and caring for the bodies of creation.

Chapter three traces Boff's development from Christian humanism to ecological theology, and examines the most consistent trait of his theological system, namely, his reliance on an experiential understanding of spirituality. In this way, he offers a very compelling argument for why and how God can and must be experienced in the world for the sake of individual and collective fulfillment. In chapter four I then examine his particular – and somewhat distinct – articulations of spirituality in his liberation and ecological theologies (with a focus on the latter). I contend that, irrespective of the differences between these articulations, Boff's lasting contribution in the face of the socio-ecological crisis is his insistence that spirituality will produce life. Thus, the power of spirituality for fostering social, global and historical transformation should not be underestimated in this time of socio-ecological crisis.

As should be evident, then, the first four chapters of the dissertation illuminate the most important features of McFague's and Boff's theologies and developments, as well as their relevance for contemporary Christian spirituality. Chapter five then summarizes their theological systems and contributions to Christian spirituality in this time of crisis, and offers a comparison of their work. In the sixth chapter I briefly engage the work of Constance FitzGerald inasmuch as she challenges people to a contemplative waiting on God so that God's own vision and imagination may transform human life. I end the dissertation with a short concluding chapter explaining my own assessment of McFague's, Boff's and FitzGerald's contributions to Christian spirituality today.

## **CHAPTER 1: MCFAGUE'S METAPHORICAL THEOLOGY**

Chapter One answers two questions: 1) What are the most important features of Sallie McFague's metaphorical theology? and 2) What does her metaphorical approach contribute to our understanding of spirituality for this time of socio-ecological crisis? Most of this chapter is focused on the first of these questions. That is, McFague herself writes more about her metaphorical approach to theology than she does about her spirituality; therefore it makes sense to elucidate here that which she has spent most of her theological career defining and refining. However, in this chapter I also make the case that by mining her metaphorical approach (which she has been careful to preserve even amid significant theological development), we begin to understand the type of spirituality that might be capable of helping people to new vision and transformation in this time of crisis. Thus, the second question is answered through the first: what arises from a careful study of McFague's metaphorical theology is a type of spirituality that refuses to languish in prisons of false social constructions and that pushes people toward continual discovery and growth.

Chapter One begins with an explanation of the most defining characteristics of McFague's theology: her insistence that metaphor is all anyone has, "from the first words of children to the most complex forays on reality by philosophers;"<sup>1</sup> her definitions of metaphor and model; and her argument that the only way to write theology is through the indirect route of metaphorical language. Metaphor is so central to her entire theology that without understanding what she means by it and how she uses it, it is impossible to understand anything else about her theological system. Part B then traces McFague's

---

<sup>1</sup> Sallie McFague, *Metaphorical Theology*, 34.

methodological and theological development from *Speaking in Parables* (1975) to her latest works, elucidating three clearly defined stages that move her from a hermeneutical to a constructivist approach to metaphorical theology.<sup>2</sup> I focus especially on her latest constructivist stage because – as I will show in Chapter Two – it is in this stage that she speaks most boldly about the socio-ecological crisis as well as her own blossoming spirituality.

Part C of this chapter elucidates an important ambiguity that only increases in the course of her development as a metaphorical theologian: on the one hand, she insists that theology cannot make metaphysical claims; on the other, she makes increasingly bold claims that give the impression of carrying metaphysical or ontological weight. What this part points to more than anything is the way McFague plays on the tension inherent in metaphorical theology, which, she insists, always speaks of God and the relationship between God and creation in ways that are true and untrue, as “a detour between nonsense and truth.”<sup>3</sup> The fourth and final part (part D) summarizes the chapter and argues that McFague’s approach to theology, as self-consciously metaphorical, provides a creative way of conceiving Christian spirituality in the face of the present crisis. Caught between the “yes” and “no” or the “is and is not” of metaphorical language, her theology points to a continuously renewing spirituality that, in the words of Mark McIntosh, necessitates that people remain oriented “toward discovery, towards new perceptions and new understandings of reality.”<sup>4</sup>

---

<sup>2</sup> For these three stages I draw from Shannon Schrein, *Quilting and Braiding: The Feminist Christologies of Sallie McFague and Elizabeth A. Johnson in Conversation* (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1998), 5-12.

<sup>3</sup> Sallie McFague, *A New Climate for Theology*, 109.

<sup>4</sup> McIntosh, *A Mystical Theology*, 6.

In sum, this chapter explicates McFague's metaphorical theology and development, and points to a spirituality of renewal that may help us to new ways of life in this time of crisis. As I will illustrate in Chapter Two, this chapter also provides the necessary theological background for the spirituality that McFague develops from her model of the world as God's body in her ecological, constructivist stage.

### A. Metaphorical Theology

In her *Speaking in Parables* McFague writes:

Language, all language, is ultimately traceable to metaphor – it is the foundation of language and thus of thought. To insist on the radical relation between metaphor and thought means, then, that it is not only in poetry that the metaphor *is* the thing, but that *all* thought is metaphorical.<sup>5</sup>

These words have set the premise upon which all her subsequent theology is based.

Up until the publication of *Philosophy and Rhetoric* (1936) by I. A. Richards, it was generally assumed that a metaphor was nothing more than ornamental language used in poetry and other literary works to communicate something that might have been expressed literally though less beautifully.<sup>6</sup> Metaphors, in other words, were nothing more than an aesthetic device, which could be substituted with plainer language with no loss of meaning. However, Richards argued that metaphors could not be substituted by other words without losing the meaning which that metaphor conveyed.<sup>7</sup> Furthering Richards' argument, Max Black, *Models and Metaphors* (1962), argued that metaphors were untranslatable: "the relevant weakness of the literal paraphrase is not that it may be

---

<sup>5</sup> Sallie (McFague) TeSelle, *Speaking in Parables: A Study in Metaphor and Theology* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1975), 50. Throughout this dissertation, all italics in the McFague quotes are hers.

<sup>6</sup> See, for example, Mary Gerhart and Allan Russell, *Metaphoric Process: The Creation of Scientific and Religious Understanding* (Fort Worth: Texas Christian University Press, 1984), 101-102; and Paul Ricoeur, "Creativity in Language: Word, Polysemy, Metaphor," *Philosophy Today* 17 no. 2 (1973): 105.

<sup>7</sup> See Gerhart & Russell, *Metaphoric Process*, 101.

tiresomely prolix or boringly explicit (or deficient in qualities of style); it fails to be a translation because it fails to give the insight that the metaphor did.”<sup>8</sup>

As McFague’s words in *Speaking in Parables* indicate, she believes that a literal paraphrasing of a metaphor is not only inappropriate, but in fact impossible. Recall that she links metaphor not merely to language, but to the way we think. As our way of thought, metaphor is also the way we know. She explains: “metaphor is a way of *knowing*, not just a way of communicating. In metaphor knowledge and its expression are one and the same.”<sup>9</sup> Therefore, “there is no way *around* the metaphor, it is not expendable.”<sup>10</sup>

McFague shows that metaphor is especially nonexpendable when it comes to God, or “what is.” She writes that “metaphor *is* the thing, or at least the only access that we highly relative and limited beings have to it.”<sup>11</sup> In fact, she argues that metaphor always functions as “the medium through which we are aware of both our relationship to ‘what is’ and our distance from it.” As such, she goes on, “metaphor is both our burden and our glory, from the first words of children to the most complex forays on reality by philosophers.”<sup>12</sup>

George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, in their *Metaphors We Live By* (1980), concur with McFague on this point. They write: “We have found . . . that metaphor is pervasive

---

<sup>8</sup> Max Black, *Models and Metaphors: Studies in Language and Philosophy* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1962), 46. So McFague writes: “metaphor is a strategy of desperation, not decoration” (*Models of God: Theology for an Ecological, Nuclear Age* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987), 33).

<sup>9</sup> McFague, *Speaking in Parables*, 4.

<sup>10</sup> McFague, *Speaking in Parables*, 4. See also Sallie McFague TeSelle, “Learning for the Whole Person; A Model from the Parables of Jesus,” *Religion in Life* 45 no. 2 (1976): 167, where in speaking of the parable as an extended metaphor she explains: “To say, then, that a New Testament parable is an extended metaphor means not that the parable “has a point” or teaches a lesson, but that it is itself what it is talking about (there is no way *around* the metaphor to what is “really” being said).”

<sup>11</sup> McFague, *Speaking in Parables*, 29.

<sup>12</sup> McFague, *Metaphorical Theology*, 34.

in everyday life, not just in language but in thought and action. Our ordinary conceptual system, in terms of which we both think and act, is fundamentally metaphorical in nature.”<sup>13</sup> Their book is an illustration of the many metaphors that shape our everyday lives. Dialoguing with the aforementioned authors, as well as with Philip Wheelwright, Paul Ricoeur, and, among others,<sup>14</sup> David Tracy, McFague has formulated a theological system that harnesses the metaphorical nature of all language, knowledge and thought. This reliance on metaphor is as true for *Speaking in Parables* (1975) as it is for her more recent *A New Climate for Theology* (2008).<sup>15</sup>

### **(i) Definition of Metaphor**

Two terms are especially important for understanding McFague’s metaphorical theology: metaphor and model. She defines metaphor as follows:

Most simply, a metaphor is seeing 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. Thinking metaphorically means spotting a thread of similarity between two dissimilar objects, events, or whatever, one of which is better known than the other, and using the better-known one as a way of speaking about the lesser known.<sup>16</sup>

---

<sup>13</sup> George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1980), 3.

<sup>14</sup> Such as Douglas Berggren, Walter Ong, and Nelson Goodman (see McFague, *Metaphorical Theology*, 37).

<sup>15</sup> In this dissertation I engage the following of McFague’s books: *Speaking in Parables: A Study in Metaphor and Theology* (1975); *Metaphorical Theology: Models of God in Religious Language* (1982); *Models of God: Theology for an Ecological, Nuclear* (1987); *The Body of God: An Ecological Theology* (1993); *Super, Natural Christians: How We Should Love Nature* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997); *Life Abundant: Rethinking Theology and Economy for a Planet in Peril* (2001); and *A New Climate for Theology: God, the World, and Global Warming* (2008). I do not engage her *Literature and the Christian Life* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1966) because it predates her turn to metaphorical theology. I also do not engage in depth her most recent publication, *Blessed Are The Consumers: Climate Change and the Practice of Restraint* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2013) because it was published after I had completed my two chapters on McFague and as I was completing my work on this dissertation.

<sup>16</sup> McFague, *Metaphorical Theology*, 15.

Stated another way, “[a] metaphor is a word or phrase used *in*appropriately. It belongs properly in one context but is being used in another.”<sup>17</sup>

An example of metaphor that McFague uses is that of viewing war, a very complex phenomena, in terms of chess, a mere game.<sup>18</sup> This example illustrates three important things about the way she understands metaphor. First, she holds that talking about the unfamiliar or more complex matter (war) in terms of a more familiar or simpler matter (chess) produces new insight (e.g. that war, like chess, involves strategizing). Stated another way, the shock produced by the combination of dissimilars has the affective power of generating fresh meaning, or, as Paul Ricoeur calls it, “semantic innovation.”<sup>19</sup> Speaking of war as a chess game produces insight that otherwise would not arise.

Second, this example illustrates for McFague the fact that, for as much as metaphor can generate fresh meaning, it nonetheless produces only a partial “screen” or “grid” to what it is attempting to describe. The metaphor “war is a chess game” illuminates certain aspects of war (such as strategizing) and filters out other aspects (such as violence and death). Therefore, she holds that metaphor gives insight but also colors our perception of the unfamiliar and slants it in one direction to the exclusion of another.<sup>20</sup> Third and consequently, she writes that “[m]etaphor always has the character

---

<sup>17</sup> McFague, *Models of God*, 33. Thus, McFague agrees with Paul Ricoeur as describes metaphor as “a calculated error. It consists in assimilating things which do not go together. But precisely by means of this calculated error, metaphor discloses a relationship of meaning hitherto unnoticed between terms which were prevented from communicating by former classifications” (“Biblical Hermeneutics,” *Semeia* no. 4 (1975): 79).

<sup>18</sup> See McFague, *Metaphorical Theology*, 23-24; and *Models of God*, 33. She borrows this example from Black, *Models and Metaphors*, 41-42.

<sup>19</sup> See Ricoeur, “Biblical Hermeneutics,” 79. McFague firmly believes that Ricoeur is right on this point (e.g., McFague, *Metaphorical Theology*, 37-42). I will deal more extensively with metaphor’s ability to produce new meaning in part C of this chapter.

<sup>20</sup> See McFague, *Metaphorical Theology*, 23-24.



of ‘is’ and ‘is not’: an assertion is made but as a likely account rather than a definition.”<sup>21</sup>

War is a chess game in some respects (strategizing) but not in others (violence and death). Therefore, “war is a chess game” produces insight but it is not a definition.

McFague explains that as long as the dissimilarity and tension (the “is not”) in a metaphor remains, it has the affective power to produce insight, and is therefore alive.<sup>22</sup> Once the metaphor is believed to be a description (only the “is” remains), it becomes literalized and dead, for it is simply accepted. To make her point, McFague borrows an amusing parable from Franz Kafka: “Leopards break into the temple and drink up the sacrificial wine; this is repeated over and over again; eventually it becomes predictable, and is incorporated into the ceremony.”<sup>23</sup> She thinks the greatest danger in life is this assimilation, when “the shocking, powerful metaphor becomes trite and accepted.”<sup>24</sup> She effectively argues that when people believe they are describing reality as it is, when they cease to be shocked into seeing it afresh, they become passive and blind not only to that which they are describing but also to their relationship with that thing. A metaphor that ceases to be recognized as such is, then, dead and also dangerous.

A mundane example McFague uses for a dead metaphor is that of “the arm of a chair,” since most people do not even notice the tension that arises from bringing together a bodily part and an inanimate object.<sup>25</sup> More serious examples of dead metaphors, McFague shows, are those of God as father (in *Metaphorical Theology*) and God as king (in *Models of God*). Too often, she argues, these metaphors are thought of as definitions

---

<sup>21</sup> McFague, *Models of God*, 33. See also McFague, *Metaphorical Theology*, 38. She borrows the idea of the “is and is not” from Ricoeur. See, for example, his “Biblical Hermeneutics,” 88.

<sup>22</sup> McFague, *Metaphorical Theology*, 38.

<sup>23</sup> In McFague, *Metaphorical Theology*, 41. The parable comes from Franz Kafka, “Leopard in the Temple,” in *Parables and Paradoxes* (New York: Schocken Books, 1962), 24-25.

<sup>24</sup> McFague, *Metaphorical Theology*, 41.

<sup>25</sup> McFague, *Models of God*, 33.

of God, and consequently, the notion that God is male, that God rules hierarchically (and therefore that patriarchy and hierarchical structures are divinely ordained on earth) are simply accepted as “the way things are.”<sup>26</sup>

McFague is not naïve. She understands that habit tends to triumph over novelty and that the shocking eventually becomes commonplace. Yesterday’s metaphors, she writes, are bound to become today’s definitions.<sup>27</sup> However unavoidable this process of assimilation may be, she believes that people need not be slaves to it. What they must do, she argues, is remain diligently conscious of the metaphorical nature of all language, and of language for God in particular, lest they equate their words with God.<sup>28</sup> Moreover, they must be willing to let go of metaphors that are no longer relevant or useful and to create new ones that engender fresh insight and meaning in contemporary life.<sup>29</sup> This is especially true for metaphors of God and the relationship between God and creation.

## **(ii) Definition of Model**

McFague writes that certain metaphorical language for God and the relationship between God and creation – for example, God as father and God as king – is in fact more properly understood as model than metaphor. To explain: Models are similar to metaphors in that they talk about “this” as “that,” seeing one thing as something else. Models also “retain the tension of the ‘is and is not’ and, like religious or poetic metaphors, they have emotional appeal insofar as they suggest ways of understanding our

---

<sup>26</sup> See, for example, *Models of God*, 67.

<sup>27</sup> McFague explains: “What we consider realistic or literal is, as Goodman points out, what we are used to; traditional labels are old metaphors” (*Metaphorical Theology*, 40). She is here referring to Nelson Goodman, *Languages of Art: An Approach to a Theory of Symbols* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1968), 79, 80.

<sup>28</sup> See, for example, McFague, *Metaphorical Theology*, 115-116, 167.

<sup>29</sup> She wants metaphors and models that are relevant for “our day” or “our time.” See, for example, McFague, *Models of God*, xiii, 6, 13, 29, 33, 56, 70, 91, and 182.

being in the world.”<sup>30</sup> In other words, as is the case with metaphors, models are both “true *and* untrue”<sup>31</sup> and have the affective power to shock people to new insight. Unlike any regular metaphor, however, a model is more comprehensive and has a more enduring quality. McFague explains: “A model is a metaphor that has gained sufficient stability and scope so as to present a pattern for relatively comprehensive and coherent explanation.”<sup>32</sup> In brief, then, a model is “a dominant metaphor, a metaphor with staying power.”<sup>33</sup> She argues that the models of God as father and God as king are good examples of models that have had staying power in the Western theological tradition.

She explains that models exist in theology as well as in science, filtering and ordering information, and organizing the metaphors of the field.<sup>34</sup> They provide the screens or grids through which less dominant metaphors are understood and interpreted. Thus, although models are necessary, she holds that they also pose a significant danger:

... for they exclude other ways of thinking and talking, and in so doing they can easily become literalized, that is, identified as *the* one and only way of understanding a subject. This danger is more prevalent with models than with metaphors because models have a wider range and are more permanent; they tend to object to competition in ways that metaphors do not.<sup>35</sup>

As dominant metaphors, models are more likely to be perceived as descriptions and, hence, to exclude other metaphors, along with their respective worldviews and transformative potential.

---

<sup>30</sup> McFague, *Metaphorical Theology*, 23.

<sup>31</sup> McFague, *Metaphorical Theology*, 21.

<sup>32</sup> McFague, *Models of God*, 34.

<sup>33</sup> McFague, *Metaphorical Theology*, 23.

<sup>34</sup> For models in science, see *Metaphorical Theology*, 67-102. For differences and similarities between models in science and theology, see *Metaphorical Theology*, 103-144. McFague writes, then, that “[t]he metaphorical people, whether in science or theology, realize that they are permanently model-dependent, that there is no such thing as a value-free, neutral, direct route to reality and that if we are to have any knowledge of reality at all, it must be heavily dependent on models” (Ibid., 99).

<sup>35</sup> McFague, *Metaphorical Theology*, 24.

McFague describes theological models as imaginative pictures of the relationship between God and creation,<sup>36</sup> and she explains that when a theological model becomes literalized – which is always a possibility – it becomes idolatrous and, very likely, irrelevant. It becomes idolatrous because it is believed to be a description when God cannot be described. It is irrelevant because it is anachronistic, built on the worldviews and assumptions of ages past, and so blindly accepted as a definition that it ceases to have shocking potential. She writes, for example, that believing God to be literally “Father” is idolatrous because it limits other language that may be used to talk about a God who is, in the end, mysterious.<sup>37</sup> She argues that it is also so blindly accepted in Western Christianity that the patriarchal system from which it is borne and which it engenders in human society – to the detriment of nature and women among others – remains largely unchallenged, and unchallenged precisely because it is accepted as fact. Such a model, as a dominant metaphor, is less likely to shock people into seeing God and the relationship between God and creation afresh, and is more likely to lead people toward passivity and blindness than any regular metaphor. Though necessary, such models are potentially very dangerous.

---

<sup>36</sup> Imagination is very important in McFague’s metaphorical theology: “Because religions, including Christianity, are not incidentally imagistic but centrally and necessarily so, theology must also be an affair of the imagination” (*Models of God*, 38). Thus, she writes that metaphorical theology “must begin at the level of the imagination, in a ‘thought experiment’ with metaphors and their accompanying concepts that, unlike the principal ones in the tradition, express a unified, interdependent framework for understanding God-world and human-world relations” (*Ibid.*, 20).

With regard to the “God-world and human-world relations” which she addresses above, it is worth noting that before she becomes an ecological theologian McFague speaks in terms of the “relationship between the divine and the human” (see *Metaphorical Theology*, 125, 126-127). Starting with *Models of God*, however, McFague extends the relationship to all of creation (see, for example, *Models of God*, xiv, 13; *The Body of God*, x; *Super, Natural Christians*, 162; and *A New Climate for Theology*, 5).

<sup>37</sup> McFague says that theologians can learn from the mystics on this front. She writes: “The theologian must take his or her models with utmost seriousness, exploiting them for all their interpretative potential and yet, at the same time, realize they are little more than the babble of infants. The mystics, those to whom prayer is the center of life, know this, and as a consequence, their religious metaphors are the richest, least conventional, and most imaginative – and they never absolutize them” (*Metaphorical Theology*, 131).

In light of this danger, McFague repeatedly reminds her readers that theological models are metaphorical – they are imagistic constructions of the relationship between God and creation based on the worldviews and needs of a particular time. She also builds new models that she believes are more conducive for a better life today, reminding her readers that even these models must be discarded when they become literalized, or are no longer relevant or shocking.<sup>38</sup>

### **(iii) Religious Language As Always Metaphorical**

As McFague’s understanding of metaphor and model insinuate, she believes that all theology must be self-consciously metaphorical. She insists that religious language, which pretends “this” (e.g. father, king) is “that” (e.g. God), is never descriptive, not even in doctrine.<sup>39</sup> At best, religious language is indirect. She explains: “The assumption here is that all talk of God is indirect: no words or phrases refer directly to God, for God-language can refer only through the detour of description that properly belongs elsewhere.”<sup>40</sup> Indeed, she believes that “*there is no way now or ever to have strange truth directly.*”<sup>41</sup> McFague offers the parables of Jesus, which she regards as extended metaphors,<sup>42</sup> as examples of this indirect religious language:

The kingdom of God is always intimated indirectly through telling a story: a man who found a special pearl and sold all he owned to buy it; a woman who turned her house upside down to locate a lost coin; sowers who scatter seed, some on good and some on poor ground; a son who leaves home and returns repentant; a man who invites his reluctant friends to a banquet and ends up opening his table to everyone.<sup>43</sup>

---

<sup>38</sup> See, for example, Sallie McFague, “Response,” *Religion and Intellectual Life* 5 no. 3 (1988): 39.

<sup>39</sup> See, for example, McFague, *Metaphorical Theology*, 50; and *The Body of God*, 73, 159.

<sup>40</sup> McFague, *Models of God*, 34.

<sup>41</sup> McFague, *Speaking in Parables*, 41.

<sup>42</sup> She explains: “Parables are stories, of course, but of a particular kind – stories that set the familiar in an unfamiliar context, which is also what a metaphor does” (*Speaking in Parables*, 4).

<sup>43</sup> McFague, *Metaphorical Theology*, 45.

As with all metaphors, when parables set the familiar and mundane (e.g. a lost coin) in an unfamiliar context (e.g. the Kingdom of God), they have “considerable shock value, for their intention is to upset conventional interpretations of reality.”<sup>44</sup> Parables invite the reader/hearer to participate in the new and insightful interpretation of reality, but also like metaphors, they are not descriptions.<sup>45</sup>

As McFague sees it, not even Jesus is a description of God – he is a parable of God,<sup>46</sup> the central metaphor of Christianity.<sup>47</sup> She holds that “Jesus ‘is and is not’ God,” leaving open the possibility that “other religions can make the claim that they also contain metaphorical expressions of divine reality.”<sup>48</sup> Thus, though there are many indirect routes, she believes there is no one direct route to God. However, she also believes that, as the parables of Jesus and Jesus as the parable of God illustrate, the indirect route can be powerful in its ability to shock people into new awareness: “good metaphors shock, they bring unlikes together, they upset conventions, they involve tension, and they are implicitly revolutionary. The parables of Jesus are typically metaphorical in this regard.”<sup>49</sup> Without that ability to shock, they are little more than dead metaphors that are no longer useful or relevant. According to McFague, then, religious language is indirect, and powerfully transformative only as long as it embraces its indirectness.

---

<sup>44</sup> McFague, *Metaphorical Theology*, 44. In “Conversion: Life on the Edge of the Raft,” *Interpretation* 32 no. 3 (1978): 256-257, McFague explains further: “In other words, a parable, as a fiction or story, is an indirect assault on the accepted, conventional way of viewing reality, ‘the way things are.’ A parable is an assault on the social, political, economic, mythic structures we human beings build for ourselves for comfort and security. A parable is a story meant to invert, to subvert, to throw wide open these structures and to suggest, always indirectly, that ‘God’s ways may not be our ways.’” She goes on to say that parables therefore place us “on the edge of a raft.”

<sup>45</sup> McFague, *Metaphorical Theology*, 46.

<sup>46</sup> McFague, *Metaphorical Theology*, 50-54.

<sup>47</sup> McFague, *Speaking in Parables*, 38.

<sup>48</sup> McFague, *Metaphorical Theology*, 51.

<sup>49</sup> McFague, *Metaphorical Theology*, 17.

She argues, furthermore, that religious language is also primarily imagistic, not conceptual: “The assumption here is that belief and behavior are more influenced by images than by concepts, or to phrase it in a less disjunctive way, concepts without images are sterile.”<sup>50</sup> She holds that doctrine is more conceptual than imagistic, for it “tends toward univocity, toward clear and concise meanings for ambiguous, multileveled, imagistic language,”<sup>51</sup> often forgetting its metaphorical roots.<sup>52</sup> Hence, she privileges the imagistic language of models and metaphors – inasmuch as they continue to be regarded as such – as both truer to the way the Scriptures communicate their message and as more capable of shocking people to new insight and transformation. Metaphorical language is indirect and imagistic, yet as McFague sees it, it is also the most appropriate and potentially transformative tool for theology.

#### **(iv) Conclusion**

McFague argues that metaphors and models are ubiquitous, not only in ordinary language and thought, but also (or especially) in Christian theology as it seeks to articulate God’s relationship with the world. Metaphors and models set the unfamiliar in a familiar context; in so doing they do not describe, but they do create new insight. McFague holds that metaphor is the language of the Christian Scriptures, from the many and varied names the psalms use to talk about God,<sup>53</sup> to the parables of Jesus and in Jesus

---

<sup>50</sup> McFague, *Models of God*, 38.

<sup>51</sup> McFague, *Metaphorical Theology*, 26. See also *Ibid.*, 115; and Sallie McFague, “Parable, Metaphor, and Narrative,” *Homiletic* 2 (1997): iii.

<sup>52</sup> McFague writes: “If our thesis holds that *all* thought is indirect, then all concepts and theories are metaphorical in the sense that they too are constructions; they are indirect attempts to interpret reality, which never can be dealt with directly” (*Metaphorical Theology*, 26).

<sup>53</sup> See, for example, McFague, *Metaphorical Theology*, 192; and *A New Climate for Theology*, 108.

as the parable of God.<sup>54</sup> Models have the tendency toward dominance, thus they possess both a danger toward hegemony and a potential to shape human assumptions and behaviors for the better. She claims that both metaphors and models are imagistic in quality, and as such, they are the main ingredients for theology. She explains it best when she writes: “Because religions, including Christianity, are not incidentally imagistic but centrally and necessarily so, theology must also be an affair of the imagination.”<sup>55</sup>

McFague argues that as metaphorical, as indirect, as both “true *and* untrue,” and as an “affair of the imagination,” theology cannot take itself too seriously. Knowing that there is no certainty or closure, theologians – as with all the faithful – must “live intellectually as we live personally, on ‘the edge of a raft,’ knowing that our models are *only* models.”<sup>56</sup> Therefore, McFague repeatedly stresses that theology is contextual,<sup>57</sup> partial,<sup>58</sup> open-ended,<sup>59</sup> and pluralistic.<sup>60</sup> She holds that each metaphorical construction represents only “one niche,”<sup>61</sup> one “square in the quilt,”<sup>62</sup> one voice in the planetary conversation<sup>63</sup> – all of which heighten the need for collegiality among theologians and, when it comes to dealing with the socio-ecological crisis, among theologians and

---

<sup>54</sup> McFague writes, therefore, that “metaphorical theology is appropriate and necessary for two reasons: metaphor is the way we think, and it is the way the parables – a central form of expression in the New Testament – work.” (*Metaphorical Theology*, 31).

<sup>55</sup> McFague, *Models of God*, 38.

<sup>56</sup> McFague, *Metaphorical Theology*, 144.

<sup>57</sup> See, for example, McFague, *The Body of God*, 67.

<sup>58</sup> See, for example, Sallie McFague, *Life Abundant*; 29. As early as 1975, she held that “[o]ur time may well be one of occasional theology, theology that is partial and particular, oriented to specific issues” (Sallie McFague TeSelle, “An ‘Intermediary Theology’: In Service of the Hearing of God’s Word,” *The Christian Century* 92 no. 23 (Jn 25 – Jl 2, 1975): 629).

<sup>59</sup> See, for example, McFague, *Speaking in Parables*, 45, 51.

<sup>60</sup> See, for example, McFague, *Models of God*, 40, where she explains: “I am not merely suggesting that theological tolerance is a good thing; rather, my own position within a metaphorical theology demands it.”

<sup>61</sup> McFague, *Life Abundant*, xiv.

<sup>62</sup> See, for example, McFague, *The Body of God*, 163; See also Sallie McFague, “A Square in the Quilt: One Theologian’s Contribution to the Planetary Agenda,” in *Spirit and Nature: Why the Environment Is a Religious Issue*, ed. Steven C. Rockefeller and John C. Elder (Boston: Beacon Press, 1992), 40-58.

<sup>63</sup> See, for example, McFague, *The Body of God*, 81.



members of other disciplines.<sup>64</sup> Although her metaphorical theology is modest about its ability to describe the relationship between God and creation, it also recognizes the power of theological models to shape life for the better. Thus, McFague repeatedly stresses that every partial metaphorical theology *must* collaboratively advocate for “the well-being of life.”<sup>65</sup>

## **B. Methodological and Theological Development**

In *Quilting and Braiding*, Shannon Schrein notes that “McFague’s methodological approach has evolved and changed over the years, so much so that there is only one identifiable link that consistently reappears. That link is metaphor.”<sup>66</sup> I have already shown that metaphor has been central to McFague’s theology since early in her career. However, Schrein also argues that as McFague’s concern for ecological degradation has increased, her metaphorical theology has shifted away from a reliance on Christian Scriptures and tradition, and has increasingly relied instead on contemporary knowledge and experience.<sup>67</sup> As I will show in Chapter Two, this development has also been marked by a deepening articulating of her own spirituality.

Schrein holds that there are three distinct stages in McFague’s methodological development: “hermeneutical, heuristic, and constructivist. Complementing these methodologies are three well-defined theologies: parabolic, metaphorical, and

---

<sup>64</sup> See, for example, *The Body of God*, 67-69. See also Sallie McFague, “An Earthly Theological Agenda,” *The Christian Century* 108 no. 1 (Ja 1-9, 1991): 13-14; and “The Theologian as Advocate,” *Theological Education* 25 no. 2 (1989): especially 90-95, for how she thinks this collegial conversation should take place.

<sup>65</sup> McFague, “The Theologian As Advocate,” 92.

<sup>66</sup> Schrein, *Quilting and Braiding*, 5-6. Schrein may be overstating things by arguing that metaphor is the *only* identifiable link in McFague’s development, but she does, nonetheless make an insightful point.

<sup>67</sup> See Schrein, *Quilting and Braiding*, 6-12.

ecological.”<sup>68</sup> Taking her three-stage insight as a starting point, this part of the chapter explores McFague’s methodological and theological development through a careful study of her work between 1975, when she initiated her metaphorical approach to theology in *Speaking in Parables*, and 2008, when she published *A New Climate for Theology*.

### (i) Hermeneutical Stage

McFague clearly articulates her first, hermeneutical stage in *Speaking in Parables; A Study in Metaphor and Theology* (1975). In that book she understands the hermeneutical task of theology to mean “translating the word spoken in the Bible into the word for today.”<sup>69</sup> Translating the word spoken in the Bible does not imply systematizing its meaning, however, but rather imaginatively participating in the metaphorical nature of Scripture, and of New Testament parables in particular.<sup>70</sup> This means, she argues, that our interpretations will be as indirect and open-ended as the parables themselves.<sup>71</sup> In *Speaking in Parables*, therefore, the metaphorical imagination of theology takes its cue from the Bible: “To live in this language milieu is to live in faith

---

<sup>68</sup> Shrein, *Quilting and Braiding*, 6.

<sup>69</sup> McFague, *Speaking in Parables*, 30.

<sup>70</sup> McFague’s argument in *Speaking in Parables* is, in fact, against theology’s attempt to systematize the New Testament (Jesus’ parables and Jesus as the parable of God in particular). The power of parable is its ability to draw people in, to shock them into awareness through the “dialectic of the ordinary and the strange,” as any good metaphor does (Ibid., 49). If theology wants to be true to the tradition, therefore, it must participate imaginatively in the richly metaphorical way of the parables. Stated another way: “It is the hearing of the word of God which results in acceptance, in faith, and the way this takes place, on the models of the parables and Jesus as the parable, is through imaginative participation” (Ibid., 83).

<sup>71</sup> McFague, *Speaking in Parables*, 29-30, 51. That parables are indirect is a wonderful thing for McFague. She explains: “a parable, as a fiction or story, is an indirect assault on the accepted, conventional way of viewing reality, ‘the way things are.’ A parable is an assault on the social, political, economic, mythic structures we human beings build for ourselves for comfort and security. A parable is a story meant to invert, to subvert, to throw wide open these structures and to suggest, always indirectly, that ‘God’s ways may not be our ways’” (McFague, “Conversion: Life on the Edge of the Raft,” 256).

and hope, not in the certainty of knowledge, but it is also, not incidentally, where Jesus' parables, with their images and stories, insist we must live."<sup>72</sup>

In *Metaphorical Theology; Models of God in Religious Language* (1982) she still understands her task as hermeneutical, but she begins to distance herself from the confines of Christian Scripture and tradition by qualifying its authority and by critiquing some of its traditional imagery. First, she limits the authority of the Bible by calling it a classic: "we cannot say that the Bible is absolute or authoritative in any sense except the way that a 'classic' text is authoritative: it continues to speak to us."<sup>73</sup> Second, she encourages the use of metaphors for God that are not restricted by biblical or traditional imagery.<sup>74</sup> Third, now heavily influenced by feminist critiques of Christianity, she targets biblical models of God which in their patriarchy are especially "idolatrous" and "irrelevant," dead metaphors whose hegemony have blinded people to their metaphorical nature.<sup>75</sup> As we have seen, she targets the model of God the father in particular.<sup>76</sup>

Nevertheless, in *Metaphorical Theology* she identifies herself as a "reformer" feminist who, unlike the "revolutionary" feminists, is unwilling to dismiss the entire Christian tradition as too patriarchal.<sup>77</sup> She holds that the root metaphor of Christianity,

---

<sup>72</sup> McFague, *Speaking in Parables*, 30.

<sup>73</sup> McFague, *Metaphorical Theology*, 19. Indeed, by emphasizing that the Bible is a classic, metaphorical theology "will differ from traditional views of the authority of Scripture" (Ibid., 9). On page 61, she quotes David Tracy to elucidate what she means by "classic": "The classics, with their two notes of permanence and excess of meaning, always demand interpretation. Never mere repetition nor simplistic rejection" (*The Analogical Imagination: Christian Theology and the Culture of Pluralism* (New York: Crossroad, 1981), 154).

<sup>74</sup> In this regard McFague follows the mystics in particular: "The mystics have not restricted their language about God to biblical or traditional imagery, for the experience of God, the certainty and the immediacy of it, has been the basis for new and powerful religious language" (*Metaphorical Theology*, 2). See also Ibid., 174-176, 191 and 192.

<sup>75</sup> See *Metaphorical Theology*, 1-10.

<sup>76</sup> Hence Chapter Five is entitled: "God the Father: Model or Idol?" (McFague, *Metaphorical Theology*, 145-192).

<sup>77</sup> McFague, *Metaphorical Theology*, 152-153; For more information on the difference between revolutionary and reformist feminist theology, see pgs. 152-177.

from which all other models must be understood and built, is the Kingdom of God and not the heavily patriarchal God the father.<sup>78</sup> From the “liberation” metaphor of Kingdom she constructs the contemporary metaphor of God as friend.<sup>79</sup> Likewise, she encourages others “who have found the traditional models of God and human life irrelevant” to freely work out their own models by building off of Christianity’s root metaphor.<sup>80</sup> The Kingdom of God is:

... characterized by disorientation toward conventional securities and reorientation toward security in God alone. Such a relationship is intrinsically tensive and it is, we contend, based in the parables and in Jesus as parable of God. The Bible is the classic text modeling this relationship and as such is the foundational text for Christians.<sup>81</sup>

Thus, as true to parabolic form and based on what she perceives to be the root metaphor of Christianity, McFague still understands her metaphorical theology at this point as hermeneutical.

## (ii) Heuristic Stage

In her next book, *Models of God; Theology for an Ecological, Nuclear Age* (1987), however, she says that her theology “is best described as neither hermeneutics nor construction but as heuristics.”<sup>82</sup> She states, for the first time, that her task as a

---

<sup>78</sup> See, for example, *Metaphorical Theology*, 108-111. Ted Peters rightly points to the irony of dispensing with God the father only to uphold the Kingdom of God as the root metaphor of Christianity. He writes: “Has she [McFague] not jumped from the frying pan into the fire? It is just this quality of patriarchy – the ruling – which she has identified as being so oppressive. To substitute a heavenly king for a heavenly father would, working with McFague’s assumptions at least, buttress an already intolerable situation” (“McFague’s Metaphors,” *Dialog* 27 no. 2 (1988): 133).

<sup>79</sup> For how the kingdom metaphor is liberating, see McFague, *Metaphorical Theology*, 164-166. For her explanation of the metaphor “God as friend,” see *Ibid.*, 177-192.

<sup>80</sup> McFague, *Metaphorical Theology*, 193.

<sup>81</sup> McFague, *Metaphorical Theology*, 138.

<sup>82</sup> McFague, *Models of God*, 36. For more on what she means by heuristic theology, see Sallie McFague, “Models of God for an Ecological, Evolutionary Era: God as Mother of the Universe,” in *Physics, Philosophy, and Theology: A Common Quest for Understanding*, ed. Roger J. Russell, William R. Stoeger, and George V. Coyne (Vatican City State: Vatican Observatory, 1988), 251-263.

theologian is to “re-mythologize” the relationship between God and creation.<sup>83</sup> “As re-mythologization,” she goes on, “such theology acknowledges that it is, as it were, painting a picture. The picture may be full and rich, but it *is* a picture. What this sort of enterprise makes very clear is that theology is *mostly* fiction: it is the elaboration of key metaphors and models.”<sup>84</sup> McFague holds that the task of theology is to “think experimentally,”<sup>85</sup> and to “be self-consciously constructive”<sup>86</sup> in order to build new models that are appropriate “*for our day*.”<sup>87</sup> While she writes that her project is best understood “as neither hermeneutics nor construction,” it is clear that a heuristic theology that stresses re-mythologization, thinking experimentally, being self-consciously constructive, and building pictures that are mostly fiction but relevant for our day, involves a great deal more construction than hermeneutic. A clear and self-conscious shift has now occurred in McFague’s theology.

She initiates this second, heuristic stage in her theology as a response to Gordon Kaufman’s Presidential Address to the American Academy of Religion in 1982. She explains:

Kaufman called for a paradigm shift, given the exigencies of our time – the possibility of nuclear war. He called theologians to deconstruct and reconstruct the basic symbols of the Jewish and Christian traditions – God, Christ and Torah – so as to be on the side of life rather than against it, as was the central symbol of God with its traditional patriarchal, hierarchical,

---

<sup>83</sup> McFague, *Models of God*, xi.

<sup>84</sup> McFague, *Models of God*, xi-xii.

<sup>85</sup> McFague, *Models of God*, 6.

<sup>86</sup> McFague, *Models of God*, 21.

<sup>87</sup> For example, speaking of God as mother, lover, and friend on the one hand, and of God as lord, king, and patriarch on the other, McFague writes: “Both are imaginative pictures (although the latter, because conventional, does not appear to be) attempting to spell out, on the basis of a few metaphors, the salvific power of God. The question we must ask is not whether one is true and the other false, but which one is a better portrait of Christian faith *for our day*” (*Models of God*, xiii). She sometimes says, “*for our time*” (see, for example, *Ibid.*, 6, 13, 30, 33).

militaristic imagery. I answered this call, and my subsequent work has been concerned with contributing to that task.<sup>88</sup>

In an effort to confront not only the possibility of nuclear war but also a looming ecological problem, McFague turns to a heuristic theology – “that could be called ‘free theology’”<sup>89</sup> – to build more life-sustaining models and metaphors for the relationship between God and creation.<sup>90</sup>

In the process, the authority of Scripture and tradition diminishes. McFague holds that building models that are appropriate for our time, that emphasize the need for human responsibility before the nuclear threat and ecological degradation, will “involve significant departures” from Scripture and tradition.<sup>91</sup> Indeed, “[t]he theologian ought not merely interpret biblical and traditional metaphors and models but ought to remythologize, to search in contemporary life and its sensibility for images more appropriate to the expression of Christian faith in our time.”<sup>92</sup> In this stage McFague calls the Bible not only a classic, but a “case study” or a “prototype,” a “model of how theology should be done, rather than as the authority dictating the terms in which it is

---

<sup>88</sup> Sallie McFague, “An Earthly Theological Agenda,” 13. See also McFague, “The Theologian as Advocate,” 79. In *Life Abundant*, she refers to her heeding of Kaufman’s call as her third of four conversions (6-7). For a clear articulation of his argument, see Gordon D. Kaufman, *The Theological Imagination: Constructing the Concept of God* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1981). For his impressions of McFague’s metaphorical approach, see Kaufman, “*Models of God: Is Metaphor Enough?*,” *Religion and Intellectual Life* 5 no. 3 (1988): 11-18.

<sup>89</sup> McFague, *Models of God*, 37.

<sup>90</sup> McFague explains: “If one were to do Christian theology from the holistic perspective, it is evident that some significant changes from traditional models and concepts would be necessary for expressing the relationships between God and the world and between ourselves and the world. Language that supports hierarchical, dualistic, external, unchanging, atomistic, anthropocentric, and deterministic ways of understanding these relationships is not appropriate *for our time*, whatever its appropriateness might have been for other times. It would appear that the appropriate language for our time, in the sense of being true to the paradigm of reality in which we actually live, would support ways of understanding the God-world and human-world relationships as open, caring, inclusive, interdependent, changing, mutual, and creative” (*Models of God*, 13).

<sup>91</sup> McFague, *Models of God*, 30.

<sup>92</sup> McFague, *Models of God*, 33.

done.”<sup>93</sup> It is not the content of Scripture which is authoritative, but its ability to model a metaphorical theology, for the Bible itself is metaphorical.

Furthermore, while in *Metaphorical Theology* she held that “if the root metaphor of a religion is lost, so is the religion: one does not have the same religion without its basic model,”<sup>94</sup> in *Models of God* she “seems willing to cut herself off from her roots,” as Ted Peters has put it,<sup>95</sup> by deconstructing the very model she had previously called the root metaphor of Christianity, that of God as king. She argues that the monarchical model of God as king exhibits three major flaws: “God is distant from the world, relates only to the human world, and controls that world through domination and benevolence.” Expounding on the second flaw, for example, she writes:

... a dualism of king and subjects is intrinsically hierarchical and encourages hierarchical, dualistic thinking of the sort that has fueled many kinds of oppression, including (in addition to that of the nonhuman by the human) those arising from the cleavages of male/female, white/colored, rich/poor, Christian/non-Christian, and mind/body. The monarchical model encourages a way of thinking that is pervasive and pernicious, in a time when exactly the opposite is needed as a basic pattern.<sup>96</sup>

In the place of the model of God as king, McFague proposes the model of the world as God’s Body,<sup>97</sup> then filling it out with the models of God as mother, lover, and friend.<sup>98</sup> In so doing she believes her theology remains Christian, for she has not neglected the

---

<sup>93</sup> McFague, *Models of God*, 43.

<sup>94</sup> McFague, *Metaphorical Theology*, 110. She takes this point from David Tracy, “Metaphor and Religion: The Test Case of Christian Texts,” in *On Metaphor*, ed. Sheldon Sacks (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), 106.

<sup>95</sup> Peters, “McFague’s Metaphors,” 134.

<sup>96</sup> McFague, *Models of God*, 67.

<sup>97</sup> McFague, *Models of God*, 69-78.

<sup>98</sup> McFague, *Models of God*, 78-87. She then expounds on each of these models in three subsequent chapters: “God as Mother” in Chapter Four (pgs. 97-123); “God as Lover” in Chapter Five (pgs. 125-155); and “God as Friend” in Chapter Six (pgs. 157-180). For more on God as mother, see Sallie McFague, “Mother God,” in *Motherhood: Experience, Intuition, Theology*, ed. Anne Carr and Elizabeth Schüssler fiorenza (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1989), 138-143; and “The Ethic of God as Mother, Lover and Friend,” in *Feminist Theology: A Reader*, ed. A. Loades (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1990), 255-274, 317-321.

tradition. She stresses that her theology is, as all Christian theology must be, constrained by two constants, that of the historical (the tradition) and the contemporary (the situation and needs of our time).<sup>99</sup> Her emphasis in her heuristic theology is, however, clearly on the constraint of the contemporary.<sup>100</sup>

### **(iii) Constructivist Stage**

After *Models of God*, McFague speaks of her metaphorical theology primarily as “construction,” “remythologization,” and “experimentation”; she rarely mentions the term “heuristic.” As her concern for ecological degradation increases, her theology becomes more focused on the construction of new and more relevant models. Thus, speaking of what she calls McFague’s third methodological stage, Schrein writes that a “shift away from the classics and the tradition to contemporary reality is the hallmark of her ecological, constructivist theology.”<sup>101</sup> Schrein offers McFague’s next book, *The Body of God: An Ecological Theology* (1993) as exemplary of her constructivist shift. In this book, she argues, McFague proceeds from an ecological perspective and builds her metaphor of the world as God’s body on “what she perceives to be most critical in this postmodern age.”<sup>102</sup> Indeed, McFague clearly states that in her theology she intends “to

---

<sup>99</sup> McFague explains: “The Christian theologian is constrained by the constant of tradition, however interpreted in attempting to deal with the other constant, that of the contemporary situation” (*Models of God*, 41).

<sup>100</sup> For example, when talking about the models of God as mother, lover, and friend, McFague writes: “So although the stress in these pages has been on an imaginative picture to undergird the new holistic sensibility needed in our time, of substantial importance as well – in order to make this picture persuasive – is its ability to deal with traditional Christian themes. ... The alternative models we have considered are not a trinity in the old sense of hallowed names for God intended to discourage experimentation and insure orthodoxy; nevertheless, a modest proposal is advanced: for our time the new models are illuminating, helpful, and appropriate ways in which to think about the relationship between God and the world” (*Models of God*, 182).

<sup>101</sup> Schrein, *Quilting and Braiding*, 11.

<sup>102</sup> Schrein, *Quilting and Braiding*, 11-12.



embody the picture of reality from postmodern science,<sup>103</sup> or “postmodern cosmology.”<sup>104</sup> Furthermore, she says that in constructing the body metaphor for the relationship between God and creation she is building “a postpatriarchal, Christian theology for the twenty-first century.”<sup>105</sup>

In this and in her subsequent books – *Super, Natural Christians; How We Should Love Nature* (1997), *Life Abundant; Rethinking Theology and Economy for a Planet in Peril* (2001), and *A New Climate for Theology; God, the World, and Global Warming* (2008) – as well as in numerous articles, McFague articulates the main features of her ecological, constructivist theology.

**a. *Interconnectedness of Social and Ecological Problems***

First, she holds that theology in our day must begin from the ecological crisis for which human beings are responsible.<sup>106</sup> McFague knows that some humans are more to blame than others, that the wealthy are primarily responsible for the environmental problems while the poor suffer most of the consequences.<sup>107</sup> Hence her theology is not only ecological, but justice centered, recognizing “the interlocking character of oppression, most notably that of women and nature.”<sup>108</sup>

---

<sup>103</sup> McFague, *The Body of God*, 83.

<sup>104</sup> McFague, *The Body of God*, 159.

<sup>105</sup> McFague, *The Body of God*, x.

<sup>106</sup> McFague writes: “Climate change, quite simply, is the issue of the twenty-first century. It is not one issue among many, but, like the canary in the mine, it is warning us that the way we are living on our planet is causing us to head for disaster. We must change. All of the other issues we care about – social justice, peace, prosperity, freedom – cannot occur unless our planet is healthy” (*A New Climate for Theology*, 15). See also McFague, “A Square in the Quilt,” 43-44; *The Body of God*, x, 3-4, 9-13; *Super, Natural Christians*, 1-2; and *Life Abundant*, xi. For McFague’s stress on the need for ecological literacy, see, for example, *A New Climate for Theology*, 49.

<sup>107</sup> See McFague, *The Body of God*, 3-5; and *Super, Natural Christians*, 150-164.

<sup>108</sup> McFague, *The Body of God*, 14. See also pgs., 164-166. In *Super, Natural Christians* she likewise writes: “Hence, justice and ecology – the liberation of the poor and the well-being of nature – are not separate issues, but two sides of the same coin” (13).

**b. *The Common Creation Story***

Second, McFague draws ever more heavily from contemporary sources for her theology. More specifically, she constructs her models on what she calls the “common creation story,” which is based on “the broadly accepted” cosmology of postmodern science and philosophy.<sup>109</sup> She explains that the common creation story begins with the Big Bang and ends in contemporary reality, where everything is understood to be both radically interconnected and radically unique.<sup>110</sup> She summarizes the merit of this story as follows:

... the distinctive aspect of the common creation story pertinent to the formation of an organic model of reality is the particular way both unity and differentiation are understood. It is a form of unity based on a

---

<sup>109</sup> McFague is talking about “basic scientific literacy” here. She explains: “Basic scientific literacy is both necessary and difficult to attain. This essay maintains, however, that the needed knowledge is not specialized expertise on quantum physics or differing theories among contemporary evolutionists, but the broadly accepted picture that respected scientists and philosophers of science have of reality” (*The Body of God*, 220, nt. 4). A few of her sources for her broad scientific knowledge include Robert M. Hazen and James Trefil, *Science Matters: Achieving Scientific Literacy* (New York: Anchor Books, 1991); and James Trefil, *1001 Things Everyone Should Know About Science* (New York: Doubleday, 1992) (see *The Body of God*, 220, nt. 4).

There are other theological works that are affected by this broad scientific perspective, which in turn influence McFague’s understanding of the common creation story. Some of these works include Ian Barbour, *Religion in an Age of Science*, vol. 1 (New York: Harper and Row, 1990) (Barbour is especially influential on McFague’s understanding of science and the relationship between science and theology); Thomas Berry, *The Dream of the Earth* (San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 1988); Charles Birch and John Cobb, Jr., *The Liberation of Life: From the Cell to the Community* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981); David Ray Griffin, *God and Religion in the Postmodern World* (Albany, N.Y.: SUNY Press, 1989); Jay McDaniel, *Of God and Pelicans: A Theology of Reverence for Life* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1989); Jürgen Moltmann, *God in Creation: A New Theology of Creation and the Spirit of God* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1985); A. R. Peacocke, *Creation and the World of Science* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979); John Polkinghorne, *Science and Creation* (London: SPCK, 1987); and Holmes Rolston III, *Science and Religion: A Critical Survey* (New York: Random House, 1987) (see *The Body of God*, 223, nt. 7).

For several of the above authors (e.g. Barbour, Birch and Cobb, Griffin and McDaniel), process philosophy plays a significant role in their scientific understanding, which explains why process thought becomes increasingly important in McFague’s work. Feminist theory likewise figures prominently in her theology starting with *Metaphorical Theology*. So in *Super, Natural Christians*, McFague writes that “One could say that the ecological model of the self and world that figures centrally in this book is an attempt to combine process and feminist thought with ecological science in a way that will be readily available to ordinary readers” (2). The common creation story is, then, the product of a broad understanding of current scientific cosmology, process theology, and feminist thought.

<sup>110</sup> McFague, *The Body of God*, 220, nt. 32.

common beginning and history, but one that has resulted in highly complex networks of interrelationships and interdependencies among all life-forms and supporting systems on this planet. It is a form of differentiation that boggles the imagination with its seeming excess of species ... as well as numbers of individuals within species. ... And since this body includes everything that is, what characterizes it above all else is diversity, not sameness. But this diversity is interconnected in the most radical, profound way, for each and every thing emerged within a common history and, in some way, ancient or present, far or near, depends upon all the others.<sup>111</sup>

As this quote indicates, McFague maintains that the common creation story radicalizes both unity and difference, interconnectedness and diversity.

She explains that the common creation story also highlights embodiment, the ways in which each body in the universe is both unique and interrelated to everything else. In its emphasis on embodiment, she believes the common creation story rings true to our actual experience, since “at the most basic level, experience is embodied; we are bodies that experience.”<sup>112</sup> Furthermore, its emphasis on embodiment points to a very concrete link between each one of us and the rest of creation:

Through our bodies, in their agonies and ecstasies that lie behind and beyond all linguistic expression, we are bound into a network of relations with our natural environment and experience ourselves as bodies with other bodies. Whatever else experience means, it includes bodily experience as a primordial reality, uniting us in ever-widening concentric circles with the entire planet in all its diverse, rich forms of embodiment.<sup>113</sup>

In short, McFague relies on the common creation story because it brings to light several features that the individualistic, self-centered mentality of contemporary life ignores: the incredible uniqueness of every single body in the universe as well as the interconnectedness of every body, of every embodied being, with all the other bodies in

---

<sup>111</sup> McFague, *The Body of God*, 46-47.

<sup>112</sup> McFague, *The Body of God*, 86.

<sup>113</sup> McFague, McFague, *The Body of God*, 86.

the universe. She believes that if people would take this story seriously, they would treat the many bodies of this earth with more care than they have done for the last several hundred years. Hence, she writes: “We need a story about ourselves and our earth that will *work*: that is, a story that will help us live justly and sustainably in our home, planet Earth. The sciences are providing us with such a story.”<sup>114</sup>

McFague never loses sight of the fact that the common creation story is, as all stories are, metaphorical: “it is a *view* (a picture, not a set of permanent absolute facts).”<sup>115</sup> Yet it is the most current view of the universe to date and it is conducive to holistic living. As such, it provides fruitful ground for building models and metaphors that can appropriately respond to the needs of our time.<sup>116</sup>

### *c. Theology of Nature*

Third, drawing from physicist and theologian Ian Barbour’s distinction between a natural theology and theology of nature, McFague makes clear that she is writing a theology of nature. She explains:

Natural theology tries to harmonize (or find points of contact between) belief and knowledge of the world; a theology of nature attempts to reconceive belief in terms of contemporary views of the natural world. A theology of nature does not solicit the help of science to provide a basis for or to confirm faith, but uses the contemporary picture of reality from the sciences of its day as a resource to reconstruct and express the faith.<sup>117</sup>

That is, natural theology considers what can be known about God without the aid of revelation, e.g. through the use of reason and observation of the world. On the

---

<sup>114</sup> McFague, *A New Climate for Theology*, 49. Here is a rare moment in which McFague capitalizes the word Earth.

<sup>115</sup> McFague, *The Body of God*, 40.

<sup>116</sup> As I explain at length in the next chapter, one important model that she builds with the common creation story is that of the world as God’s body.

<sup>117</sup> McFague, *The Body of God*, 65-66. For more on McFague’s understanding of a theology of nature, see *Ibid.*, 78-91, 146-147.

other hand, a theology of nature starts from a religious tradition based on religious experience and revelation.

However, a theology of nature also holds “that some traditional doctrines need to be reformulated in the light of current science. ... In particular, the doctrines of creation, providence, and human nature are affected by the findings of science.”<sup>118</sup> To reformulate these traditional doctrines, a theology of nature draws “mainly from features of science that are widely accepted, rather than risk adopting to limited or speculative theories that are more likely to be abandoned in the future.”<sup>119</sup> Therefore, a theology of nature begins with the experience and revelation of a religious tradition, but is willing to reformulate its traditional doctrines based on the widely accepted features of contemporary science.

McFague holds that the common creation story, formulated on “the broadly accepted picture that respected scientists and philosophers of science have of reality,”<sup>120</sup> provides such a basis for deconstructing and reconstructing certain elements of the Christian faith. True to a theology of nature, then, she deconstructs the classical body models of the tradition and reconstructs her model of the world as God’s body according to the lessons of the common creation story. She also reformulates her theological anthropology, theology (her

---

<sup>118</sup> Sallie McFague, “Ian Barbour: Theologian’s Friend, Scientist’s Interpreter,” *Zygon* 31 no. 1 (1996): 23. McFague is quoting here from Ian Barbour, *Religion in an Age of Science* vol. 1, 26-27.

<sup>119</sup> McFague, “Ian Barbour,” 23, quoting Barbour, *Religion in an Age of Science* vol. 1, 26-27.

<sup>120</sup> McFague, *The Body of God*, 220, nt. 4.

discourse on the relationship between God and creation), and her Christology to correspond with this story.<sup>121</sup>

In practice, then, the common creation story takes certain precedence over Christian Scripture and tradition in her constructivist stage. Although, as was the case in her heuristic theology, McFague continues to call the Bible a classic,<sup>122</sup> and to hold that her theology is an attempt to think about God “in light of what the tradition has claimed in the past and what we must say in the present,”<sup>123</sup> she is now perfectly willing to deconstruct traditional models, replace them with new constructions, and reshape doctrine according to the current picture of reality.<sup>124</sup> McFague contends that “[n]either the world of the Bible, nor of Newtonian dualistic mechanism, nor of present-day creationism is the world to which we must respond as theologians;”<sup>125</sup> she believes instead that theologians must build on holistic contemporary worldviews such as what the common creation story provides.

Speaking of this constructivist stage, then, Gloria Schaab is right in stating that, “[w]hile McFague readily draws correlations between her own constructs and the theological and philosophical proposals of an earlier era, she is not restricted by these considerations, nor compelled to integrate their insights into her own.”<sup>126</sup> McFague’s

---

<sup>121</sup> I explain this matter in more detail in part A of Chapter Two.

<sup>122</sup> See, for example, McFague, *Life Abundant*, 58-60.

<sup>123</sup> See, for example, McFague, *A New Climate for Theology*, 5.

<sup>124</sup> As McFague writes: “This in no way privileges Scripture as the first and last word, but only as the touchstone text that Christians return to as a resource (not *the* source) for helping them to construct for their own time the distinctiveness of their way of being in the world” (*The Body of God*, 162-163).

<sup>125</sup> McFague, “A Square in the Quilt,” 50.

<sup>126</sup> Gloria Schaab, “Of Models and Metaphors: The Trinitarian Proposals of Sallie McFague and Elizabeth Johnson,” *Theoforum* 33 no. 2 (2002): 229. McFague reinforces Schaab’s argument with passages such as these: “Like all other experiences of God’s love, those in the Bible are from relative, partial contexts by people limited by their own times” (*Life Abundant*, 58). Moreover, “because revelation – insights into God’s love – occurs in our ordinary experience, it is ongoing. Revelation did not stop at the Bible” (*Ibid.*, 53).

constructivist theology of nature is by now more bound by the lessons of the more current common creation story.

*d. Functionality*

The fourth feature of McFague's ecological, constructivist theology is its increased stress on the functionality of theological constructions, namely, on their ability to produce more sustainable and just behavior in human beings. She explains that "[t]he goal of theology, as I see it, is to be *functional*, that is, to actually work in someone's life. It is meant to be an aid to right living."<sup>127</sup> McFague now contends that faith in God "is not so much correct thoughts about God (ones that correspond to God's being), but appropriate, responsible action to help a planet, created and loved by God, be an adequate home for all its many creatures."<sup>128</sup> By way of example: As we have seen, one of the reasons she rejects the God as king model is because it "encourages hierarchical, dualistic thinking of the sort that has fueled many kinds of oppression."<sup>129</sup> On the other hand, she upholds the model of the world as God's body for its ability to shape people into "liberating, healing, sharing self-conscious ones."<sup>130</sup>

McFague's ecological, constructivist theology of nature is characterized, then, by its desire to remedy ecological and social injustice through the construction of models and metaphors drawn from contemporary knowledge of reality and capable of instigating behavioral change in humans. Therefore, she holds that her partial, metaphorical Christian constructions must be judged by "their compatibility with the current view of

---

<sup>127</sup> McFague, *Life Abundant*, 15. In other words, she stresses the ethical side of theological models, arguing that they must be "an aid in helping people to live rightly, appropriately, on the earth, in our home" (McFague, "A Square in a Quilt," 46).

<sup>128</sup> McFague, *The Body of God*, 89-90.

<sup>129</sup> McFague, *Models of God*, 67.

<sup>130</sup> McFague, *The Body of God*, 129.

reality from postmodern science, their fit with one's embodied (physical, cultural, historical) experience, and the value of the insights for planetary well-being."<sup>131</sup>

#### **(iv) Conclusion**

Returning to the three stages of McFague's methodological development, it should be clear by now that the shift between her hermeneutical and heuristic stages is a significant one, for it marks a focus away from the Christian tradition toward contemporary knowledge and needs. The shift between her heuristic and constructivist stages is more subtle, for the latter stage is best understood as an intensification or emboldening of the former.

Since McFague first started writing about metaphor, she has been cognizant of the transformative potential of metaphorical language, so long as it is recognized as metaphorical and not as descriptive. In her hermeneutical stage her task was to point to the powerful ways in which the Christian Scriptures and tradition have used metaphorical constructions to shock people into insight, and to build new, less patriarchal models from the root metaphor of Christianity – in *Metaphorical Theology* this was “the kingdom of God.”

In her heuristic stage, McFague's stance toward the Christian tradition becomes more critical, recognizing the patriarchy latent even in what she had previously regarded as Christianity's root metaphor (God as king). She becomes disillusioned by the dominance of patriarchal God-talk in the tradition, and turns her attention instead to building contemporary models for the relationship between God and creation that she believes will shock people into more holistic living – the models she develops here are

---

<sup>131</sup> McFague, *The Body of God*, 163.



those of the world as God's body, and of God as mother, lover, and friend. Yet, some hesitancy remains: When, in *Models of God*, McFague criticizes the model of God as king for its hierarchical and dualistic tendencies, she maintains that this model might have been appropriate for other times, even if not our own.<sup>132</sup> She also presents her new models with less confidence than she later does, speaking of them as "not necessarily less inadequate or improper than old ones."<sup>133</sup> Having not yet clearly defined the role her contemporary sources would play in her metaphorical constructions, she remains somewhat constrained by the tradition, refusing to – in the words of Rosemary Radford Ruether – "explode the foundations."<sup>134</sup>

By the time McFague writes *The Body of God*, her words are less tentative. While she continues to stress that, as metaphorical, her theological constructions are not descriptions – and are therefore both true and untrue – her words start to sound increasingly certain. She becomes more critical of traditional models and more bold in her willingness to replace old models with new, more holistic and contemporary ones.<sup>135</sup> Moreover, as the years progress she relies more heavily on the common creation story, and becomes more confident in the functional ability of her new models to create a better reality. Indeed, she writes: "We can create reality – in fact, we do all the time with the constructs we embrace unknowingly. We can also create reality knowingly – and

---

<sup>132</sup> See, for example, McFague, *Models of God*, 13. Rosemary Radford Ruether criticizes McFague on this point, holding that patriarchal God-talk is not only damaging now, but always has been. "If this is the case," Ruether goes on, "then the blasphemous and idolatrous character of patriarchal, monarchical God-language is much more scandalous than McFague tends to suggest. Or rather the new God-language she suggests stands in much more radical judgment upon the tradition of Christian theology than she admits" ("*Models of God: Exploding the Foundations*," *Religion and Intellectual Life* 5 no. 3 (1988): 22).

<sup>133</sup> McFague, *Models of God*, 35.

<sup>134</sup> Ruether, "*Models of God: Exploding the Foundations*," 23.

<sup>135</sup> See, for example, McFague, "A Square in the Quilt," 48.

humanely – by living within models that we wager are true as well as good for human beings and other life forms.”<sup>136</sup>

Schrein has written that a “shift away from the classics and the tradition to contemporary reality is the hallmark of [McFague’s] ecological, constructivist theology.”<sup>137</sup> Because she privileges the common creation story over Christian Scripture as she reformulates Christian doctrine, Schrein has, in fact, called McFague’s third stage “post Christian.”<sup>138</sup> McFague, however, has continued to regard her work as a project of Christian theology. She explains:

We have a choice. We do not need to live within interpretations of Christian faith created in other times from other contexts for other needs. We can live in theological constructions for and from our own times. This is what theology has always been when it has made sense to people and when it has helped them love the world. If we reconstruct Christian faith for our planet’s well-being, we will simply be following in the steps of all good, appropriate theology.<sup>139</sup>

---

<sup>136</sup> McFague, *The Body of God*, 91.

<sup>137</sup> Schrein, *Quilting and Braiding*, 11. In fact, William C. French believes that McFague is too quick to dismiss the Christian theological tradition in her ecological theology because “it may well be that she actually has more allies in our theological tradition than she recognizes” (“The World as God’s Body: Theological Ethics and Panentheism,” in *Broken and Whole: Essays on Religion and the Body*, ed. Maureen A. Tilley and Susan A. Ross (Lanham: University Press of America, 1994), 144. He says that this recognition “is of great practical importance” because, for example, her panentheist stress on radical divine immanence could become more widespread “if people can be shown that the world viewed as God’s Body isn’t some ‘new age’ aberrant fad, but rather is deeply compatible with certain core traditions in Christian theology” (Ibid.).

<sup>138</sup> Personal email correspondence, June 1, 2010. See also Schrein, *Quilting and Braiding*, 107. Schrein’s primary concern is with the ways McFague’s modifies traditional Christology to better fit with the common creation story. She thinks McFague is too quick to dispose of the Christian tradition and its models, particularly in reference to Christology, where such a break is not necessary. Schrein acknowledges that some people have found her interpretation of McFague’s constructivist stage as post-Christian too harsh. And of course, McFague herself has never claimed the “post-Christian” label. Though I am highly indebted to Schrein’s insights, I would argue that McFague does indeed continue to work within the Christian tradition, even if in an *untraditional* way. Though she gives a certain amount of priority to the common creation story and is willing to reformulate doctrine according to this story, she does so in conversation with the Christian tradition and for the good of Christianity, namely, so that it may remain relevant in our time and thus a positive force for change.

<sup>139</sup> McFague, *Life Abundant*, 66.

Her metaphorical theology has gradually gravitated toward the contemporary, but for McFague such a move is absolutely necessary if Christian theology is to have an impact on the planetary problems that plague us today.

### C. An (Intentional) Ambiguity in McFague's Theology

Having discussed the development of McFague's metaphorical theology toward the contemporary and ecological, we now turn our attention to an interesting – if not sometimes confounding – aspect of her later theology. To explain: While McFague never ceases to insist that theology is by necessity metaphorical, she makes increasingly bold claims about God and the relationship between God and creation in her heuristic theology and especially in her constructivist theology. That is, she explicitly states that theology “never ‘advances’ to a system, to metaphysics, to certain or absolute claims. It is always just metaphor.”<sup>140</sup> As metaphorical, as incapable of getting at the truth, she writes that metaphorical theology can only be evaluated on the way it functions in a given time. However, she also makes ontological claims (usually qualified with a “shy” or “slight” and occasionally not), discusses how “we can become increasingly certain,”<sup>141</sup> and argues that “[t]he primary task of theologians (and perhaps the only task) is to guard and encourage right thinking about God and ourselves.”<sup>142</sup> In this part of the chapter I show why these two aspects of McFague's later theology are sometimes difficult to reconcile.

---

<sup>140</sup> McFague, *A New Climate for Theology*, 109.

<sup>141</sup> McFague, *A New Climate for Theology*, 113.

<sup>142</sup> Sallie McFague, “Global Warming: A Theological Problem and Paradigm,” in *Shaping a Global Theological Mind*, ed. Darren C. Marks (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2008), 112.

### (i) The Impossibility of Making Ontological Statements About Reality

As we have seen, there is a fundamental assumption in the entirety of McFague's metaphorical theology that people have no unmediated access to ontological reality or metaphysical truth. She insists that for theologians who speak of God this is an especially important lesson to learn. Indeed, she holds (in what she calls true "Protestant fashion") that there is nothing in creation – not nature, experience, revelation, human or evolutionary history – that directly points to God or makes God's goodness unequivocally evident.<sup>143</sup> The glory of God is only reflected in the world as in a dim or distorted mirror.<sup>144</sup> Not even Scripture, liturgy, or creedal statements can describe God's metaphysical qualities.<sup>145</sup>

Three consequences follow. First, McFague argues that it is impossible to make metaphysical statements, which by implication would also have to preclude unqualified ontological claims.<sup>146</sup> She explains that people may offer a wager "that reality is like this

---

<sup>143</sup> As I show in part C of Chapter Two, McFague tempers – though does not cancel out – this Protestant skepticism with a Catholic sensibility. Thus, for example, she writes that "[o]ur sacred world order ... must, in a sense, be more 'Protestant' while at the same time remaining 'Catholic.' 'Protestant' here stands for the disjunctive, divided, skeptical, postmodern mind-set that sees difference and difficulties wherever it turns. 'Catholic' here stands for the wish, nonetheless, for connection, continuity, and coherence, that sees possibilities and prospects wherever it looks" (*Super, Natural Christians*, 52).

<sup>144</sup> McFague, *The Body of God*, 137; *A New Climate for Theology*, 110.

<sup>145</sup> McFague writes, for example, that "[a]ll [words about God] are in the same situation and no authority – not scriptural status, liturgical longevity, nor ecclesiastical fiat – can decree that some types of language or some images, refer literally to God while others do not. None do" ("The Theologian As Advocate," 87). In *Life Abundant*, she also writes that "there is no such thing as *the* doctrine of God, but only interpretations" (135). For the limitations of creedal language, see McFague, *Metaphorical Theology*, 115-116.

<sup>146</sup> McFague explains: "Metaphysical language – the language of certainty, of the absolute, claims to know God. But metaphor does not; it is modest. It makes a claim, but only with 'assertorial lightness' or 'soft focus,' undercutting it immediately with the 'is not.'" (McFague, *A New Climate for Theology*, 107). She is taking the terms "assertorial lightness" and "soft focus" from Philip Wheelwright, *The Burning Fountain: A Study in the Language of Symbolism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1962), 86-88, 92-96. Simply stated, the language of "light assertorial tone" and "soft focus" makes statements by indirection, recognizing the ambiguity both of language and the object it is trying to describe. Wheelwright summarizes it well when he writes: "the plain fact is that not all facts are plain" (Wheelwright, 86).

more than it is like that”<sup>147</sup> and build their metaphors and models upon that wager. She has wagered, for example, that in spite of an “indifferent, often brutal and sometimes tragic” evolutionary picture of reality,<sup>148</sup> we can trust “at the deepest level, in the goodness of things.”<sup>149</sup> Her later models reflect that wager. However, she insists that such a wager is held by faith and not by any kind of metaphysical or ontological certainty.<sup>150</sup>

Hence, she claims that all language for God is necessarily metaphorical – it uses the familiar (mundane existence) in order to say something, partially and indirectly, about the unfamiliar (God).<sup>151</sup> She holds that metaphor – the language of “is and is not” – is appropriate for theology precisely because it does not get at the whole truth. It always “misses the mark,”<sup>152</sup> but to miss the mark is very fitting given God’s incomprehensible Mystery.<sup>153</sup> She believes that the best people can do is offer “backside” theology (Ex. 33:23b) that is “satisfied with *mediated* experiences of divine transcendence.”<sup>154</sup>

Second, McFague claims that because every experience of God or reality is mediated in some way, it is necessarily contextual and thus partial. In fact, in *Life*

---

<sup>147</sup> McFague, *The Body of God*, 91.

<sup>148</sup> Sallie McFague, “Intimate Creation,” 44.

<sup>149</sup> McFague, *Life Abundant*, 133.

<sup>150</sup> For example, in *Models of God* McFague begins with the wager that God is on the side of life and its fulfillment, but she admits that ultimately this is a statement of faith (see *Models*, x-xi). Along these lines, see also McFague, “Response,” 42, 43; and “The Theologian as Advocate,” 84, 91. Likewise, while she asserts that God is in charge in our world, she also holds that “there is little in our world that suggests this; in fact, reading the daily newspaper is all one needs to refute it” (Sallie McFague, “Is God in Charge? Creation and Providence,” in *Essentials of Christian Theology*, ed. William C. Placher (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2003), 114). Along these lines, see also *Life Abundant*, 150; and “Intimate Creation; God’s Body, Our Home,” 44.

<sup>151</sup> She explains: “The point is that difficult, strange, unfamiliar matters must be approached with the utmost cunning, imagination, and indirection in order for them to be seen *at all*” (McFague, *Speaking in Parables*, 40).

<sup>152</sup> McFague, *Models of God*, 23.

<sup>153</sup> See McFague, *Metaphorical Theology*, 2.

<sup>154</sup> McFague, *A New Climate for Theology*, 113. She is referring to Exodus 33:23b here, where God says to Moses, “And you shall see my back; but my face shall not be seen.” I address her use of this text more in part B of Chapter Two.

*Abundant* she defines theology as “reflection on experiences of God’s liberating love from various contexts and within the Christian community.”<sup>155</sup> She holds that theological statements are universal in scope – they address God, the world, and human beings – but they are, in the end, only “risky, partial assertions made by relative, historically bound creatures.”<sup>156</sup> Each contribution is, she writes, only one “square in the quilt.”<sup>157</sup>

McFague believes that the partial nature of theologies does not in fact diminish them, but it does relativize individual contributions, and by implication, it calls for collegiality and cooperation among theologians. Whatever proximity to truth can be reached, then, is reached in conversation.<sup>158</sup>

Finally, starting especially with her heuristic theology, McFague stresses that a any given model or metaphor (including her own) can only be judged on its functionality – on its potential for shocking people to seeing and behaving differently<sup>159</sup> – and not on how closely it approximates “the truth.” The question of whether a metaphorical

---

<sup>155</sup> McFague, *Life Abundant*, 40.

<sup>156</sup> McFague, *Life Abundant*, 28-29.

<sup>157</sup> See, for example, McFague, *The Body of God*, 163; and “A Square in the Quilt,” 40-58.

<sup>158</sup> See, for example, McFague, “The Theologian As Advocate,” 91. Cynthia B. Dehmlow Witt explains that the operative assumption here is “that the greater the agreement from a variety of different people and/or communities of people, the greater the warrant for any knowleges of reality” (“Epistemology in the Theological Writings of Rosemary Radford Ruether, Sallie McFague and Carter Heyward” (Ph.D. diss., The Claremont Graduate School, 1995), 404). For this conversation model, McFague draws from feminist scientists who hold that every knowledge is situated and embodied, “but when acknowledged, each embodied site can join with others in a network of partial perspectives in which the goal of the many bodies rather than a few privileged ones will emerge as the priority agenda” (*The Body of God*, 95). She is here speaking of a “strong objectivity” that is reached through the consensus of many different kinds of people, all of whom bring their own particular situated knowledges into the conversation. This consensus/conversation model, she believes, avoids both the pitfalls of absolutism and relativism (Ibid.). For this insight, McFague’s main sources are Donna Haraway, “Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective,” *Feminist Studies* 14 no. 3 (1988): 575-599; and Sandra Harding, *Whose Science? Whose Knowledge? Thinking from Women’s Lives* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press 1991).

<sup>159</sup> Or, as she puts it, on their ability to “help us live so that human beings and other creatures can thrive and reach some level of fulfillment” (McFague, *The Body of God*, 89).

construction is ultimately true or whether it corresponds to “some presumed reality”<sup>160</sup> is not a question she believes anyone can in fact answer.<sup>161</sup> As she sees it, “human life is fundamentally practical and hence . . . true knowledge is not basically correspondence with ‘reality-as-it-is’; rather, it is [that which] contribute[s] to fulfillment of life in its many forms.”<sup>162</sup> Based on her wagers and functional criteria, McFague holds that a metaphor or model is good, better, or true inasmuch as it is able to create a better world now. Indeed, “[t]he ‘certainty’ of metaphorical theology is not in its assertions but in the opportunity it provides to live differently.”<sup>163</sup> This, she admits, “is largely a functional, pragmatic view of truth.”<sup>164</sup>

In sum, then: Believing that there is no such thing as unmediated access to God or to reality-as-it-is, McFague insists that all theological statements are metaphorical and partial. Theologians cannot make ontological or metaphysical claims, though in conversation with others they may approximate an understanding of reality that is relevant at least for our time. The only way to judge whether they have approximated reality for our time, however, is by how well their theological models function; that is, by how well they lead humans to behave on planet earth.

### **(ii) Reality as Something We Create (Metaphor as Redescription)**

Her stress on the functionality of metaphorical language is not surprising given that she believes such language is only viable as long as it has the ability to shock people into new perception and action. That is, while McFague holds that theological models

---

<sup>160</sup> Sallie McFague, “Cosmology and Christianity: Implications of the Common Creation Story for Theology,” in *Theology at the End of Modernity: Essays in Honor of Gordon D. Kaufman*, ed. Sheila Greeve Davaney (Philadelphia: Trinity Press International, 1991), 30-31, nt. 13.

<sup>161</sup> See, for example, McFague, *Life Abundant*, 29.

<sup>162</sup> McFague, “Response,” 42.

<sup>163</sup> McFague, *A New Climate for Theology*, 120.

<sup>164</sup> McFague, *Models of God*, 192, nt. 37.

cannot get at reality-as-it-is, in her heuristic and constructivist theology she does harness the ability of models to shock people into new insight (what Paul Ricoeur calls the semantic innovation of metaphorical language) and thus create a new version of reality by which they may live. If the joining of dissimilars (e.g. chess and war, or God and father, or God and body) is sufficiently shocking, it has the power to produce new insight in people, reshaping their understanding of reality and – in the case of a profound insight – changing the way they interact with that reality.

Therefore, McFague writes that “[m]etaphors and models relate to reality not in imitating it but in being productive of it. There are only versions, hypotheses, or models of reality (or God).”<sup>165</sup> “In this sense,” she explains, “we create the reality in which we live.”<sup>166</sup> Or as Ted Peters states concerning McFague’s metaphorical approach: “Metaphors do not merely name things which already exist. They actually create phenomena, human related phenomena. They have the affective power to transform our consciousness and to evoke new visions which lead to new actions.”<sup>167</sup> In this sense, then, metaphor redescribes reality and in so doing changes it.

---

<sup>165</sup> McFague, *Models of God*, 192, nt. 37.

<sup>166</sup> McFague, *Models of God*, 26. She has drawn especially from Paul Ricoeur for this point. He explains that what begins as a semantic impertinence – the putting together of two dissimilars – becomes a semantic innovation – creating new meaning, allowing people to “perceive new connections in things.” What began as a *heuristic fiction*, as Ricoeur calls it, ends up becoming reality (“Biblical Hermeneutics,” 85). This heuristic dimension of metaphor, or the ability of metaphor to generate “a moment of discovery,” writes Schrein, “has the strongest appeal for McFague” (*Quilting and Braiding*, 74). It is worth noting, however, that when McFague says that we create reality, she assumes that “there is a reality to which our constructions refer, even though the only way we have of reaching it is by creating versions of it” (*Models of God*, 26).

<sup>167</sup> Peters, “McFague’s Metaphors,” 137. Or as Lakoff and Johnson explain: “It is reasonable enough to assume that words alone don’t change reality. But changes in our conceptual system do change what is real for us and effect how we perceive the world and act upon those perceptions” (*Metaphors We Live By*, 146). Thus, Lucy Tatman explains concerning McFague’s metaphorical approach, “we who co-create (primarily through language) whatever knowledge we share are the ones who are responsible for the world-shaping implications of our knowledge claims” (*Knowledge That Matters: A Feminist Theological Paradigm and Epistemology* (Cleveland: The Pilgrim Press, 2001), 248).



McFague argues that even though there is no way of knowing whether a metaphorical construction is ultimately true or false, a good metaphor or model has the ability to “project a possibility,”<sup>168</sup> to give people the possibility of living “as if” reality was as the metaphor or model says it is. After all, she claims that “[w]e live our lives according to our constructions of the world.”<sup>169</sup> She often reminds her readers: “Be careful how you interpret God and the world. It *is* like that.”<sup>170</sup> This means that theologians bear significant responsibility, for their metaphorical constructions have the power of shaping human understanding and behavior, and hence, the wellbeing of the earth.<sup>171</sup>

Given McFague’s stress on the ability of metaphors and models to *redescribe* and thus shape present day reality, and their *inability* to describe reality-as-it-is or God, it is not surprising that she judges these metaphors and models on their functional ability to produce a better world now. It is also not surprising that she continually stresses the need to discard metaphors and models that are no longer functional, and to continuously create new ones that will lead people to a renewed insight of God and world.<sup>172</sup>

---

<sup>168</sup> See McFague, *Models of God*, 192, nt. 37.

<sup>169</sup> McFague, *Models of God*, 28. Elsewhere she explains: “We think in terms of major metaphors and models that implicitly structure our most basic understandings of self, world, and God” (*Super, Natural Christians*, 7).

<sup>170</sup> McFague, *Life Abundant*, 39. Be careful how you construct your interpretations of both world and God, holds McFague, for “[t]hey become our glasses to the world and affect what we love, how we spend out time and money, what we are willing to work for, how we vote, what we protest, and what we give ourselves to.” (Ibid., 66-67). See also McFague, *Models of God*, 28; and *A New Climate for Theology*, 120.

<sup>171</sup> See Peters, “McFague’s Metaphors,” 137. McFague argues that “thinking theologically is not an end to itself; it is for the purpose of right action, for discipleship” (*Life Abundant*, 15). Therefore, she holds that “[t]heology has special responsibility for the symbols, images and language used for expressing the relationship between God and the world in every age” (Sallie McFague, “The World as God’s Body,” *Christian Century* 105 no. 22 (Jl. 20-27, 1988): 671).

<sup>172</sup> Thus, in *The Body of God*, McFague deconstructs the classic organic model and replaces it with the organic model of the world as God’s body; in *Super, Natural Christians* she deconstructs the subject-object model and replaces it with the subject-subjects model; and in *Life Abundant* she deconstructs the contemporary economic model and replaces it with the ecological economic model. She writes that for as much as it may seem that the models she is deconstructing describe “the way things are,” they are in fact

### (iii) McFague's "Slight" Ontological Claims

However, an ambiguity enters when, starting with her heuristic theology and increasingly in her constructivist theology, McFague sounds more certain about her models (especially the model of the world as God's body) than her epistemological commitment to the unknowability of metaphysical truth would seem to allow. This apparent certainty presents itself in two different ways: The first is when she makes "shy" or "slight" ontological claims with her constructions; the second is when her language becomes so bold that it sounds more like description than metaphor. Of the two, the second is more problematic.

#### a. "Shy" or "Slight" Ontological Claims

On occasion, McFague writes that her theological models make "shy" or "slight" ontological claims.<sup>173</sup> She adapts the phrase "shy ontological claim" from Philip Wheelwright's *Metaphor and Reality*, where he uses it only once, and then only in passing.<sup>174</sup> What she means by the phrase, or the "slight ontological claim" that she uses interchangeably with it, is not entirely clear since she never defines it (neither does Wheelwright for that matter). What is clear, however, is that her shy or slight ontological claims do not get directly at ontological truth.

---

only models that are more destructive and less appropriate for our time than the ones she proposes (see, for example, *Super, Natural Christians*, 47).

<sup>173</sup> See, for example, McFague, *Models of God*, 193, nt. 37; "Response," 42-43; "The Theologian as Advocate," 87; *Life Abundant*, 232, nt. 17; and *A New Climate for Theology*, 120.

<sup>174</sup> Wheelwright, *Metaphor and Reality*, 153-173. Here is the sentence in which he uses the term: "When an imagist poem is successful in communicating not merely its visual imagery but also its full mood – its shy ontological claim – to the reader, the success is made possible by some diaphoric, tensive collocation of elements" (162). That is, there are instances in which a poet effectively communicates visual imagery *but not* its arresting and retaining importance, or the significant way the imagery was/is experienced by the poet (so his/her readers can experience it also). Such a poem would not be making a shy ontological claim. However, a poem that did manage to convey the retaining importance or the experience of the imagery – what Wheelwright seems to be calling "its full mood" – would be making a shy ontological claim (see 159-162).

Take the way Wheelwright talks about reality in the section from which McFague has drawn the phrase “shy ontological claim.” He writes, first, that reality is presential (as in “presence”) inasmuch as it refers to who/what someone or something *is* apart from any informational detail about them (which he calls their thinghood). Ultimately, presential reality defies explanation, for “a presence is a mystery.”<sup>175</sup> Second, reality is coalescent, it does not abide by dichotomies or dualisms, it “is neither object nor subject, neither matter nor mind, nor can it be limited to any other philosophical category: it is That to which every such category tries to describe, always from an intellectual point of view and always with ultimate inadequacy.”<sup>176</sup> Third, as his other two definitions of reality make clear, reality is perspectival – it is beheld in a certain way, from a given context and angle of vision.

As such, Wheelwright shows that there is an illusory quality of reality-as-it-is that defies description: “From the contextual and perspectival character of reality it follows that the nature of reality is intrinsically and ultimately hidden from any finite exploration.”<sup>177</sup> He believes people can make ontological claims about reality only as long as they realize that such claims will be shy just as reality itself is “latent, subtle, shy.”<sup>178</sup> In other words, since reality is always revealed only partially and ambiguously, any claim about it will likewise be partial and ambiguous.

This understanding of shy ontology would certainly be appealing to McFague, who uses metaphorical language precisely because it allows her to say something about

---

<sup>175</sup> Wheelwright, *Metaphor and Reality*, 158.

<sup>176</sup> Wheelwright, *Metaphor and Reality*, 167. To insist on dichotomy where none exists, he argues, generates artificial questions. For example: “To ask (as philosophical aestheticians often do) whether the beauty of a rose is in the rose or in the eye of the beholder is palpably an unreal question, for the correct answer is ‘Both’” (Ibid., 166).

<sup>177</sup> Wheelwright, *Metaphor and Reality*, 172.

<sup>178</sup> Wheelwright, *Metaphor and Reality*, 172.

reality without it having to be ultimately or entirely true.<sup>179</sup> Accordingly, she frequently reminds her readers that metaphors and models “‘say a lot’ – good ones are rich with hermeneutical possibilities for making sense of things – but they do not ‘mean much.’”<sup>180</sup> Stated another way: “metaphors and models say a lot but mean little. The imaginative as-if world they paint is rich and detailed, but the ontological assertion is slight.”<sup>181</sup>

McFague’s shy or slight ontological claims, then, do not get at reality-as-it-is. As with all metaphorical language, in fact, she holds that they must be evaluated with pragmatic criteria on their functionality. She writes: “Had I experimented with the models and found them to be inappropriate and unhelpful for expressing God’s transforming love in our time, I would have made no ontological claim for them.”<sup>182</sup> Indeed, pragmatic criteria set the “the basis for ontological claims.”<sup>183</sup> As McFague sees it, a metaphor or model cannot describe reality as such, but it does make a shy or slight ontological claim as long as it is functionally viable. As puzzling as McFague’s mention of shy or slight ontological claims is, it would appear that the “ontological” part carries a very reduced meaning in her theology.

### ***b. Bold Language***

More difficult to dismiss, however, is the fact that even as McFague writes that her models “mean little,” she makes increasingly bold claims in her heuristic and constructivist theologies, particularly with respect to her body model. David Tracy

---

<sup>179</sup> Indeed, she writes that the construction of imagistic metaphors and models offer “an ‘in-between strategy,’ avoiding the presumption of the *via positiva* and the silence of the *via negativa*” (McFague, *A New Climate for Theology*, 108).

<sup>180</sup> Sallie McFague, “Intimations of Transcendence; Praise and Compassion,” in *Transcendence and Beyond: A Postmodern Inquiry*, ed. John D. Caputo and Michael J. Scanlon (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2007), 157.

<sup>181</sup> McFague, *A New Climate for Theology*, 120.

<sup>182</sup> McFague, “Response,” 42.

<sup>183</sup> McFague, “Response,” 43.

highlights the problem in his review of *Models of God*. There, he points to a tension between, on the one hand, McFague's "frequent appeals to 'trying on' the new models to see their fruitfulness and her equally frequent appeals to 'as if' language," and on the other hand, her "as" language. He explains: "More exactly, it is one thing to construe the world 'as if' it were God's body and quite another to construe the world 'as' God's body."<sup>184</sup>

To illustrate his point: in *Models of God* McFague begins her section on the world as God's body by stating that "[w]e are letting the metaphor of the world as God's body try its chance. We are experimenting with a bit of nonsense to see if it can make a claim to truth."<sup>185</sup> Her attitude is clearly experimental, seeing what kind of "semantic innovation" the metaphor can produce, or how it might shape reality for the better. It makes sense that such experiments would be warranted on their functionality and evaluated on pragmatic criteria. Yet as she expounds on the implications of the model, she makes weighty claims about God's immanence and transcendence, about sin and evil, about humanity's special role in the body of this world. For example, she writes that "the model of the world as God's body suggests that God loves bodies," and consequently, that "the basic necessities of bodily existence – adequate food and shelter, for example – are central aspects of God's love for all bodily creatures and therefore should be central concerns of us, God's co-workers."<sup>186</sup> Tracy points out that it is hard to reconcile the experimental, pragmatic side of McFague's metaphorical language with the metaphysical-sounding claims she makes about God and the world. This leads him to

---

<sup>184</sup> David Tracy, "Models of God: Three Observations," *Religion and Intellectual Life* 5 no. 3 (1988): 26.

<sup>185</sup> McFague, *Models of God*, 69.

<sup>186</sup> McFague, *Models of God*, 74.

ask: is her heuristic theology only projective construction (shocking people into new vision and action) or is it also a response “to that ultimate power, however construed, which we name God?”<sup>187</sup>

In her response to Tracy, McFague remains intentionally ambiguous. She writes: “My position is epitomized in the statement by Paul Ricoeur: ‘It would seem that the enigma of metaphorical discourse is ... what it creates, it discovers; and what it finds, it invents.’”<sup>188</sup> For those who would like to see McFague stand clearly in one camp or the other – either the functionality of the metaphor is sufficient and no ontological claim is made *or* an ontological claim is made with the explicit acknowledgement that “however much God, by definition, may surpass human understanding, God does not in all respects *defy* human understanding”<sup>189</sup> – McFague’s position remains both frustrating and confusing.<sup>190</sup> She refuses to resolve the tension between the functional role of metaphorical language and its ontological or metaphysical sounding claims. The closest she comes to resolving the tension is with her “shy” or “slight” ontological claims. But as I have already shown, such claims stand or fall on pragmatic criteria and not on how

---

<sup>187</sup> McFague, *Models of God*, 74.

<sup>188</sup> McFague, “Response,” 42. She is here quoting from Paul Ricoeur, *The Rule of Metaphor: Multi-Disciplinary Studies of the Creation of Meaning in Language*, trans. K. McLaughlin and J. Costello (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1977), 239.

<sup>189</sup> David Bromell, “Sallie McFague’s ‘Metaphorical Theology,’” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 61 no. 3 (1993): 499-500.

<sup>190</sup> For example, in separate articles David Bromell and Terrence Reynolds argue that there are two seemingly incommensurate streams of thought running through McFague’s *Models of God*. On the one hand, there is the pragmatic approach to truth which holds that “the adoption of God-talk itself remains a wager taken for purely pragmatic purposes.” (Bromell, “Sallie McFague’s ‘Metaphorical Theology,’” 499). McFague “defends her claims to truth pragmatically, arguing that her constructs are ‘truer’ because they advance moral positions and promote human flourishing” (Terrance Reynolds, “Two McFagues: Meaning, Truth, and Justification in *Models of God*,” *Modern Theology* 11 no. 3 (1995): 296). This is the metaphor as redescription (or “as if”) approach to truth. On the other hand, they believe she is relying on some unacknowledged metaphysic (something beyond mere wagers and pragmatic criteria) to justify those moments in which she argues that her models are truer than the established ones or where she proceeds with the implications of her models as though they were literally true (with an “as” or an “is” – no longer the “as if”) (See Bromell, 502; Reynolds, 298). They cannot see how she could have it both ways. For her part, McFague refuses that choice and instead places herself in the ambiguous middle.

well they approximate an illusory reality-as-it-is. McFague's shy and slight ontological claims cannot entirely account for the occasional certainty in her theology.

The tension in McFague's theology in fact only increases in her ecological, constructivist stage. On the one hand, she not only continues to argue that metaphor – as our way of speaking and thinking – cannot describe divine reality, but she also insists that theology has no absolute foundation.<sup>191</sup> She states that while in *Models of God* she subscribed to a form of the “method of correlation,” her theological methodology now begins with the presupposition of “the impossibility of grounding thought (including theology) in the past or in any one foundation.”<sup>192</sup> As such, “theology can make few pretensions to metaphysical truth.”<sup>193</sup>

On the other hand, her claims become even bolder than they were in her heuristic stage. For example, in her “Credo” in *Life Abundant*, McFague writes:

While God and the world – God's reality and ours – are not identical, they are ontologically related. That is, the world's reality derives from God, but just as important, the world is God's beloved which is joined to God: the world is God's body.<sup>194</sup>

---

<sup>191</sup> In one of her transitional articles between *Models of God* (heuristic methodology) and *The Body of God* (constructivist methodology), McFague writes: “All [metaphors and models] are in the same situation and no authority – not scriptural status, liturgical longevity, nor ecclesial fiat – can decree that some types of language or some images, refer literally to God while others do not. None do. Hence, the criteria for preferring some to others must be other than authority, however defined” (“The Theologian as Advocate,” 87).

<sup>192</sup> McFague, “Cosmology and Christianity,” 30-31, nt. 13. (I have yet to figure out what “method of correlation” she actually upheld in *Models of God*).

<sup>193</sup> She continues: “Metaphor says that the world is/is-not God's body. All it takes is that we entertain the nonsense for a while, in order to see if there is any truth in it” (McFague, “Intimations of Transcendence,” 155).

<sup>194</sup> McFague, *Life Abundant*, 18.

She talks about ontology without the disclaimer “shy” or “slight” at least twice in *Life Abundant*, once in *Super, Natural Christians*, and once in *A New Climate for Theology*.<sup>195</sup>

Moreover, in *A New Climate for Theology* the unqualified “is” really stands out:

Because God is always incarnational, always embodied, we can see God’s transcendence *immanently*. Meeting God is not a momentary “spiritual” affair; rather, God is the ether, the reality, the body, the garden *in which we live*. God is never absent; God is reality (being).<sup>196</sup>

In the same book she also talks about certainty in a surprising way given the “as if” quality of her model:

All is divine, even this earth and its creatures, in ways we do not understand but of which we can become increasingly certain. And how does one become certain? Not by thinking or even believing, but by living within the world *as if it were the body of God*.<sup>197</sup>

As a final example, in a late article McFague insists that it is the responsibility of theologians to undo false notions and encourage right thinking about God and ourselves.

She writes:

If theologians, who are one of the keepers and interpreters of this deep knowledge, allow false, inappropriate, unhelpful, and dangerous notions of God and ourselves to continue as our society’s assumptions, we are not doing our job. The primary task of theologians (and perhaps the only task) is to guard and encourage right thinking about God and ourselves.<sup>198</sup>

These are strong words indeed. Taken out of context, it would seem that McFague had given up her presupposition about the inaccessible nature of metaphysical truth. As we have seen, however, her position is more ambiguous – it truly lies somewhere between,

---

<sup>195</sup> The second instance in *Life Abundance* is: “Ontologically, we live from, toward, and with God” (182). The instance I found in *Super, Natural Christians*, is on pg. 103. In *A New Climate for Theology* it is: “This ontology – the world within God – provides a picture of the God-world relationship that is the ground of our hope” (162).

<sup>196</sup> McFague, *A New Climate for Theology*, 76.

<sup>197</sup> McFague, *A New Climate for Theology*, 113.

<sup>198</sup> Sallie McFague, “Global Warming,” 112.



as Derrida puts it, nonsense (the “as if”) and truth (the “as”).<sup>199</sup> There is no resolving the tension between pragmatic and ontological truth in McFague’s later theology.

#### (iv) Conclusion

McFague’s heuristic and constructivist theologies are marked by an intentional ambiguity, or a tension, that insists both that “theology can make few pretensions to metaphysical truth” and that “we can become increasingly certain.” She explains that “[t]he ‘certainty’ of metaphorical theology is not in its assertions but in the opportunity it provides to live differently,”<sup>200</sup> that is, on its functional ability to shock people into new insight and new behavior. Nonetheless, as many of her interpreters have shown, it is difficult to shake the feeling that McFague is either getting at something deeper (making a metaphysical or ontological claim)<sup>201</sup> or that she is playing a game with no substantive or real theological meaning.<sup>202</sup> My guess is that McFague would say that both sides are

---

<sup>199</sup> See McFague, *Models of God*, 34; and *A New Climate for Theology*, 109.

<sup>200</sup> McFague, *A New Climate for Theology*, 120.

<sup>201</sup> See, for example, Joseph Braken, “Images of God Within Systematic Theology,” *Theological Studies* 63 no. 2 (2002): 364.

<sup>202</sup> There are several scholars who have argued that McFague overemphasizes the unknowability of God, and in so doing, becomes unable to truly speak about God. Stephen W. Need has argued that McFague overemphasizes the “is not” quality of metaphor to such an extent that she fails to recognize that “[a]lthough metaphors do not quite mean what they say, they do, nevertheless, have meaning” (“Language, Metaphor, and Chalcedon: A Case of Theological Double Vision,” *Harvard Theological Review* 88 no. 2 (1995): 254). Likewise, Joseph Runzo takes issue with McFague’s claim that “we always see God through pictures, not directly.” He argues that “if our ‘pictures’ of the divine never properly refer to God (whether we can know this or not) then we have lost God: all we have is our pictures” (“Review: *Models of God for An Ecological, Nuclear Age*,” *Faith and Philosophy* 7 no. 3 (1990): 366).

Ray Anderson and G. Clarke Chapman, Jr. have argued that McFague gives in to Kant’s epistemological dualism which states that “being itself [is] unknowable to us as a metaphysical object of thought ... We can know something only as it gives itself to us within the limits of our world of sensory experience” (Anderson, “The Incarnation of God in Feminist Christology,” in *Speaking the Christian God: The Holy Trinity and the Challenge of Feminism*, ed. Alvin F. Kimel, Jr. (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1992), 299. Unwilling or unable to cross metaphysical boundaries, Chapman writes that McFague becomes “like a lover who is ever checking his/her eyeglasses prescription but never expects to see the Beloved” (“Speaking of God in a Nuclear Age,” *Anglican Theological Review* 73 no. 3 (1991): 257).

Finally, there are those who argue that McFague has given in to Feuerbachian claims that “the predicates we attribute to God do not belong so much to God as they belong to us” (D. Stephen Long, “Fetishizing Feuerbach’s God; Contextual Theologies as the End of Modernity,” *Pro Ecclesia* 12 no. 4

right and wrong: she is indeed getting at something deeper, but in an indirect, imagistic, “true and untrue” way.

Recall that a metaphor or a model has the ability to shock people into insight, changing the way they interact with reality, only as long as it is not assimilated, literalized, or regarded as a description. The paradox of metaphorical language is, then, that it can only approximate reality-as-it-is if it can shock people into new insight and action, and it can only shock people into new insight and action if it has enough dissimilarity and tension to first jolt them into attention. In short, metaphorical theology must be both true and untrue for it to work. In her heuristic and especially in her constructivist stage, McFague boldly plays on this necessary tension.

#### **D. Chapter Summary and Assessment**

In the beginning of this chapter I posed two questions: 1) What are the most important features of Sallie McFague’s metaphorical theology? and 2) What does her metaphorical approach contribute to our understanding of spirituality for this time of socio-ecological crisis? I offer a brief summary of this chapter in order to answer, as concisely as possible, the first question. Drawing from this first answer, I then respond to the second question by arguing that her metaphorical approach points to a type of spiritual practice that refuses to let people rest in false social constructions and that demands continuous discovery, renewal and growth.

---

(2003): 453; 465). For this argument, see also F. G. Immink, “Theism and Christian Worship,” in *Christian Faith and Philosophical Theology*, ed. Gijsbert van den Brink, Luco J. van den Brom and Marcel Sarot (Kampen: Kok Pharos Publishing House, 1992), 133; B. Jill Carroll, “Models of God or Models of Us? On the Theology of Sallie McFague,” *Encounter* 52 no. 2 (1991): 194; and Ellen Armour, “Toward an Elemental Theology: A Constructive Proposal,” in *Theology That Matters: Ecology, Economy, and God*, ed. Darby Kathleen Ray (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2006), 47). Thus, they hold that when McFague speaks of God, she is in fact only projecting human characteristics onto God.

### (i) Summary

In this chapter we have seen that what most defines Sallie McFague's work is her insistence that all thought and language, and therefore all theology, is metaphorical. As metaphorical, she holds that theology is always both true and untrue, an affair of the imagination, partial and open-ended, but also a powerful tool for shaping worldviews and actions. McFague repeatedly states that what makes metaphorical theology powerful is its ability to shock people into new insight and action, or to create "semantic innovation" and thus shape our lived reality. Inasmuch as theology loses its ability to shock people into new insight and action, she believes that it becomes irrelevant, even idolatrous, and must therefore be reformulated or remythologized. Thus, increasingly through her career, she evaluates any theology (including her own) on its functional ability to create a better, more compassionate world.

Though she does not waver in her insistence that theology is and must be metaphorical, her primary point of reference does shift through the course of her career. Hence, I have shown that her development has been marked by a movement away from the constraints of Scripture and tradition and toward an increasing consideration of contemporary knowledge and needs.

That is, whereas in the hermeneutical theology of her *Speaking in Parables* (1975) and *Metaphorical Theology* (1982) she draws from the metaphorical imagination of Scripture, her turn to heuristic theology with *Models of God* (1987) is marked by a push to "think experimentally" and to "be self-consciously constructive"<sup>203</sup> in order to build models that are appropriate for our day. Her movement into constructivist theology

---

<sup>203</sup> McFague, *Models of God*, 6 and 21.

with *The Body of God* (1993) marks an intensification of her deconstruction and reconstruction of Christian models, now more explicitly geared to ecological concerns. It is in this latter stage that she develops a clear articulation of the common creation story, which she formulates from the teachings of postmodern science and philosophy, and which, she holds, radicalizes both the unity and differentiation of all things in creation. Calling her work a theology of nature, inasmuch as it gives certain precedence to the findings of contemporary knowledge, she builds her theology on the common creation story and on the functional necessity to produce a more responsible humanity on the earth. McFague's development is defined, then, by a gradual shift in her primary point of reference, from Scripture and tradition to contemporary knowledge and needs. In spite of her development, however, her reliance on metaphor has always remained firm.

It is important to acknowledge her continued reliance on metaphor because as she enters her heuristic, and especially her constructivist stage, her words about God and the relationship between God and creation become increasingly bold. This creates an important tension in her work. On the one hand, she insists that theology “never ‘advances’ to a system, to metaphysics, to certain or absolute claims. It is always just metaphor.”<sup>204</sup> On the other hand, she becomes increasingly bold in her own words about her theological models of God and creation, speaking of their ontological claims (usually qualified with a “shy” or “slight,” but not always) and arguing that they can help people become “increasingly certain.”<sup>205</sup> Placing her theology between the “is and is not” of metaphor, she only heightens this tension in her constructivist stage by stressing her

---

<sup>204</sup> McFague, *A New Climate for Theology*, 109.

<sup>205</sup> McFague, *A New Climate for Theology*, 113.

inability to reach reality-as-it-is while speaking boldly of the reality (or the *redescription* of reality) that her models create.

Thus, answering the first question that I posed at the beginning of this chapter – What are the defining features of McFague’s theology? – we see that her work is defined, first, as metaphorical, as both “true” and “untrue,” as both “as” and “as if.” Second, her theological system is defined by its development toward contemporary knowledge and needs so as to create ever more functional metaphors and models today. Finally, her work is marked by an increased willingness to speak boldly (stressing the “is”) even while continuing to insist on the “is not” quality of her theology. She hopes her models will shock people into new insight and action in a time of socio-ecological crisis.

## **(ii) Assessment and Conclusion**

What do these defining features of McFague’s theology have to do with spirituality? I propose that, as difficult as it can sometimes be to contend with the tension of the “yes” and “no” of McFague’s metaphorical approach, it nonetheless points to an important way of approaching a spirituality of discovery and growth in our day.

Mark McIntosh has written that an authentic Christian spirituality “is inherently oriented towards discovery, towards new perceptions and new understandings of reality,” in such a way that a person is unable to “rest in a reassuring self-image [or] to languish in the prison of a false social construction of oneself.”<sup>206</sup> McFague’s metaphorical approach does nothing if not push people to constant renewal, insisting that they continuously create/discover and find/invent language for that which defies definition.

---

<sup>206</sup> McIntosh, *Mystical Theology*, 6, 5.

Indeed, she has argued that when people cease to realize that it is impossible to define strange truth directly, they become blindly complacent to the very thing they mean to define; in fact, they come to be defined by their own definitions of reality until only a rigid sense of “the way things are” remains. This is why, for example, she criticizes the models of God as father and king: believing them to be definitions, people get stuck in patriarchal and hierarchical conceptions of the world, and find no way out of them. Therefore, she holds that we must very intentionally play with metaphors, “sucking the juice out of them and throwing them away (as the Hebrew psalmists did), using everything and anything the world provides for talking about God,”<sup>207</sup> so that no one model is allowed to become a definition. In this way, she pushes people, and Christians in particular, to a continuous process of discovery whereby no metaphorical construction is taken so seriously that it cannot be thrown away, and whereby new and shocking ways of talking about God and world are always allowed to emerge in order to challenge us to new life.

Though McFague does not equate the process of continuous metaphorical renewal with spirituality, she does see a similarity between this process and what the psalmists and mystics have done, as they “use *all* images that will help to intimate the profound renewal occasioned by life with God.”<sup>208</sup> She holds that just as the psalmists and mystics know that no language can express what they have experienced in God, “at the level of worship,”<sup>209</sup> so all Christians must recognize, at least on the intellectual level, that every image for God and world will miss the mark. Moreover, she highlights an affinity

---

<sup>207</sup> McFague, *A New Climate for Theology*, 108.

<sup>208</sup> McFague, *Metaphorical Theology*, 174. See also *Ibid.*, 1, 2, 131, 174-176; and *A New Climate for Theology*, 108.

<sup>209</sup> McFague, *Metaphorical Theology*, 1.

between metaphorical renewal and prayer, for, she writes, “when we pray, we know we are addressing, not describing God.”<sup>210</sup> Thus, she says that as we recognize that “models are *only* models,” yet nonetheless create and support new models that will shock us into better ways of life, “we should do so in the spirit of passionate nonchalance, that is, in the spirit of prayer.”<sup>211</sup> To pray and to proceed in the spirit of psalmists and mystics means that we name God and world in ever evolving terms, letting each name shock us into new insight and action, but not allowing it to become a rigid definition of the ways things are.

Of course, the psalmists and mystics recognize the inadequacy of their every naming of God (and yet the need to so anyway) because they have experienced in some way the Mystery behind their naming. But McFague’s central purpose is not to move her readers to the mystical experience. Her purpose is more functional in nature: she challenges us to replace unhelpful and outdated metaphorical constructions with new, more life giving ones, without taking any of it too seriously.

Nonetheless, to the extent that she challenges us to be conscious of the constructed nature of reality and to see beyond these constructions into new ones, I would argue that she points to an important form of spirituality today. For, as McIntosh explains, spirituality makes one unable to languish in the prisons of false social constructions, and McFague very intentionally pushes people out of their constructed prisons and into new ways of living in this world. If spirituality is inherently oriented towards discovery and new understandings of reality, then McFague’s metaphorical methodology is at least an arrow pointing people to such a spiritual life. In this time of socio-ecological crisis, when people are so trapped by the “cult of material

---

<sup>210</sup> McFague, *Models of God*, 181.

<sup>211</sup> McFague, *Metaphorical Theology*, 144.

consumption”<sup>212</sup> and by religious conceptions that keep the status quo in place, McFague opens a path to a spirituality capable of moving beyond these traps and into more life-giving possibilities for the future.

---

<sup>212</sup> Curry, *Ecological Ethics*, 15.



## CHAPTER 2: MCFAGUE'S BODY SPIRITUALITY

I ended Chapter One by discussing the spirituality that arises from the “is” and “is not” of Sallie McFague’s metaphorical theology. In this chapter we explore the particular spirituality that she develops from her model of the world (universe) as God’s body in her ecological, constructivist stage.<sup>1</sup> I argue that her “body spirituality” provides clear guidelines for helping people today love God while caring deeply for the wellbeing of creation. Her contribution to spirituality in this time of socio-ecological crisis, then, is precisely the clarity with which she speaks about how to love God *and* the world.

As we have seen, McFague argues that metaphorical language calls for continuous testing and renewal. However, she also argues that the “as if” quality of metaphorical language “calls us to imagine ourselves *within* the world that these shocking metaphors imply.” Hence, she goes on to explain, “[m]etaphor is a trickster, trying its chance, seducing us to give it a chance, the chance of seeing differently and maybe saying yes to a different way of being in the world.”<sup>2</sup> With the model of the world as God’s body, then, McFague invites her readers to live as if God were embodied in the world, as if bodies really mattered, as if everything hinged on the ability of human beings to care for embodied life. From this model she also develops a meditation and spirituality that has helped her personally – and could help others – to experience God’s love in the paying attention to and the caring for embodied creation. It is, in fact, only in allowing

---

<sup>1</sup> McFague usually talks about this model in terms of the world as God’s body, but occasionally she replaces “world” with “universe” – for example: “We are suggesting, then, that the model of the universe as God’s body is a way of expressing both radical transcendence *and* immanence” (*The Body of God*, 133). For the sake of simplicity, unless I am quoting McFague directly I talk about the model in terms of “world” in this dissertation.

<sup>2</sup> McFague, *A New Climate for Theology*, 108.

herself to be seduced by the model of God's body and living within its worldview that she has become capable of perceiving God's love in the world and articulating clearly what spirituality entails. Living within this model, she provides people with very clear ways in which to direct their spiritual fire toward loving and caring for God's creation.

The chapter begins with an explanation of the theological system McFague develops from the model of the world as God's body, explaining the anthropology, relationship between God and creation, and Christology that the model necessitates and implies. Stressing that human beings are responsible for the fulfillment of creation, and that God is embodied in (though not confined to) every worldly body, I show that her body theology is functionally built to encourage privileged Christians in particular "to focus on the neighborhood,"<sup>3</sup> namely, the particular bodies of this world. In part B, I then turn to the intellectual meditation that McFague develops from her body model, with its functional purpose of turning Christians' gaze to the wondrousness of embodied creation. I also illustrate how this intellectual meditation becomes a deeply spiritual one for McFague as she has allowed herself to perceive God's immanent presence in the world (a significant feat for an "erstwhile Barthian"<sup>4</sup>) and to feel a certain sense of certainty about God's loving presence here.

In part C, I delineate her words on spirituality in her ecological, constructivist stage. I show that while her earlier articulations of spirituality in this stage are focused on how Christians should love worldly bodies – paying attention to the particular other, treating it as a subject in its own right, observing it not from a distance but in the reciprocal way of touch and friendship, recognizing its intrinsic worth – in her more

---

<sup>3</sup> McFague, "Intimate Creation," 42.

<sup>4</sup> McFague, *The Body of God*, 208.

recent work she has focused on the sacrifices the privileged must make so that other bodies can live and thrive. Yet even as she has turned to the practical need for the ego and eco self-restraint of the wealthy, McFague has spoken ever more freely about the abundant and even exuberant love of God that arises through such a practice. Thus, I show that as she has meditated on the body model and lived by its spirituality to the point of self-sacrifice, she has come to a deeper experience of God's presence in the world, and through this experience, to a profound sense of hope. In the final part of the chapter (D), then, I summarize the chapter and argue that McFague's meditation and spirituality from the world as God's body offers important clarity for Christian spirituality today as it encourages people to love and live in God but not at the neglect of the world.

### A. Body Theology

As early as *Speaking in Parables* McFague held that a metaphorical language that takes its cues from the parables never leaves behind the ordinary and the physical.<sup>5</sup> The mystery that is God (the unfamiliar) always comes to us through our current bodily, ordinary existence (the familiar) – such is metaphor, such is the way of the parables. Hence she writes, “This is the parabolic form – the hidden way of locating the mystery of the universe within the ordinary and mundane.”<sup>6</sup>

With her model of the world as God's body, which she first introduces in *Models of God*, McFague further accentuates the connection between God and the ordinary/mundane. Indeed, the world as God's body locates the mystery of God within the metaphor of body for the sake of inspiring greater appreciation for material existence. “The implication of this picture,” she writes, “is that we never meet God unmediated or

---

<sup>5</sup> See McFague, *Speaking in Parables*, 61, 70, 180.

<sup>6</sup> McFague, *Speaking in Parables*, 117.

unembodied. ... We meet God in the body of the world.”<sup>7</sup> The main argument of her next book, *The Body of God*, is simple and strong: “A theology that works within the context of the body model claims that bodies matter, that they are indeed the main attraction.”<sup>8</sup> She argues that the world as God’s body means that God is available to us in bodies; as such, bodies are important.<sup>9</sup>

With the body model, McFague writes that “Christians are invited to imagine the entire universe – all matter and energy in all its billions of differentiated forms – as God with us, or more accurately, as the body, the matrix, in which we live and move and have our being.”<sup>10</sup> The model suggests that God loves bodies, and that therefore we should love them too, in all their beauty, vulnerability, and pain.<sup>11</sup> In *The Body of God* McFague develops a systematic theology through the lens of the body model,<sup>12</sup> and then continues to deepen and draw from this body theology throughout her ecological, constructivist stage. In this part of chapter two I outline the most important features of her theology from the model of the world as God’s body.

### **(i) Preliminary Observations**

Before explicating the main features of McFague’s body theology, however, I remind the reader of three things. First, as with all her work in her ecological, constructivist stage, her body theology is a theology of nature, not a natural theology. As a theology of nature, it “uses the contemporary picture from the sciences of its day as a

---

<sup>7</sup> McFague, *Models of God*, 184.

<sup>8</sup> McFague, *The Body of God*, 18.

<sup>9</sup> McFague, *The Body of God*, 132.

<sup>10</sup> McFague, “Intimations of Transcendence,” 154.

<sup>11</sup> See Sallie McFague, “Imaging a Theology of Nature: The World as God’s Body,” in *Liberating Life: Contemporary Approaches to Ecological Theology*, ed. Charles Birch, William Eakin, and Jay B. McDaniel (Maryknoll: Orbis Press, 1990), 215; and *The Body of God*, 132-133.

<sup>12</sup> McFague describes *The Body of God* as a systematic theology on the body model in *Super, Natural Christians*, 2.

resource to reconstruct and express the faith.”<sup>13</sup> Thus, in her body theology, the common creation story of postmodern science and thought takes a central role: it not only shapes her models (especially her central model of the world as God’s body) but also grounds her remythologization of Christian doctrine.<sup>14</sup> Second, McFague’s body theology is meant to be functional, that is, it is meant to be an “aid in helping people to live rightly, appropriately, on earth, in our home.”<sup>15</sup> Therefore, as will become evident, her body model and its accompanying theology are always geared toward helping people see and act differently in the world today. Finally, McFague often reminds her readers that her body model and its accompanying theology are only metaphorical: they invite us “to imagine boldly and radically while insisting that models do not provide descriptions.”<sup>16</sup> She understands that her body theology will have assets and liabilities as all metaphorical theology does. Nonetheless, she believes it is an important theology for human beings in our day.

## **(ii) Anthropology**

Who are these human beings whose worldviews and actions McFague aims to shape with her theology from the model of the world as God’s body? Who does the common creation story say we are? Or, as she puts it, who are human beings if we “look at ourselves from the earth up, rather than from the sky down”?<sup>17</sup>

She answers this question in five ways. First, we are latecomers in the evolutionary process: “On the universe’s clock, human existence appears a *few seconds*

---

<sup>13</sup> McFague, *The Body of God*, 66. For a more detailed explanation of a theology of nature, see part B, section (iii) c of Chapter One in this dissertation.

<sup>14</sup> McFague, *The Body of God*, 78-91.

<sup>15</sup> McFague, “A Square in the Quilt,” 46.

<sup>16</sup> McFague, *The Body of God*, 22.

<sup>17</sup> McFague, *The Body of God*, 103-104.

before midnight. This suggests, surely, that the whole show could scarcely have been put on for our benefit; our natural anthropocentrism is sobered, to put it mildly.”<sup>18</sup> Second, humans are special in that they possess self-consciousness, and the dynamic universe is still in the process of evolving. Consequently, “we human beings might be seen as partners in creation, as the self-conscious, reflexive part of the creation that could participate in furthering the process.”<sup>19</sup> Third, given the special role of human beings in furthering the process of evolution, it is imperative that we educate ourselves on the “radical interrelatedness and interdependence” that the contemporary scientific picture teaches, so that we may interact with the world accordingly. Fourth, it is equally imperative that we recognize our dependence on lower life forms, since “[t]he higher and more complex the level, the more vulnerable it is and dependent upon the levels that support it” – for example, “the plants can do very nicely without us, in fact, better, but we would quickly perish without them.”<sup>20</sup> Finally, she writes that “[w]hat this common story suggests is that our primary loyalty should not be to nation or religion, but to the earth and its creator (albeit we would understand that creator in different ways). We are members of the universe and citizens of planet earth.”<sup>21</sup>

In sum, she writes that according to the common creation story, “we are not the center of things by any stretch of the imagination, although in a curious reversal, we are

---

<sup>18</sup> McFague, *The Body of God*, 104.

<sup>19</sup> McFague, *The Body of God*, 105. Unlike many deep ecologists who highlight the interrelatedness and interdependence of creation to such an extent that they fail to recognize the distinctions in creation – and thus fail to see what is different about human beings – McFague argues that humans are different from the rest of creation in that they alone are the “self-conscious ones” (see *Ibid.*, 127-129 for her critique of deep ecology on this issue).

<sup>20</sup> Both quotes come from McFague, *The Body of God*, 106.

<sup>21</sup> McFague, *The Body of God*, 107. For a similar account of her anthropology, see Sallie McFague, “Human Beings, Embodiment, and Our Home the Earth,” in *Reconstructing Christian Theology*, ed. Rebecca S. Chopp and Mark L. Taylor (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1994), 141-169.

increasingly very important.”<sup>22</sup> That is, on the one hand, we are “profoundly interrelated and interdependent with everything living and nonliving in the universe and especially on our planet.”<sup>23</sup> Humans are interrelated and interdependent with “everything that is.”<sup>24</sup> On the other hand, because we are self-conscious, because “[we] are creatures who *know* that we know,”<sup>25</sup> we are also “profoundly responsible,” “the guardians and caretakers of our tiny planet.”<sup>26</sup> Therefore, McFague writes that with the common creation story “we have been decentered as God’s darlings, and recentered as God’s partners, the ones who can help work for a just and sustainable planet.”<sup>27</sup>

This understanding of the human as responsible means that both “the Christian tradition, especially since the Reformation” and “secular, modern culture” are wrong in the ways they conceive of the human being. She explains:

These two views differ in critical ways, with the religious picture focusing on the importance of human beings, especially those who accept Jesus Christ as savior, whereas the secular picture elevates individualism, consumerism, and technology. In both cases, however, the focus is on human beings and individual well-being.<sup>28</sup>

In both cases, she argues, what matters is the human being (not nature), and more specifically, the individual human being looking out for him/herself. Drawing from

---

<sup>22</sup> McFague, *The Body of God*, 108.

<sup>23</sup> McFague, *The Body of God*, 108.

<sup>24</sup> See McFague, “Imaging a Theology of Nature,” 203.

<sup>25</sup> McFague, *The Body of God*, 122.

<sup>26</sup> McFague, *The Body of God*, 108, 109. She explains: “We are creatures who *know* that we know. Many creatures know many things; intelligence is not limited to human beings. But the ability to step back, to reflect on *that* we know and *what* we know – in other words, self-consciousness – may well be our peculiar specialty” (Ibid., 122).

<sup>27</sup> McFague, *A New Climate for Theology*, 58-59. Thomas Finger, “Trinity, Ecology and Panentheism,” *Christian Scholar’s Review* 27 no. 1 (1997): 90, and David J. Bryant, “God’s Body or Beloved Other? Sallie McFague and Jürgen Molmann on God and Creation,” in *Theology as Conversation: The Significance of Dialogue in Historical and Contemporary Theology*, ed. Bruce L. McCormack and Kimlyn J. Bender (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 2009), 192, wonder if McFague places too much responsibility on human shoulders. On the other hand, McFague thinks the tradition has not placed *enough* responsibility on humans to help creation flourish, and this is a situation she hopes to remedy with her theology.

<sup>28</sup> McFague, *The Body of God*, 107.

Robert Bellah’s illuminative article, “Is There A Common American Culture?” she writes that today people operate out of an “expressive individualism” that focuses on the satisfaction of individuals both in the religious and public spheres.<sup>29</sup> She believes the situation is significantly aggravated by a culture of consumption whose “central value is the gratification of individuals competing for scarce resources.”<sup>30</sup> In the United States, and through the consumeristic culture the world around, individualism runs rampant. She holds that according to the common creation story, this anthropocentrism and individualistic mentality is entirely wrong; in fact, she believes it is sinful.

*a. Sin*

McFague writes that if we take the common creation story seriously in its portrayal of the human as both dependent on other life forms and as profoundly responsible for all life, sin comes to mean “our unwillingness to stay in our place, to accept our proper limits so that other individuals of our species as well as other species can also have needed space.”<sup>31</sup> If “our grandeur is our role as responsible partners helping our planet prosper,” she holds that “our sin is plain old selfishness – wanting to have everything for ourselves.”<sup>32</sup> According to McFague, being human entails accepting our limitations as interconnected and interdependent beings on planet earth *and* our unique role as God’s partners in ensuring the earth’s well-being. Sin is the unwillingness to live according to our limitations and grandeur.

---

<sup>29</sup> McFague, *Life Abundant*, 82-83.

<sup>30</sup> McFague, *Life Abundant*, 77.

<sup>31</sup> McFague, *The Body of God*, 113.

<sup>32</sup> McFague, *The Body of God*, 113-114.



**b. *Salvation***

She explains that if sin is selfishness, salvation “is living appropriately on our planet, living as the one creature who can consciously help bring about God’s beloved community.”<sup>33</sup> Stressing God’s embodied presence or “divine abundance” in *this* world, she holds that humanity’s proper vocation is, not an other-worldly salvation of the self, but rather the “working with God toward the flourishing of all life in our home,” “planet Earth.”<sup>34</sup> She argues that as we work for the flourishing of creation, we are conforming to God’s will and living as disciples of Jesus Christ.<sup>35</sup> McFague holds that salvation is, in simplest terms, the well-being of bodies.<sup>36</sup> Given the common creation’s account of humanity as “profoundly responsible,” and as “God’s partners,” she argues that salvation is the process by which humans work with God for the well-being of bodies in this world. Stated differently, salvation is a “working for the flourishing of others.”<sup>37</sup>

**c. *Summary***

McFague argues that with the common creation story of postmodern knowledge and science, human beings come to see their interrelationality with (and dependence on) all life, as well as their special role as God’s partners in ensuring the well-being of creation. To not abide by our limitations as interrelational beings and to not accept our special role as caretakers is, she believes, the contemporary definition of sin. On the

---

<sup>33</sup> McFague, *Life Abundant*, 21.

<sup>34</sup> McFague, *Life Abundant*, 21. While McFague generally does not capitalize the word Earth, in this instance she does.

<sup>35</sup> See McFague, *Life Abundant*, 21-22.

<sup>36</sup> McFague, *The Body of God*, 18.

<sup>37</sup> McFague, *Life Abundant*, 22.

other hand, to live as Gods' partners and to work toward the flourishing of creation is to work toward salvation. She writes that this means that:

No longer should we speak of ourselves as children of a loving, all-powerful father who will take care of us and our planet. Nor can we continue to act like willful, brash adolescents out of control, as we have been doing in the modern story of scientism, militarism, individualism, and consumerism. We need to become who we really are, neither the possessor nor principal tenant of planet earth, but responsible adults, the only species on the planet that knows the common creation story and can assume our role as partners for its well-being.<sup>38</sup>

With her model of the world as God's body, she offers an image and a theological system that she believes will help humans be who they are according to the common creation story: conscious of their interrelationality with, and responsibility for, all forms of life.

### **(iii) God and The Relationship Between God and Creation**

McFague's model of the world as God's body paints a picture of God and the relationship between God and creation that she believes is commensurate with the common creation story and engenders in human beings an appreciation for the bodies of this world. As "a white, middle-class, American Christian woman writing to first-world, privileged, mainstream Christians (and other interested persons)," she particularly wants to help "those of us from this background and with the power it carries to begin to think and act differently, *to think and act as if bodies matter.*"<sup>39</sup> The model of the world as God's body stresses God's embodied presence in creation in order to engender and shape the kind of responsible living required of privileged Christians.

---

<sup>38</sup> McFague, *The Body of God*, 109.

<sup>39</sup> McFague, *the Body of God*, viii.

*a. The Body Model as Organic*

McFague explains further that the world as God's body is an organic model. This means two things. First, she explains that it is organic in that it is grounded in the image of the body as a living organism. She writes that her body model is similar to the Christian "classic" model of the church as Christ's body in the sense that they are both organic, that is, they are body-centered. However, she differentiates her organic model from the classic one because she believes the classic model has a tendency to be spiritualized, thus "excluding not only all of nature and most human beings but also the physical aspects of life, including sex and therefore, women."<sup>40</sup> Moreover, she criticizes the general assumption in the classic model that body means *one* (usually male human) body, which "underscores sameness, not difference, and, of course, the sameness in question is what derives from and benefits the head."<sup>41</sup> Heavily spiritualized, focused on (male) humanity to the exclusion of the rest of creation, highlighting sameness, and privileging mind over body, the classic organic model requires significant modification according to McFague.

Thus, drawing from the common creation story as it highlights embodiment in all its interconnected and differentiated forms, she reconstructs her body model in such a way that "[t]he body of God is not *a* body, but all the different, peculiar, particular bodies about us."<sup>42</sup> Stated another way: "The universe is a body ... but it is not a human body; rather, it is matter bodied forth seemingly infinitely, diversely, endlessly, yet internally as

---

<sup>40</sup> McFague, *The Body of God*, 35.

<sup>41</sup> McFague, *The Body of God*, 37.

<sup>42</sup> McFague, *The Body of God*, 211.

one.”<sup>43</sup> McFague’s organic body model accentuates the gritty mundane existence of all the distinct and interconnected bodies of this world, both human and otherwise.<sup>44</sup> When she talks about her body model as organic, then, she means to stress the interconnectedness and uniqueness of all embodied life.

Second, inasmuch as her organic body model says something not only about the world but also about God, she explains that it stresses God’s immanent presence in every interconnected and unique body of this world. She writes: “The universe as a whole as well as in each and every bit and fragment of it, God’s transcendence is embodied. The important word here is ‘embodied’: the transcendence of God is not available to us except as embodied.”<sup>45</sup> Indeed, the model of the world as God’s body indicates that we must be “satisfied with *mediated* experiences of divine transcendence.”<sup>46</sup>

Stressing the interconnected and unique bodies of this world, as well as God’s embodiment there, her organic body model is intended to engender responsible behavior in human beings – particularly privileged ones – toward the bodies of creation. Nonetheless, with its stress of God’s immanent embodiment in the world, McFague acknowledges that the organic side of her body model may be regarded by some as pantheistic.<sup>47</sup> To counter this potential danger, she writes that her body model is not only organic but also agential.

---

<sup>43</sup> McFague, *The Body of God*, 97.

<sup>44</sup> McFague writes: “We meet God in the nitty-gritty of our religious lives, for God is always present in every here and now” (*A New Climate for Theology*, 77).

<sup>45</sup> McFague, *The Body of God*, 133.

<sup>46</sup> McFague, *A New Climate for Theology*, 113.

<sup>47</sup> In *The Body of God, Life Abundant* and *A New Climate*, McFague finds it necessary to defend her model as panentheistic and not pantheistic. See, for example, *The Body of God*, 149 and *Life Abundant*, 149.

***b. The Body Model as Agential***

While the organic side of McFague's body model stresses God's immanent presence in the bodies of creation, the agential side is meant to preserve the distinction between God and creation by stressing the distinct agency of each. She believes that in refusing to conflate God's agency with the agency of humans or even with the agencies inherent in the evolutionary process, she has made room for God's transcendence.<sup>48</sup>

Hence, she writes:

The agential model preserves transcendence, while the organic model underscores immanence. Alone, the agential model overemphasizes the transcendent power and freedom of God at the expense of the world. Alone, the organic model tends to collapse God and the world, denying the freedom and individuality of both.<sup>49</sup>

At the root of her insistence that her body model is both organic and agential, then, is the conviction that it must be panentheistic. That is, it must abide by the fact that “[e]verything that is is *in* God and God is *in* all things and yet God is not identical with the universe, for the universe is dependent on God in a way that God is not dependent on the universe.”<sup>50</sup> She holds that in the body model, God is in the world and *visa versa*, but they also remain distinct (as in distinct agents).

In *The Body of God*, McFague illustrates the agential side of her body model by painting a picture in which “God is related to the world as spirit is to body.”<sup>51</sup> She

---

<sup>48</sup> See McFague, *The Body of God*, 145-146.

<sup>49</sup> McFague, *The Body of God*, 141. This is also the main reason she gives for upholding both the agential and organic aspects of the body model in *Life Abundant*. She explains: “The world as God’s body or the agential/organic model of God and the world is a form of panentheism. Whereas deism is an extreme form of theism (God as external to and distant from the world) and organism is an example of pantheism (the identification of God and the world), panentheism is an attempt to speak of God as both radically transcendent to *and* radically immanent in the world” (*Life Abundant*, 141).

<sup>50</sup> McFague, *The Body of God*, 149.

<sup>51</sup> McFague, *The Body of God*, 141.

believes this picture preserves the agency of both God and world within the model of the world as God's body.

By spirit, she means wind or breath, as in "Then the Lord God formed man [sic] from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life" (Gen. 2:7).<sup>52</sup> She likes the spirit/body analogy because, first, every person and every living thing is sustained by breath.<sup>53</sup> She explains that she prefers "spirit" to "self," "mind," "heart," "will," or "soul" precisely because it encompasses all life in its uniqueness and diversity, not only human life.<sup>54</sup> As such, spirit/breath "takes seriously the fecundity, diversity, range, and complexity of life and of life-supporting systems," a significant feature of the common creation story.<sup>55</sup>

Secondly, she likes the spirit/body analogy because she believes that if we understand God's agency in terms of spirit or breath, as that which enlivens and sustains all bodies of creation, neither God's nor creation's agency is compromised. McFague argues that this is not true for the mind/body analogy that is usually used to support body metaphors for God. She writes that the mind analogy is not only often dualistic, upholding a strong mind/body division, but "it implies that divine activity in relation to the world is primarily intellectual and controlling: God is Mind or Will."<sup>56</sup> This leads to the view that God has agency but creation does not, or that God controls everything. On the other hand, she holds that the spirit/body analogy suggests not control but empowerment, not God as the orderer of creation but God as the breath that energizes

---

<sup>52</sup> As quoted in *The Body of God*, 143-144.

<sup>53</sup> McFague explains: "Each of us, and each and every other part of the body as well, owes our existence, breath by breath as we inhale and exhale, to God. We 'live and move and have our being' in God (Acts 17:28)" (*The Body of God*, 144).

<sup>54</sup> McFague writes: "Only a human being has a mind or self, whereas spirit, while able to include mind and self, has a much broader range" (*The Body of God*, 144).

<sup>55</sup> McFague, *The Body of God*, 145.

<sup>56</sup> McFague, *The Body of God*, 144-145.

creation. The connection between God and creation, then, “is one of *relationship* at the deepest level, the level of life, rather than *control* at the level of ordering and directing nature.”<sup>57</sup>

She explains that God as the breath that sustains the body/bodies of this world means that God is present in the world but does not direct its history. Indeed, spirit/breath highlights “*empowerment*, not direction. It does not claim that God is guiding the process in general or in particular; rather, it suggests that *all* life, regardless of which individuals or species prosper, is dependent upon God.”<sup>58</sup> This means that life depends on God for its existence, that it is sustained by God, but that it is not controlled by God. For McFague, God’s agency gives life and empowers creation so that creation may act on its own agency.

However, she does qualify this double agency in one important way: after discussing the spirit/body analogy at length, she also talks about God the Holy Spirit as the one who guides and directs creation through the willing participation of self-conscious human beings. She writes that with the Holy Spirit working through us, “we become the mind and heart as well as the hands and feet of the body of God on our planet.”<sup>59</sup> With the image of the Holy Spirit, she allows an instance in which God directs history, but it entails the willing participation of human beings who take their responsibility for all life seriously. In our willing participation, she writes that evolution

---

<sup>57</sup> McFague, *The Body of God*, 145.

<sup>58</sup> McFague, *The Body of God*, 148.

<sup>59</sup> McFague, *The Body of God*, 148. For more on her understanding of the Holy Spirit, see Sallie McFague, “Holy Spirit,” in *Dictionary of Feminist Theologies*, ed. Letty Manderville Russell and J. Shannon Clarkson (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996), 146-147; and Claire Marie Westley, “The Spirit of Life: The Pneumatology of Jürgen Moltmann in Dialogue with the Feminist Theologies of the the Spirit of Elizabeth A. Johnson and Sallie McFague,” Ph.D. diss., The University of St. Michael’s College and Toronto School of Theology, 2006.

becomes more than just a biological process: “with self-conscious creatures it enters a historical, cultural phase,” and “divine purpose” enters the evolutionary process.<sup>60</sup>

Thus:

... we can say that God’s action as the spirit of the body is twofold. The spirit is the source of life, the breath of creation; at the same time, the Holy Spirit is the source of the renewal of life, the direction or purpose for all the bodies of the world – a goal characterized by inclusive love.<sup>61</sup>

With the picture of God as spirit/enlivening breath of creation, McFague illustrates the double agency that she believes is imperative for the model of the world as God’s body to be panentheistic. With the picture of God as Holy Spirit she allows God’s agency to enter history through the willing participation of self-conscious human beings, that is, through human beings willing to offer their own agency to God’s direction.<sup>62</sup> Indeed, as she writes in *A New Climate for Theology*, “[t]he only difference between us and the rest of creation is that the others reflect God, tell of God, simply by being, whereas we must will that it be so.”<sup>63</sup> In either case, whether through the image of God breathing through all creation or the Holy Spirit directing it through willing human beings, she believes she has preserved the agential side of her body model.

After *The Body of God*, McFague occasionally returns to the pictures of God as spirit and as Holy Spirit to portray the distinction between God and creation (agency) while preserving God’s immanent presence (breath, direction) in the world. As they are only pictures and not descriptions, she also plays with other images to make the same point. For example, while in *Life Abundant* she continues to write that God is “the breath that gives life, the spirit that transforms it,” she writes that “I also find metaphors such as

---

<sup>60</sup> McFague, *The Body of God*, 148.

<sup>61</sup> McFague, *The Body of God*, 149.

<sup>62</sup> This giving up of our will to God becomes part of the spirituality of restraint that she describes in her most recent theology. See part C (ii) b in this chapter for more on this.

<sup>63</sup> McFague, *A New Climate for Theology*, 161.



spirit, life, light, water, and truth, which are impersonal or less personal, significant ways to express belief in God as love, as the source of creation's flourishing."<sup>64</sup> Nonetheless, her point remains the same: God's agency and the world's agency are not in competition. Her theology does not say, "'The more God, the less world,' or 'the more world, the less God.' Rather, it says, 'The more God, the more world,' and *visa versa*. We, the world, flourish *in* God, *only* in God, and *fully* in God."<sup>65</sup> In McFague's body model, God enlivens creation, directs it through willing humanity, but does not overcome it. In other words, God is immanent yet distinct from the world.

### *c. Summary*

McFague argues that her model of the world as God's body paints a picture of God and the relationship between God and creation that is commensurate with the common creation story and good for planetary well-being today. She holds that it is organic in that it highlights God's immanent presence in the unique and interrelated bodies of creation, and it is agential in that it preserves the distinct agency of both God and world. By accentuating both the organic and agential aspects of her body model, McFague believes she has shown her model to be panentheistic.

Moreover, both the organic and agential sides of her body model are meant to highlight the kind of human behavior that she believes is imperative for planetary well-being. The organic side says that we encounter God by paying attention to, listening, loving, and caring for worldly bodies. The agential side says that if we are willing to be the mind and heart as well as the hands and feet of God's body on our planet, if we are indeed willing to pay attention to and care for worldly bodies, we become the agents of

---

<sup>64</sup> McFague, *Life Abundant*, 18.

<sup>65</sup> McFague, *A New Climate for Theology*, 164.

“divine purpose” in the evolutionary process. In other words, McFague’s model of the world as God’s body paints a picture that engenders an anthropology commensurate with the common creation story. It encourages an anthropology in which “we have been decentered as God’s darlings, and recentered as God’s partners, the ones who can help work for a just and sustainable planet.”<sup>66</sup>

With her Christology, McFague continues to elucidate the ways humans should act in their role as God’s partners. Challenging “the long antibody, antiphysical, antimatter tradition within Christianity,”<sup>67</sup> and drawing instead on Christianity’s image of God incarnate, she develops a Christology that stresses God’s immanence in creation and, therefore, the need for humans to care for that creation.

#### **(iv) Christology**

McFague’s Christology is an articulation of her model of the world as God’s body through a Christian lens. She draws her Christology from the Christian tradition inasmuch as it stresses God’s embodied presence in creation. She explains:

Christianity is the religion of the incarnation par excellence. Its earliest and most persistent doctrines focus on embodiment: from the incarnation (the Word made flesh) and Christology (Christ was fully human) to the eucharist (this is my body, this is my blood), the resurrection of the body, and the church (the body of Christ who is its head), Christianity has been a religion of the body.<sup>68</sup>

Interpreting Christianity as a religion of the body, then, she approaches her Christology as indicative not only of God’s incarnation in Jesus Christ, but of God’s incarnation in all worldly bodies. That is, she argues that Jesus Christ is paradigmatic of God’s

---

<sup>66</sup> McFague, *A New Climate for Theology*, 58-59.

<sup>67</sup> McFague, “Imaging A Theology of Nature,” 215.

<sup>68</sup> McFague, *The Body of God*, 14.

embodiment everywhere. The emphasis of her particular appropriation of the Christian tradition, then, falls on God's immanent presence in creation. She writes:

The world (universe) as God's body is also, then, a radicalization of divine immanence, for God is not present to us in just one place (Jesus of Nazareth, although also and especially, paradigmatically there), but in and through all bodies, the bodies of the sun and moon, trees and rivers, animals, and people. The scandal of the gospel is that the Word became flesh; the radicalization of incarnation sees Jesus not as a surd, an enigma, but as a paradigm or culmination of the divine way of enfleshment.<sup>69</sup>

Likewise, in her "Credo" in *Life Abundant*, she writes:

When I confess that Jesus is the Christ, I am saying that he is paradigmatic of what we see everywhere and always: God with us, God with and for *all* of us, all creatures, all worldly processes and events. ... If incarnation were limited to Jesus of Nazareth, it would not only be a surd (and hence, absurd), but paltry in comparison to God's embodiment in all of creation.<sup>70</sup>

McFague's Christology holds that Jesus is paradigmatic of God's enfleshment everywhere. Hence, she is not sympathetic to traditional claims of Christ's uniqueness.

**a. *Christ as Paradigmatic, Not Unique***

She writes that the belief that "[t]he creator and redeemer of the fifteen-billion-year history of the universe ... is available only in a thirty-year span of one human being's life on planet earth ... [is] skewed."<sup>71</sup> She goes on to say that, in its traditional form, the claim of Christ's uniqueness "is not only offensive to the integrity and value of other religions, but incredible, indeed, absurd ... It is not remotely compatible with our current picture of the universe."<sup>72</sup> Drawing her theology from the common creation story, she sees no room for the uniqueness of Christ. Besides, as she explains in *Life*

---

<sup>69</sup> McFague, *The Body of God*, 133.

<sup>70</sup> McFague, *Life Abundant*, 20.

<sup>71</sup> McFague, *The Body of God*, 159.

<sup>72</sup> McFague, *The Body of God*, 159.

*Abundant*, McFague believes traditional Christology does little more than appease individuals psychologically, leaving the economic status quo not only unchallenged but in fact religiously supported. She explains:

If God is present only in Jesus and if Jesus “does it all,” then we do not have to meet God in the face of the starving person or in the remains of a clear-cut forest, nor do we have to help that starving person or that devastated forest. We can confine God to Jesus and Jesus’ work of forgiving human sins. This theology is convenient for an economic paradigm that does not want religion intruding into economic matters: here God is concerned primarily with individuals and their personal failings.<sup>73</sup>

She believes that the end result of this traditional understanding of the incarnation is, quite simply, that it limits God and excuses us. Indeed, she warns her readers not to fall into the trap of “Jesusolatry.”<sup>74</sup>

Instead, she studies Jesus’ incarnation, ministry, death, and resurrection for the clues it offers about the ways God is embodied in the world, and consequently, the ways human beings should treat bodies.<sup>75</sup> She explains that Jesus as paradigmatic of God’s enfleshment everywhere gives shape and scope to her body model. To that end, she suggests two interrelated moves with respect to her Christology: “the first is to relativize the incarnation in relation to Jesus of Nazareth and the second is to maximize it in relation to the cosmos.”<sup>76</sup> She speaks of the first move in terms of the “shape” of God’s body, and the second in terms of its “scope.” In both cases, there are specific implications for human action.

---

<sup>73</sup> McFague, *Life Abundant*, 159.

<sup>74</sup> McFague, *Life Abundant*, 159.

<sup>75</sup> For more on the way McFague’s understanding of Jesus as the paradigm of God, see Schrein, *Quilting and Braiding*, 37-47; and Warren McWilliams, “Christic Paradigm And Cosmic Christ: Ecological Christology in the Theologies of Sallie McFague and Jürgen Moltmann,” *Perspectives in Religious Studies* 25 no. 4 (1998): 341-355. For a sympathetic critique of this position, see Harold Wells, “The Flesh of God: Christological Implications for an Ecological Vision of the World,” *Toronto Journal of Theology* 15 no. 1 (1999): 59.

<sup>76</sup> McFague, *The Body of God*, 162.

**b. *The Shape of God's Body (Christology Relativized)***

McFague writes that the incarnation of Jesus shows that the shape of God's body takes the form of "oppressed, vulnerable, suffering *bodies*."<sup>77</sup> Jesus was incarnated among the poor and vulnerable, his destabilizing parables sided with the outcast, he healed people, and he ate with them.<sup>78</sup> At every turn he took care of the physical needs of bodies, especially those of the needy.<sup>79</sup> Therefore, "[t]he story of Jesus suggests that the shape of God's body includes all, especially the needy and outcast."<sup>80</sup>

For McFague, the shape of God's body means that Christians must take special care not only of the human needy and outcast, but also of nature, the "new poor." She explains:

... nature as the new poor means that *we have made nature poor*. ... It means that nature needs to be liberated and healed because *we* have enslaved it and made it sick. This perspective claims that in the twentieth century on our planet, human beings have caused nature to be the new poor in the same way that a small elite of the human population has created and continues to create the old poor – through a gross imbalance of the haves and the have-nots. Those "other" people (the old poor) and nature (the new poor) are, in both cases, the "for our use."<sup>81</sup>

She holds that "[w]hile there is little in the New Testament about nature (and it is futile to rummage about with fig trees and hens, trying to make Jesus into a nature lover), his

---

<sup>77</sup> McFague, *The Body of God*, 164; see also *Super, Natural Christians*, 15.

<sup>78</sup> McFague, *The Body of God*, 167-170.

<sup>79</sup> Talking about the stories of Jesus' healings, McFague writes: "The healing metaphor for salvation is a modest claim. It does not suggest ecstatic fulfillment of all desires but rather preservation from destruction or, at most, the restoration to adequate bodily functioning" (*The Body of God*, 168). In this way, the stories of Jesus' healings show the importance of caring for bodily needs.

Talking about Jesus' eating stories, she writes: "Jesus' eating stories and practices suggest that physical needs are basic and must be met – food is not a metaphor here but should be taken literally. All creatures deserve what is basic to bodily health" (Ibid., 169). Her point is that food is so basic to life (indeed, without it we die) that we should not move too quickly to its metaphorical meaning. She does say that, in fact, food is also metaphorical: it "serves as a metaphor of fulfillment at the deepest level of our longings and desires" (Ibid., 169-170). But for McFague it is fundamentally important that we not bypass the basic bodily need for food, which she says Jesus repeatedly acknowledged.

<sup>80</sup> McFague, *The Body of God*, 164. The italics, as always, are hers.

<sup>81</sup> McFague, *The Body of God*, 166.

ministry to the oppressed can be extended to nature;”<sup>82</sup> she clearly thinks it must. She writes that for Christians the call of Matthew 25:31-46 includes not only the human oppressed, but also oppressed nature: “Just as in the face of a suffering child, woman, or man, Christians see the face of Christ, so also there is a trace of that face in a clear-cut forest, an inner-city landfill, or a polluted river.”<sup>83</sup>

Therefore, McFague argues that Jesus’ incarnate existence elucidates the shape of God’s body as especially inclusive of vulnerable humanity and nature. Taken seriously, she believes the shape of God’s body has the power to transform human action in the world and even to change the course of evolution. She explains:

Jesus voiced a yes in the stories we have of his life and death: human beings can *choose* to side with the vulnerable and the outcast. Evolution is not only or solely biological; it is also historical and cultural. Once evolutionary history reaches the human, self-conscious stage, natural selection is not the only operative principle, for natural selection can be countered with the principle of solidarity.<sup>84</sup>

When McFague discusses the shape of God’s body, relativizing the incarnation to include vulnerable humans and nature especially, she means to say something very central about the way human beings should act in the world: as siding with the oppressed and taking responsibility for the direction of evolution from this point forward.

---

<sup>82</sup> McFague, *Life Abundant*, 167. McFague says something very similar in “An Ecological Christology: Does Christianity Have It?,” in *Christianity and Ecology: Seeking the Well-Being of Earth and Humans*, ed. Dieter T. Hessel and Rosemary Radford Ruether (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000), 35. In her response to this essay, Kwok Pui-Lan challenges McFague’s statement that “there is little in Jesus’ teachings about nature.” Kwok writes: “My reading of the New Testament and especially the Gospels is quite the opposite. Jesus himself uses nature in his parables and teachings a lot, and Paul speaks about the groaning and moaning of creation. Furthermore, coming from an East Asian cultural background, I do not think these natural images are just rhetorical devices or embellishments of Jesus’ teaching because I think they are an inseparable part of his message” (“Response to Sallie McFague,” in *Christianity and Ecology*, 48).

<sup>83</sup> McFague, *Super, Natural Christians*, 174.

<sup>84</sup> McFague, *The Body of God*, 171. Here McFague points to Pierre Teilhard de Chardin as “[o]ne of the first to recognize what is now broadly accepted, namely, the importance of cultural evolution as a further stage beyond biological evolution, as well as a counterforce to it” (Ibid., 257, nt. 10).

**c. *The Scope of God's Body (Christology Maximized)***

Just as McFague illustrates the shape of God's body in Jesus' care for the physical needs of the oppressed, so she illuminates the scope of God's body through the model of the resurrected Cosmic Christ. She explains that "[t]he resurrected Christ is the cosmic Christ, the Christ freed from the body of Jesus of Nazareth, to be present in and to all bodies."<sup>85</sup> She holds that the Cosmic Christ is paradigmatic of God's presence in all bodies. For McFague, to see the Cosmic Christ as the paradigm of God's inclusive love means that "[a]ll are included, not only in their liberation and healing, but also in their defeat and despair."<sup>86</sup> As such, she holds that the scope of God's body is limitless as it encompasses all worldly bodies at all times, even during times of despair.

To say that God is present in all worldly bodies at all times means for McFague that the world is important. It is in the world that salvation takes place.<sup>87</sup> It is in the world that humans must work for the flourishing of creation.<sup>88</sup> She writes that "[t]he scope of God's power and love is cosmological; it must include every scrap of creation."<sup>89</sup> Thus, the scope of God's body indicates that humans should treat every single body in creation as intrinsically important and valuable.

**d. *Summary***

McFague writes that "[i]f God is always incarnate, then Christians should attend to the model of the world as God's body. For Christians, God did not become human on a whim; rather, it is God's nature to be embodied, to be the One in whom we live and

---

<sup>85</sup> McFague, *The Body of God*, 179.

<sup>86</sup> McFague, *The Body of God*, 179.

<sup>87</sup> See McFague, *The Body of God*, 182.

<sup>88</sup> McFague, *Life Abundant*, 186.

<sup>89</sup> McFague, *Life Abundant*, 169.

move and have our being.’<sup>90</sup> With her Christology, McFague shows how the body model is commensurate with the Christian tradition. In fact, with her Christology she indicates how the Christian tradition, when appropriated as a religion of the body, actually gives shape and scope to her body model. By relativizing the person of Jesus, who became incarnate among the poor, who sided with the outcast, and who healed and fed the physical bodies of the needy, she indicates that the shape of God’s body is especially apparent with those who suffer, both human and in nature. By maximizing the resurrected cosmic Christ, who is present in every scrap and moment of creation, she indicates that there are absolutely no limits to the scope of God’s body. The implications of McFague’s Christology for human action are clear: we must attend to the bodies of creation realizing that our encounter with God entails a profound encounter with, and care for, the physical bodies of this world, especially oppressed and suffering bodies.<sup>91</sup>

#### **(v) Conclusion**

Built as a theology of nature, McFague’s body theology reconstructs Christian anthropology, the relationship between God and creation, and Christology by drawing especially from the lessons of the common creation story. With this story, she highlights our need to recognize that humans are both highly dependent on other life forms for our survival (e.g. trees), and also, because of our self-consciousness, profoundly responsible for the flourishing of creation. Describing her body model as both organic (stressing

---

<sup>90</sup> McFague, “Is God in Charge?,” 110.

<sup>91</sup> Indeed, McFague writes: “The world as we have come to know it through the common creation story cannot be saved by Christianity or any other religion, but Christians have some special contributions to make to the planetary agenda. As the incarnational religion *par excellence*, Christianity can offer its basic belief in divine enfleshment, its theology of embodiment in which God, human beings, and everything else in the cosmos are knit together. Christianity can also offer to the planetary agenda its vision of the liberation, healing, and inclusion of the oppressed, and in our day that must include vulnerable nature.” (*The Body of God*, 207).



God's embodiment in every particular body of creation) and agential (preserving the agency of both God and world), she indicates that as we work for the flourishing of worldly bodies, we are caring for God who is embodied there, and acting as willing agents of God's purpose in the evolutionary process. With her Christology, she then shows that, if we relativize Jesus of Nazareth and maximize the Cosmic Christ, Christians in particular must come to see that caring for God's body entails perceiving the divine presence in every single body and providing for the physical, material needs of those bodies which suffer. With the assumption – established in the lessons of the common creation story – that human beings are God's partners in creation, McFague builds a functional theology intended to help us live our very special role.

Though she never loses sight of the fact that the body model, with its corresponding theological system, is metaphorical, she nonetheless thinks that it is valuable “for our time (as well as being in continuity with the Christian incarnational tradition) because it encourages us to focus on the neighborhood,” that is, on the bodies before us.<sup>92</sup> McFague thinks contemporary privileged Christians are especially unpracticed in this focus on worldly bodies other than their own. To help them develop this practice, then, she discusses an intellectual meditation, based on the body model, that she believes will help them turn their attention to the bodies of this world. We now turn to an explanation of this body meditation.

---

<sup>92</sup> McFague, “Intimate Creation,” 42.

## B. Body Meditation

In *The Body of God*, McFague occasionally describes the model of the world as God's body as a form of meditation that brings our attention to the physical, material world. For example:

But the model of the universe as God's body is, as I hope to show, a way to think about, reflect upon, divine transcendence – a way to deepen its significance to us. It is a form of meditation: the more we contemplate *any* aspect of our universe and especially our own planet, the more we know about it, delve into it, the more mysterious and wondrous it appears.<sup>93</sup>

This is an intellectual meditation; it is meant to help us think and therefore act differently with respect to other bodies. It is meant to help privileged Christians especially to see God in the particular embodiments of this world: “[w]e are asked to contemplate the visible universe, God's body, as the place where the surpassing, extraordinary character of divine presence is to be found.”<sup>94</sup> She develops the meditation, then, with very functional outcomes in mind: to help people, and Christians in particular, keep their attention on the glory and needs of this world.

However, it would seem that this intellectual, functional meditation has come to affect her in profoundly spiritual ways. That is, by meditating on the bodies of this world as her body model requires, she has actually, and even to her own surprise and delight, come to experience God as love. Therefore, while her conception of the meditation was intellectual and functional, I believe it also provides a window into the spirituality that has shaped McFague's theology, particularly through her ecological, constructivist stage.

---

<sup>93</sup> McFague, *The Body of God*, 21.

<sup>94</sup> McFague, *The Body of God*, 154.

### (i) McFague's Explanation of the Body Meditation

McFague explains her body meditation in light of Exodus 33:23b. She argues that just as when Moses asks to see God's glory, and God replies "And you shall see my back; but my face shall not be seen," so we do not see God's face but rather God's back in the humble bodies of this world.<sup>95</sup>

#### a. *Panentheistic Meditation*

That we can only see God's back and not God's glory means for McFague that, first, the world cannot contain God; it cannot encapsulate the depths of divine radiance. For as much as she stresses the embodiment of the divine, she does not believe that the divine is exhausted in being embodied in the world. This is an important point to make because with her stress on divine embodiment, she believes that her body model is in danger of being regarded as pantheistic.<sup>96</sup> Even with her differentiation of God and world in terms of agency (the agential side of her body model), she holds that her meditation on the embodiment of divine transcendence would be pantheistic if in fact it stated that we could see God's grandeur, or God's face, in the bodies of this world. She explains:

Pantheism says that God is embodied, necessarily and totally; traditional theism claims that God is disembodied, necessarily and totally; panentheism suggests that God is embodied but not necessarily or totally. Rather, God is sacramentally embodied: God is mediated, expressed, in and through embodiment, but not necessarily or totally. It is, as we recall, the back and not the face of God that we are allowed to see.<sup>97</sup>

---

<sup>95</sup> McFague, *The Body of God*, 131.

<sup>96</sup> See, for example, McFague, *The Body of God*, 149 and *Life Abundant*, 149.

<sup>97</sup> McFague, *The Body of God*, 149-150.

With Exodus 33:23b, then, McFague qualifies the extent to which divine transcendence is embodied in the world so as to ensure that her body model and our meditation on the model remain panentheistic.

***b. Mediated Meditation***

The second and perhaps more important reason she talks about the body meditation in terms of Exodus 33:23b is to emphasize that the only way we encounter God in creation is through the mediation of physical bodies. In other words, she holds that “the entire cosmos is the habitat of God, but we know this only through the mediation of the physical world.”<sup>98</sup> Just as with her metaphorical theology she refuses the possibility of direct access to God (or reality-as-it-is) in language, so with her back-side meditation she refuses the possibility of an unmediated experience of God, who is ultimately mystery. Nonetheless, to have to rely on bodies for the mediation of our encounter with divine transcendence is wonderful from McFague’s perspective, because it forces us to pay attention to and care for worldly bodies. Paying attention to and caring for bodies is the key to her body meditation. As such, she writes:

Like Moses, when we ask, “Show me your glory,” we might see the humble bodies of our own planet as visible signs of the invisible grandeur. Not the face, not the depths of divine radiance, but enough, more than enough. We might begin to see (for the first time, perhaps) the marvels at our feet and at our fingertips: the intricate splendor of an Alpine forget-me-not or a child’s hand. ... We might see ourselves and everything else as the living body of God. We would, then, have an entire planet that reflects the glory, the very being – although not the face – of God.<sup>99</sup>

McFague’s body meditation stresses that when we encounter divinity in embodied creation we may not see the face or the depth of divine radiance, “but enough, more than

---

<sup>98</sup> McFague, *The Body of God*, 183.

<sup>99</sup> McFague, *The Body of God*, 131-132.

enough.” She repeatedly states that such a mediated experience of divinity is consistent with a radicalized understanding of the incarnation.<sup>100</sup>

As she practices this mediated form of God-contemplation in her ecological, constructivist stage, McFague becomes increasingly exuberant and extravagant in her practice of perceiving the breath of God in every embodied form. By *A New Climate for Theology* (2008), she refers to this mediated practice as mysticism: “Mysticism is radical incarnationalism, seeing God in the flesh *everywhere*. Mysticism is delight in things and in God; it is seeing, hearing, tasting, smelling, touching God everywhere and in everything, but *only* in and through all of these wonderful creatures.”<sup>101</sup> She is so enthralled by this mediated form of God contemplation that she asks: “Who would want a disembodied mysticism?”<sup>102</sup>

Ultimately, McFague writes, “we meet God not face-to-face, but by way of God’s ‘back side,’ the world, in its sticky, deteriorating, suffering condition. It is a prophetic cry to attend to a dimension of the divine, the world, that desperately needs our total attention and energies.”<sup>103</sup> She holds that we perceive “intimations of transcendence” in paying attention to and caring for the immanent bodies of creation: “‘Back side’ theology finds the glory of God in the beauty of the earth and in service to our neighbor.”<sup>104</sup> Back

---

<sup>100</sup> For example, she writes: “Incarnationalism, radicalized, means that we do not ever, at least in this life, see God face to face, but only through the mediation of the bodies we pay attention to, listen to, and learn to love and care for” (*The Body of God*, 135).

<sup>101</sup> McFague, *A New Climate for Theology*, 164. Catherine Keller reinforces McFague’s embodied mysticism as she writes: “Without some metaphor of the world as God’s body, ‘God’ becomes for me a gallery of distant icons, a rehearsal of relentless projections, or a minefield of apocalyptic contestations. In other words, ‘God’ becomes a disembodied abstraction (“The Flesh of God: A Metaphor in the Wild,” in *Theology That Matters*, 91).

<sup>102</sup> McFague, *A New Climate for Theology*, 164.

<sup>103</sup> McFague, *A New Climate for Theology*, 117.

<sup>104</sup> McFague, *A New Climate for Theology*, 113. She discusses intimations of transcendence briefly at the end of *The Body of God* (pgs. 156-57). In her most recent theology, the subject becomes more prominent – see, for example, *A New Climate for Theology*, Chapter Six, 101-120; and “Intimations of Transcendence,” 151-168.

side theology – or perhaps better said, back side meditation – is a prophetic call to attend to the bodies of this earth.

*c. Meditation Based on Metaphor*

When McFague discusses her body meditation, she does so in the context of Exodus 33:23b in order to indicate that embodiment cannot encapsulate divine glory, and that our experience of God is mediated through bodies and therefore that we must pay attention to and care for these bodies. But with Exodus 33:23b she also means to weaken the very body model on which her meditation is based, lest anyone confuse it for description. Recall that what makes a metaphor or model good or viable is not its ability to describe God or reality-as-it-is, but rather its ability to shock people into new insight and action. McFague’s meditation on the body model is meant to help us perceive divine transcendence, or, metaphorically speaking, God’s breath, in every immanent body of creation. It is meant to help us live as if God were truly incarnate in these bodies.

McFague understands that, as metaphorical, her body model “will have assets and liabilities and will provide, at best, only one perspective. It will allow us to see some things and it will screen out others; it will take one aspect of our experience and use it as a lens through which to see other aspects.”<sup>105</sup> She knows that her model will be partial and imperfect. By way of example, we might point out that despite her careful stress on the agential and back side qualities of her body model in order to distinguish God from creation, and her continued insistence that her model is panentheistic, in her later work she recognizes that the model may approximate pantheism. Yet she is willing to accept

---

<sup>105</sup> McFague, *The Body of God*, 22.

the threat of pantheism if the model helps people care more for the bodies of the earth.

She explains:

In order to underscore the immanence of God in the world, this model prefers to entertain the threat of pantheism in preference to the tradition's lapse into deism. Since our theologies will always be "wrong," is it better to err on the side of the presence or the absence of God? An incarnational theology opts for presence, with all of the caveats, qualifications, and negations that metaphor necessitates.<sup>106</sup>

In a late personal account of her own experience of becoming "outrageously sacramental," she even writes that "I feel as if I live within the divine milieu and can worship God in the intricacies, specialness, and particularity of each thing. I am not even afraid of pantheism; the line between God and the world is fuzzy."<sup>107</sup>

In truth, even as she becomes unafraid of pantheism, she continues to assert that the model of the world as God's body is panentheistic.<sup>108</sup> Nonetheless, the point here is that *even if* the model has tended toward pantheism, it does not entirely matter, for it was never intended as a description of God and the relationship between God and creation.<sup>109</sup> McFague's model of the world as God's body is nothing more and nothing less than an invitation to live *as if* bodies matter, as if they were indeed the main attraction. It provides a form of meditation that takes its chance at perceiving divine transcendence in the immanent bodies of creation, for the sake of engendering compassion for these bodies in the hearts of human beings.

McFague argues that *if* we are willing to meditate in this way, a kind of certainty takes over. She writes:

---

<sup>106</sup> McFague, *A New Climate for Theology*, 114-115.

<sup>107</sup> McFague, *A New Climate for Theology*, 120.

<sup>108</sup> See, for example, McFague, *A New Climate for Theology*, 115.

<sup>109</sup> Hence, Lucy Tatman rightfully points out that "[i]n characterizing divine transcendence as that which is beyond human interpretation, as that which can never be reduced to or expressed through human linguistic constructs, McFague denies a completely immanent reading of her model of the cosmos as God's body" (*Knowledge That Matters*, 246).

All is divine, even this earth and its creatures, in ways we do not understand but of which we can become increasingly certain. And how does one become certain? Not by thinking or even believing, but by living within the world *as if it were the body of God*.<sup>110</sup>

Yet she adds one important caveat about this certainty:

The “certainty” of metaphorical theology is not in its assertions but in the opportunity it provides to live differently. It allows “the world as God’s body” to try its chance at serving as our way of being in the world. It is bold in filling out what life would be like within such a model, but modest in its claim of whether or not it is true. It is, at best, a faith, a hope, a possibility.<sup>111</sup>

McFague holds that all models will be wrong to some degree, for they are only distorted mirrors and back side attempts to imagine the divine-world relationship. However, she has faith in her body model and on the opportunity a meditation on the body model provides for changing the minds and actions of human beings. More to the point, she has faith in the functional opportunity her meditation provides for people to live differently in the world today.

### **(ii) The Impact of the Body Meditation on McFague**

Nonetheless, for as much as McFague stresses the functional capabilities of her body model and its accompanying meditation, it is worth noting that this body meditation has also profoundly impacted her own spiritual life. In Chapter One, I pointed to a tension that only grows in her ecological, constructivist theology, between the “is not” and the increasing boldness of the “is,” particularly as it pertains to the model of the world as God’s body. In this section, I argue that one of the reasons the “is” of her body model becomes so much bolder is because she begins to experience, in a spiritual and profound way, that the world *is* God’s body, that God is truly incarnated in the world.

---

<sup>110</sup> McFague, *A New Climate for Theology*, 113.

<sup>111</sup> McFague, *A New Climate for Theology*, 120.



After years of meditating on God's invisible grandeur in the visible universe, she comes to experience a type of "certainty" about God's presence in the world.

Coming to this experience was no small feat for McFague. In various places she writes about the love she had for nature even at an early age,<sup>112</sup> but she also explains that upon reading Karl Barth's *Commentary on Romans* in college, God and world become so distinct in her mind that "only 'the Word' that reached my ears conveyed the presence of God, never the sights before my eyes."<sup>113</sup> The effect of Barth was not entirely negative; she writes that it split wide open her "boxed-in, comfortable, tribal notion of God," and, "like a cold, blazing mountain wind, the awesome presence of the divine brushed my life."<sup>114</sup> But she explains that reading Barth – and we might guess that her subsequent training in radical monotheism only exacerbated this<sup>115</sup> – "created a dualism in my belief and actions that sent me on a long detour, a detour in which the world was not *in* God and God was not *with* the world."<sup>116</sup>

She says that her way back came through nature. She became a hiker, and though she did not initially see God in the trail, she did find a sense of belonging there, a feeling of coming home. After many years, she writes, "[w]hat had been an experience of overwhelming and distant transcendence became one of equally awesome but now immanent and intimate transcendence."<sup>117</sup> She states that she first came to understand that God was manifest in and through and with the earth through her experience of nature, and only eventually came to understand God's ubiquitous presence in terms of the

---

<sup>112</sup> See, for example, McFague, *The Body of God*, 209; and *Super, Natural Christians*, 122-123.

<sup>113</sup> McFague, *The Body of God*, 208.

<sup>114</sup> McFague, *Life Abundant*, 5.

<sup>115</sup> See McFague, *Life Abundant*, 5-6.

<sup>116</sup> McFague, *Life Abundant*, 6.

<sup>117</sup> McFague, *Life Abundant*, 6.

incarnation. However, it seems to me that something else gave her the eyes to see God in nature and the incarnation in all embodied creation: this something was the willingness to abide by her own model of the world as God's body. Her own words point to this argument.

In a brief autobiography in *Life Abundant* (2001), McFague explains that she has had four conversions in her life, "four experiences of such importance that they changed my thinking about God and my behavior."<sup>118</sup> The first took place when she was seven; it began with the realization of her own finitude and resulted in a sense of wonder "for life in all its incredible shapes, colors, and sizes."<sup>119</sup> Her second conversion happened in college while reading Karl Barth's *Commentary on Romans*: "Suddenly the transcendence of God took on a whole new meaning for me."<sup>120</sup> The third was when she read Kaufman's 1982 Presidential Address to the American Academy of Religion, which, as we saw in Chapter One, motivated her to formulate her heuristic theology. She writes that this third conversion was intellectual and theological, as well as vocational. It was at this time that she became an "activist theologian," helping people, "especially Christians, shift from an anthropocentric to a cosmological paradigm."<sup>121</sup> It was in this stage that McFague first articulated the model of the world as God's body, with its implication that "[w]e meet God in the body of the world."<sup>122</sup> That the body model had a profound effect on her is undeniable: every book after her heuristic stage is suffused with talk of divine enfleshment. Though her third conversion was more intellectual than spiritual, it allowed

---

<sup>118</sup> McFague, *Life Abundant*, 4.

<sup>119</sup> McFague, *Life Abundant*, 5.

<sup>120</sup> McFague, *Life Abundant*, 5.

<sup>121</sup> McFague, *Life Abundant*, 7.

<sup>122</sup> McFague, *Models of God*, 184.

her to formulate the model by which she could later come to actually experience God as embodied in the world.

Her fourth conversion was intentionally spiritual, the result of feeling that in spite of her intellectual and theological conversion after reading Kaufman, a problem remained: “a piece was missing. That piece was me.”<sup>123</sup> She writes that her fourth conversion occurred in her sixties, which means sometime after the publication of *The Body of God*, well into her ecological, constructivist stage. She explains this conversion as follows:

My fourth conversion has been something like Bonhoeffer’s sense of becoming contemporary with God. Finally, after years of talking *about* God (what theologians are paid to do!), I am becoming acquainted *with* God. This conversion has occurred quite deliberately: I engaged a spiritual director and have undertaken a daily pattern of meditation. I am doing what is called “practicing the presence of God,” setting aside time for relating to God. To say that it has been instructive would be a gross understatement; it has been revelatory. Revelation, as I now see it, is God’s loving self-disclosure, and that is what I have experienced. I am meeting *God* and God is *love*. How outrageous as well as platitudinous that sounds! I can scarcely believe I am writing it, let alone intending to publish it. Why am I doing so? Simply because it is true; it is what has happened, is happening, to me.<sup>124</sup>

Her fourth conversion required the deliberate decision to engage a spiritual director and to undertake a daily pattern of meditation. The result has been astounding for McFague:

Over the decades separating my six-year-old self from my sixty-plus-year-old self, the mystery [of life] has been revealed to me – or so it seems, at least. I quote from an entry in my journal: “I feel as though I finally understand what life is about. It is, quite simply, acknowledging how things are – living in the truth. And the truth is that God is the source and sustainer of everything.” Since I have undertaken the daily practice of prayer, I have gradually felt my center, the center of my being, shifting from myself to God. From the burdensome task of trying to ground myself in myself, I have let go and allowed God to become the One in and for whom I live. ...

---

<sup>123</sup> McFague, *Life Abundant*, 7.

<sup>124</sup> McFague, *Life Abundant*, 8.

The overwhelming emotion that I have experienced from this revelation of the mystery of things – from meeting God and knowing that God is love – is similar to Ebenezer Scrooge’s on Christmas Day. He kicked up his heels, exclaiming, “I didn’t miss it after all!” I feel this way. In the sixth decade of my life I have been invited on a new journey, which seems like a great adventure, perhaps the greatest adventure of which human beings are capable.<sup>125</sup>

This account of her fourth conversion indicates just how profound the effect of meeting God and knowing that God is love has had on McFague. It explains in part why, in her more recent work, she can be “outrageously sacramental” and uninhibited in her love for the God embodied in our world. From her fourth conversion she has come to understand that it is alright to be excessive: “one can’t love God *too much*.”<sup>126</sup>

The question remains: What is the daily pattern of meditation, the “practicing the presence of God,” that McFague has undertaken as part of her fourth conversion? Given everything she has written concerning the model of the world as God’s body, and given her pronounced love for nature, I would venture to guess that practicing the presence of God means, more specifically, practicing the presence of God in every encounter with embodied creation. Her daily pattern of meditation has entailed, in other words, the very body meditation she described in *The Body of God*, where “[t]he more we meditated on these bits of the divine body, the more intricate, different, and special each would become.”<sup>127</sup> Indeed, her autobiography in *Life Abundant* confirms this view, as she explains that contemplating God is never an either/or – God or the world.<sup>128</sup>

In *The Body of God* McFague explains that meditation on the body model “is neither otherworldly nor abstract, but is a this-worldly, concrete form of contemplating

---

<sup>125</sup> McFague, *Life Abundant*, 8-9.

<sup>126</sup> McFague, *Life Abundant*, 10.

<sup>127</sup> McFague, *The Body of God*, 132.

<sup>128</sup> McFague, *Life Abundant*, 10.

divine magnificence. ... And it is based on the assumption, central to the Christian tradition, that God not only is not afraid of the flesh but loves it, *becomes* it.”<sup>129</sup> Indeed, she holds that according to the body model and incarnational understanding of creation, contemplating God entails contemplating the “intricacies, specialness, and particularity of each thing”<sup>130</sup> because God is there embodied. I believe it is precisely this form of contemplation that she has undertaken in her constructivist theology. We might say, in fact, that her metaphorical construction has become the world within which she lives. It is from within the model of the world as God’s body that she has become increasingly certain that “[a]ll is divine, even this earth and its creatures.”<sup>131</sup> In this sense, her metaphor has approximated truth not merely because it is functionally viable, but because she has experienced it, in a spiritually significant way, to be true.

Of course, she is always cognizant that the body model is only a metaphor; it is only a back side attempt at naming God and the relationship between God and creation. Thus, she writes, “I believe what I believe is, in some sense, ‘the way things are;’” nonetheless, “I cannot prove that claim – faith is not knowledge.”<sup>132</sup> However, she also knows by experience that allowing herself to be tricked by a good metaphor, to be seduced by it to see differently, can be profoundly transformative. Indeed, letting herself be seduced by the body model has led her to a spiritual awakening so profound that she exclaims, “I didn’t miss it after all!” Meditating on the model of the world as God’s body, and allowing the incarnation to enter all creation, she has come to believe that she is, quite simply, living in the truth.

---

<sup>129</sup> McFague, *The Body of God*, 132.

<sup>130</sup> McFague, *A New Climate for Theology*, 120.

<sup>131</sup> McFague, *A New Climate for Theology*, 113.

<sup>132</sup> McFague, *Life Abundant*, 60.

### (iii) Conclusion

McFague had a long way to go from believing in an overly transcendent God to a God embodied in creation. Her experience of hiking obviously helped her begin to perceive God in nature, but what I have indicated here is that a chief reason she became capable of perceiving God's presence in the world is that she allowed herself to live within the model of the world as God's body. The formulation of this model was primarily intellectual; it entailed significant study for McFague, both theological and scientific. But the result, once she began meditating on the embodiment model, was spiritually transformative, for it allowed her to uninhibitedly devote herself to the bodies of this world, which was clearly liberating for her. In loving and caring for earthly bodies, moreover, she began to experience God, and most especially, God as love.

McFague has written that "[t]he model of the world as God's body encourages us to dare to love bodies and find them valuable and wonderful – just that and nothing more. The 'God part' will take care of itself if we can love and value the bodies."<sup>133</sup> What she speaks of here is a functional ethic: it is meant to help humans better care for the earth. However, by her own testimony, which she gives "as a case study for other Christians who are also trying to integrate their beliefs and their actions at the deepest level,"<sup>134</sup> it is clear she believes the body model, with its meditation of "practicing the presence of God," can lead people to a profound God encounter; a mediated, back side encounter, but a wonderful encounter nonetheless.

In the next part I explain McFague's explicit words on spirituality in her ecological, constructivist stage. I show that though her articulation of spirituality moves

---

<sup>133</sup> McFague, *The Body of God*, 211.

<sup>134</sup> McFague, *Life Abundant*, 4.

from an emphasis on love to an emphasis on self-sacrifice, there is also, ironically, a movement toward a greater sense of abundance and exuberance. That is, as she turns her attention from how Christians should love nature to the public, political and economic sacrifices privileged Christians must make for the flourishing of bodies other than their own, she also begins to articulate her experience of living in the truth and knowing that God is love. In this sense, I argue that the profound God encounter that we have discussed in the context of McFague's body meditation happens, interestingly enough, as she articulates more fully the need for "ego and eco" restraint.

### **C. Body Spirituality**

When McFague discusses spirituality in her ecological, constructivist stage, two assumptions are uniformly present. First, she is adamant that spirituality does not refer to a one-on-one relationship between the human and God.<sup>135</sup> As we have already seen with the body meditation, McFague holds that relationship with God is mediated by our relationship with worldly bodies. She writes that her spirituality is based, most broadly, "on the tradition's incarnationalism: on the Word made flesh, on God as embodied. The incarnate God is not a spiritualized, abstract, distant, or mental deity but a bodily, concrete, near, and physical One."<sup>136</sup> In this way, the model of the world as God's body plays an important role in her understanding of a spirituality in which love for God and world become inseparable.

---

<sup>135</sup> See, for example, McFague, *Super, Natural Christians*, 10.

<sup>136</sup> McFague, *Super, Natural Christians*, 14.

Second, she holds that spirituality and ethics are interconnected: loving God means caring for the world and visa versa.<sup>137</sup> Borrowing from the 1977 Scottish Churches Council, which holds that spirituality is “an exploration into what is involved in becoming human,” and describes “becoming human” as “an attempt to grow in sensitivity to self, to others, to non-human creation, and to God who is within and beyond this totality,” she writes:

The stress of this definition is on becoming human through *relationships*, with nature included as a central one. The *way* we become human is “to grow in sensitivity,” to develop awareness of, feeling for, sympathy with, these others. Christian spirituality is not, then, principally a “religious” relationship. It is not mainly or only about a relationship with God: the individual alone with God, as some popular views of it would suggest. In these views, spirituality is the opposite of ethics, whereas it should actually be seen as the preparation or grounding for action. Spirituality is developing the attention to, awareness of, knowledge about, the other (whether another person, a lifeform or entity in nature, God, or even the self) so that one can respond to that other appropriately.<sup>138</sup>

McFague concludes that prayer and action, piety and praxis, the human-God and the human-world relationships go together.<sup>139</sup> Again, our relationship with God and our relationship with the world are inseparable. Thus, she holds that our actions for care or neglect of worldly bodies are indicative of our relationship with God.

While these two assumptions remain in place throughout her ecological, constructivist stage, there is also a marked development in her articulation of spirituality, from a focus on building love for worldly bodies to calling privileged Christians to self-sacrifice for the sake of worldly bodies. That is, in *The Body of God* (1993), and much more so in *Super, Natural Christians* (1997), her main purpose with spirituality is to

---

<sup>137</sup> See, for example, McFague, *The Body of God*, 31, 103-104; *Super, Natural Christians*, 102-103; *Life Abundant*, 157-160; and *A New Climate for Theology*, 33, 36, 45, 169-170.

<sup>138</sup> McFague, *Super, Natural Christians*, 10.

<sup>139</sup> McFague, *Super, Natural Christians*, 10, 11.



build love for nature and to explain exactly how she thinks Christians should love the world. Love is the center of the spirituality she articulates. However, starting with *Life Abundant* (2001), and intensifying her efforts with *A New Climate for Theology* (2008), she makes an explicit link between spirituality and economics, calling on privileged North American Christians to significantly cut back their consumption so that they may better love the bodies of this earth. Recognizing that the privileged cannot truly love worldly bodies when they are exploiting them for the sake of their insatiable consumerist lifestyle, she calls them to “cruciform living,” and later, to a life of spiritual and material kenosis. The focus of her spirituality turns, then, to the sacrifices the privileged must make to allow space and place for others to live.

Ironically, this movement from an emphasis on love to self-sacrifice is also marked by an increasing sense of abundance. She holds that when the privileged become willing to live in a restrained way, abundance arises in relationship, inclusivity, and very especially, in the awareness of God’s rich presence in the world. From this sense of abundance, which as we have already seen becomes exuberance in her latest work, she argues that people discover a deep sense of God’s love and reason for hope.

### **(i) Nature Spirituality**

McFague’s first formal approach to spirituality in her ecological, constructivist stage is intended to engender love for nature among Christians.<sup>140</sup> She believes Christians are used to loving God, but they are not used to loving nature as intrinsically

---

<sup>140</sup> She explains: “A Christian nature spirituality need not be built on conscience or guilt alone; it can also be built on love. It can be grounded in our natural affection for the earth and ... the respect for otherness at the heart of the great commandment” (Sallie McFague, “The Loving Eye vs. the Arrogant Eye: Christian Critique of the Western Gaze on Nature and the Third World,” *Ecumenical Review* 49 no. 2 (1997): 192.

valuable in and of itself. Thus, with her “nature spirituality,” as she calls it, she encourages Christians to educate themselves with respect to nature, to pay attention, to care, and to love it for its own sake. She believes love for God will arise spontaneously in Christians inasmuch as they love nature in this way.

She first discusses this nature spirituality at the end of *The Body of God* (1993). Consonant with the body meditation, she writes that nature spirituality requires that Christians pay careful attention to the unique and interconnected bodies of creation, starting with the ones right in front of them.<sup>141</sup> The key here is paying attention to the particular body of another, studying it, recognizing both what makes it intrinsically special and the ways it is connected to everything else, loving it and caring for it. If we can do that, she assures us, the “God part” will take care of itself.<sup>142</sup>

Her next book, *Super, Natural Christians* (1997), is dedicated to more carefully explicating what nature spirituality entails and how it must be lived. She talks about this form of spirituality as “Christian praxis (reflective practice) extended to the natural world,”<sup>143</sup> as radical love that grows in ever-widening circles,<sup>144</sup> and as based on the tradition’s incarnationism, “on the Word made flesh, on God as embodied.”<sup>145</sup> Drawing from Jesus’ paradigmatic ministry among the oppressed, she holds that Christian nature spirituality especially recognizes the need to love and care for the bodies

---

<sup>141</sup> See McFague, *The Body of God*, 208-211.

<sup>142</sup> McFague, *The Body of God*, 211.

<sup>143</sup> McFague, *Super, Natural Christians*, 9. Note the influence of liberation theology with the use of “praxis.”

<sup>144</sup> McFague, *Super, Natural Christians*, 11. She says that she has learned this from the saints. Talking about Saint Francis, Dorothy Day, Black Elk, and Martin Luther King, Jr., she explains that they all show the same tendency: “what often begins with a particular cause – my people – grows into care for all oppressed people and sometimes into a concern for environmental destruction” (Ibid., 163).

<sup>145</sup> McFague, *Super, Natural Christians*, 14.

of the poor, whether human or in nature.<sup>146</sup> Though she is clear that nature spirituality helps Christians love and care for both human and nature bodies, however, her stress in *Super, Natural Christians* is certainly on nature. She places her stress there because it was through nature that she found her way back to God-in-the-world and because she perceives that many people today have lost their connection with nature, to their great detriment.<sup>147</sup>

McFague indicates that the practice of nature spirituality entails a willingness to see the intrinsic worth, or the subjecthood, of a body other than one's own, to love that body, and to allow that love to grow in concentric circles to encompass all the bodies of creation. She argues that above all, nature spirituality requires paying attention to the body of another, starting with the particular body in one's path. She stresses that it is important to pay particular attention to the body of another because, "*we cannot love what we do not know.*"<sup>148</sup> Indeed, "[t]o *really* love nature (and not just ourselves in nature or nature as useful to us – even its use as a pathway to God), we must pay attention *to it*. Love and knowledge go together; we can't have the one without the other."<sup>149</sup> But more specifically, McFague argues that it is important to begin by paying attention to the particular body in one's path because, she holds, no one "loves the whole earth except as

---

<sup>146</sup> See McFague, *Super, Natural Christians*, 15.

<sup>147</sup> Subscribing to E. O. Wilson's theory of "biophilia," which states that humans have an innate desire to connect with other life-forms, that we are hard-wired or pre-adapted to close encounters with the natural world, McFague writes that "the loss of such experiences is a deep and damaging one – to us. We are less because of that loss" (*Super, Natural Christians*, 119).

<sup>148</sup> McFague, *Super, Natural Christians*, 29.

<sup>149</sup> McFague, *Super, Natural Christians*, 29. As such, she urges Christians to cultivate an attention to embodied life day by day (*Ibid.*, 177).

she or he loves a particular bit of it.”<sup>150</sup> To know the earth we must first love it, and to love it, we must first encounter it in the unique and interrelated body before us.

*a. Pay Attention to the Particular Body Before You*

McFague discusses the proper way of spiritual engagement with the particular body before us through an autobiographical account. She explains that when she was fourteen years old, she had a profound experience hiking in the White Mountains in Vermont in which, “I wallowed in oceanic feelings of oneness-with-it-all. I fused with nature: lying on mountaintops covered with billowing clouds, I sank into Wagnerian religious raptures.”<sup>151</sup> This willingness to become one with nature was later hampered by her training in radical monotheism, with its stress on God’s awesome transcendence or, as she came to interpret it, God’s distance from the world.<sup>152</sup> But she did eventually return to nature, only this time her approach to nature was filtered through her reading of process philosophy, feminist epistemology and ecological science (from which she devised the common creation story), with their stress on radical individuality and unity.<sup>153</sup>

From this later perspective, she criticizes her fourteen-year-old “mountain top” experience of fusion with a quote of Jim Cheney: “The correct metaphor for such fusion is of a lonely but megalomaniacal pond sucking up all the water of the world and

---

<sup>150</sup> McFague, *Super, Natural Christians*, 43. For how love/knowledge of the local becomes global, see *Ibid.*, 153, 154, 163.

<sup>151</sup> McFague, *Super, Natural Christians*, 36-37. See also *The Body of God*, 209 for another account of the same experience.

<sup>152</sup> See McFague, *The Body of God*, 207-209.

<sup>153</sup> See McFague, *Super, Natural Christians*, 3. This is how she returned to nature with a “second naiveté.” She explains: “We cannot return to the womb and the breast nor fuse with nature, as children do (and deep ecologists and romantics would like to),” or as we did with our “first naiveté.” But she writes that we can return to nature, now with a “second naiveté,” with “a mature, nuanced sense of self and world as intimately, dynamically related – but a relationship that respects others as separate, complex, and marvelously diverse” (*Ibid.*, 97).

becoming itself the ocean.”<sup>154</sup> The problem with her experience of fusion, as she comes to understand it in her ecological stage, is that, like the organic model of the church as Christ’s body, it stressed unity to the exclusion of difference: “I was the whole, the only one.”<sup>155</sup> While McFague does not want to perpetuate the type of dualism she believes is present in traditional theism, she also does not want to encourage a fusion that is incapable of recognizing difference. She wants both: unity *and* difference. “Neither hyperseparation nor fusion will do.”<sup>156</sup>

In accordance with the common creation story, then, McFague’s nature spirituality stresses both unity and difference, which for her becomes palpable in paying attention to the particular body of another in one’s path. She repeatedly gives examples of what she means by the particular body of another: a twenty-five cent goldfish named Ellery,<sup>157</sup> a sun turtle,<sup>158</sup> the color purple in a field,<sup>159</sup> a small city park.<sup>160</sup> In order to encourage paying attention to the particular other, she develops a subject-subjects model for Christians to live by, introducing it with the following account:

One day while hiking, I recall coming across a bi-footed, tri-colored violet, a rare and extraordinarily beautiful, tiny flower. It was all alone by the side of the trail. I had never seen one before. I squatted down to look at it closely and for a few minutes it was my whole world. I was transfixed by its beauty, its specialness, its fragility, and by the sense of privilege I felt to be looking at it. I was, I believe, seeing it as a subject; that is, I was relating to it with a recognition of its own intrinsic value quite apart from me. I was surprised and delighted by it and felt respect

---

<sup>154</sup> In *Super, Natural Christians*, 37. She is quoting Jim Cheney, “Eco-feminism and Deep Ecology,” *Environmental Ethics* 9 (Summer 1987): 124. This is a criticism of the fusion spirituality of deep ecology, which she says she unknowingly espoused at the time.

<sup>155</sup> McFague, *Super, Natural Christians*, 37.

<sup>156</sup> McFague, *Super, Natural Christians*, 98.

<sup>157</sup> Here she is drawing from Annie Dillard’s description of her goldfish in *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek: A Mystical Excursion into the Natural World* (New York: Bantam Books, 1975), 126. See McFague, *The Body of God*, 209-210; and *Super, Natural Christians*, 22, 30-31, 32, 41, 146 and 176.

<sup>158</sup> See McFague, *Super, Natural Christians*, 122-123.

<sup>159</sup> See, for example, McFague *Super, Natural Christians*, 29; and *Life Abundant*, 9.

<sup>160</sup> See McFague *Super, Natural Christians*, 43.

for it as well as a desire to care for it (in fact, I thought of putting some rocks around it to protect it from a careless hiker's boot, but decided this was too controlling). The violet was not a subject in the way you or I or one of the higher mammals is, but I could recognize its otherness and yet at the same time feel a connection with it. It was not simply an object to me. Rather, it has its own very special being, which surprised and delighted me even as I appreciated and felt empathy and concern for it. Which analogy is more appropriate for describing this experience – a subject viewing an object or a subject trying to know another subject?<sup>161</sup>

In paying attention to this particular bi-footed, tri-colored violet in her path, in studying it, in allowing it to shape her experience, McFague believes she has related to it as a subject in its own right. She has both recognized what makes the violet intrinsically unique and its incredible relationship to her and other life forms, which is imperative for a nature spirituality. She believes all Christians should relate to nature in this way.

***b. Subject-Subjects Model***

McFague introduces the subject-subjects model as an alternative to the subject-object model that she holds dominates in Western culture today. The subject-object model, she argues, assumes a hierarchical dualism of one over the other (e.g. “male/female, whites/people of color, rich/poor, heterosexual/homosexual, West/East, North/South – and humans/nature”<sup>162</sup>). It entails a way of knowing that requires distance, objectification, and control. She talks about this way of knowing as analogous to the Western “arrogant eye”<sup>163</sup>:

Since Plato, who called vision the eye of the mind, sight has been the privileged sense, in part because it alone is “of the mind,” free of the messy bodiliness of the other senses. Sight gives the viewer distance, objectivity, and control: one can see without being touched, without being heard, without being detected.<sup>164</sup>

---

<sup>161</sup> McFague, *Super, Natural Christians*, 37.

<sup>162</sup> McFague, *Super, Natural Christians*, 38. She elaborates more on this in *Ibid.*, 88-89.

<sup>163</sup> See McFague *Super, Natural Christians*, Chapter Four, pgs. 67-90.

<sup>164</sup> McFague, *Super, Natural Christians*, 67.

She argues that this way of seeing became intensified with the landscape view of Renaissance art. In this art form, the “better view” is “spread out panoramically before us,” and “[r]eciprocity diminishes” because whatever is observed is observed from an “objective” distance.<sup>165</sup> She believes that with the landscape view, “a basically different place for human beings emerged – not *in* the earth, but as viewers *of* it.”<sup>166</sup> It was from this “objective,” distant viewpoint that she believes the mechanistic understanding of the world emerged, along with the rise of science and technology, and the Enlightenment’s over-confidence in human rationality.<sup>167</sup>

Unlike the objectifying, distancing, and controlling subject-object model that perpetuates an “arrogant eye” approach to nature, McFague argues that the subject-subjects model assumes that we always know in relationships:

... we are not solitary individuals who choose to be in relationship with others, but we are in relationships, from before our birth until after our death. Hence, the language of relationship – respect, reciprocity, interest in the particular, listening, openness, paying attention, care, concern – all this sort of language becomes relevant to how we know others.<sup>168</sup>

---

<sup>165</sup> See McFague, *Super, Natural Christians*, 79. McFague believes that “[t]he landscape sensibility, then, the way of seeing the world from a privileged, distant, objective point of view, can slip easily into a position of surveillance and control” (Ibid., 81). She gives several examples of contemporary phenomena that encourages objective distance “spectator” type viewing: for example, the NASA whole-earth image from space (“When we view the whole-earth image, we look at the earth from a distance of thousands of miles, not as if we live and move and have our being in it” (Ibid., 80)); the very common portrayal of female nudes and the presence of zoos (“If female nudity is an example of the arrogant eye, the eye that objectifies in order to control, so also are zoos – places where human beings can observe animals in a way similar to viewing nudes in an art gallery” (Ibid., 81); and the constant use of cameras (“we are now in danger of losing [the world] as we substitute pictures for the real thing” (Ibid., 83). She writes that such a view leads people to live by what Sigmund Freud called “scopophilia,” which means, “subjecting other people [and, she adds, nature] to a curious, controlling gaze, seeing them as objects” (Ibid., 84). She explains that the worst case of scopophilia is pornography, “the erotic gratification of watching someone without being oneself seen” (Ibid., 85; she is quoting here from E. Ann Kaplan, *Women and Film: Both Sides of the Camera* (London: Methuen, 1983), 14).

<sup>166</sup> McFague, *Super, Natural Christians*, 79.

<sup>167</sup> McFague, *Super, Natural Christians*, 79. She argues that the final outcome of the subject-object thinking is the death of the self (Ibid., 97).

<sup>168</sup> McFague, *Super, Natural Christians*, 37.

The subject-subjects model says that we come to know the bodies of creation in close proximity with them, in an embodied way. It also acknowledges that “what I know is *many* subjects. The model is not subject-subject, replacing the singular subject, but subject-subjects.”<sup>169</sup> In other words, the subject-subjects model respects both unity *and* the many unique and different embodiments of creation. Paying attention to these unique embodiments within the subject-subjects model requires an embodied way of knowing, which McFague describes as the “loving eye,” and likens to the act of touching.

*c. Loving Eye (Touch as the Way to Know)*

McFague explains that with the loving eye,

... the route to knowledge is slow, open, full of surprises, interactive and reciprocal, as well as attentive to detail and difference. And it will be embodied. The disembodied, distant, transcendent, simplifying, objectifying, quick and easy arrogant eye becomes the embodied, lowly, immanent, complexifying, subjectifying, proximate, and “make-do” loving eye. The pure mind’s eye becomes the messy body’s eye, and those lowly senses (the so-called female ones of taste, touch, and smell) are allowed back into the knowledge game.<sup>170</sup>

The key here is “embodied.” McFague writes that if Christians look at nature with a loving eye, then the primary metaphor for their relationship with it will be that of touch; it will not be the insular visual activity that characterizes the arrogant eye. She argues that touch implies a two-way relationship, “for one cannot touch without being touched;”<sup>171</sup> it provides people with a sense of limits: “other bodies resist when we push or pull them;”<sup>172</sup> and it denotes an embodied kind of knowing, for it “gives us a way to think about ourselves as profoundly embodied, relational, responsive beings, as created to

---

<sup>169</sup> McFague, *Super, Natural Christians*, 39.

<sup>170</sup> McFague, *Super, Natural Christians*, 35.

<sup>171</sup> McFague, *Super, Natural Christians*, 93.

<sup>172</sup> McFague, *Super, Natural Christians*, 94.



love others, not to control them.”<sup>173</sup> The subject-subjects, loving eye, touch model encourages going out into nature, participating in relationship with other bodies of nature, learning about them and getting involved in their care.<sup>174</sup>

McFague’s words on the loving eye as a way of knowing the other, and requiring touch and being touched, indicates that the paying attention of nature spirituality is something that must be done in close proximity with others. This is not the kind of paying attention that one can do while watching a nature show on a television screen or looking at pictures of the earth from outer space.<sup>175</sup> It requires a kind of attention that is intimate, messy, and close, analogous to friendship, and, McFague insists, embodied.<sup>176</sup> Therefore, she advocates for “wild spaces” in cities, and not only “wilderness spaces” accessible to a privileged few, so that everyone may have the opportunity to encounter the many forms of God’s body outside, in nature, in close proximity, if only in a city lot.<sup>177</sup>

---

<sup>173</sup> McFague, *Super, Natural Christians*, 92.

<sup>174</sup> As opposed to the subject-object model, which she says is characterized by an “extinction of experience.” McFague explains that, especially because of the camera, people today tend to perceive the world almost solely through vision; they have lost “the world of smell, taste, touch, hearing – and close, detailed perception of the other” (*Super, Natural Christians*, 87). By way of illustration she writes: “As recently as one generation ago children spent their free time out of doors ‘doing nothing’ in vacant lots and small city parks. How many children today spend their time looking for tadpoles in ditches of water, versus the number of children glued to the television set or home computer – even if they are watching a nature program on television or calling up pictures of frogs on the computer screen?” (Ibid., 83).

<sup>175</sup> See nt. 165 in this chapter. Sally Smith Holt has argued that study is an important aspect of McFague’s spiritual practice. By study she means not only studying theology and other disciplines – e.g. cosmology, biology and economics – but also studying nature by actually experiencing it (“Practicing Spiritual Disciplines in Relationship to Creation.” *Review and Expositor* 102 no. 1 (Winter 2005): 33-34).

<sup>176</sup> McFague, *Super, Natural Christians*, 36.

<sup>177</sup> She says city lots are examples of “wildness” spaces (as opposed to “wilderness” spaces – e.g. national parks – which are accessible to only a small portion of the public). She explains that wildness spaces are pieces of “near-by nature ... free spaces for pottering, netting, catching, and watching” (*Super, Natural Christians*, 124). She likes such spaces because they are available to *everyone*, and most importantly to the poor who cannot leave the city limits. Hence, she writes: “just as Gustavo Gutiérrez said that the poor have a right to think, I would add that they also have the right to the joy of being in nature” (Ibid., 125).

#### *d. Sacramental and Prophetic*

Finally, expanding on the notion that “[t]he ‘God part’ will take care of itself if we can love and value the bodies,” McFague writes that while it is appropriate to have a sacramental approach to perceive God’s presence in the bodies of creation, it is imperative to first love the bodies as intrinsically worthy of our attention and care. She believes that “[t]he Christian eye does not need training to see God but to see other things, especially earth others – and *then* to see God.”<sup>178</sup> She thinks there is a tendency in Christians to approach sacramentality as a form of emblemism, “which tends to see animals and plants entirely in terms of their usefulness for the human journey to God,”<sup>179</sup> and thus to circumvent relationship with creation altogether.<sup>180</sup> Her nature spirituality tries to remedy this tendency by qualifying the meaning of “Catholic” sacramentality, and then by tempering it further with a “Protestant” prophetic stance.

##### **(1) “Catholic” Sacramentality**

To qualify what she means by sacramentality, she uses Leonardo Boff’s discussion of Saint Francis’ sacramental vision. She writes that Francis had a “double vision,” a vision that was both horizontal and vertical.<sup>181</sup> By horizontal, she means that he treated each body as an intrinsic subject, as unique and valuable in and of itself. By vertical, she means that he understood these bodies to be symbols of God, not for the sheer sake of human beings, and not in such a way that he negated their intrinsic worth.

---

<sup>178</sup> McFague, *Super, Natural Christians*, 172.

<sup>179</sup> McFague, *Super, Natural Christians*, 56.

<sup>180</sup> Thus, for example, McFague is critical of Martin Buber’s conception of the I-Thou relationship. She explains: “On one reading of Buber, the momentary, fleeting I-Thou relationships with a tree or a person are the means to an individual’s union with the eternal Thou. Thus, Buber could be accused of religious utilitarianism: using the things of this world as stepping-stones to God” (*Super, Natural Christians*, 101).

<sup>181</sup> See, for example, McFague, *Super, Natural Christians*, 56.

In short, he knew that “[w]ater, wind, sun, and stars, the entire earth and even death, are natural symbols, singing the praises of the creator *by doing their own thing*, not by being a symbol of a doctrine or a moral lesson for human beings.”<sup>182</sup> Francis had a double vision: he could see *both* the intrinsic value of earthly bodies *and* God in them.

McFague believes that Christians should likewise have such a vision:

Once we “see” the world – and ourselves as part of it – with “double vision,” as grounded in God and resplendent with the individuality of each thing, from slugs to forget-me-nots, from whales to big cedars, from crouching tigers to fields of waving wheat, we want to shout, “Hallelujah!” To see creatures, including human beings, becoming their illimitable selves *as* they live within and for God – this is a great joy. We realize that there is no either/or, but a both/and: it is not God versus us, but rather God as the ground, source, breath, water, womb, bath, air, breast, and tomb within which we become who we truly are. Each scrap of creation, including us human beings, becomes the unique individual that in its own distinctive way tells of God’s glory.<sup>183</sup>

For McFague, sacramentality at its best makes us aware that we can both fully appreciate bodily existence and come to know God through it. Indeed, “[a]s the body of God, the world is a sacrament, *the* sacrament, the incarnation, of God, so that while each thing is itself in all its marvelous particularity and uniqueness, *it is at the same time and in and through its own specialness*, the presence of God.”<sup>184</sup> A sacramentality of double vision, then, is both horizontal and vertical, both attentive to what makes a particular body distinct and cognizant of God’s incarnate presence there.

However, there can be no doubt that her emphasis falls on the horizontal. In all her ecological theology she holds that it is by paying careful attention to the body of another that we come to perceive God. She insists “on being bonded to skin, fur, and feathers, to the smells and sounds of the earth, to the intricate and detailed differences in

---

<sup>182</sup> McFague, *Super, Natural Christians*, 57.

<sup>183</sup> McFague, *A New Climate for Theology*, 166.

<sup>184</sup> McFague, *Life Abundant*, 150.

people and other lifeforms.”<sup>185</sup> She insists, as she puts it, that we “hold on hard to the huckleberries,” refusing under all circumstances to let go of the particular bodies of creation.<sup>186</sup>

## (2) “Protestant” Prophetic

McFague is sufficiently concerned about sacramentality turning into emblemism that she not only stresses its horizontal dimension, but also further tempers the sacramental approach with what she calls the “Protestant” prophetic approach. She talks about sacramentality as a “Catholic” sensibility that “is symbolic, seeing connections, similarities, and unity among all parts of the whole,” and says that it must be counter-balanced with a “Protestant” prophetic stance that “is metaphorical, seeing differences, divergences, and deterioration.”<sup>187</sup> She explains further:

The sacramental sees continuity between God and the world; the prophetic, discontinuity. The first has been characterized as the Catholic sensibility (Thomas Aquinas), the second as the Protestant sensibility (Karl Barth). The sacramental allows for the two books of revelation – nature and Scripture – while the prophetic insists on *sola scriptura*. The first sees the entire universe as the image of God, for nothing less could begin to reflect God’s glory (Irenaeus, Augustine, Thomas Aquinas, G.M. Hopkins, Teilhard de Chardin); the second is terrified lest any visible, present thing claim to *be* the invisible presence of the divine. The first

---

<sup>185</sup> McFague, *Super, Natural Christians*, 102.

<sup>186</sup> See, for example, McFague, *Super, Natural Christians*, 102. She explains that “holding on hard to the huckleberries means that the focus of the Christian sacramentalism and the ‘loving eye’ ‘is not vertical but horizontal; not on ‘God in this tree,’ but ‘*this tree* in God.’ The focus of this eye is not on seeing God, but on seeing the tree (this particular tree) which, in its own way, as itself, is *also* in God” (Ibid., 172). Holding on hard to the huckleberries means seeing God in all things without bypassing or letting go of the things.

<sup>187</sup> McFague, *Super, Natural Christians*, 53. Throughout her metaphorical theology McFague tends to stress the “differences, divergences, and deterioration.” Commenting on McFague’s *Metaphorical Theology* (1982) – a work of her hermeneutical stage – June O’Connor laments her emphasizing “dissimilarity, disconnection, and disunity” to such an extent that little room is left for the “similarity, connection, and unity” of a sacramental and symbolic approach to life (“Sensuality, Spirituality, Sacramentality,” *Union Seminary Quarterly Review* 40 no. 1-2 (1985): 68). In her ecological, constructivist theology McFague has obviously sought to temper her emphasis on disconnection (the Protestant) with the sacramental (Catholic) approach, but as the above discussion indicates, her stress has remained on divergence more than unity.

presses the iconic, advocating deification, the transparency of the world to its source, while the second fears idolatry, admonishing humility due to the opaqueness of all things before the wholly other.<sup>188</sup>

McFague allows for the bodies of creation to point to God (the sacramental) only with the understanding that their relationship to God is opaque, “back side,” metaphorical (the prophetic). As she sees it, we can only say, in true metaphorical form, that God “is” and “is not” embodied in the world. Even as she comes to experience God’s love in embodied creation, and even as she becomes “outrageously sacramental,” McFague continues to insist that the sacramental “yes” must be tempered by the prophetic “no.”

In most practical terms, McFague continues to insist on the “Protestant” prophetic in her nature spirituality because she believes it keeps our attention on the bodies of creation, and especially on those bodies that suffer. She explains that the prophetic “no” refuses to allow the sacramental sensibility to fall into the kind of sentimentality that, seeing only unity and embodiment, either does not or cannot see where God’s incarnation is undermined through suffering and pain.<sup>189</sup> The prophetic sensibility reminds us that God is embodied even in pain, perhaps especially there, as Jesus’ paradigmatic incarnation teaches us. McFague’s prophetic sensibility implies, then, that nature spirituality must attend especially to needy bodies. It reminds us that “who has food, shelter, medical care, education, work, leisure – these [are] ‘works of the spirit.’”<sup>190</sup>

The God-relationship is important to McFague, and she believes that embodied creation does aid in that relationship (double vision). That said, with her nature spirituality she wants to stress that without attentive relationship with the bodies of

---

<sup>188</sup> McFague, *A New Climate for Theology*, 110.

<sup>189</sup> McFague, *A New Climate for Theology*, 117.

<sup>190</sup> Sallie McFague, “Human Dignity and the Integrity of Creation,” in *Theology That Matters*, 209.

creation, without “holding on hard to the huckleberries,” the God-relationship is not possible. She writes: “If we cannot find the transcendent *in* the world, in its beauty and its suffering, then for us bodily, earthly creatures it is probably not to be found at all.”<sup>191</sup>

As such, McFague’s words on the sacramental and prophetic aspects of nature spirituality indicate that its practice entails, first, love for bodies, and only then love for God.

*e. Summary*

When McFague explicitly turns her attention to the subject of spirituality in her ecological theology, she does so with the express purpose of building love for nature. Holding that Christians do not need training to see God but rather to see earth others, she develops a nature spirituality that brings our attention to the unique and interrelated bodies of creation. With the subject-subjects model, she indicates that such a spirituality entails coming to know earthly bodies in close relationship with them. Indeed, she holds that with nature spirituality we come to know others by a “loving eye,” that is, an embodied, lowly, immanent and proximate vision that she equates to touching and being touched. In coming to know the particular body before us with a loving eye, she believes love for this particular body blossoms, and through it, love for all creation grows.

McFague believes that love for God also develops through this process of coming to know and love earthly bodies. But she is intent on preserving the priority of earthly bodies because she thinks Christians tend to bypass creation in their relationship with God. Thus, she discusses sacramentality in terms of double-vision, insisting that the vertical recognition of God’s presence not trump the horizontal recognition of the intrinsic specialness of the body before us. Moreover, stressing “the opaqueness of all

---

<sup>191</sup> McFague, *A New Climate for Theology*, 113.

things before the wholly other,”<sup>192</sup> she insists on the constant presence of a prophetic “no,” lest anyone think that the suffering and pain of earthly bodies is consonant with an embodied God. With her stress on the horizontal dimension of sacramentality and on the prophetic “no,” she means to keep Christians’ attention on the bodies of this world, urging them to help with the concrete needs of such bodies when they are suffering.

McFague quotes Meister Eckhart as saying: “If I spent enough time with the tiniest creature – even a caterpillar – I would never have to prepare a sermon. So full of God is every creature.”<sup>193</sup> She does not intent to bypass love for God with her nature spirituality. Rather, she simply means to indicate that given the needs of our time, Christians must come to love God by first knowing and loving the particular bodies before them. In other words, McFague’s nature spirituality keeps the attention of Christians on creation so that they may work for its flourishing.

## **(ii) Spirituality of Restraint**

While in *Super, Natural Christians* McFague talks about spirituality in terms of how Christians should love nature, in her next two books she focuses on the economic ramifications for privileged Christians of enacting such a love. In *Life Abundant* (2001) she explains: “I realized that we middle-class North American Christians are destroying nature, not because we do not love it, but because of the way we live: our taken-for-granted high-consumer lifestyle.”<sup>194</sup>

She goes on to explain that in order to truly love the unique and interconnected bodies of creation, we need to pull back our consumption significantly to make space and

---

<sup>192</sup> McFague, *A New Climate for Theology*, 110.

<sup>193</sup> McFague, *The Body of God*, 211.

<sup>194</sup> McFague, *Life Abundant*, xi.

place for others. Thus, playing on the theme of Christ's sacrifice on the cross, she calls privileged Christians to their own form of sacrifice, or "cruciform living," which entails living by "a philosophy of 'enoughness,' limitations on energy use, and sacrifice for the sake of others."<sup>195</sup> She explains that in its most intense form, cruciform living entails becoming "public advocates for political and economic policies that promote fair distribution of necessities and the sustainability of the planet,"<sup>196</sup> even when such policies would work to the immediate disadvantage of the advocates. Cruciform living means individuals pulling back on their consumption *and* working for systemic policies of restraint.

When she discusses spirituality, then, she writes that "we love God by loving the world, but such love can only be done in public, political, and economic ways."<sup>197</sup> She quotes Gustavo Gutiérrez as saying: "When one is concerned with one's stomach, it is materialism, but when one is concerned with other people's stomachs it is spirituality."<sup>198</sup> For as much as she stresses the need for paying attention to and loving the body of another, she is very clear that "love without economics is empty rhetoric."<sup>199</sup> For economically privileged Christians, this means that "[w]e cannot love our neighbors – neither the human ones nor the earth ones – unless we drastically cut back on our consumption."<sup>200</sup> The practice of spirituality, then, entails not only paying attention to the particularity and uniqueness of each body with a sacramental-prophetic double-

---

<sup>195</sup> McFague, *Life Abundant*, 14.

<sup>196</sup> McFague, *Life Abundant*, 151.

<sup>197</sup> McFague, *Life Abundant*, 151.

<sup>198</sup> McFague, *Life Abundant*, 34. McFague takes this quote from Aruna Gnanadason, "Women and Spirituality in Asia," in *Feminist Theology from the Third World: A Reader*, ed. Ursula King (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1994), 354. Gnanadason does not state where the quote comes from.

<sup>199</sup> McFague, *Life Abundant*, 128.

<sup>200</sup> McFague, *Life Abundant*, 22-23.



vision,<sup>201</sup> but also sacrificing personal wealth and comfort for the sake of allowing other bodies to live and thrive.

By the time she writes *A New Climate for Theology* (2008) she speaks not merely in terms of cruciform living for privileged Christians, but in terms of kenosis (see Phil. 2:6-7), or self-emptying. She connects ego and eco, spiritual and ecological practices, in order to indicate that “[w]hat is widespread in religions as a personal practice – taking up less ‘ego space’ – is reflected at the planetary level as the demand that we diminish our ecological footprint.”<sup>202</sup> She explains:

Spiritual space and bodily space are related: those with insatiable ego-gratifying desires use up huge amounts of physical space with their rampant consumption, large energy-hungry dwellings, and jet travel lifestyles. Ego and eco – soul and body – are mysteriously related both at the level of our personal lives and at the level of planetary health.<sup>203</sup>

In the affluent West, she goes on, we must “shrink our swollen Western egos and sense of entitlement in order that others might have space to live.”<sup>204</sup> Kenosis comes to have practical consequences in her theology: becoming empty of the ego is entwined with material emptying and making physical space for others. The act of emptying oneself to make space for God is an act of love, then, for both God and world.

#### *a. Self-Sacrifice*

Whether she calls it cruciform living or kenosis, her emphasis from *Life Abundant* forward is on the need for those who are economically privileged to pull back their consumption significantly. In *Life Abundant* she explains that cruciform living starts

---

<sup>201</sup> McFague, *Life Abundant*, 149-150.

<sup>202</sup> McFague, *A New Climate for Theology*, 137.

<sup>203</sup> McFague, *A New Climate for Theology*, 137.

<sup>204</sup> McFague, *A New Climate for Theology*, 137. Her most recent book, *Blessed Are the Consumers: Climate Change and the Practice of Restraint* (2013), is even more focused on exploring the meaning of kenosis for privileged people.

with a critical eye to what she terms “the neoclassical economic model.” By neoclassical economics she means “market capitalism as conceived by Adam Smith in the eighteenth century and, more particularly, the version of it practiced by the major economies of our time.”<sup>205</sup> Under this model, she explains that anthropology is conceived as individuals motivated by self-interest, separate from others and therefore in constant competition for resources, with rights but not responsibilities, and ultimately, McFague believes, unhappy.<sup>206</sup> She holds that in this model, humans are regarded as nothing more than consumers. She writes:

We have allowed the economy not just to produce things, but people – the people we have become at the beginning of the twenty-first century. We have become consumers – not citizens, or children of God, or lovers of the world, but *consumers*.<sup>207</sup>

Accompanying this anthropology is an understanding of the world as a dead machine that can easily be repaired if damaged, and a value system that continuously privileges economic growth over planetary wellbeing. Though this model may produce many *things*, McFague holds that it does not and cannot produce the good life; she holds that it is “unworkable. It is a loser.”<sup>208</sup>

In its place, she proposes that people today live by an “ecological economic model” that focuses on the wellbeing of the earth community. Recognizing God’s embodied presence everywhere, this model sees the “whole earth as God’s household, God’s *oikos*.”<sup>209</sup> Living in this earth “household,” McFague writes that humans come to understand themselves in terms of the common creation story: as part of the earth, a

---

<sup>205</sup> McFague, *Life Abundant*, 76.

<sup>206</sup> See McFague, *Life Abundant*, 81-83.

<sup>207</sup> McFague, *Life Abundant*, 96.

<sup>208</sup> McFague, *Life Abundant*, 114.

<sup>209</sup> McFague, *Life Abundant*, 36.

product of evolution, in relationship and community with all things, dependent on other life-forms, and yet special as the conscious ones of creation.<sup>210</sup> The earth becomes a living household that requires people to abide by house rules – for example, “take only your share, clean up after yourselves, and keep the house in good repair for future occupants.”<sup>211</sup> With cruciform living, she stresses especially “take no more than your share (do not raid the fridge).”<sup>212</sup>

In *A New Climate for Theology* and articles published around that time, she continues to talk in terms of house rules,<sup>213</sup> though now accompanied by her discussion on kenosis. Drawing from Simone Weil, who writes that in our interactions with this world home we should look and not “eat,” McFague reflects: “We seldom do this. Human love is usually “cannibalistic,” wanting to use God and others for our own benefit, to fill up our own emptiness.”<sup>214</sup> She holds that being “cannibalistic,” using things to our own benefit and wanting “more, more, more”<sup>215</sup> are ways of living that are incompatible with the dispossession of the ego that kenosis demands. Thus, McFague calls for self-denial, not as a way of “ascetic flagellation,” but as “the first step toward universal love for others, toward seeing all others as valuable and all as interrelated.”<sup>216</sup> Returning to the model of the world as God’s body, she then writes plainly: “Feed the body, not the self; look and love – do not devour.”<sup>217</sup> Again, the way to love other bodies requires self-sacrifice.

---

<sup>210</sup> McFague, *Life Abundant*, 105-111.

<sup>211</sup> McFague, *Life Abundant*, 122. See also McFague, “Intimate Creation,” 43.

<sup>212</sup> McFague, *Life Abundant*, 122.

<sup>213</sup> See, for example, *A New Climate for Theology*, 50, 53-56, 85-86, 91-92, 94.

<sup>214</sup> McFague, *A New Climate for Theology*, 112.

<sup>215</sup> McFague, *A New Climate for Theology*, 116.

<sup>216</sup> McFague, “Human Dignity and the Integrity of Creation,” 210.

<sup>217</sup> McFague, *A New Climate for Theology*, 117.

McFague emphasizes restraint in her theology after *Life Abundant* in increasingly poignant ways, first asking us not to “raid the fridge,” and then asking us to refrain from voracious “eating.” She makes clear that loving the particular bodies of others requires making space for those bodies by pulling back our consumption in a very substantive way.<sup>218</sup> Whether she is talking about cruciform living or kenosis, however, she proceeds on the assumption that through restraint, people come to know a much deeper sense of happiness and abundance than what the consumerist model can provide.<sup>219</sup>

### ***b. Abundant Life***

In *Life Abundant* she holds that cruciform living points to abundance, first, inasmuch as it makes space for everyone. Using the symbol of the Eucharistic banquet, McFague writes that “with the right management of the household – respect for the integrity of nature and equitable sharing of resources – all can be included at the dinner table.”<sup>220</sup> The alternative abundance to which she points is one that encompasses the whole earth and not just those privileged enough to be able to afford a place at the table. It is an abundance that makes room so that *everyone* may be and have. Therefore, the abundant life as she sees it is a “moderate one,” or a “middle-way” which entails “moving the billion privileged and the billion impoverished toward each other.”<sup>221</sup>

Second, turning away from a neurotic obsession with the accumulation of material wealth, cruciform living encompasses abundance inasmuch as it cultivates all those things that are necessary for a good life for everyone. She explains:

---

<sup>218</sup> Indeed, in *Blessed Are the Consumers*, McFague writes, for example, that it is not enough to change from an SUV to a Prius: “we have to reconsider the use of automobiles” altogether (ix).

<sup>219</sup> McFague writes that “for us privileged North Americans,” the one thing that is most needed is “a world-affirming restraint, of enough, because our very constitution as ecological beings demands it and because it is the way to our true happiness” (*Life Abundant*, 116).

<sup>220</sup> McFague, *Life Abundant*, 36.

<sup>221</sup> McFague, *Life Abundant*, 115.

The good life is not having “more and more,” but “enough.” “Enough” of what? Not money as such but what money can give people: adequate food, clothing, shelter, education, medical care, creative and spiritual opportunities, fellowship and leisure time and space. Money is here being redefined in terms of its *use* value to the well-being of the whole community, all human beings, and the planet itself.<sup>222</sup>

The abundant life is about living – letting humans and nature *live*, not just be used, work, produce, spend, buy, accumulate. She writes: “Money is not the end but a means to an end: the end is the healthy development of human beings on a sustainable planet.”<sup>223</sup>

Cruciform living focuses on the healthy development of human beings and the whole planet. It derives happiness not principally “from possession of things (beyond the basics), but from community, nurture, friendship, love, and dedication to higher purposes.”<sup>224</sup> Thus, the cruciform life provides abundance as it refuses to be used by money and instead uses money for the holistic wellbeing of people and nature.

Finally, McFague indicates that cruciform living leads to abundance inasmuch as it enables the growth of love for earth bodies and God. Indeed, she discusses love at length – for example, her budding experience of God as love,<sup>225</sup> her insistence that “[e]ach of us can love only a tiny fragment of the earth, but that is our task,”<sup>226</sup> her belief that we can, we must, “love God by loving the world,”<sup>227</sup> her conviction that “we live in the presence – the power and love – of God.”<sup>228</sup> However, there is a sense in this book

---

<sup>222</sup> McFague, *Life Abundant*, 111. Moreover, the good life McFague advocates for allows for the possibility of a future. She explains: “Unless the limited resources of the planet are justly distributed among its myriad life forms so they all can flourish, there will be no sustainable future for even the greediest among us” (Sallie McFague, “God’s Household: Christianity, Economics, and Planetary Living,” in *Subverting Greed: Religious Perspectives on the Global Economy*, ed. Paul Knitter and Chandra Muzaffar (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2002), 121).

<sup>223</sup> McFague, *Life Abundant*, 112.

<sup>224</sup> McFague, *Life Abundant*, 115.

<sup>225</sup> See, for example, McFague, *Life Abundant*, 8.

<sup>226</sup> McFague, *Life Abundant*, 12.

<sup>227</sup> McFague, *Life Abundant*, 18.

<sup>228</sup> McFague, *Life Abundant*, 133-134.

that the only way to live in abundant love is by pulling away from the false abundance of the consumer lifestyle. She explains that it is through “detachment from the distorted goods (money, power, fame)” that “attachment to genuine goods (God, other people, the natural world)” becomes possible.<sup>229</sup> Love for God and world becomes possible through restraint. Spirituality, as that act of paying attention to and loving the bodies of others in a sacramental-prophetic way, requires sacrifice by the privileged. In this sacrifice, she believes a deep sense of belonging and abundance arises.

McFague writes that “we are healthiest, sanest, and happiest when we are doing God’s will for the world.”<sup>230</sup> In *The Body of God* she had indicated that when humans willingly allow the Holy Spirit to work through them, “we become the mind and heart as well as the hands and feet of the body of God on our planet.”<sup>231</sup> With her discourse on cruciform living, she shows that it is God’s will that privileged Christians live by personal and systemic restraint. Living in this restraint, she holds that they become not only the hands and feet of God’s body, but also happy and sane. Therefore, cruciform living points to abundance, not only in opening space for everyone to thrive in a holistic (though not materialistic) way, but in its ability to open every person to love and wellbeing. McFague writes that from her study of Christian saints such as John Woolman and Dorothy Day, who she says “are spiritually alive,” she has learned that “[p]ersistent, life-long cruciform living appears possible only through immersing oneself in God’s presence.”<sup>232</sup> It would appear that, immersed in God’s presence, people learn

---

<sup>229</sup> McFague, *Life Abundant*, 22.

<sup>230</sup> McFague, *Life Abundant*, 37.

<sup>231</sup> McFague, *The Body of God*, 148.

<sup>232</sup> McFague, *Life Abundant*, 186.

not merely how to persistently live in a cruciform way but how to live in inclusive and life-giving abundance.

**c. Exuberance in God's Body**

With *A New Climate for Theology*, even as she discusses kenosis as, in its most extreme sense, “consenting to die,”<sup>233</sup> she expresses a deep sense not merely of abundance but of exuberance. She speaks of this exuberance mostly in terms of spirituality, or in terms of perceiving God in embodied creation. She writes that she has become “outrageously sacramental” and feels like she now lives “within the divine milieu.”<sup>234</sup> Returning more explicitly than she had in *Life Abundant* to the model of the world as God’s body, she writes that she has come to feel that “[e]verything is suffused, infused, with God’s breath and light and power. The world is alive with God – but indirectly – incarnationally.”<sup>235</sup>

Writing in terms of “incarnate spirituality” and “spirituality of the body,”<sup>236</sup> as well as “embodied mysticism,”<sup>237</sup> she encourages others to love and praise God in worldly bodies. Speaking of praise, or the aesthetic, she encourages extravagance:

Here one should not be a minimalist, but let all the stops out: There is no praise too great, no language too extravagant for expressing our Yes to the gift of life, in spite of the shocking negativities and evils it involves.<sup>238</sup>

Speaking of loving others, or the ethical, she writes that as we come “to realize that the greatest need of these lovely bodies is to be fed,”<sup>239</sup> and as we feed these bodies and

---

<sup>233</sup> McFague, *A New Climate for Theology*, 117. Here she is quoting Simone Weil, *First and Last Notebooks*, trans. Richard Resz (London: Oxford University Press, 1970), 212.

<sup>234</sup> McFague, *A New Climate for Theology*, 120.

<sup>235</sup> McFague, *A New Climate for Theology*, 163.

<sup>236</sup> See McFague, *A New Climate for Theology*, 115; and “Human Dignity and the integrity of Creation,” 209.

<sup>237</sup> See McFague, *A New Climate for Theology*, 163-164.

<sup>238</sup> McFague, “Intimations of Transcendence,” 153.

make ego and eco space so that they may live, we come to perceive intimations of transcendence everywhere. As she did with the body meditation, she explains intimations of transcendence in terms of Exodus 33:23b. She holds that the God encounter is mediated through earthly, bodily existence; and in this encounter we perceive not God's face, not the depth of divine radiance, but enough, more than enough. However, with intimations of transcendence, more so even than with her original description of body meditation, her stress is on the acts of praise and compassion: it is in the *doing* that we perceive God. She writes: "transcendence is the movement, the deed, that we do 'for the love of God.'"<sup>240</sup>

In the doing, in the praising and in the kenotic acts of love and compassion, she believes a deep sense of gratitude grows: we begin "to say 'thank you' and to mean it."<sup>241</sup> Living and acting as if God were embodied in the world, she holds that a sense of certainty arises that "[w]e, the world, flourish *in* God, *only* in God, and *fully* in God," and "that God is good, that God is love."<sup>242</sup> Finally, in this sense of God's love, she has come to know an "odd kind of hope"<sup>243</sup> that "things will be 'all right.'"<sup>244</sup> She explains:

How can "things be well" if people and the planet are dying from global warming? We do not know. We believe, however, that it is so, not because we will make it so, but because of God. This is not a sentimental or romantic hope that things will turn out okay, but rather the faith that however they turn out, the world and all its creatures are held, kept, within God.<sup>245</sup>

---

<sup>239</sup> McFague, "Intimations of Transcendence," 151.

<sup>240</sup> McFague, *A New Climate for Theology*, 102.

<sup>241</sup> McFague, *A New Climate for Theology*, 106.

<sup>242</sup> McFague, *A New Climate for Theology*, 164.

<sup>243</sup> McFague, *A New Climate for Theology*, 170.

<sup>244</sup> McFague, *A New Climate for Theology*, 171.

<sup>245</sup> McFague, *A New Climate for Theology*, 171. For this understanding of hope McFague draws from Julian of Norwich's vision of God's creation as the hazelnut in her hand. She quotes Julian as saying: "I saw three properties about this tiny object. First, God had made it; second, God loves it; and third, God keeps it" (Julian of Norwich, *Revelation of Love*, ed. and trans. John Skinner (New York: Doubleday



She goes on: “Curiously, this faith, not in ourselves, but in God, can free us to live lives of radical change.”<sup>246</sup>

Living in intimations of transcendence, or praising and loving God through earthly bodies, she believes people come to the realization that God permeates and sustains all things: ““there lives the deepest freshness deep down things’ *because* of the sustaining power and love of God, within whom the earth, our bent world, lives.”<sup>247</sup>

With this realization a hope arises, not that things will necessarily turn out as we wish, but that “everything is ‘kept’ by God.”<sup>248</sup> In this hope is the sustenance, even the exuberance, necessary to grow further in acts of praise and compassion in the world.

#### *d. Summary*

While her stress at the beginning of her ecological, constructivist stage is on building love for earthly bodies, McFague comes to underscore, starting with *Life Abundant*, the sacrifices the privileged must make to enable the wellbeing of bodies other than their own. Ironically, as she focuses on cruciform living, and later, on kenotic life, she also expresses a deep sense of abundance, and even exuberance. Indeed, she comes to hold public, political and economic self-emptying together with a deep sense of gratitude, love and hope. In a 2011 conference with His Holiness the Dalai Lama, she explains her current position well as she states: “Happiness is found in self-emptying, satisfaction is found more in relationship than things, and simplicity can lead to a fuller

---

Image, 1997), 10-11; as quoted in McFague, *A New Climate for Theology*, 170). McFague also makes reference to this account in *The Body of God*, 212.

<sup>246</sup> McFague, *A New Climate for Theology*, 171.

<sup>247</sup> McFague, *A New Climate for Theology*, 173. She is drawing from a line in a poem by Gerard Manley Hopkins here. In the poem Hopkins actually writes: “There lives the *dearest* freshness deep down things.” (The italics are mine). McFague quotes the line correctly in *A New Climate for Theology*, 159, as well as in the title for its Chapter Nine. For this reason, I would guess that she meant to write “dearest” instead of “deepest” on pg. 173 as well.

<sup>248</sup> McFague, *A New Climate for Theology*, 173.

life.”<sup>249</sup> McFague has come to position her spirituality, and in fact all her work, at the intersection between material self-restraint and exuberate abundance in shared and compassionate love.

### **(iii) Conclusion**

In Chapter One I discussed the increased boldness of McFague’s language in her ecological, constructivist stage. I argued there that her boldness is due, in part, to her play on the tension of metaphor: by placing her work squarely between a growing articulation of the “is” and a continued insistence on the “is not,” she ensures that her metaphors remain alive and capable of shocking people into new insight and action. In my explication of her body meditation in this chapter (part B), I argued that she has actually found resource for her increased boldness in her growing acquaintance with God as love, which she has arrived at by living within the model of the world as God’s body.

By studying her words on spirituality in her ecological, constructivist stage, we see that her emboldening sense of God’s love has also come as she has insisted on the self-restraint of the privileged. To be sure, in this stage she begins talking about spirituality in terms of the particular ways Christians *should* love nature: pay attention to the particular body before you through the proximate vision of the loving eye, treat this body as a subject in its own right, recognize its uniqueness and interrelatedness with all things, honor both the horizontal and vertical dimensions of sacramentality in it, retain a prophetic “no” with respect to its suffering, and let this love and care spread in concentric circles to encompass all of creation.

---

<sup>249</sup> This is Session 5 of the Mind and Life Conference XXIII with His Holiness the Dalai Lama. (See [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=\\_NDSt7XeO8w](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_NDSt7XeO8w) to stream McFague’s presentation).

However, it is as she has focused on cruciform living and kenosis that her articulation of abundance and exuberance in God's body has become more personal and deep seated. Indeed, she begins to articulate her own experience of "God's loving self-disclosure"<sup>250</sup> and of "living in the truth"<sup>251</sup> as she realizes in *Life Abundant* that, particularly for the privileged, "love without economics is empty rhetoric."<sup>252</sup> Though she continues to speak about how Christians should love nature, she also now speaks of the love that has overwhelmed her, and which she believes will overwhelm those who make space for its reception. McFague writes that she has come to realize that "God is available all the time to everyone and everything. *We* have to become conscious of God's presence."<sup>253</sup> It would seem that in the self-emptying that economic restraint necessitates, she has experienced God's abundance enter in.

Thus, we could say that McFague has found resource for her increasing boldness not only through regular meditation on the world as God's body but also through the discipline of self-restraint. She writes that human beings are "paradise-haunted creatures" who will find satisfaction only in "living all together within God's love."<sup>254</sup> For McFague, making ego and eco space so that others may live and flourish allows for the perception of God's love, which in the end is the paradise we truly seek.

#### **D. Chapter Summary and Assessment**

In this chapter we discussed the spirituality that McFague has developed from the model of the world as God's body. She has written that "[m]etaphor is a trickster, trying

---

<sup>250</sup> McFague, *Life Abundant*, 8.

<sup>251</sup> McFague, *Life Abundant*, 9.

<sup>252</sup> McFague, *Life Abundant*, 128.

<sup>253</sup> McFague, *Life Abundant*, 10.

<sup>254</sup> McFague, *A New Climate for Theology*, 152 and 153; see also "Human Dignity and the Integrity of Creation," 207.

its chance, seducing us to give it a chance, the chance of seeing differently and maybe saying yes to a different way of being in the world.”<sup>255</sup> In allowing herself to be seduced by the body model, she has come to propose not only a different way of being, but more especially an embodied, loving, self-sacrificing and exuberant way of living our relationship with God in the world. As such, through her body model McFague offers Christians a very concrete way to love both world and God today.

**(i) Summary**

McFague created the model of the world as God’s body as a means to help people, especially privileged Christians, to live as if bodies truly mattered. Holding that humans are not at the center of things but rather the ones who must help God’s creation flourish, she develops a theological system from the body model that she hopes will help us live our proper role as “guardians and caretakers of our tiny planet.”<sup>256</sup>

By talking about the body model as organic she highlights God’s presence in, and therefore the importance of, every embodied form. By talking about this model as agential she indicates that although God’s and creation’s agencies are distinct, human beings can become the “mind and heart as well as the hands and feet”<sup>257</sup> of God when they become willing to live by the call of the Holy Spirit to care for God’s worldly bodies. With her Christology, which begins with the argument that Jesus is paradigmatic of God’s incarnation in every embodied form, she argues that Christians must come to understand that every single body in creation is intrinsically important and valuable. Moreover, she indicates that if we are to follow Jesus’ example, we must take special

---

<sup>255</sup> McFague, *A New Climate for Theology*, 108.

<sup>256</sup> McFague, *The Body of God*, 109.

<sup>257</sup> McFague, *The Body of God*, 148.

care of “oppressed, vulnerable, suffering *bodies*.”<sup>258</sup> From the model of the world as God’s body, then, she provides a theological system that justifies why and how people should care for the bodies of this world, especially the ones that most suffer.

As we have seen, she develops not only a theological system but also a meditation on the model of the world as God’s body. In this meditation, she holds that “the more we contemplate *any* aspect of our universe, . . . the more mysterious and wondrous it appears.”<sup>259</sup> If we can contemplate in this way, she believes the “God part” will take care of itself. Though she conceives of the meditation for functional reasons – to orient people to earthly bodies – I have shown that she has also grown spiritually through its practice, to the point of experiencing a certainty in God’s love that “[a]ll is divine, even this earth and its creatures.”<sup>260</sup>

Finally, with the model of the world as God’s body, she develops two different ways of speaking about spirituality. In the early part of her ecological, constructivist stage she talks in terms of nature spirituality. With nature spirituality her focus is on how Christians should love worldly bodies: by paying careful attention to them; treating them as subjects in their own right; coming to know them in a reciprocal way akin to touch and being touched; and by being cognizant of both the sacramental and prophetic dimensions of our relationship with each of these bodies. Beginning with *Life Abundant*, her focus shifts from love to economic and material self-sacrifice by the privileged. Ironically, her engagement of cruciform living, and later, kenosis, ends up leading her to speak more openly about abundance and even exuberance in God’s love. Thus, it is through the

---

<sup>258</sup> McFague, *The Body of God*, 164.

<sup>259</sup> McFague, *The Body of God*, 21.

<sup>260</sup> McFague, *A New Climate for Theology*, 113.

discipline of self-restraint for the sake of the flourishing of bodies other than our own that she believes a deep sense of gratitude and certainty in God's love increases.

I have argued that through her meditation on the model of the world as God's body, and with her insistence that the privileged make ego and eco space for bodies other than their own, her words about God have become increasingly bold. In particular, she has become more vocal and certain that God, as love, is present in embodied creation. When she created the body model, her goal was to show Christians "that bodies matter, that they are indeed the main attraction."<sup>261</sup> Though she never loses sight of the metaphoricity of this model, she has come to know that in allowing herself to be seduced by it, in living by its meditation and in being willing to follow its spirituality to the point of self-sacrifice, the world has come alive with God's love. With the model of the world as God's body, then, she invites others to transform their lives not only in functional ways but also in ways that are spiritually nourishing.

## **(ii) Assessment and Conclusion**

In the introductory chapter I indicated that while a healthy or life-giving Christian spirituality must be directed to the God who can fulfill us, it is important that the world not be neglected in the process of living out such a spirituality. With her body model, McFague offers a very clear explanation of how people may love God while being profoundly attentive and loving to the bodies of this world. In fact, because she thinks that Christians have generally been taught how to love God but not how to value and care for the world, she has focused her work on helping people – especially privileged Christians – truly appreciate the physical, concrete reality around them. Hence she offers

---

<sup>261</sup> McFague, *The Body of God*, 18.

“a this-worldly, concrete form of contemplating divine magnificence”<sup>262</sup> and very clearly explains the way worldly bodies must be loved (in neither fusion nor hyperseparation) and how such a love must be lived (in self-sacrifice and a deep sense of abundance).

In this way, she illustrates more clearly than most theologians what Roberto Goizueta has written in the context of Latino theology:

One cannot love the universal and supernatural if one cannot love the particular and natural – and love these precisely *as* particular and natural. One cannot love the Creator if one cannot love the creature – and love him, her, or it precisely *as* creature.<sup>263</sup>

In this time of socio-ecological crisis, marked as it is by a lack of attention and care for creation, McFague clearly demonstrates that Christian spirituality is authentic to the extent that it turns the human gaze to the particular needs of the bodies of this world.

---

<sup>262</sup> McFague, *The Body of God*, 132.

<sup>263</sup> Roberato S. Goizueta, *Caminemos Con Jesús: Toward a Hispanic/Latino Theology of Accompaniment* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1995), 49.

### CHAPTER 3: BOFF'S SPIRITUAL THEOLOGY

Chapter Three introduces Leonardo Boff's theological system, ranging from his earliest work in the 1970's to the ecological theology he began writing in the early 90's and continues to write today. Boff has had a highly prolific career, publishing over one hundred books in a wide range of theological subjects for both lay and academic audiences.<sup>1</sup> Though he is best known for his work as a Latin American liberation theologian, I indicate in this chapter that his theology is not contained by that label, particularly when we engage his work prior to 1975 and after 1992. In fact, I show that what unifies his entire theological system is not his work among the poor, but more specifically his privileging of the spiritual experience of God in the world as foundational for all theology, *including* theology of and for the poor. Stated differently, the most consistent trait of his long career is the primacy he affords to the God experience. Given his extensive words on the importance and nature of experiencing God in the world, I argue that Boff shows people why and how they must experience God in the face of the socio-ecological crisis today.

Chapter Three begins with an explanation of the evolution of Boff's thought. Following Boff's own words concerning his theological development, I characterize his evolution as a broadening of horizons, moving him from the fairly narrow concerns of liberal Christian humanism to the global concerns of his ecological theology. For as much as there has been development in his work, part B delineates the categories of Boff's spirituality that have remained consistent throughout his career. That is,

---

<sup>1</sup> For a recent comprehensive bibliography of Boff's works, see José Mario Vázquez Carballo, *Trinidad y Sociedad: Implicaciones éticas y sociales en el pensamiento trinitario de Leonardo Boff* (Salamanca: Secretariado Trinitario, 2008), 623-631.



understanding spirituality as the continual experience of God in the world, he utilizes three categories – experience, transience and sacramentality – to explain why and how God must be experienced in the world by all people and as the foundation of all theological and religious thought. I explicate how he uses these categories through the span of his works to explain his experientially-based spirituality.

In part C we then turn our attention to the anthropology that upholds Boff's experiential understanding of spirituality throughout his career. Characterizing the human as a knot of relations stretching out in all directions, as open-ended and as dialectical, he indicates that it is humans in particular who must experience God in the world, and in so doing, make God palpable in history. In the fourth and final part, then, I summarize Chapter Three and argue that Boff's primary contribution to spirituality is precisely his clear and comprehensive explanation for why and how we must live in the experience of God today if we are to move from crisis and into new life.

#### **A. The Evolution of Boff's Thought**

Leonardo Boff was born in Córdoba, in the state of Santa Catarina, Brazil on December 14, 1938. He was ordained as a Franciscan priest on December 15, 1964. In Brazil, he received a graduate degree in philosophy in 1961, and in theology in 1965. He received a doctorate in theology from the University of Munich in 1971, where he studied under the direction of Karl Rahner, Leo Scheffczyk, and Heinrich Fries.

Boff returned to Brazil from Germany in February of 1970, and by August of that same year he suffered a “decisive crisis” while preaching a retreat to missionary priests and religious working among the poor in the Amazonian jungle. He realized during the retreat that all his theological training was for naught if it could not answer the questions:

“How are we to be Christians in the midst of overwhelming poverty, in the loneliness of the Amazon, in the injustice of social relations?”<sup>2</sup> In 1975, he published his first work of Latin American liberation theology, called *Theology of Captivity and Liberation*.<sup>3</sup> He quickly became one of the leading proponents of this theology intended to give voice to the needs and concerns of the poor. Indeed, Vázquez Carballo has pointed out that “with an agile and incisive style, sometimes more journalistic than academic, he brought liberation theology to the popular masses and made it into a cultural, religious, and ecclesial movement.”<sup>4</sup>

Boff’s work as a liberation theologian did not come without controversy. He became known worldwide when Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, prefect of the Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of Faith and Boff’s former professor,<sup>5</sup> summoned him to Rome on May 15, 1984 and officially silenced him on May 9, 1985. The silence was lifted on March 29, 1986, but he was then silenced again in 1991, and this proved too much for Boff. In the summer of 1992 he left the Franciscan order and the priesthood. In an open letter explaining his decision to leave, he stated that he intended to “change course but not direction.” Standing at the periphery and outside the priesthood, he would continue “the fight for the kingdom, which begins with the poor; the passion for the gospel; compassion for the suffering; commitment to the liberation of the oppressed, the

---

<sup>2</sup> Leonardo Boff, “Um balanço de corpo e alma,” in *O Que Ficou: Balanço aos 50*, ed. Leonardo Boff (Petrópolis: Vozes, 1989), 20. Translation comes from Leonardo Boff, *The Path to Hope; Fragments from a Theologian’s Journey*, trans. Phillip Berryman (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1993), 5.

<sup>3</sup> The dates of publication that I list in the main text of the Boff chapters pertain to the first publication of each book, usually in Portuguese. However, in the footnotes I list the date of the publication I have utilized in my own research and writing of these chapters.

<sup>4</sup> “... con un estilo ágil e incisivo, a veces más periodístico que académico, llevó la TdL a las masas populares e hizo de ella un movimiento cultural, religioso y eclesial” (Vázquez Carballo, *Trinidad y sociedad*, 15). Indeed, B. Mondin has suggested that while Gustavo Gutierrez is the father of liberation theology, Leonardo Boff has been its principal protagonist (see *Ibid.*, 15-16).

<sup>5</sup> See Harvey Cox, *The Silencing of Leonardo Boff: The Vatican and the Future of World Christianity* (Oak Park: Meyer Stone Books, 1988), 28.

nurturing of the tenderness towards every being in creation in the light of St. Francis of Assisi's example."<sup>6</sup>

As the above quote indicates, Boff intended to continue his liberation work among the poor even after leaving the priesthood; but he also intended to engage his growing concern for "every being in creation" in what would become his ecological theology. Boff writes that he began to focus his attention on ecology around 1986 when, through the eyes of the Franciscan tradition and the insights of contemporary science (especially quantum physics and what he would come to call the new cosmology), he began to see the importance of both the growing ecological crisis and the incredible mystery of the world.<sup>7</sup> In June of 1992 he participated in the Rio Earth Summit, and became part of the editorial commission for the Earth Charter, which was completed in 2000.<sup>8</sup> His first full-length monograph on the subject of ecology, *Ecology and Liberation*, was published in 1993. Though in the years since Boff has insisted that his ecological theology is but the most recent development of his liberation theology,<sup>9</sup> he has very clearly amplified his focus to include "the earth and the set of ecosystems that constitute it."<sup>10</sup> Moreover, in his ecological theology his concerns have become increasingly global in scope, drawing less from the specific situation of the Latin

---

<sup>6</sup> Peter Hebblethwaite, "Boff leaves the priesthood and order for the 'periphery,'" *National Catholic Reporter* (July 17, 1992): 13.

<sup>7</sup> Boff, "Um balanço de corpo e alma," 23.

<sup>8</sup> To read the Earth Charter, go to <http://www.earthcharterinaction.org/content/pages/Read-the-Charter.html>. Boff has included the document in several of his books: e.g. *Global Civilization: Challenges to Society and to Christianity*, trans. A. Guilherme (London: Equinox, 2005), 75-82; *Ethos Mundial: Um consenso mínimo entre os humanos* (Rio de Janeiro: Sextante, 2003), 117-128; and *Do iceberg à Arca de Noé: O nascimento de uma ética planetária* (Rio de Janeiro: Garamond, 2002), 148-159.

<sup>9</sup> See, for example, Juan José Tamayo Acosta, *Leonardo Boff: Ecología, mística y liberación* (Bilbao: Desclée de Brouwer, 1999), 129-130.

<sup>10</sup> Leonardo Boff, "The Poor, the New Cosmology and Liberation," 117. Boff generally capitalizes the word Earth in his ecological theology (though not always in his earliest ecological works); in his liberation theology, the word remains in lower case. Honoring his most recent choice to capitalize the word, I also capitalize it whenever paraphrasing or explaining his work.

American poor and more from a spirituality of re-connectedness that he believes will unite the Earth as a whole.<sup>11</sup> Boff continues to write and speak on matters of ecological and social concern today.<sup>12</sup>

In the pages ahead I give a more detailed overview of Boff's theological career. I show that his work may be divided into three stages, each defined by a different set of guiding concerns. The three stages, which together mark a broadening of horizons, are liberal Christian humanism (1970-75), Latin American liberation theology (1975-92), and ecological theology (1992-).<sup>13</sup>

### **(i) Liberal Christian Humanism**

Just before Boff returned to Brazil in 1970 from his doctoral studies in Munich, he told his fellow student Ludovico Gramus: "When I get back to Brazil I am going to write the kind of theology people can read the way they read a newspaper."<sup>14</sup> Even his earliest works reflect that clarity of writing and communicate the desire to engage the common folk and not just academic and ecclesial audiences. But it took a few years, even after his decisive crisis in the face of Brazil's poverty, before Boff wrote not only

---

<sup>11</sup> Andrew Dawson has argued that with his ecological theology, Boff has "exchanged his epistemological *locus standi* among the poor for the generalised experience of mystical connectedness" ("Mystical Experience as Universal Connectedness: Leonardo Boff's 'Trans-Cultural Phenomenology,'" *Journal of Contemporary Religion* 19 no. 2 (2004): 164). While Dawson may be overstating the extent to which Boff has moved away from his locus among the poor, it is undoubtedly true that he has come to focus especially on spirituality as the vehicle for re-connecting the Earth in his ecological theology.

<sup>12</sup> The most contemporary publication I have found to date is Leonardo Boff, *Homem: Satã ou Anjo Bom* (Rio de Janeiro: Editora Record, 2008). But he continues to write in a weekly blog (see <http://leonardoboff.wordpress.com>) and speak publicly on ecological matters (see <http://www.stakeholderforum.org/sf/outreach/index.php/rio/110-dialogueday2/987-dialogue1day2item9>). For a more recent account of Boff's theological career, including some recent interviews, see Benjamín Forcano, *Leonardo Boff: Semblanza, teología de la liberación, textos básicos, proceso en Roma, entrevistas, situación actual* (Madrid: Editorial Nueva Utopía, 2007).

<sup>13</sup> For the first two stages I am relying principally on the insights of Luis R. Rivera Rodríguez, "Anthropogenesis: The Theological Anthropology of Leonardo Boff" (PhD diss., Harvard Divinity School, 1993).

<sup>14</sup> Cox, *The Silencing of Leonardo Boff*, 27.

*for* the common people, but *from* the perspective of the common people, especially the most oppressed. Therefore, while Boff did eventually become a leading proponent of liberation theology in Brazil, Luis Rivera has characterized his earliest works as “liberal Christian humanist.”<sup>15</sup> The dates of this earliest stage range from 1970, when he returned to Brazil from Munich, until 1975, when he published his *Theology of Captivity and Liberation*.

Rivera describes liberal Christian humanism as being primarily apologetical: it is concerned with making the Christian faith intelligible and relevant to “modern man” in a highly secularized world. It tries to promote a society of Christian values, human dignity, democracy, progress and social justice through an approach that is more reformist than revolutionary. Its fundamental questions are: “how are we to talk about God in the world come of age? How can the Christian church join and contribute to the historical process towards the reality of a developed world and a humane and just society for all?”<sup>16</sup> Rivera explains that Boff’s theological formation took place during the hegemony of reformist theology in both Brazil and Europe,” thus his earliest theology reflects the problems, questions, and topics of liberal Christian humanism.<sup>17</sup>

That Boff’s early work is apologetical is evidenced by the fact that he begins two of his early books – *The Gospel of the Cosmic Christ* (1971) and *The Destiny of Man and the World* (1973) – with the argument that the question posed by modern philosophical structuralism, as to what (if anything) structures and sustains the universe, is best

---

<sup>15</sup> Rivera, “Anthropogenesis,” 24-30; 93.

<sup>16</sup> Rivera, “Anthropogenesis,” 25-26.

<sup>17</sup> Rivera, “Anthropogenesis,” 28. Rivera explains that this is also the form of theology that triumphed in the Second Vatican Council.

answered through Christology.<sup>18</sup> Relying primarily on the Christology and cosmology of Pierre Teilhard de Chardin,<sup>19</sup> he argues that the structure that holds the cosmos together and guides evolution forward is Christ, Motor and Omega Point of evolution.<sup>20</sup> He holds that in Christ the future of the world has already been guaranteed because in him “the Kingdom and the end are already present in the world; [fermenting] in the evolutionary process those definitive realities that some day will be completely realized.”<sup>21</sup> In *Jesus Christ Liberator* (1972) and *The Destiny of Man and the World*, with the help of Jungian psychology, he also defines his anthropology in relation to his Christology: Jesus is “the prototype-archetype of the true human being that each of us ought to be but is not as yet,”<sup>22</sup> and therefore, the eschatological and trans-historical dimension of humanity is found in Christ, who is the first human, who became fully human so that we may follow

---

<sup>18</sup> See Leonardo Boff, *O Evangelho do Cristo Cósmico. A realidade de um mito; O mito de uma realidade* (Petrópolis: Vozes, 1971), 12-13; and *El destino del hombre y del mundo: Ensayo sobre la vocación humana*, trans. Juan Carlos Rodríguez Herranz (Bilbao: La Editorial Vizcaina, 1980), 22-24.

<sup>19</sup> Boff became fond of Teilhard’s work during his early theological training in Brazil. He writes that during this time he read the theologian’s works in their entirety and even organized a seminar for his fellow on the subject of Teilhard’s work (see Boff, “Um balanço de corpo e alma,” 18-19). Teilhard’s influence on Boff is evident especially in his Christology and his teleological understanding of history. This is true throughout the course of Boff’s career, but most especially in his first and third stages.

<sup>20</sup> See, for example, Boff, *O Evangelho do Cristo Cósmico*, 22, 36.

<sup>21</sup> “... el Reino y el final ya están presentes en el mundo; fermentan dentro del proceso evolutivo esas realidades definitivas que un día serán totalmente actualizadas” (Boff, *El destino del hombre y del mundo*, 31).

<sup>22</sup> Boff, *Jesus Christ Liberator: A Critical Christology for Our Time*, trans. Patrick Hughes (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1978), 203-204. This book is primarily the work of a Christian Liberal Humanist, concerned with making the Christology of the Church intelligible to contemporary people. There are hints of the liberation theology that Boff would later write in *Jesus Christ Liberator*, particularly as he discusses the primacy of the anthropological over the ecclesiastical, the utopian over the factual, the critical over the dogmatic, the social over the personal, and orthopraxis over orthodoxy (see *Ibid.*, 43-47). Nonetheless, whether it was because the book “was put together in Brazil at a time when severe political repression was being exerted against broad segments of the church” and so it “did not say all that its author wanted to say; it said what could be said,” as Boff wrote in the forward to the 1977 English translation of the book (see *Ibid.*, xii); or because, as Rivera has argued, the book marks a transitional period between Boff’s liberal Christian humanist theology and his liberation theology, “beginning to integrate a type of radical socio-analytical thought which was not present before” (“Anthropogenesis,” 30), the majority of the text lacks the marks of liberation theology. The epilogue that Boff wrote for the 1977 English translation of the book is, however, very clearly liberationist (see Boff, *Jesus Christ Liberator*, 264-295).

suit.<sup>23</sup> In other words, Boff argues that the meeting of humanity and divinity in Jesus indicates that humanity and divinity must meet in every person; therefore, “[t]he vocation of the human being is divinization.”<sup>24</sup>

In conversation with modern philosophy (structuralism) and psychology (Jungian analysis), Boff argues in his Christian humanist theology that the key to understanding the goal of both human beings and history is Christ. In other words, he indicates that a Teilhardian form of Christology may help the church contribute to a more humane and just society by giving people hope for the future already guaranteed in the person of Jesus.

As Boff moves into his liberation theology, he does not denounce the anthropology and teleological understanding of history that comes with his interpretation of Teilhard’s Christology in his Christian humanist stage. Rather, he assumes these arguments into a more politicized theological system, now intended to work toward the concrete liberation of the Latin American poor in history. In fact, there are several aspects of his liberal Christian humanist theology that remain important not only in his liberation theology, but in his ecological theology as well: for example, the teleological drive,<sup>25</sup> the insistence on the mutual transference of God and world,<sup>26</sup> and the understanding of the human as a knot of relations stretching out in all directions.<sup>27</sup> Moreover, in these books he articulates a clear concern for evolutionary and cosmic

---

<sup>23</sup> See Boff, *El destino del hombre y del mundo*, 36-37.

<sup>24</sup> Boff, *Jesus Christ Liberator*, 244.

<sup>25</sup> Interestingly enough, even as he enters his ecological theology many years later, and in an effort to encompass other religious and spiritual traditions the Christ figure wanes, the movement of humanity toward divinization and the teleological thrust of evolution remain in place, though now without a clear grounding in Christology (see Dawson, “Mystical Experience as Universal Connectedness,” 155-156).

<sup>26</sup> See, for example, Boff, *Jesus Christ Liberator*, 207. I explain this further in part B of this chapter.

<sup>27</sup> See, for example, Boff, *El destino del hombre y del mundo*, 33. I explain this further in part C of this chapter.

processes, something that becomes very important in his ecological theology many years later.<sup>28</sup> Thus, while the reformist tendencies of his liberal Christian humanist stage give way to a more revolutionary stance in his liberation and ecological theologies, some of the ideas he formulates in this stage remain important throughout his theological career.

## **(ii) Liberation Theology**

After 1975, Leonardo Boff quickly became one of the leading proponents of the liberation theology that arose from the cry of the oppressed in Latin America. Liberation theology originated in a political and economic climate that was especially oppressive, where dictatorships dominated, and where a dependent form of capitalism led to the exploitation of raw materials and the human labor force in Latin American countries.<sup>29</sup> Out of frustration for their political and economic situation, popular movements began to arise in the early 60's, the labor force began to unionize, university students mobilized, and intellectuals joined the ranks of the laboring classes. While the Catholic Church hierarchy in many of these countries was slow to respond in kind, large numbers of lay Christians, as well as pastors and several bishops joined popular organizations that were "conscientizing" the oppressed (in the style of Paulo Freire) and challenging the status quo.<sup>30</sup> Christian base communities (CEBs) began arising, and these in turn were teaching the poor to read the Bible through Freire's empowering methodology, bringing the force of the Gospel into their struggle for liberation. Empowered also by the call of the Second

---

<sup>28</sup> In his interview with Juan José Tamayo, Boff says that his interest in ecology began when he was writing about the cosmic Christ in the 1970's (See Tamayo, *Ecología, mística y liberación*, 128).

<sup>29</sup> See Leonardo Boff, *When Theology Listens to the Poor*, trans. Robert R. Barr (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1988), 9-11.

<sup>30</sup> Freire's pedagogical "conscientization" is a process by which "as the poor learn to read and learn the power of the word, the poor also become aware of the injustice of their present situation and are given some of the tools necessary for challenging the status quo that oppresses them" (Thomas L. Schubeck, *Liberation Ethics: Sources, Models, and Norms* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), 7).



Vatican Council (1962-1965) for greater lay participation,<sup>31</sup> as well as by the insistence of the Second General Conference of CELAM in Medellín (1968) that churches must be capable of “delivering us human beings from our cultural, economic, and political servitude,”<sup>32</sup> the poor themselves, most of whom were Catholic, began working for their own concrete and historical liberation.<sup>33</sup> The economic, political, and religious stirrings of the time came together, in short, to bring about an “irruption of the poor in history.”<sup>34</sup> It is this irruption that gave liberation theology its locus and voice.

Though the popular movement began earlier, Latin American liberation theology first came to be known under that name with Gustavo Gutiérrez’ landmark publication, *A Theology of Liberation* (1971). In this book he defined this theology as the critical reflection on the praxis of liberation in the light of the Word of God.<sup>35</sup> With the publication of his *Theology of Captivity and Liberation* (1975), Boff joined the ranks of

---

<sup>31</sup> See Leonardo Boff and Clodovis Boff, *Salvation and Liberation: In Search of a Balance between Faith and Politics*, trans. Robert R. Barr (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1984), 18-19.

<sup>32</sup> As quoted in Boff, *When Theology Listens to the Poor*, 21.

<sup>33</sup> Boff and Boff, *Salvation and Liberation*, 14-24. For more on the development of Latin American liberation theology and the Church, see Edward L. Cleary, ed., *Born of the Poor: The Latin American Church Since Medellín* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1990); and Lisa Isherwood, *Liberating Christ: Exploring the Christologies of Contemporary Liberation Movements* (Cleveland: The Pilgrim Press, 1999), 1-21.

<sup>34</sup> Gustavo Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics, and Salvation*, trans. and ed. Caridad Inda and John Eagleson (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1988), xx. Who are the poor? Gutiérrez says that, “[c]oncretely, to be poor means to die of hunger, to be illiterate, to be exploited by others, not to know that you are being exploited, not to know that you are a person” (Ibid., 164). Moreover, “poverty means death. It means death due to hunger and sickness ... It means physical death to which is added cultural death, inasmuch as those in power seek to do away with everything that gives unity and strength to the dispossessed of this world” (Gustavo Gutiérrez, *We Drink From Our Own Wells: Spiritual Journey of a People*, trans. Matthew J. Connell (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2003), 9-10). Who are these poor who not only *have* nothing but also believe that they *are* nothing? The Third General Conference of CELAM at Puebla (1979) determined that: “The poor do not lack simply material goods. They also miss, on the level of human dignity, full participation in sociopolitical life. Those found in this category are principally our indigenous people, peasants, manual laborers, marginalized urban dwellers and, in particular, the women of these social groups. The women are doubly oppressed and marginalized (*Puebla*, 1134) (In John Eagleson and Philip Sharper, *Puebla and Beyond: Documentation and Commentary*, trans. John Drury (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1980), 264). It is these people who, in working toward their own liberation, are irrupting in history.

<sup>35</sup> See Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, 12. Leonardo Boff alludes to this definition in *Teología del cautiverio y de la liberación*, trans. Alfonso Ortiz Garcia (Madrid: Ediciones Paulinas, 1978), 42.

liberation theologians who would write their theology as a second act, that is, as a reflection on the praxis of the oppressed and their allies.<sup>36</sup> Thus, the driving preoccupation of Boff's liberation theology is to develop "a political praxis and a vision of humanity, both informed by Christian faith, that can justify and motivate people to be engaged in emancipatory [historical] practice."<sup>37</sup> In other words, his liberation theology is concerned with naming and propagating Christian liberative praxis of and for the poor.

As a liberation theologian, Boff wrote numerous books (for both popular and academic audiences) on subjects as diverse as the history and method of Latin American liberation theology,<sup>38</sup> sacramentality,<sup>39</sup> grace,<sup>40</sup> Christology,<sup>41</sup> Mariology,<sup>42</sup> Prayer,<sup>43</sup>

---

<sup>36</sup> See Boff, *Teología del cautiverio y de la liberación*, 49. See also Leonardo Boff, *Liberating Grace*, trans. John Drury (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1979), 65. I explain the role of praxis and the epistemological privilege of the poor more extensively in part A of Chapter Four.

<sup>37</sup> Rivera, "Anthropogenesis," 48.

<sup>38</sup> See, for example, Leonardo Boff, *Teología del cautiverio y de la liberación* (1978); *When Theology Listens to the Poor* (1988); and *Faith on the Edge: Religion and Marginalized Existence*, trans. Robert R. Barr (San Francisco: Harper Row, 1989); and with Clodovis Boff, *Salvation and Liberation: In Search of a Balance between Faith and Politics* (1984); *Liberation Theology: From Confrontation to Dialogue*, trans. Robert R. Barr (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1986), and *Introducing Liberation Theology*, trans. Paul Burns (Orbis: Maryknoll, 1990).

<sup>39</sup> Leonardo Boff, *Sacraments of Life; Life of the Sacraments*, trans. John Drury (Washington D.C.: Pastoral Press, 1987).

<sup>40</sup> Boff, *Liberating Grace* (1979).

<sup>41</sup> See, for example, Leonardo Boff, *Encarnação: A humanidade e a jovialidade de nosso Deus* (Petrópolis: Vozes, 1977); and *Passion of Christ, Passion of the World: The Facts, Their Interpretation, and Their Meaning Yesterday and Today*, trans. Robert R. Barr (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1987). Boff began articulating his liberation Christology, which focuses on the historical Jesus, in an early article published in English: "Salvation in Jesus Christ and the Process of Liberation," translated by J. P. Donnelly, in *Mystical and Political Dimension of the Christian Faith*, edited by Claude Geffré and Gustavo Gutiérrez (New York: Herder and Herder, 1974), 78-91.

<sup>42</sup> See, for example, Leonardo Boff, *The Maternal Face of God: The Feminine and Its Religious Expressions*, trans. Robert R. Barr and John W. Diercksmeier (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1987). For a critique of Boff's Mariology and appropriation of feminism in *The Maternal Face of God*, see Sarah Coakley, "Mariology and 'Romantic Feminism': A Critique," in *Women's Voices: Essays in Contemporary Feminist Theology*, ed. Teresa Elwes (London: Marshall Publishing, 1992), 97-110; 168-171.

<sup>43</sup> See, for example, Leonardo Boff, *Praying With Jesus and Mary*, trans. Theodore Morrow and Phillip Berryman (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2005). This book combines two works by Boff: *O pai-nosso: A oração da libertação integral* (Petrópolis: Editora Vozes, 1979); and *A Ave-Maria: O feminino e o Espírito Santo* (Petrópolis: Editora Vozes, 1980).

ecclesiology,<sup>44</sup> St. Francis of Assisi,<sup>45</sup> spirituality,<sup>46</sup> the Trinity,<sup>47</sup> and the new evangelization of the poor.<sup>48</sup> His earliest writings of liberation theology are concerned with propagating the integral liberation (economic, political, cultural and religious) of the poor in general.<sup>49</sup> By the late 70's he began speaking more carefully about the feminine and the role of women in the church and society.<sup>50</sup> Starting in the late 80's his work addresses the more specific oppression of native and black populations in Latin America.<sup>51</sup>

**a. Marx and St. Francis**

Boff writes that his turn to liberation theology led him to engage Marxism because of its lucid and committed stance on the side of the oppressed, and because of its ability to turn people's attention to the historical and structural dimensions of human society (as opposed to the fragmented and compartmentalized approach of the liberal bourgeois).<sup>52</sup> He also came to favor the dialectical approach of Marxism, which, looking at society from the bottom up, "stresses the notion of struggle and conflict and sees

---

<sup>44</sup> See, for example, Leonardo Boff, *Church, Charism and Power: Liberation Theology and the Institutional Church*, trans. John W. Diercksmeier (New York: Crossroad, 1985); and *E a Igreja se fez povo: Ecclesiológenese: a Igreja que nasce da fé do povo* (Petrópolis: Vozes, 1986).

<sup>45</sup> Leonardo Boff, *Saint Francis: A Model for Human Liberation*, trans. John W. Diercksmeier (New York: Crossroad, 1982); and *Francisco de Assis. Saudades do paraíso* (Petrópolis: Vozes, 1985).

<sup>46</sup> See, for example, Leonardo Boff, *Vida Segundo o Espírito* (Petrópolis: Vozes, 1981).

<sup>47</sup> Leonardo Boff, *Trinity and Society*, trans. Paul Burns (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1988); and *Holy Trinity, Perfect Community*, trans. P. Berryman (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2000).

<sup>48</sup> Leonardo Boff, *New Evangelization: Good News to the Poor*, trans. Robert R. Barr (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1991); and *América Latina: Da conquista à nova evangelização* (São Paulo: Ática, 1992).

<sup>49</sup> See, for example, Leonardo Boff, *When Theology Listens to the Poor*, 21; and "What are Third World Theologies?," trans. Paul Burns, in *Convergences and Differences*, ed. Leonardo Boff and Virgil Elizondo (Edinburgh: T & T Clark LTD, 1988), 3-4.

<sup>50</sup> See, for example, Boff, *The Maternal Face of God* (1987).

<sup>51</sup> See, for example, Boff, *New Evangelization; Good News to the Poor* (1991).

<sup>52</sup> See Boff, "Um balanço de corpo e alma," 20-21.

society fraught with contradictions.”<sup>53</sup> In other words, Marxism shows that from the perspective of the oppressed, the very perspective from which Boff writes his liberation theology, societies that may look just fine from the standpoint of the privileged are in fact riddled with poverty, injustice and early death for those who lack the resources and social standing to access the benefits of that society. Thus, Marxism became a socio-analytic tool that Boff used – as most Latin American liberation theologians did – in order to elucidate the state and structural nature of poverty in his liberation theology.

His turn to liberation theology and Marxist thought also had the effect of leading him to the more careful study and integration of the Franciscan charism that had shaped him from his youth. Boff writes that he came to see St. Francis as a natural liberator because, speaking of the poor as the ones who reveal the suffering servant Christ, he inaugurated a new form of fraternity where the poor are not held at a distance but rather become brother [and sister].<sup>54</sup> That is, Boff found in St. Francis a strong theological warrant for the kind of perspective on the side of the oppressed that Marxism demands. From 1981 to 1999 Boff wrote three books, as well as several chapters in books of other subjects, on St. Francis and Franciscan charism.<sup>55</sup> In these books and chapters Boff emphasizes the close communion between St. Francis and the poor, calling all Christians to the evangelical poverty that Francis lived for the sake of initiating equality and joining forces with the poor who seek their historical liberation. Thus, Boff’s liberation theology has a distinctly Franciscan flavor; this will become especially clear in our discussion of

---

<sup>53</sup> Boff, *Jesus Christ Liberator*, 274. As I show in part C of this chapter, Boff has had an affinity for dialectics throughout his career.

<sup>54</sup> Boff, “Um balanço de corpo e alma,” 22.

<sup>55</sup> In addition to the two books listed in nt. 45 of this chapter, Leonardo Boff has also written *The Prayer of Saint Francis: A Message of Peace for the World Today*, trans. Phillip Berryman (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2001).

his sacramentality in part B of this chapter. As I already mentioned, Boff's (re)turn to Franciscan thought also had the effect of opening his framework to encompassing ecological issues.<sup>56</sup>

**b. First Phase**

In his 1989 autobiographical article, Boff divides his work in liberation theology into three phases. I indicate that each phase marks a widening, or broadening of horizons.<sup>57</sup> Thus, through the course of his liberation theology, Boff moves from engaging the Church in the liberative praxis of the poor, to engaging all of society, until he comes to encompass the whole Earth community in his work.

During the first of these phases (which he dates from the 70's to the mid 80's) he was occupied by the question: "How to win the great ecclesial institution for the cause of the poor?"<sup>58</sup> In other words, he was concerned with how to bring the Catholic Church into line with the praxis of and for the poor.<sup>59</sup>

One important book of this phase is *Church: Charism and Power* (1981). The book consists of essays written by Boff on the subject of ecclesiology; in most of these essays he is critical of the Catholic Church because he believes it has erroneously identified itself with earthly power instead of with the poor. He writes that when the Church identifies itself with *potestas* (power), when it "sees power as the greatest way in which the Gospel will be accepted, understood, and proclaimed," it separates itself from Jesus of Nazareth who became the Suffering Servant and who decidedly renounced all

---

<sup>56</sup> See Rivera, "Anthropogenesis," 306-307.

<sup>57</sup> Boff himself describes it as such (see "Um balanço de corpo e alma," 24).

<sup>58</sup> Boff, "Um balanço de corpo e alma," 22. Translation comes from Rivera, "Anthropogenesis," 313.

<sup>59</sup> See Kjell Nordstokke, *Council and Context in Leonardo Boff's Ecclesiology: the Rebirth of the Church among the Poor*, trans. Brian MacNeil (Lewisto: The Edwin Mellen Press, 1996).

earthly power and glory.<sup>60</sup> Identifying itself with power, he holds that the Church ends up functioning more like a giant multinational corporation,<sup>61</sup> or like Russia under communist rule,<sup>62</sup> than as the sacramental presence of the Holy Spirit in the world. In the process, he argues that the Church violates the rights and dignity of the human person,<sup>63</sup> and stifles the many gifts (*charisms*) that its members bring to the table.<sup>64</sup>

Because of the arguments he put forth in *Church: Charism and Power*, Boff received a silencing order on May 9, 1985 from the then prefect of the Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of Faith, Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger.<sup>65</sup> In his analysis of Boff's silencing, Harvey Cox writes that Ratzinger and Boff represent two very different ways of being Church in a pluralistic world, particularly given the emergence of "Third World Christianity" and the consequent "de-Europeanization" of theology: on the one hand, a centralizing of power in its ancient homeland (Rome) for the sake of Church unity; on the other, a "catholicity in which the gospel can take root in a variety of disparate cultures and flourish especially among the poor."<sup>66</sup> Boff stands firmly in the

---

<sup>60</sup> Boff, *Church: Charism and Power*, 51.

<sup>61</sup> Boff, *Church: Charism and Power*, 53.

<sup>62</sup> Boff, *Church: Charism and Power*, 171-172, nt.17.

<sup>63</sup> (a) In the way it marginalizes its congregants from participating in decisions that will effect them as individuals and as community; (b) in the way it treats priests when they want to return to the lay state, as though their "decision of conscience" are not morally legitimate and therefore subject to "a series of prohibitions, reducing them to a sub-lay status;" and (c) in its discrimination of women who are considered "unfit for the sacrament of orders," and are therefore treated as non-persons. (Boff, *Church: Charism and Power*, 34-36).

<sup>64</sup> See Boff, *Church: Charism and Power*, ch. 13. For a later reflection on the same subject matter, see Leonardo Boff, "The Uncompleted Vision of Vatican II: The Church – Hierarchy or People of God?," translated by Paul Burns, in *Non-Ordination of Women and the Politics of Power*, edited by Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza and Hermann Häring (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1999), 31-39.

<sup>65</sup> Before he received the silencing order, Boff received a letter from Ratzinger detailing the charges against him (May 1984) and was summoned to Rome to discuss these charges (September 1984). For an account of these communications and the silencing, see Robert McAfee Brown, "Leonardo Boff: Theologian for All Christians," *Christian Century* 103 no. 21 (Jl. 2-9, 1986), 615-617.

<sup>66</sup> Cox, *The Silencing of Leonardo Boff*, 92.

latter perspective. His concern is not with Church unity per se but with the continuous conversion of the institution to the poor, “with everything that term implies:”

poverty, rejection of false security, acceptance of the inability to control the future, the challenge of faith, trust, and surrender to the Spirit who was given to the Church not to develop an already received and guaranteed deposit of faith but to guarantee fidelity to its essential element, Jesus Christ, in every confrontation between faith and the world (cf. Matt 10:20; John 15:26; 16:8).<sup>67</sup>

Boff argues that it is in the Christian base communities and among the poor that this latter form of Church is flourishing.<sup>68</sup> He believes that, “[g]iven the power structure at the center, the periphery is the only place where true creativity and freedom is possible.”<sup>69</sup>

If Ratzinger’s understanding of Church produces a “monocentric model,” Boff admits that this gives rise to “a polycentric view, that is, various centers of coordination and power.”<sup>70</sup> But how and in what way power is centralized in the Church is not Boff’s main concern; rather, it is that of opening the Church to the movement of the Spirit of Jesus Christ from and for those standing in the periphery. Boff and Ratzinger never came to an agreement on their ecclesiologies, even after the silence was lifted on Easter Saturday (March 29), 1986.

---

<sup>67</sup> Boff, *Church: Charism and Power*, 58. Boff repeats these concerns, and his critique of the Roman Catholic Church for being “more concerned with its own image than with service to the cause of the humiliated and condemned of the earth,” in a more recent reflection of the circumstances surrounding his first silencing. See Leonardo Boff, “In the Chair of Galileo Galilei,” *Catholic New Times* 28 (Oct. 10, 2004): 12.

<sup>68</sup> For more on the importance of the Christian base communities for the Church, see Leonardo Boff, “Ecclesio-genesis: Ecclesial Basic Communities Re-Invent the Church,” *Mid-Stream* 20 no. 4 (1981): 431-488.

<sup>69</sup> Boff, *Church: Charism and Power*, 62.

<sup>70</sup> Leonardo Boff, “I Changed to Stay the Same (Why I Left The Priesthood,” trans. Francis McDonagh, in *Any Room for Christ in Asia?*, ed. Leonardo Boff and Virgil Elizondo (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1993), 145.

*c. Second Phase*

During the time of his silencing Boff could not teach or publish, but he could write. One of the three books he put together during that time was *Trinity and Society*, which he published in August of 1986. This book is characteristic of the second phase of his liberation theology, which he says started in the mid-80's.<sup>71</sup> During this phase his horizon began to expand from the Church to society. He became increasingly aware that the real theological problem was not the Church but people, humanity, who are the center of God's salvific project and the ones for whom the Church exists. Thus, he shifted from targeting the Church for liberative praxis, to trying to get the Church to engage society for this praxis. The question that concerned Boff during this time was: "How does the Roman Catholic Church collaborate with the emergence of human solidarity, participation, communion and good will for all?"<sup>72</sup> In other words, how does the Catholic Church, itself marred in discriminatory and authoritarian practices, encourage the liberative praxis of the poor in greater society? His Trinitarian theology exemplifies this concern.

Central to his reflections on the Trinity is the Greek term *perichoresis*: "each Person contains the other two, each one penetrates the others and is penetrated by them, one lives in the other and vice-versa."<sup>73</sup> The term becomes "the structural axis"<sup>74</sup> of Boff's Trinitarian theology not only because it aptly describes the union, love, and hypostatic relationships within the Trinity, but because it points to how human beings should live in society. His central assumption is, of course, that since humans are created

---

<sup>71</sup> Boff, "Um balanço de corpo e alma," 22.

<sup>72</sup> Boff, "Um balanço," 22. Translation comes from Rivera, "Anthropogenesis," 313-314.

<sup>73</sup> Boff, *Trinity and Society*, 5.

<sup>74</sup> Boff, *Trinity and Society*, 6.



in God's image, God's way of being in God's self indicates something of our proper being in the world. As such, "The community of Father, Son and Holy Spirit becomes the prototype of the human community."<sup>75</sup>

This understanding of the Trinity as a prototype for human beings means two things for Boff. First, as God the Trinity is always within a network of relationships, so "being a person in the image and likeness of the divine Person means acting as a permanently active web of relationships," relating upwards to the unfathomable mystery of the Faith, relating outwards to one's fellow human beings who reveal the mystery of the Son, and relating inwards to the depths of oneself in the mystery of the Spirit.<sup>76</sup> In other words, Boff shows that the mystery of the Trinity grounds his longstanding conception of the human person as a "knot of relationships" stretching out in all directions.<sup>77</sup>

Second, Boff argues that societal injustices are due to "our losing the memory of the essential perspective of the triune God."<sup>78</sup> He believes that only a strict monotheism (solitude of the one) that is blind to the perichoretic relationship within the Trinity – and therefore blind to the kind of relationships necessary in society – can justify totalitarianism and the concentration of power in one person's hands. He holds that the patriarchalism and paternalism that has excluded women in both politics and religion has also been due to this strict form of monotheism (a particularly masculine form).<sup>79</sup>

Writing about the Catholic Church's tendency to power, for example, Boff explains:

---

<sup>75</sup> Boff, *Trinity and Society*, 6-7

<sup>76</sup> Boff, *Trinity and Society*, 149.

<sup>77</sup> Again, I discuss Boff's understanding of the human as a knot of relations in part C of this chapter.

<sup>78</sup> Boff, *Trinity and Society*, 15-16.

<sup>79</sup> Boff, *Trinity and Society*, 20-21; 121.

As an institution in history, the church has developed within the Western framework, which is strongly marked by the concentration of power in a few hands. It has been inculturated into settings where monarchical power, the principle of both authority and property, prevail over other values more oriented toward community and society. . . . It is not surprising, then, that the prevailing mindset in the church is more that of an “a-trinitarian” or “pre-trinitarian” monotheism than a true trinitarian consciousness of God.<sup>80</sup>

Boff holds, then, that when a society, or a church, is structured along egalitarian lines, it is a sacrament of the Trinity; “[b]ut as long as the present social inequalities remain, faith in the Trinity will mean criticism of all injustices and a source of inspiration for basic changes.”<sup>81</sup>

Thus, to the question “How does the Roman Catholic Church collaborate with the emergence of human solidarity, participation, communion and good will for all?” Boff answers: Become more like the Trinity. He explains: “the church is more the sacrament of trinitarian communion the more it reduces inequalities between Christians and between the various ministries in it, and the more it understands and practices unity as co-existence in diversity.”<sup>82</sup> He shows that to become a sacrament of trinitarian communion, society – and the church within it – should learn from the poor who “reject their impoverishment as sin against trinitarian communion and see the inter-relatedness of the divine ‘Differences’ as the model for a human society based on mutual collaboration.”<sup>83</sup> As in all of his work after the mid-70’s, Boff’s trinitarian theology remains firmly rooted in the praxis of and for the poor.

In 1991, after twenty years of receiving “letters, warnings, restrictions and punishments” from the Vatican, Boff’s Franciscan superiors (themselves under intense

---

<sup>80</sup> Boff, *Holy Trinity, Perfect Community*, xii.

<sup>81</sup> Boff, *Trinity and Society*, 13.

<sup>82</sup> Boff, *Trinity and Society*, 236-237.

<sup>83</sup> Boff, *Trinity and Society*, 237.

pressure from the Vatican) removed him from his position as editor of the prestigious journal *Vozes*, and “advised” him to give up teaching in the Petrópolis Institute of Theology and to refrain from teaching and writing on controversial issues. This proved to be too much for Boff, and in the summer of 1992 he made public his intentions to leave the Franciscan Order, though not the Catholic Church.<sup>84</sup> In an open letter explaining his decision to leave the priesthood, Boff grounded his decision theologically in the doctrine of the Trinity by writing: “I have frequently made the following reflection which I repeat here. That which is wrong in the doctrine on Trinity cannot be truth in the doctrine on church. One is taught that in the Trinity there can be no hierarchy. Therefore, all subordination is heretical.” He continues:

For such views, which are moreover part of the prophetic tradition of Christianity and of the mind-set of the reformers, beginning with St. Francis of Assisi, I came under the strict vigilance of the doctrinal authorities of the Vatican. Directly or through intermediary authorities, this vigilance became like an ever-tightening tourniquet rendering my work as theologian, teacher, lecturer, adviser and writer almost impossible.

... Before I become bitter, before I see the human bases of Christian faith and hope destroyed in me, before I see the evangelical image of God-the-communion-of-persons shaken, I prefer to change course. Not direction.<sup>85</sup>

Boff believed that the perichoretic doctrine of the Trinity did not allow for the type of subordination which the Vatican had required of him – and with him, the many people living in the periphery of society – so he decided to change course by leaving the Franciscan order and the priesthood. His concern for bringing the liberative praxis of the poor to society would no longer be encumbered by a Church which he felt was unwilling to be a vehicle for liberation.

---

<sup>84</sup> Hebblethwaite, “Boff leaves priesthood and order for ‘periphery,’” 12.

<sup>85</sup> Hebblethwaite, “Boff leaves priesthood and order for ‘periphery,’” 12-13.

*d. Third Phase*

Boff dates the beginning of his third phase to around 1986, when, due to a deepening emersion in Franciscan spirituality and his reading of contemporary science, he widened his horizons further to encompass the ecological crisis and the mystery of creation into his theology.<sup>86</sup> In his 1989 autobiographical article he is still uncertain about where this widening horizon will take him in the years ahead, but he is certain that he must go down the path it has opened. Consequently, the guiding question of his third phase is both ambiguous and personal: “how do I become more human and construct my identity while including others, creation, the feminine, the God-community, the Christian phenomenon, and the Franciscan?”<sup>87</sup> The path was open, but where it would lead would first require leaving his official position in the Church as a Franciscan priest.

Thus, the third phase of his liberation theology is transitional. His most immediate publications after 1989 deal with the subject of evangelization from the perspective of liberation theology and in light of the 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the conquest of the Americas.<sup>88</sup> They call the church to free itself from vestiges of its colonial past, recognizing especially the toll colonialism has had on native and black peoples, and on the poor. In these books there are also traces of Boff’s growing ecological concern. For example: “To take up the cause of life, the means of life, to help develop a full ecological sense of love, respect, and preservation of every kind of life (everything alive deserves to

---

<sup>86</sup> Boff, “Um balanço de corpo e alma,” 23-24.

<sup>87</sup> “... como me torno mais humano e construo minha identidade com a inclusão dos outros, da criação, do feminino, do Deus-comunhão, do fenômeno cristão, do franciscanismo?” (Boff, “Um balanço de corpo e alma,” 24).

<sup>88</sup> Boff, *New Evangelization: Good News to the Poor* (1991); and *América Latina: Da conquista à nova evangelização* (1992).

live) is itself to effect the core of the gospel.”<sup>89</sup> The first full articulation of his ecological theology would have to wait until 1993 with the publication of *Ecology and Liberation*.

*e. Summary*

In his 1989 autobiographical article, reflecting on twenty-five years of being a Franciscan priest, Leonardo Boff writes that his trajectory of his development has taken the following direction:

... my first enthusiasm was for the Franciscan order, and for the priesthood, and then for theology; from theology I went on to the church, and from the church to the people; from the people to the poor, from the poor to humankind; from humankind to the mystery of creation.<sup>90</sup>

He continues by saying that “[a]s things opened up and my horizons broadened, I experienced growth in interior authenticity and genuine freedom.”<sup>91</sup> Moving from the Church, to all of society, to the mystery of creation, his liberation theology marks this broadening of horizons. Wanting to maintain the authenticity and freedom he had come to experience in the broadening of his horizons, he eventually left the priesthood and Franciscan order. After his departure from religious life, he turned his attention to encompassing the Earth more explicitly among the poor in his work.

**(iii) Ecological Theology**

With his move to ecological theology, then, Boff’s work for justice grows to encompass not only the human poor, but also the entire Earth and the global systems that currently shape human perceptions of this world. In fact, global concerns come to take

---

<sup>89</sup> Boff, *New Evangelization*, 53-54.

<sup>90</sup> Boff, “Um balanço de corpo e alma,” 24. Translation comes from Boff, *The Path to Hope*, 3.

<sup>91</sup> Boff, “Um balanço de corpo e alma,” 24. Translation comes from Boff, *The Path to Hope*, 3.

precedence in his ecological work.<sup>92</sup> That is, Boff's ecological theology comes to be marked by global political commitment to liberation, not merely of the Latin American poor but of the entire Earth on whose survival the poor and all creatures depend. Accompanying this global concern is a pronounced reliance on a form of spirituality or mysticism<sup>93</sup> that he thinks can tie the whole Earth together like a pearl necklace.<sup>94</sup> In the meantime, Teilhard de Chardin's cosmological theology – with his insistence that we are moving into the noosphere, a new human sphere characterized by the spirit of communion and love between humans and between humans and the Earth – rises to prominence once again in Boff's work.<sup>95</sup>

To be sure, in his first book of ecological theology, *Ecology and Liberation* (1993), Boff still sounds, in some ways, very much like the liberation theologian who wrote *Church: Charism and Power* and *Trinity and Society*. He explicitly privileges the human poor, espouses the conviction that “[i]f we do not take the side of the wretched of the earth, we become enemies of our very humanity,”<sup>96</sup> and gives voice to the utopic vision of equality “underlying all the struggles of the oppressed.”<sup>97</sup> He also argues that Christian spirituality “implies a commitment to solidarity with the poor, for Jesus wishes to be one of them.”<sup>98</sup> Thus, the human poor and the struggle for justice with and for the poor play a prominent role in this book.

---

<sup>92</sup> I illustrate this shift in focus, or broadening scope of Boff's ecological theology, in part B of Chapter Four.

<sup>93</sup> Boff tends to often use the terms “spirituality” and “mysticism” interchangeably.

<sup>94</sup> For the pearl necklace analogy, see, for example, Boff, *The Prayer of Saint Francis*, 32.

<sup>95</sup> For Boff's discussion of Teilhard's noosphere, see, for example, *Ética da vida*, 117-118; *Global Civilization*, 92-93; and *A Voz do arco-íris*, 48.

<sup>96</sup> Boff, *Ecology and Liberation*, 100. He continues: “By losing the poor, we also lose God and Jesus Christ, who chose the side of the poor” (Ibid.).

<sup>97</sup> Boff, *Ecology and Liberation*, 133.

<sup>98</sup> Boff, *Ecology and Liberation*, 151.

However, there are some things that are markedly new and fresh in *Ecology and Liberation*; for example, his explanation of the new cosmology,<sup>99</sup> his call for a societal-wide paradigm shift<sup>100</sup> and the global ecologico-social democracy that he thinks is arising.<sup>101</sup> In this book he also begins to explain the form of spirituality and mysticism that he believes will, and in fact already is, bringing about global change.<sup>102</sup> Therefore, while trying to maintain a focus on the needs of the Latin American poor, his horizons widen to encompass not only ecological issues but global societal transformation.<sup>103</sup>

With the publication of *Cry of the Earth, Cry of the Poor* (1995), Boff continues to widen his horizons, and this leads to a position that is ever more clearly focused on matters of global concern. In the process, the identification marks of his liberation theology, as explicitly arising from the praxis of the Latin American poor and their allies, wane to some degree.

Starting with *Cry of the Earth, Cry of the Poor*, Boff argues that the cry of the human poor and of the Earth are of one accord. He holds that the paradigm of modernity is responsible for producing the wound of poverty that breaks the social fabric of millions

---

<sup>99</sup> See especially Boff, *Ecology and Liberation*, 62-66.

<sup>100</sup> Boff dedicates Part 1 of the *Ecology and Liberation* to this subject, pgs. 7-90.

<sup>101</sup> Boff, *Ecology and Liberation*, ch. 3, pgs. 81-92.

<sup>102</sup> The entire book is infused with the discussion of this spirituality and mysticism.

<sup>103</sup> While writing a very positive review of *Ecology and Liberation*, Catherine Keller nonetheless points to a certain difficulty that she thinks arises as Boff tries to maintain a focus *both* on the Latin American poor *and* on the spirituality and mysticism that will bring about a global societal paradigm shift. The difficulty arises as Boff argues, on the one hand, that under the new societal paradigm “[w]ork has to be balanced with leisure time, efficiency with gratuitousness, and productivity with playfulness” (*Ecology and Liberation*, 92), and on the other, that “[t]heologians and pastoral workers who walk in the warren of the lives of the poor should be ready to divest themselves of everything. They will never be able to set their own schedule; they will have to be prepared to cut out leisure time, because the poor have no leisure and their problems take no account of our schedules” (Ibid., 136). Keller then comments: “I cannot tell if it’s my feminism, my Protestantism, or my bourgeois, North American selfishness that revolts against the model of self-abnegation in identification with the other. It seems also at odds with Boff’s own mysticism: how, for instance, does the donation of one’s every moment to ‘the poor’ fit with his insistence on regular meditation? Moreover, does the celebrative holism of his new paradigm support a one-way, agapic sacrifice of mind and body?” (“Review of *Ecology and Liberation: A New Paradigm* by Leonardo Boff, and *Sustaining the Common Good: A Christian Perspective on the Global Economy* by John B. Cobb,” *The Journal of Religion* 78 no. 1 (1998): 135).

around the world *and* the wound of assault on the Earth that breaks down the careful balance of our planet.<sup>104</sup> He argues that this paradigm has caused people the globe around to forget their ontological interconnectedness with all things and thus to exploit both Earth and the human poor.<sup>105</sup> Pointing to signs of crisis in the old paradigm, then, he advocates for a new societal paradigm that he believes is currently arising across religious traditions and cultures. He also discusses at length the form of spirituality – aided by the new science or new cosmology – that he believes is reconnecting humans once again with the diaphanous and transparent Mystery of God in the world, and consequently, with all things in a ecologico-social cosmic democracy.<sup>106</sup> As such, the focus of his argument is on shifting the very foundations of global society in order to stop injustice towards humans and the Earth at its roots.

This focus on shifting the foundations does not diminish his political commitment to liberation, but rather broadens it: he no longer seeks merely the liberation of the human poor but of the entire Earth on whose survival all creatures depend. Therefore, in his ecological theology he often says that the Earth is like a spaceship, which if destroyed, would eliminate everyone and everything.<sup>107</sup> He writes that if we do not change our

---

<sup>104</sup> Boff, *Cry of the Earth*, 104.

<sup>105</sup> Boff, *The Prayer of Saint Francis*, 33.

<sup>106</sup> I discuss this spirituality at length in parts B and C of Chapter Four.

<sup>107</sup> This is the analogy Boff uses: “Earth and humankind: we are like a spaceship in full flight. This vessel has limited amounts of fuel and food onboard for the trip. Only 1% of its passengers travel first class with over-abundant means of life. Just 4% travel economy class, with abundant resources. The remaining 95% are crammed into the baggage hold, cold and needy. The social and economic status of the passengers is of little importance, as the lives of all of them are threatened by the depletion of the resources of this spaceship. They will all meet the same dramatic fate; rich, comfortable and poor, if no agreement is reached on the survival of them all, making no distinctions” (“The New Cosmology,” 116). He uses this analogy often. See, for example, Leonardo Boff, “Social Ecology: Poverty and Misery,” in *Ecotheology: Voices from the South and North*, ed. David G. Hallman (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1995), 242; and *Ética da vida*, 123.



ways, the entire Earth will share the same fate as the Titanic.<sup>108</sup> He holds that the dangers we now face are global and all-encompassing, to such a degree that “[t]his time there will be no Noah’s ark to rescue the few from the deadly fate of the many.”<sup>109</sup> He now perceives the danger to be global, therefore his ecological theology is global in scope.

In his ecological theology Boff has written (for both academic and lay audiences) on the subjects of ecology and liberation,<sup>110</sup> globalization,<sup>111</sup> mysticism and spirituality,<sup>112</sup> anthropology,<sup>113</sup> Saint Francis,<sup>114</sup> global ethics,<sup>115</sup> the marks of the new societal paradigm,<sup>116</sup> religious and ideological fundamentalism,<sup>117</sup> and the current societal

---

<sup>108</sup> For the Titanic analogy, see, for example, Leonardo Boff and Marcos Arruda, *Globalização: Desafios socioeconômicos, éticos e educativos; Uma visão a partir do Sul* (Petrópolis: Vozes, 2001), 112; and Boff, *Do iceberg à Arca de Noé*, 38-39; 72-74.

<sup>109</sup> Boff, *New Evangelization*, 50. The Noah’s ark theme is one he repeats often in his ecological theology; for example: “There is no Noah’s Ark that will save some and leave others to perish. We either save everybody or we all die together” (Leonardo Boff, *Fundamentalism, Terrorism and the Future of Humanity*, trans. and notes Alexandre Guilherme (London: SPCK, 2006), 89). See also Boff, “The Poor, The New Cosmology and Liberation,” 116; and *Ética da vida*, 210. As the title of the book suggests, this theme also plays prominently in *Do iceberg à Arca de Noé* (2002).

<sup>110</sup> See, for example, *Ecology and Liberation: A New Paradigm* (1995); *Cry of the Earth; Cry of the Poor* (1997); and with Mark Hathaway, *The Tao of Liberation; Exploring the Ecology of Transformation* (2009).

<sup>111</sup> See, for example, Boff, *Global Civilization: Challenges to Society and to Christianity* (2005); and with Marcos Arruda, *Globalização: Desafios socioeconômicos, éticos e educativos; Uma visão a partir do Sul* (2001).

<sup>112</sup> See, for example, Leonardo Boff, *Tempo de transcendência* (2000); *Espiritualidade: Um caminho de transformação* (Rio de Janeiro: Sextante, 2001); *Experimentar Deus: A transparência de todas as coisas* (Campinas: Verus, 2002); and with Frei Betto, *Mística e Espiritualidade* (Rio de Janeiro: Editora Rocco, 1994).

<sup>113</sup> See, for example, Leonardo Boff, *A águia e a galinha: Uma metáfora da condição humana* (Petrópolis: Vozes, 1997); *Homem: Satã ou Anjo Bom* (2008); and with Rose Marie Murano, *Feminino e masculino; Uma nova consciência para o encontro das diferenças* (Rio de Janeiro: Sextante, 2002).

<sup>114</sup> See, for example, Boff, *The Prayer of Saint Francis* (1999).

<sup>115</sup> See, for example, Leonardo Boff, *Ética da vida* (1999); *Ethos Mundial: Um consenso mínimo entre os humanos* (2000); *Essential Care: An Ethics of Human Nature*, trans. Alexandre Guilherme (Waco: Baylor University Press, 1999); *Do iceberg à Arca de Noé: O nascimento de uma ética planetária* (2002); *Ética e moral: A busca dos fundamentos* (Petrópolis: Vozes, 2003); “The Ethic of Care,” translated by Phillip Berryman, in *A Voice for Earth: American Writers Respond to the Earth Charter*, edited by Peter Blaze Corcoran and A. James Wohlpart, with editorial assistance by Brando P. Hollingshead (Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 2008), 129-145.

<sup>116</sup> See, for example, Leonardo Boff, *Nova Era: A civilização planetária; Desafios à sociedade e ao cristianismo* (São Paulo: Ática, 1994); *A voz do arco-íris* (2000).

<sup>117</sup> See, for example, Boff, *Fundamentalism, Terrorism and the Future of Humanity* (2006).

crisis as a moment of opportunity.<sup>118</sup> The majority of these works begin with the assumption of socio-ecological crisis and with the insights of the new cosmology, and aim to engender a new societal paradigm on Earth. Moreover, they indicate one central concern: To alter the societal paradigm of modernity by engendering a sense spiritual re-connectedness throughout the Earth.

#### **(iv) Conclusion**

Boff characterizes his own theological development as a broadening of horizons. He begins his theological career as a Christian liberal humanist concerned with promoting Christian values and making the Christian faith intelligible to a secularized world. He then turns his attention to Latin American liberation theology, with its commitment to the praxis of the oppressed, and within this theology moves from a concern to transform the Roman Catholic Church, to all society, finally turning his attention to the mystery of all creation. With his move to ecological theology, Boff broadens his scope to include not merely the human poor, or the Earth poor, but those paradigmatic structures that lead to socio-ecological injustice throughout the world. In other words, his focus becomes global in scope.

For as much as there has been a broadening movement through the course of his theological career, however, Boff has freely drawn from his earlier stages inasmuch as they support the particular arguments he is making at any given time. Thus, for example, he speaks of the human as a knot of relations from his first stage to the last. Likewise, once he begins drawing from, for example, philosophical structuralism and phenomenology, Teilhard de Chardin and depth psychology, or Marxism and Franciscan

---

<sup>118</sup> See, for example, Leonardo Boff, *Crise: Oportunidade de crescimento* (Campinas, Verus, 2002).

thought, he continues to draw from these sources wherever appropriate from that point forward.

In the next part of the chapter I indicate that his reliance on spirituality, as the lived experience of God in creation, is in fact the most consistent trait of his long theological career. Accompanying this spirituality is a particular understanding of human beings, whose ontological traits equip them especially well for the spiritual life. Though Boff's theology grows in scope throughout his career, then, I show that the fundamentals of his spirituality and spiritual anthropology remain consistent, and in fact unify his entire theological system, from his earliest Christian humanist writings to his more recent ecological work.

### **B. The Spirituality that Unifies Boff's Theology**

*Our basic concern is to discern the signs of God's presence in the world, in social processes, in the struggles of the oppressed, in the tender affection of those who love one another, in the deeds of solidarity by all who choose to strive for a better society for those now outcast, in the sensitivity of conscience, and in the depths of our own hearts.*

-- Boff, *Res Publica*, October, 1989.<sup>119</sup>

In simplest terms, the spirituality that Leonardo Boff espouses through his theological career is this: To discern the signs of God's presence in the world, or stated another way, "to live the mystery of God deciphered in each situation."<sup>120</sup> Boff's spirituality is about experiencing God, or the depth of Mystery, in every experience of the world. It entails cultivating and educating ourselves to perceive God in all things. Thus for Boff, spirituality, or even mysticism as he understands it, does not entail withdrawal, but rather immersion into a world that is suffused with God's presence. Steeped in

---

<sup>119</sup> Boff, *The Path to Hope*, 34.

<sup>120</sup> Boff, *The Path to Hope*, 14.

Franciscan spirituality, Boff wants Christians to experience God in their every experience of the world.<sup>121</sup> He articulates this spirituality in different ways according to the particular focus of his theology at the time, but in this one way – in the sense that spirituality means perceiving the mystery of God at every moment and in the daily stuff of life (*o cotidiano*) – Boff remains entirely consistent.

For this understanding of spirituality Boff relies on three interrelated categories: experience, transparence, and sacramentality. I explain each of these categories in the pages ahead.

### **(i) Experience**

Boff has written that “[a] theology – any theology – not based on a spiritual experience is mere panting – religious breathlessness.”<sup>122</sup> Indeed, he believes that “[b]ehind all innovative practice within the church, as the root of every genuinely new theology, there lies hidden a typical religious experience, which constitutes the word-source.”<sup>123</sup> He talks about transparence as the “original experience”<sup>124</sup> and

---

<sup>121</sup> As I have already noted, the influence of Saint Francis on Boff is deep and wide. In *The Silencing of Leonardo Boff*, Harvey Cox aptly writes: “Boff’s commitment to follow the saint of Assisi is the rosetta stone for anyone trying to understand his mind and spirit” (33). With respect to spirituality, Cox goes on to explain that “contrary to many theologians of the day, Francis did not consider natural beauty a distraction from God. For him it was a luminous medium through which the divine and the human could meet. ... Boff is also a world-affirmer. One can sense in his general bearing as well as in the tone of his writing a kind of hopefulness and a continuous confidence in the underlying goodness both of the created world and of human cultural activity. In reading Boff one catches a glimpse of his belief that the earth – despite the agony he sees around him all the time – is not just a veil of tears but a womb filled with life” (Ibid., 34). Moreover, in his dissertation on Boff’s anthropology, Luis Rivera argues that “the religious matrix of Boff’s anthropology is found in his Franciscan spirituality” (“Anthropogenesis,” 11).

<sup>122</sup> Boff and Boff, *Salvation and Liberation*, 2.

<sup>123</sup> Leonardo Boff, “The Need for Political Saints,” trans. Linde Rivera and León King, *Cross Currents* 30 no. 4 (Winter 1980-81): 369. He continues: “everything else proceeds from that all-encompassing experience, trying to work out a translation within the framework of a historically determined reality.”

<sup>124</sup> See, for example, Boff, *Tempo de transcendência*, 81; and Boff and Betto, *Mística e Espiritualidade*, 66-80.

sacramentality as the “vital experience”<sup>125</sup>; he frequently mentions religious experience, spiritual experience, and mystical experience as the way God becomes palpable in our personal and collective lives;<sup>126</sup> he talks about religious and mystical experience as globalizing and unifying;<sup>127</sup> and he acknowledges that it is the experience of God that makes true transformation possible.<sup>128</sup> He argues that Jesus’ ministry was rooted in an “original personal experience of God”<sup>129</sup> and arose “from a profound encounter with a God whom he experienced as, yes, the absolute meaning of all history.”<sup>130</sup> Moreover, Boff bases his liberation theology not merely on the locus of the poor, but more exactly on “a spiritual experience of encounter with the Lord of the poor.”<sup>131</sup> In his ecological theology, Boff often writes along these lines:

The return of religion today is through the experiential. People do not listen to theologians to find religious meaning, or to priests tied to old experiences, buried in religious institutions. But there is a return of those who say, “I experience the divine. I know the divine because I live. I live in its dream, in its utopia, in its vision, and this experience brings me back to life.”<sup>132</sup>

Experience is, simply put, an important and central category in Boff’s entire theological system. But what does Boff mean by experience?

What he means is best characterized by a story he often tells about his mother, who though illiterate, knew how to see God. He writes that one day his mother asked

---

<sup>125</sup> Boff, *Sacraments of Life*, 6; *Saint Francis*, 38.

<sup>126</sup> See, for example, Boff, *Liberating Grace*, 45; *Faith on the Edge*, 80, 81; *Vida segundo o Espiritu*, 29; *Trinity and Society*, 2; *Essential Care*, 112-113.

<sup>127</sup> See, for example, Boff, *Ecology and Liberation*, 61; *Global Civilization*, 44; *Cry of the Earth*, 214; and *The Prayer of Saint Francis*, 33.

<sup>128</sup> See, for example, Boff, *Cry of the Earth*, 139.

<sup>129</sup> Leonardo Boff, “Christ’s Liberation via Oppression: An Attempt at Theological Construction from the Standpoint of Latin America,” in *Frontiers of Theology in Latin America*, ed. Rosino Gibellini (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1979), 121-122.

<sup>130</sup> Boff, *Passion of Christ, Passion of the World*, 24.

<sup>131</sup> Boff, *Faith on the Edge*, 80.

<sup>132</sup> Leonardo Boff, “Society Doomed Without People of Vision,” trans. A. Piccolino, *National Catholic Reporter* (April 10, 1992): 2.

him if he had seen God, to which Boff responded that no one sees God, for God is spirit and invisible. Surprised, she asked sadly: “You’ve been a priest for so many years and you still haven’t seen God?” Boff once again responded that no one sees God. She corrected him: “You don’t see God, but I see God every day. When the sun appears in the horizon, God passes with a fantastic, beautiful cloak. He always looks serious, and your dad who already died comes behind, looks at me, and smiles at me and continues along with God. I see Him every day.” Boff then humbly reflects: “Who is the theologian here, she or I? An illiterate woman or the doctor of theology?” He concludes by writing: “We need to learn from the people who live such experiences. ... Those people do not believe in God. They know of God because they see God, because they experience God.”<sup>133</sup> In Boff’s theology, those who know how to experience God in and through the everyday have more authority than the most erudite theologian.

He operates by the fundamental assumption, in other words, that God is not a mere object of faith; God can and must be experienced in this world.<sup>134</sup> However, he knows that God cannot be experienced as another phenomenon of this world; rather God must be experienced as the depth, Mystery, and meaning of everything that exists and of every moment. He explains: “God cannot be confused with the world, but God is the profound meaning of human existence.”<sup>135</sup> He writes that if we were to find a phenomenon in this world that we thought was God, we could be rest assured that this god was nothing but an idol guising itself as divine.<sup>136</sup> In Boff’s theology, God is not and

---

<sup>133</sup> Boff, *Espiritualidade*, 76-78. He relates a shorter version of this account in *Mística e Espiritualidade*, 73. Due to its length, I do not quote the original Portuguese text here.

<sup>134</sup> Boff and Betto, *Mística e Espiritualidade*, 68-69.

<sup>135</sup> “Deus não pode ser confundido com o mundo, mas é o sentido profundo da existência humana” (Leonardo Boff, Ademar Spindeldreier and Hermógenes Horada, *A oração no mundo secular: Desafio e chance* (Petrópolis: Editora Vozes Ltda., 1975), 10).

<sup>136</sup> Boff, *Experimentar Deus*, 52.

cannot be an object of scientific analysis; God is a God of Mystery. He writes that we cannot experience God via reasoned knowledge or power, but rather by a “no-knowledge” or a “no-power”: “As the wisdom of ancient India used to say: ‘The force by which the thought thinks cannot be thought’”<sup>137</sup> As Boff sees it, God is not experienced as an object in this world but as the Mystery that suffuses every object; God communicates less by epiphany and more by diaphany, by emerging from inside every reality.<sup>138</sup> Thus, to experience God is to experience the depth of Mystery in our every experience of the world.

***a. The God Experienced Is a God of Mystery***

The God of which Boff writes is most fundamentally a God of Mystery. He explains that Mystery “does not constitute a reality to be contrasted with or set against knowing. It is a part of the nature of mystery that it should continue to be mysterious even when known.”<sup>139</sup> Mystery cannot be known once and for all. The nature of Mystery is such that while it can be represented by religious symbols and doctrine, it cannot be contained by them. Thus, he writes that “[o]nce we begin to espy the mysterious, we see the most impeccably traditional doctrines waver, the most precise formulations fade to nothingness, and the most profound symbols dissolve.”<sup>140</sup> (Even when Boff writes on doctrinal matters, his Christology or Trinitarian theology for

---

<sup>137</sup> “Como dizia a sabedoria da antiga Índia: ‘A força pela qual o pensamento pensa, não pode ser pensada’” (Boff, *Experimentar Deus*, 53).

<sup>138</sup> Boff, *Tempo de transcendência*, 80.

<sup>139</sup> Boff, *Ecology and Liberation*. 145.

<sup>140</sup> Boff, *Ecology and Liberation*, 146.

instance, he points to the Mystery that lies at the root of such doctrine and which we must experience anew in every generation<sup>141</sup>).

To espy the mysterious is to be aware of its presence in every moment: “This mystical approach is available to all of us without exception, as long as we are human and remain aware.”<sup>142</sup> God as Mystery is never known once and for all as if it were a phenomenon of this world, but is rather perceived in and through every moment, every encounter, and every knowing. To experience Mystery is to experience it in the everyday.

***b. The Experience of God is an Everyday Affair***

Furthermore, to experience Mystery of God is an everyday affair that is available to everyone:

The experience of mystery is not only a matter of ecstasy. It is also an everyday affair of experiencing wonder at the sacred aspect of reality and of life. ... Mysticism is not the privilege of the fortunate few. It is rather a dimension of human life to which all of us have access when we become conscious of a deeper level of the self, when we try to study the other side of things, when we become aware of the inward richness of the other, and when we confront the grandeur, complexity, and harmony of the universe. All of us, at a certain level, are mystics.<sup>143</sup>

To experience God or the mystery of all things in every moment of life is what Boff calls the mystical, religious, vital and original experience of human beings. Seeped in a world that too often favors analytical reason in the public square<sup>144</sup> and dogmatic formulations in the religions,<sup>145</sup> he recognizes that the process of experiencing God’s presence in the

---

<sup>141</sup> See, for example, Boff, *Jesus Christ Liberator*, 182; and *Trinity and Society*, 1-2. Boff makes the same argument with respect to mystery in his discussion on grace – see *Liberating Grace*, 115.

<sup>142</sup> Boff, *Ecology and Liberation*, 147.

<sup>143</sup> Boff, *Ecology and Liberation*, 147-148. See also Boff, *Experimentar Deus*, 155, 156.

<sup>144</sup> See, for example, Boff, *Saint Francis*, 6.

<sup>145</sup> See, for example, Boff and Betto, *Mística e Espiritualidade*, 68.



world will involve struggle and suffering, as well as a healthy denunciation of preconceived notions.<sup>146</sup> He believes, however, that experiencing the world in this way can become second nature, something that we do without having to even think about it.<sup>147</sup> He writes that the Latin American poor are especially good at experiencing God in every moment, in feeling that God is accompanying them in their struggles and celebrations.<sup>148</sup> He argues that it is imperative that all Christians, indeed all human beings, learn to experience God in this way, for it is through the experience of human beings that God's grace enters history.

***c. It Is Through Experience That God Becomes Palpable in History***

Drawing from phenomenology, inasmuch as it points to the experiences that enable any reality to become a phenomena for our conscience,<sup>149</sup> Boff writes:

God is ever fully present in the world, but the world is not always fully present in God. Human beings and the world do not always allow God to be transparent. They can prevent the presence of God from showing up phenomenologically. Such obstacles do not destroy the presence of God, but they do prevent it from historicizing itself in the world. They place obstacles in the way of the concrete experience of grace.<sup>150</sup>

In order for God's presence to be felt in history, for it to be recognized in the evolutionary process, for it to become palpable in the struggle of the poor for justice, for

---

<sup>146</sup> Boff, *Experimental Deus*, 39-40.

<sup>147</sup> Boff writes: "We need to create the conditions so that spirituality can emerge as something so deeply inside us that we need not even think about it, but we simply live the presence of God in everything and of everything in God" (*Cry of the Earth*, 189).

<sup>148</sup> See, for example, Boff, *Vida segundo o Espiritu*, 62-63; and *Ética da vida*, 193; and Boff and Betto, *Mística e Espiritualidade*, 72-73.

<sup>149</sup> For this understanding of phenomenology, see Boff, *Essential Care*, 56.

<sup>150</sup> Boff, *Liberating Grace*, 89. At the base of Boff's reliance on experience is his particular appropriation of Heideggerian phenomenology, which he first learned from Max Müller and Karl Rahner during his doctoral studies in Munich. Boff writes that from Heidegger and Rahner he learned that to study phenomenologically the human – the permanent hearer of the Word of God – was the task and challenge of theology ("Um balanço de corpo e alma," 19). In fact, Heidegger remains an important influence on Boff's theology, not only through his appropriation of Heideggerian phenomenology in his understanding of experience, but also of his reliance on Heidegger's principle of "care" in his ecological theology (see Boff, *Essential Care*, 14-15)

it to guide the church, it must be experienced by human beings. “Knowing is not enough; we must experience it, let ourselves be swept away and enveloped” by a sense that in everything we do we are building the Kingdom of God.<sup>151</sup> God, the “mystery of communion and life,”<sup>152</sup> becomes present through the experience of human beings. Theology not based on a spiritual experience is mere panting or religious breathlessness because it is devoid of the God who must be experienced to be known. Boff believes that God self-communicates and inserts a concrete self-revelation into history through the religious experience of attentive spirits willing to see Mystery in all things.

Where that experience is lacking or is overpowered, as he believes the institution of the Catholic Church has too often done to the poor, a deadness or stagnation happens. Indeed, he writes that without the experience of God in all things,

... dogmas are rigid scaffolding; morality, an oppressive breastplate; asceticism, a dry river; religious practice, a monotonous routine of stereotypical gestures; devotion, a strategy for combating fear; and celebrations, an empty display without the grace of the interior life.<sup>153</sup>

In Boff’s theology, the religious experience is imperative. But how does he justify saying that God can and must be experienced in this world? How can he say that God is not a mere object of faith but a Mystery which we experience in our every experience of the world? Because, as he sees it, God is entirely transparent in this world.

---

<sup>151</sup> Boff, *Cry of the Earth*, 199.

<sup>152</sup> Boff, *Cry of the Earth*, xii.

<sup>153</sup> “Toda religião assenta sobre uma experiência de Deus. Sem ela os dogmas são andaimes rígidos; a moral, uma couraça opressora; a ascese, um rio seco; a prática religiosa, um desfiar monótono de gestos estereotipados; a devação, um estratagema para combater o medo; e as celebrações, uma ostentação vazia, sem a graça da vida interior” (Boff, *Experimentar Deus*, 155).

## (ii) Transparence

Starting from his earliest works, Boff talks about God and the world as being mutually transparent.<sup>154</sup> He adapts the category of transparence from Teilhard de Chardin, who wrote that “[t]he great mystery of Christianity is not exactly the appearance, but the transparence, of God in the universe. *Yes Lord, not only the ray that strikes the surface, but the ray that penetrates, not only your Epiphany, Jesus, but your diaphany.*”<sup>155</sup> In Boff’s theology, transparence arises as a category to explain panentheism, as he calls it in his later ecological theology,<sup>156</sup> or Christian pantheism, as he calls it in his earlier theology.<sup>157</sup> Panentheism or Christian pantheism means that while the world and God are distinct, “[t]hey are open to one another. They are always intertwined with one another.”<sup>158</sup> This mutual presence means for Boff that simple transcendence and simple immanence are overcome; transcendence and immanence penetrate one another to such an extent that God and the world become mutually transparent.<sup>159</sup> The category of transparence means that transcendence infuses and penetrates immanence. In most practical terms, transparence means that the world is diaphanous – God emerges from inside reality, the universe, the other, and the self.<sup>160</sup>

---

<sup>154</sup> See, for example, Boff, *Jesus Christ Liberator*, 207.

<sup>155</sup> Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, *The Divine Milieu: An Essay on the Interior Life* (New York: Harper & Row, 1965), 131; as quoted (with the italics) in Boff, *Cry of the Earth*, 154. As I have already noted, Teilhard has had a major influence on Boff’s theology.

<sup>156</sup> See, for example, Boff, *Cry of the Earth*, 152-154.

<sup>157</sup> See Boff, *Jesus Christ Liberator*, 261.

<sup>158</sup> Boff, *Cry of the Earth*, 153. In *Jesus Christ Liberator*, Boff explains it like this: “while preserving the otherness of each thing, God is ‘all in all’ (1 Cor 15:28)” (261). Boff writes that no one in the twentieth century lived a deep spirituality of transparence better than Teilhard de Chardin (*Cry of the Earth*, 153).

<sup>159</sup> Boff, *Cry of the Earth*, 153.

<sup>160</sup> Boff stresses that because of transparency we need to look for God not primarily in moments of epiphany, but in the diaphany of everyday life. God emerges from inside – see, for example, Boff, *Tempo de transcendência*, 80.

Thus, he holds that transparence requires that we see and hear God in every aspect of our lives, including in the most seemingly mundane (*o cotidiano*).<sup>161</sup> He writes that God can and must be detected in all dimensions of life, not only in privileged instances when we are in Church or reading the Bible,<sup>162</sup> but also in falling in love,<sup>163</sup> in feeling profound respect for another,<sup>164</sup> in dancing and celebrating,<sup>165</sup> in the discovery of scientists,<sup>166</sup> and in the eyes of the oppressed.<sup>167</sup> In short, he argues that God intends to be known through creation. He writes: “This truth enables us to understand what the greatest Western mystic Meister Eckhart meant when he said that if the soul could know God without the world, the world would never have been created.”<sup>168</sup> For Boff, the fact of transparence means that the human is meant to know God in the world.

He explains that for Christians, the category of transparence is rooted in the incarnation of Jesus Christ, who takes on the flesh and can thus say “Whoever sees me sees my Father,”<sup>169</sup> and who in the resurrection becomes the cosmic Christ who penetrates all material existence.<sup>170</sup> In his ecological theology he comes to classify the experience of God’s transparence as the “original experience,” because he now holds that the experience of God’s transparent presence is original to *all* religious and spiritual

---

<sup>161</sup> Boff and Betto, *Mística e Espiritualidade*, 75. Indeed, Boff writes that “[t]he divine is not something added to human experience from outside. It is manifested through all experience. Everything has a depth that constitutes its other aspect and that mystery which refers to Mystery” (*Ecology and Liberation*, 61).

<sup>162</sup> Boff and Betto, *Mística e Espiritualidade*, 71.

<sup>163</sup> Boff, *Tempo de transcendência*, 43.

<sup>164</sup> See Boff, *Tempo de transcendência*, 49-50, where Boff explains an incidence in which he displayed profound reverence for Dom Hélder Câmara, Archbishop of Recife, Brazil.

<sup>165</sup> Boff and Betto, *Mística e Espiritualidade*, 79.

<sup>166</sup> Boff, *Ecology and Liberation*, 78.

<sup>167</sup> Boff and Betto, *Mística e Espiritualidade*, 69-70.

<sup>168</sup> Boff, *Ecology and Liberation*, 51.

<sup>169</sup> Boff and Betto, *Mística e Espiritualidade*, 71. For more on Christology and transparence, see Boff, *A águia e a galinha*, 169-175.

<sup>170</sup> Boff, *Jesus Christ Liberator*, 207.

traditions.<sup>171</sup> Consequently, he advocates for dialogue across religions, holding that in so doing we may recuperate “the accumulated experience that humanity has in contact with the sacred and divine.”<sup>172</sup>

Yet the question remains: *how* do we come to experience God’s transference in the world? How does it become an everyday affair? Boff answers this “how” question most clearly in his discussion of sacramentality and the sacramental way of Saint Francis of Assisi.

### (iii) Sacramentality

In his 1975 book, *Sacraments of Life and Life of the Sacraments*, Boff explains that “[t]he sacramental structure emerges when things begin to speak and human beings begin to hear their voices. On the frontispiece of this structure is inscribed the phrase: all of reality is but a sign. A sign of what? Of another reality, a Reality that founds and grounds all things: God.”<sup>173</sup> Thus, he states in a later book, “the spiritual person is one who is always in the position of seeing the other side of reality, and who can perceive the ‘Ultimate Reality that religions call God.’”<sup>174</sup> As with transference, the sacramental in

---

<sup>171</sup> See, for example, Boff, *Tempo de transcendência*, 81; and Boff and Betto, *Mística e Espiritualidade*, 66-80.

<sup>172</sup> “... experiências acumuladas que a humanidade fez em contato com o sagrado e o divino” (Boff and Betto, *Mística e Espiritualidade*, 67). This is consistent with the more globalizing approach to religion and spirituality of his ecological theology, and which I explicate in Chapter Four.

<sup>173</sup> Boff, *Sacraments of Life*, 2. Boff explains that he wrote *Theology of Captivity and Liberation* and *Sacraments of Life; Life of Sacraments* at the same time, and he says that his liberation theology should be read in light of his sacramental theology and visa versa. See *Teología del cautiverio y liberación*, 12, for Boff’s comments on this matter.

<sup>174</sup> Boff, *Ecology and Liberation*, 37. Commenting on Boff’s sacramentality, Marie Conn writes: “Boff’s theology is permeated and informed by a sacramental view of creation. The whole universe is shot through with the reality of God ... The symbolic and the sacramental are profound dimensions imbedded in human reality and those who, for whatever reason, break all ties with religious symbolism close the windows of their soul” (“The Sacramental Theology of Leonardo Boff,” *Worship* 64 no. 6 (1990): 525). For more on Boff’s sacramentality, see Abdji Keizerberg, *The World As Sacrament: Sacramentality of Creation from the Perspectives of Leonardo Boff, Alexander Schmemmann and Saint Ephram* (Leuven:

Boff's theology points to God's presence in the world, not only in the sacraments of the church, but everywhere – for example, in a family mug, in his father's cigarette butt, and in his mother's homemade bread.<sup>175</sup> He holds that everything is sacramental “because it is penetrated by and suffused with the presence of the divine.”<sup>176</sup>

Given the presence of God in the world, Boff writes that “Christians must be educated to see sacraments”<sup>177</sup>; they must be awakened to see God, “to celebrate the mysterious but concrete presence of grace in our world.”<sup>178</sup> In order to have this sacramental vision they must cultivate what he calls “sacramental and symbolic reason,”<sup>179</sup> or “symbolic and mystic awareness.”<sup>180</sup> Boff repeatedly points to St. Francis of Assisi as one who lived by this sacramental or symbolic reason, in that he was especially “capable of grasping the sacramental message echoing from all things.”<sup>181</sup> He explains:

Francis reclaimed the truth of paganism: this world is not mute, not lifeless, not empty; it speaks and is full of movement, love, purpose, and beckonings from the Divinity. It can be the place for encountering God and God's spirit, through the world itself, its energies, its profusion of sound, color, and movements.<sup>182</sup>

Sacramental reason – or symbolic or mystic awareness as he sometimes calls it – means being able and willing to encounter God in the multifaceted dimensions of worldly life.

---

Peeters Leuven, 2005); and Euler Renato Westphal, “O Pensar Sacramental em Leonardo Boff,” *Vox Scripturae* 16 no. 1 (2008): 74-91.

<sup>175</sup> I am here referring to Chapters Two, Three and Four of Boff, *Sacraments of Life*, 9-25.

<sup>176</sup> Boff, *Ecology and Liberation*, 61.

<sup>177</sup> Boff, *Sacraments of Life*, 5.

<sup>178</sup> Boff, *Sacraments of Life*, 8.

<sup>179</sup> Boff, *Ecology and Liberation*, 37.

<sup>180</sup> Boff, *Ecology and Liberation*, 78. Boff often uses the terms sacramental and symbolic interchangeably, since a sacrament is a symbol of the Reality we call God.

<sup>181</sup> Boff, *Cry of the Earth*, 213.

<sup>182</sup> Boff, *Cry of the Earth*, 205.

St. Francis is important for Boff, among other reasons, because he shows us *how* to perceive the world in a sacramental way.

*a. Sacramentality Perceived Through Emotion and Proximity*

The sacramentality which Francis lived by and which Boff wants all Christians to emulate has three primary characteristics. First, it relies not as much on Logos (the analytical reason that has dominated in the modern age) as it does on Pathos (feeling, emotion) and Eros (enthusiasm, passion, care).<sup>183</sup> Pathos and Eros point to a way of knowing that demands proximity;<sup>184</sup> they are best characterized by “the capacity for sympathy and empathy, dedication, care and communion with the other.”<sup>185</sup> Thus, the focus of his sacramentality is on the type of knowledge that is produced by affectivity, or by physical and emotional closeness. He finds strong justification for this focus in depth psychology. He writes: “The ontological basis for depth psychology (Freud, Jung, Adler, and their disciples) lies in this conviction: the ultimate structure of life is feeling, not only as a movement of the psyche, but as an ‘existential quality, the ontic structuring of the human being.’”<sup>186</sup> In other words, emotion (Pathos) and passion (Eros) are more basic to human knowledge than intellectual reasoning (Logos). Boff knows that all three must play their roles in our lives; all forms of knowledge must cooperate for a healthy existence.<sup>187</sup> But when it comes to perceiving the presence of God, he believes that the knowledge of emotion, passion, and care – or the knowledge of the heart rather than of

---

<sup>183</sup> See Boff, *Saint Francis*, 5-15.

<sup>184</sup> Boff explains: “Knowledge by way of Pathos (feeling) is achieved by sym-pathy, by feeling together with perceived reality. And by em-pathy, or identification with perceived reality” (*Saint Francis*, 10).

<sup>185</sup> Boff, *Essential Care*, 67. The full statement is as follows: “the original fact is not logos, rationality and the structures of understanding, but the pathos, sentiment, the capacity for sympathy and empathy, dedication, care and communion with the other. Everything starts with feeling” (*Ibid.*).

<sup>186</sup> Boff, *Saint Francis*, 10.

<sup>187</sup> Again, see Boff, *Saint Francis*, 5-15.

the mind – as a more profound quality of the human person, is also better suited for perceiving the divine presence in the self and in all things.

By way of example: discussing the type of knowledge exemplified by Francis, as well as Teilhard de Chardin and “the entire great Augustinian, Bonaventuran, Pascalian, and existentialist tradition,” Boff writes:

None of these masters believed that knowledge was a form of appropriation and a dominance of things, but rather a form of love and of communion with things. They valued emotion as a way of communicating with the world and as a way of experiencing the divine. Pascal rightly said that faith meant perceiving God with the heart and not the reason.<sup>188</sup>

Sacramental reason, then, is a way of appropriating knowledge that demands proximity, the willingness to love, and, Boff argues, listening to our intuition.<sup>189</sup> That is: “Knowing is a way of loving, sharing, and communing. . . . Knowing means discovering oneself within the whole, internalizing it, and plunging into it. Indeed, we only know what we love. The mystics are proof of this.”<sup>190</sup> In Boff’s theology, the deepest knowledge of God and of the world requires affectivity; proximity and love are the key to having sacramental vision.

***b. Sacramentality as Horizontal and Vertical***

Related to this first characteristic of Francis’ sacramentality, the second indicates that our relationship with the things of this world is not one of simple use – regarding them as mere vehicles to God – but of intimacy and respect. To explain this need for intimacy and respect, Boff describes Francis’ sacramentality as a type of double movement: the horizontal movement reaches out to the things in themselves as brothers

---

<sup>188</sup> Boff, *Ecology and Liberation*, 38.

<sup>189</sup> See Boff, *Ecology and Liberation*, 145.

<sup>190</sup> Boff, *Cry of the Earth*, 143.



and sisters; the vertical reaches out to Mystery, or to God who is transparent in these things.<sup>191</sup>

Boff writes about the horizontal as follows: “The novelty of Francis consists in the living of the horizontal dimension: if all are children of God, all are brothers and sisters to one another. All live in the same Great House of the Father. All acquire a deep intimacy with all things.”<sup>192</sup> The horizontal dimension entails respect and affection for other creatures as they are in themselves, no matter how big or small. With this dimension we recognize that no matter who or what these creature are, they are so intimately related to us that we may regard them as brothers and sisters.

Nonetheless, he also shows that all things contain a vertical dimension:

The sun continues to be sun; fire, fire; water, water. But beyond their objective value, these elements also have a symbolic worth. Humanity expresses by means of these elements its interior world. And what does that interior world express? It expresses the emergence of universal reconciliation, the fusion between the cosmic mysticism, oriented toward fraternity with nature, and evangelical mysticism, oriented toward love for the person of Christ.<sup>193</sup>

As Boff understands it, the symbolic or vertical quality of the world is such that everything points beyond itself to that Mystery which is the root and connecting force of all things.<sup>194</sup> This Mystery is sometimes expressed in religious language, but what it is

---

<sup>191</sup> For this double movement, see Boff, *Saint Francis*, 36-43; and *Cry of the Earth*, 152.

<sup>192</sup> Boff, *Saint Francis*, 37.

<sup>193</sup> Boff, *Saint Francis*, 42-43.

<sup>194</sup> He explains: “On the basis of this unifying experience, everything may be seen as sacramental: that is, everything can become a vehicle for the Divine Presence. This in turn inspires an attitude of respect, veneration, and welcome toward all things, which themselves are carriers of the Mystery of the World, pregnant with God” (Leonardo Boff, “Ways of Experiencing God Today,” trans. Hugh Hazelton, in *Religion in a Secular City: Essays in Honor of Harvey Cox*, ed. Arvind Sharma (Harrisburg: Trinity Press International, 2001), 145).

called ultimately does not matter to Boff; “what matters is the experience of the unifying Mystery.”<sup>195</sup>

While the horizontal dimension points to the intrinsic dignity and fraternity of all things, then, the vertical dimension points to that Mystery that infuses and connects all things – in his ecological theology Boff calls this Mystery the motherly fatherly Fount to whom we are unbilically tied.<sup>196</sup> In both cases, whether he is speaking of horizontal or vertical sacramentality, intimacy is required. Following the example set by Saint Francis, Boff believes that it is in situating oneself not above things, “but at their feet, truly as brother and sister, discovering the bonds of kinship linking all things,”<sup>197</sup> that both the horizontal (the intrinsic worth of things) and vertical dimensions (the depth of Mystery in all things) are realized.<sup>198</sup>

### *c. Sacramentality Requires Poverty*

The third characteristic of the sacramental reason that Francis exemplifies is that of poverty. Poverty is the prerequisite for being able to interact with the world with the

---

<sup>195</sup> Boff, *The Prayer of Saint Francis*, 33.

<sup>196</sup> See Boff, *The Prayer of Saint Francis*, 33, 34, 59. Boff actually discusses our umbilical tie to God as early as 1981 – see *Vida segundo o Espiritu*, 114.

<sup>197</sup> Boff, *The Prayer of Saint Francis*, 59.

<sup>198</sup> As we saw in Chapter Two, McFague adopts this idea of horizontal and vertical sacramentality from Boff, though she appropriates it in a somewhat different way than he does. For Boff, the vertical always points back to the horizontal and visa versa. He believes that when we perceive the presence of God in the things of this world, even if we see these things as a vehicle to God, we inevitably come to respect and venerate the things in themselves (see nt. 194 of this chapter). Thus, the vertical dimension of sacramentality points to the horizontal just as the horizontal points to the vertical.

McFague does not have the same trust that recognizing God’s presence in the world will necessarily lead people to respect and venerate the things in themselves. In fact, she repeatedly indicates that in Christian practice the vertical has tended to trump the horizontal. She criticizes Martin Buber’s conception of the I-Thou relationship as “religious utilitarianism: using the things of this world as stepping-stones to God” (*Super, Natural Christians*, 101), she argues that “[t]he Christian eye does not need training to see God but to see other things, especially earth others – and *then* to see God” (*Ibid.*, 197), and she asks that Christians “hold on hard to the huckleberries,” or that they see God in all things without bypassing or letting go of the things in themselves (see, for example, *Ibid.*, 102). Consequently, McFague stresses the horizontal dimension of sacramentality to a far greater degree than she does the vertical, lest our relationship with God trump our relationship with the world. For more detail on McFague’s understanding of sacramentality, see part C (i) d of Chapter Two.

kind of love and intimacy that Pathos (love) and Eros (passion, care) require, and to be able to intimately experience both the horizontal and vertical dimensions of sacramentality.

Boff explains poverty as follows:

Poverty, fundamentally, does not only consist in not having things, because individuals always have things: their body, their intelligence, their clothes, their being-in-the-world. Poverty is a way of being by which the individual lets things be what they are; one refuses to dominate them, subjugate them, and make them the objects of the will to power. One refuses to be over them in order to be with them. ... Interests, selfishness, and exclusive possessions interfere between the individual and the world. ... The more radical the poverty, the closer the individual comes to reality, and the easier it is to commune with all things, respecting and reverencing their differences and distinctions. Universal fraternity is the result of the way-of-being-poor of Saint Francis.<sup>199</sup>

Boff holds that poverty is most fundamentally a posture or an attitude, a way of being in the world that allows others to be, and that refuses to dominate them. This poverty requires “an immense asceticism” to renounce the human instinct to power and to continual satisfaction of desire. Simply stated, he goes on, this posture of poverty is “a synonym for humility; this is not another virtue, but an attitude by which the individual is on the ground, in the earth, at the side of all things.”<sup>200</sup> Poverty is the persistent and humble posture of being with, and the refusal to stand above others in this world.<sup>201</sup>

Particularly in his liberation theology, Boff also stresses that poverty is not merely a posture but rather something that is realized in “the physical place of the poor.”<sup>202</sup> He holds that it is in choosing to become poor *in actuality* that Saint Francis came to

---

<sup>199</sup> Boff, *Saint Francis*, 39. See also *Cry of the Earth*, 215-216, where he says something very similar.

<sup>200</sup> Boff, *Saint Francis*, 39.

<sup>201</sup> Given this argument, one can see why Boff would have such trouble with the hierarchical structure of the Roman Catholic Church.

<sup>202</sup> Boff, *Saint Francis*, 39.

commune with all things, to respect and reverence their differences and distinctions, and to establish a universal fraternity. In the lack of material clutter and everything this clutter demands, he became capable of having space for true communion. Hence, Boff writes that “[h]e truly felt a brother because he could gather all things devoid of the interest in possessions, riches, and efficiency.”<sup>203</sup>

For as much as he emphasizes poverty, Boff is clear that such poverty must be freely chosen, most basically as a posture of being-with, and then concretely as a physical emptying so that the other and God may enter. He does not mean to justify that oppressive poverty to which two-thirds of humanity is subjected because of institutional and systemic greed. In the situation of Latin America from which Boff writes his theology, “this impoverishment is a real social sin.”<sup>204</sup> He holds that chosen poverty and the poverty of the oppressed are two different things; he even argues that the former may be able to cure the latter. Thus, he writes that:

... on the one hand, [poverty] appears as a manifestation of sin, while, on the other hand, it may be one of the highest expressions of love and solidarity. Poverty is cured with poverty, freely accepted as identification with the poor and as a denouncement of their iniquitous situation.<sup>205</sup>

For Boff, chosen poverty has the power to eliminate actual poverty because it opens those who would otherwise have no contact with the oppressed of the Earth to experience their iniquitous situation and to work with them to overcome it.

---

<sup>203</sup> Boff, *Saint Francis*, 39.

<sup>204</sup> Boff, *Saint Francis*, 61.

<sup>205</sup> Boff, *Saint Francis*, 59. Choosing poverty in solidarity with the poor means, he explains, “to live together with them, participating in the[ir] hopes and bitterness” (Ibid., 63), and “fighting for the cause of their liberation, searching for ways of overcoming poverty toward more just and participatory forms of work and social life” (Ibid., 64).

Boff holds that poverty – which is an attitude or posture *and* the actual living “physically where the poor are”<sup>206</sup> – is important because it places the person near the vulnerable (“on the ground, in the earth”). He shows that it is through the proximity of poverty – which is a standing-with and not a standing-over – that the person comes to know the other and its needs in love (Pathos, Eros). It is through this love that he believes people begin to experience God.

#### **(iv) Conclusion**

The spirituality that Boff draws from through the course of his theological career relies on the three interrelated categories of experience, transparence and sacramentality. With the category of experience Boff explains the basis for all theology and religious life. He holds that God must be experienced in the world, and that it is in this experience that God becomes phenomenologically present in history. With the category of transparence Boff explains *why* all people may experience God in the world: in arguing that God and the world are mutually transparent he shows that God is entirely diaphanous and therefore accessible in the world. Finally, with the category of sacramentality he explains *how* people may come to perceive God’s diaphanous presence. He argues that sacramental vision (or symbolic awareness) comes through a knowledge born of intuition and love (Pathos, Eros), in the capability of recognizing both the horizontal and vertical dimensions of God’s presence, and in the lived posture and physical location of the poor. Using the three categories of experience, transparence and sacramentality, Boff argues through the extant of his career that people must come to know God, or Mystery, in the world and in the daily stuff of life (*o cotidiano*).

---

<sup>206</sup> Boff, *Cry of the Earth*, 215.

In Chapter Four of this dissertation I show how his articulation of spirituality shifts as he transitions from his liberation to his ecological theology. However, as I have indicated here, his basic conception of spirituality as perceiving God in daily life, and the three categories he uses to explain this spirituality, remains remarkably consistent throughout his career. In fact, we might say that, inasmuch as he privileges the God experience throughout his career – be it of the poor and their allies (in his liberation theology) or as the impetus of global transformation (in his ecological theology) – this experiential spirituality remains the most consistent trait of his theological system. Boff is a theologian whose work is firmly grounded in spirituality.

### C. Anthropology in Boff's Spirituality

Accompanying Boff's consistent use of the three spiritual categories of experience, transparence and sacramentality is a consistent understanding of the human as ontologically structured to live and flourish within these three categories. Boff tends to emphasize the anthropological side of spirituality, for it is humans who may experience God in the world, who may live the original experience of mutual transparence, and who may acquire sacramental or symbolic awareness. In his ecological theology, with the help of the new cosmology, Boff comes to recognize that there is a spiritual depth to the entire universe.<sup>207</sup> However, he continues to insist that there is a level of self-consciousness which evolution has afforded to humanity that is not present anywhere else on this Earth.<sup>208</sup> Thus, for Boff, it is through the mystical experience of

---

<sup>207</sup> Boff holds that all things have spiritual profundity: "spirit refers to all living beings, human beings, animals, and plants. But that is not all. The whole earth and the universe are experienced as bearers of spirit" (*Ecology and Liberation*, 36). See also Boff, *Cry of the Earth*, 29; and *Ética da vida*, 33.

<sup>208</sup> He explains: "We are the most complex and singular expression known, so far, of the earth and the cosmos. Men and women are earth that thinks, hopes, loves and has entered into the no longer

those who are most self-conscious that God is experienced and becomes phenomenologically present in history.<sup>209</sup>

The question, then, is what exactly makes these self-conscious human beings especially capable of experiencing God in the world, and with this experience, of bringing God into history. As Boff sees it, this capability is grounded in three traits that are ontological to humanity. First, as we have already noted, he holds that the human being is a knot of relations branching out in all directions, to the world, the other, and God. Such deep relationality necessitates the intuitive proximity that Boff calls for with his category of sacramentality. Second, he believes that the human being is inherently open-ended, to such an extent that they cannot help but seek God, the Fount of all creation in their lives. Third, in arguing that humans are dialectical – a “difficult and tense unity” of body/matter and soul/“entity striving toward complete fulfillment”<sup>210</sup> – he shows how it is that the experience of God becomes historicized. In the following pages I explain each of these traits separately.

### **(i) Knot of Relations**

Starting with his earliest books and into his ecological theology, Boff talks about the human being as a knot of relationships that branches out in all directions, toward the world, the other, and God.<sup>211</sup> At the center of this relationality is God, our motherly

---

instinctive but conscious phase of decision-making” (Leonardo Boff, “Liberation Theology and Ecology: Alternative, Confrontation or Complementary?,” trans. Paul Burns, in *Ecology and Poverty: Cry of the Earth, Cry of the Poor*, ed. Leonardo Boff and Virgil Elizondo (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1995), 69). For more on this, see Chapter Four, part B (ii) b.

<sup>209</sup> See Boff, *Cry of the Earth*, 30.

<sup>210</sup> Boff, *The Path to Hope*, 14-15.

<sup>211</sup> See, for example, Boff, *Jesus Christ Liberator*, 203; *El destino del hombre y del mundo*, 33; *Cry of the Earth*, 81; *Ética da vida*, 208; *Tempo de transcendência*, 36.

Father and Fount, to whom we are umbilically bound.<sup>212</sup> In his Trinitarian theology he explains that we are created in the image and likeness of this God, who is perichoretically relational, and therefore, we must recognize ourselves as “a permanently active web of relationships.”<sup>213</sup> In his ecological theology, with the help of the new cosmology, he stresses interrelationality not only among human beings and God, but between humans and everything, the universe, the cosmos, and all forms of existence. As he sees it, the scope of human relationality is unlimited: we are “inter(retro)related” with everything that is, has been, and will be.<sup>214</sup> Therefore, in Boff’s theology the human is intrinsically, ontologically relational. To lose the blessed memory of our relationality is to lose our personal center and to forgo peace.<sup>215</sup> To recognize our relational nature is to recognize our Fount in a relational God.

The fact of our relationality puts Boff’s discussion of sacramentality in perspective. If humans are inherently relational, if we are ontologically knots-of-relations, it stands to reason that we must stand, in love and close proximity, with others and with God. Assuming this intense relationality in humans, Boff advocates in his sacramentality for poverty and emotion, placing all things at equal footing and in close communion. In his liberation theology, this proximity means standing with the poor in their struggle for liberation. In his ecological theology, this proximity entails recognizing our interconnectivity with all things, from the most grandiose body in the universe to its

---

<sup>212</sup> For our umbilical dependence on God, see Boff, *Vida segundo o Espírito*, 114. For God as motherly Father, see Boff, *Prayer of Saint Francis*, 59. For God as Fount, see *Ibid.*, 34.

<sup>213</sup> Boff, *Trinity and Society*, 149. For more on Boff’s Trinitarian theology and its influence on his anthropology, see part A (ii) c of this chapter.

<sup>214</sup> See Boff, *Cry of the Earth*, 40-41; and *Ética da vida*, 128-129. This term refers to the fact that, according to quantum physics, we are related to the core to everything that has existed, currently exists, and will exist. There are no restrictions to our relationality; neither time nor space can limit it. I discuss “inter(retro)related” further in part B (ii) of Chapter Four.

<sup>215</sup> Boff, *The Prayer of Saint Francis*, 33.



smallest particle. The point is simply this: if we are ontologically relational, we see most clearly when we place ourselves in a position to relate at equal footing with others.

## **(ii) Open-Ended**

In addition to talking of humans as knots-of-relations, Boff holds that we are, fundamentally, an infinite project, unlimited, always open.<sup>216</sup> As Luis Rivera explains concerning Boff's spirituality: "human life is always an open process and an unfinished task, a continuous pilgrimage."<sup>217</sup> Hence, he does not merely talk about anthropology, but about anthropogenesis, the continual renewal and becoming of the human being.<sup>218</sup> He writes that the human reaches out into transcendence, that the primary vocation of humanity is divinization (radical unity with God), and that it is through the consciousness of human beings that evolution moves forward. To be human is to be in motion, to be in the process of greater unity with God, and to a better enactment of God's Kingdom.

### ***a. Transcendence***

According to Boff, humans are open in the sense that they open up to transcendence. By transcendence he means "that capacity to break all limits, to overcome barriers, to always project themselves to something beyond."<sup>219</sup> Tied to this transcendence is an insatiable desire (an "eternal anguish") that finds its home in God, otherwise called Mystery, the indescribable, the original fount, and the source of every

---

<sup>216</sup> See Leonardo Boff, "Earth as Gaia: An Ethical and Spiritual Challenge," trans. Paul Burns, in *Eco-Theology*, ed. Elaine Wainwright, Luis C. Susin and Felix Wilfred (London: SCM Press, 2009), 30; *Ética da vida*, 224; *Tempo de transcendência*, 36.

<sup>217</sup> Rivera, "Anthropogenesis," 17. Rivera explains that this understanding of the human as an open process is an important aspect of Franciscan anthropology in general. It is part of the understanding of humanity as "homo viator" (Ibid.).

<sup>218</sup> See, for example, Boff, *Tempo de transcendência*, 26.

<sup>219</sup> "Então, transcendência, fundamentalmente, é essa capacidade de romper todos os limites, superar e violar os interditos, projectar-se sempre num mais além" (Boff, *Tempo de transcendência*, 31).

being.<sup>220</sup> In our hunger for transcendence we are, Boff writes, an “infinite project.”<sup>221</sup>

When marketing or entertainment media exploits our insatiable desire we fall into the trap of pseudo-transcendence, but ultimately, he believes, these finite objects cannot and will not contain us.<sup>222</sup> Our propensity for transcendence is simply too strong.

### ***b. Divinization***

To be human is also to be open to divinization, which is radical unity with God.

In fact, he holds that divinization is the primary vocation of human beings, the final result of our full humanization in Jesus Christ. Basing this assertion on his (Teilhardian) Christology,<sup>223</sup> he explains:

Man [sic] has been destined to become one with God and, therefore, to be completely divinized. . . . This would not be possible for him to affirm had he not witnessed it in Jesus of Nazareth, dead and resurrected. He was the human being who realized the potentiality in man of becoming one with divinity. Full hominization implies divinization. This means that in order for man to become who he is, he must actualize the most important capacity inscribed in his nature of becoming one with God, without division, mutation or confusion. Christianity saw the realization of that potentiality in Jesus of Nazareth.<sup>224</sup>

Jesus indicates that to be fully human is to be in union with God.<sup>225</sup> Using Jungian depth psychology, Boff explains that Jesus is the “prototype-archetype of the true human being

---

<sup>220</sup> Boff, *Tempo de transcendência*, 70.

<sup>221</sup> Boff, *Tempo de transcendência*, 70. See also Boff, *Espiritualidade*, 11.

<sup>222</sup> Boff, *Tempo de transcendência*, 54-57.

<sup>223</sup> Boff argues that because God became human, the “vocation of the human being is divinization” (*Jesus Christ Liberator*, 244).

<sup>224</sup> Boff, *El destino del hombre y del mundo*, 35. The translation comes from Rivera, “Anthropogenesis,” 133. For a similar argument, see also Leonardo Boff, “A Christology Based on the Nazarene,” *Voices from the Third World* 30 no. 1 (2007): 21-27.

<sup>225</sup> Boff explains: “Jesus of Nazareth not only liberated human beings *from* something – from their inhumanity, thus restoring to them their genuine humanity. He did much more. He liberated human beings *for* something – for the complete revelation of the human person according to God’s design” (*Faith on the Edge*, 151-152).

that each of us ought to be but is not as yet.”<sup>226</sup> That is, Jesus is the “*homo revelatus*,” “the anticipated future, the end manifesting itself in the middle of the journey,”<sup>227</sup> who “renders the utopian ‘topian,’”<sup>228</sup> by revealing what humans must, and will, be. In Boff’s theology, then, Jesus Christ has “the characteristics of the ultimate human being” which we will surely become.<sup>229</sup> Simply stated, because of Jesus, we have come to know that we must remain open to radical unity with God, for which we are not only equipped as human beings, but are in fact destined.

### *c. Evolution*

With this understanding of Jesus Christ as the “homo revelatus” is also a strong teleological thrust to Boff’s theology: he believes that humans will bring evolution to the fulfillment which Christ has already guaranteed. That is, Jesus anticipates a future in which our full humanization will mean our divinization, and through our divinization, the fulfillment of evolution.

In the first part of his career the teleological thrust of evolution is driven exclusively by Christ who is its Motor and Omega Point.<sup>230</sup> However, in his ecological theology this Christological focus, though still present, becomes relativized. For example, in an article published in English in 2007, Boff writes that not only Jesus but

---

<sup>226</sup> Boff, *Jesus Christ Liberator*, 203. Boff uses depth psychology, especially that of Jung, in much of his theology. As the above quote indicates, one important way he appropriates depth psychology is in the way he talks about the religious archetype, both as the “collective unconscious” become spacio-temporally manifested (see Rivera, “Anthropogenesis,” 175), and as the one in who “[t]he negative tendencies that created an anti-history were unwound from within and the archetypes of positivity, especially the archetype of Self (*Selbst*: the archetype of God), were activated” (Boff, *Jesus Christ Liberator*, 203-204).

<sup>227</sup> Boff, *Jesus Christ Liberator*, 235. See also Leonardo Boff, “La Era del Espíritu,” trans. A. Pintor-Ramos, in M. Arias Reyero, ed., *Panorama de la teología latinoamericana* (Salamanca: Ediciones Sígueme, 1975), 97.

<sup>228</sup> Boff, *Passion of Christ, Passion of the World*, 14.

<sup>229</sup> See, for example, Boff, *Jesus Christ Liberator*, 235.

<sup>230</sup> See Boff, *O Evangelho do Cristo Cósmico*, 22. Or as he writes elsewhere: “Cristo garantiu o desfecho feliz da história” (Leonardo Boff, “A Absoluta Frustração Humana,” *Vozes* 75 (1971): 572).

also Siddhartha Gautama and Chuang Tzu, “gave archetypal shape to potentialities inherent in the universe.”<sup>231</sup> In other words, it is not only Jesus who is the archetypal human being, but religious figures of other traditions as well. Nonetheless, because of Teilhard’s lasting influence, Boff remains ever hopeful, even optimistic, that “the end will be good and has been guaranteed by God in our favor.”<sup>232</sup> Even without the strong Christological focus, he continues to believe in the power of anthropogenesis to move evolution toward something better (noosphere).<sup>233</sup> He believes that as human beings open up into the guaranteed future they help guide the evolutionary process forward.<sup>234</sup> To say that humans are open, then, means that we are open to the future, and thus we have reason to hope.<sup>235</sup>

Inasmuch as we remain open to transcendence, and to the extent that we can hand ourselves over to the future which is guaranteed in God, human beings guide evolution forward. Thus, in Boff’s theology, where human beings remain open, the Earth and the cosmic processes remains open as well.

### **(iii) Dialectical**

Nonetheless, in Boff’s theology human beings are dialectical (something which he holds to be true of all creation). Every person is, on the one hand, “a finite self-center

---

<sup>231</sup> Leonardo Boff, “Is the Cosmic Christ Greater than Jesus of Nazareth?,” trans. Paul Burns, in *Pluralist Theology: The Emerging Paradigm*, ed. in Luis C. Susin, Andrés Torres Queiruga, and José María Vigil (London: SCM Press, 2007), 59. Here is the full quote: “Everything that exists pre-exists in some form. Before appearing in human history, Jesus, Siddhartha Gautama, Chuang Tzu, and others were in gestation within the universe. On account of what they did they were called Christ, in Jesus’ case, or Buddha, in Siddhartha Guatama’s. All of them have cosmic dimensions to the extent that the entire universe worked to make their appearance possible. What emerged in them did not become a personal monopoly. They gave archetypal shape to potentialities inherent in the universe” (Ibid., 58-59).

<sup>232</sup> Boff, *Jesus Christ Liberator*, 260.

<sup>233</sup> See Dawson, “Mystical Experience as Universal Connectedness,” 155-156.

<sup>234</sup> See, for example, “Liberation Theology and Ecology,” 69-70.

<sup>235</sup> See Boff, *Ética da vida*, 22; *Cry of the Earth*, 185-186; and *Tempo de transcendência*, 92.

bounded to time and space concreteness. On the other, it [the person] is an unlimited relationship, an insatiable dynamic distention towards the Absolute and Transcendent. ... The person lives this dialectic between an infinite openness and a partial realization of it.”<sup>236</sup> Boff talks about this dialectic in terms of spirit/body, life/death, unconscious/conscious, feminine/masculine, and Pathos/Logos.<sup>237</sup> He says humans are both openness and closedness, a soaring eagle and a simple chicken,<sup>238</sup> Christ and Antichrist,<sup>239</sup> Christ and Adam,<sup>240</sup> guardian angels and demons/satans of the Earth,<sup>241</sup> *sapiens* (beings of reason and wisdom) and *demens* (beings of excesses and dementia),<sup>242</sup> *symbolic* (seeking to retie and bond what has been shattered) and *diabolic* (seeking to divide and to do evil).<sup>243</sup> Humans may be knots of relationships stretching out in all directions, but we are also capable of closing ourselves off from relationship. We may be open to transcendence and capable of divinity, but we are also embodied and subject to a

---

<sup>236</sup> Rivera, “Anthropogenesis,” 152.

<sup>237</sup> Luis Rivera divides the polarities of Boff’s anthropology into two columns. He places such terms as spirit, life, unconscious, feminine and Pathos in column A; and in column B he places such terms as body, death, conscious, masculine and Logos. He writes that column A represents the pole of human transcendence, love, freedom, hope, etc., while column B represents the pole of the concrete and limiting factors of human life, for example, the ecological system, the biological body, socio-cultural structures, and so on. From his analysis of Boff’s anthropological polarities, he concludes that though Boff argues that “an integrated, fulfilled, liberated and redeemed life requires an affirmation of and a correct balance between these polarities,” in practice he tends to give priority “to the elements in column A (the feminine) because those in column B (the masculine) tend to make life static, self-centered, structured, rigid, limited, oppressive, etc.” Thus, Rivera argues that Boff tends to favor slightly those traits listed in column A, though not too the exclusion of the traits in column B. See Rivera, “Anthropogenesis,” 185-186.

For more on the feminine-masculine dialectic, which Boff mentions often (particularly favoring the feminine), see Leonardo Boff, “Masculino e feminino: que é? Frangmentos de uma ontologia,” in *A mulher na igreja: presença e ação hoje*, ed. Jeanne M. Tierny et. al. (Petrópolis: Editora Vozes, 1976), 29-50; and Murano and Boff, *Feminino e masculino: Uma nova consciência das diferenças*.

<sup>238</sup> See Boff, *A águia e a galinha: Uma metáfora da condição humana* (1997).

<sup>239</sup> Both the openness/closedness and Christ/Antichrist come from Boff, *Liberating Grace*, 5.

<sup>240</sup> See Boff, *Tempo de transcendência*, 62.

<sup>241</sup> See Boff, *Ecology and Liberation*, 15; *Cry of the Earth*, 19; “Social Ecology,” 73; “The Poor, the New Cosmology, and Liberation,” 120.

<sup>242</sup> See Boff, *Cry of the Earth*, 19; *Global Civilization*, 18; *Fundamentalism, Terrorism and the Future of Humanity*, 85.

<sup>243</sup> See Boff, *The Prayer of Saint Francis*, 70; *Tempo de transcendência*, 62.

culture and place. Boff holds that humans are composed of a tense dialectic that can never be fully balanced once and for all.<sup>244</sup>

Therefore, he argues that to be human is to live within polarities. As Luis Rivera explains, “Boff’s anthropology holds that human existence has a polar structure and that life is a creative and conflictive process which evolves from a dynamic interchange between the polarities in that structure (dialectic).”<sup>245</sup> In simplest terms, life is a creative and tensive process of living transcendence within embodiment:

We are like a tree, with roots in the ground that give us the strength to face the storms. But we also have branches, which interact with the universe, with the cosmic energies, with the winds, the rain, the sun and the stars. We synthesize all this and our life becomes more open. And if we do not remain open, the branches or the trunk weaken, the roots become dry and the sap no longer flows. We die. The dialectic consists, then, in maintaining together our rootedness and our openness. Immanent, yet open to transcendence.<sup>246</sup>

To say that human beings are open-ended is also to recognize our tendency toward closedness, to say that we are conscious is to recognize the many ways in which we remain unconscious and blind, and to say that we are open to transcendence is to recognize ourselves as immanent. He believes creativity and growth happen in these

---

<sup>244</sup> See Boff, *Ética da vida*, 226. Everyone lives in this dialectical way – this is what Boff means by “transcultural phenomenology” (see *Ibid.*, 228). His understanding of the human being as dialectical is largely drawn from Jungian depth psychology. According to Rivera, for example, Boff adopts from Jung the androgynous view of the human person, which holds that in every person is present the archetypes of the feminine and masculine. Rivera also argues that Boff has appropriated Jung’s argument of the human as a dialectic between consciousness and personal/collective unconscious. He writes: “This involves a tension between the rational, moral and aesthetic character of consciousness, and the unadapted, irrational, evil, and inferior parts of the psyche (Jung’s shadow)” (Rivera, “Anthropogenesis,” 175). The aim of life in this sense is a “harmonious integration of the different dynamisms in consciousness and the unconscious, especially the shadows of our psyches” (Boff, *El destino del hombre y del mundo*, 54; translation comes from Rivera, “Anthropogenesis,” 176).

<sup>245</sup> Rivera, “Anthropogenesis,” 149.

<sup>246</sup> “Somos como uma árvore, fundados no chão que nos dá força para enfrentar as tempestades. Mas também temos a copa, que interage com o universo, com as energias cósmicas, com os ventos, com as chuvas, com o sol e as estrelas. Sintetizamos tudo isso, transformamos em mais vida a nossa abertura. E se não mantemos a abertura – a copa –, o tronco estiola, as raízes secam e a seiva já não flui. Morremos. A dialética consiste então em manter juntos o enraizamento e a abertura. Imanentes, mas abertos à transcendência” (Boff, *Tempo de transcendência*, 63).

polarities of life. As such, while he often favors one side of the polarity (e.g. feminine over the masculine, Pathos over Logos, the symbolic over the diabolic, openness over closedness) he understands that, at least in this life, these polar opposites must co-exist.

Thus, it is important to understand that in Boff's theological system, the human being is ultimately "an animated body and an embodied soul,"<sup>247</sup> an inseparable unit of spirit and body,<sup>248</sup> a unified tension between human and divine.<sup>249</sup> We cannot neglect one side of our polarity to the exclusion of the other because it is through our polarities that God and world meet. Recall that for Boff, God becomes phenomenologically present in history through the experience of human beings, when we recognize God's transience in the world and thus experience God in our every experience of the world. Humans are capable of experiencing God in this way precisely because we are both in the process of divinization/open to transcendence, and physical/material/worldly. We experience God/Divine Mystery in the world, and in so doing, we bring God into the history of the world. As Boff explains:

If it is true that human existence is characterized by the constant summons to transcendency – if human beings order themselves positively or negatively, to God or the Reign of God (God's project) in all that they do, think, and say – then we must also posit the unity of history. History is always the history of salvation or perdition, the history of human beings and God in dialogue, in breach, in redemption and liberation.<sup>250</sup>

History is shaped by the yes or no of human beings who open or close themselves to their transcendence while being in the world.<sup>251</sup> In Boff's theology, human beings, who are as

---

<sup>247</sup> "O ser humano é um corpo animado ou uma alma corporificada" (Boff, *Ética da vida*, 227).

<sup>248</sup> See Boff, *El destino del hombre y del mundo*, 24-25; *A águia e a galinha*, 82-87; and Boff and Bettor, *Mística y Espiritualidade*, 46-48;

<sup>249</sup> Boff, *Praying With Jesus and Mary*, 4.

<sup>250</sup> Boff, *When Theology Listens to the Poor*, 70-71.

<sup>251</sup> Boff does not explicitly credit Karl Rahner with this line of thinking, but it is hard to miss the influence of his transcendental anthropology here. Rivera sees a lot of Rahner, who was Boff's professor in Munich, in Boff's anthropology. He writes: "Leonardo Boff employs transcendental anthropology without

much spirit as they are body, direct evolution forward only as long as their pull to transcendence pulls also the physical, bodily, material world.

On the negative side, then, the dialectical nature of human life means that we will never be able to reach a final equilibrium, or to rest once and for all within our polarities – both sides will always be present and struggling for dominance in worldly life. This means that the diabolic (that which seeks to divide and do evil) and the symbolic (that which seeks to bond what has been shattered) must co-exist in this world. On the positive side, however, the dialectical nature of human beings means that when we are open to relationship, or to the future which God has guaranteed in Christ, nothing is left behind – we move the whole world in all its polarities and contradictions toward the favoring of that openness also. For Boff, the dialectical nature of human beings is such that when we experience God in the world, the world experiences God. In other words, it is through the yes of dialectical human beings that God’s transience becomes a phenomenological reality. In this way, we become the “created creator.”<sup>252</sup>

#### **(iv) Conclusion**

Emphasizing that it is human beings who experience God in the world, Boff develops an anthropology to correspond with his understanding of spirituality. He argues, first, that humans are knots of relations branching out in all directions; as such, we are inherently relational. He holds that sacramental and symbolic awareness comes in the willingness to relate to others in love and proximity – “on the ground, in the earth.”<sup>253</sup>

---

the degree of justification and consistency that Rahner imparts to this method. Nevertheless, this is what Boff is doing whether he speaks of the person as a nexus of relationships; transcendental subject; being-in-the-world, being-for-others, being-toward-God; hearer of the Word” (Rivera, “Anthropogenesis,” 62).

<sup>252</sup> “criado-criador” (Boff, *A voz do arco-íris*, 90).

<sup>253</sup> Boff, *Saint Francis*, 39.



We who are relational by nature perceive God's transparent presence most clearly when we do so in close relationship with others.

Second, Boff writes that humans are open-ended; we continuously open up to transcendence and move toward divinization into a future that has already been guaranteed by God in our favor. To be open-ended means, above all, that we continuously seek to know God; even in those moments when we are caught in patterns of pseudo-transcendence, Boff believes we are seeking God. In other words, by virtue of our open-endedness, humans want to experience God, or Mystery, in the world.

Third, however, he holds that humans are not only open but also dialectical. Humans are both "an infinite openness and a partial realization of it,"<sup>254</sup> transcendent and immanent, an inseparable unit of spirit and body. For as difficult as it can be to navigate these polarities, Boff indicates that when humans move with all their polarities toward transcendence or divinization, the bodily, physical world moves also with them. With this movement, which refuses to leave anything behind, he sees the possibility of directing history, indeed evolution, toward fulfillment. As such, the phenomenological or felt presence of God in the world becomes stronger as dialectical humans – the inseparable unit of transcendence and immanence – move toward God.

Inasmuch as Boff's basic understanding of spirituality as the experience of God in every experience of the world remains constant throughout his career, so his basic understanding of anthropology remains constant. In his theology, the human being, who is a knot of relations, open-ended and dialectical, lives most happily and clearly in the experience of the transparent and sacramental presence of God in the world.

---

<sup>254</sup> Rivera, "Anthropogenesis," 152.

## **D. Chapter Summary and Assessment**

In this chapter we have seen that although there has been significant development in Boff's theological career, his general understanding of spirituality and its accompanying anthropology have remained remarkably consistent. This spirituality, honed and strengthened through the course of a long career, offers clear ways in which people may, and in fact must, experience God as they seek new pathways today.

### **(i) Summary**

Boff started his career in 1970 as a liberal Christian humanist, primarily concerned with making the Christian faith intelligible to a secularized world. Within five years, however, he was taking a prominent role in the Latin American liberation theology that arose from the praxis of and for the poor. He has explained that while working within liberation theology, he transitioned from wanting to bring the Roman Catholic Church into line with the praxis of the poor, to focusing his attention on bringing all society to this liberative praxis, to encompassing all creation among the poor. He has characterized this movement as a broadening of horizons. I have indicated that this broadening of horizons eventually led him to become an ecological theologian. In his ecological theology, he advocates for global transformation because he understands that the poor will only survive if the Earth and its ecosystems continue to exist. Thus, the liberation he now seeks is global in scope. He calls for a society-wide paradigm shift that, through spirituality, will unify humanity to a new era of cooperation on our planet.

Despite the broadening movement of his long career, Boff has remained consistent in his understanding of spirituality as the experience of God in the world. He

argues that without this experience theology becomes mere panting and religious breathlessness. He writes that when people experience God – the depth of Mystery in all things – in the everyday moments of their lives, God becomes phenomenologically present, or a palpable reality in history. With his words on transience he shows that God is profoundly diaphanous in the world. By discussing sacramentality, he demonstrates how, through emotion and a proximity of standing-with, people develop a “symbolic and mystic awareness”<sup>255</sup> that allows them to perceive God’s presence always. With the categories of experience, transience and sacramentality, then, he indicates over and over that the basic concern of his career is, simply stated, “to discern the signs of God’s presence in the world.”<sup>256</sup>

Moreover, Boff continually emphasizes that it is humans who experience God in this way. Thus, holding that human beings are knots-of-relations, open-ended and dialectical, he demonstrates in his many theological works that these traits prepare humans in particular to live in the spiritual experience of God in all things. In the close proximity with others that our relational nature demands, in the open movement toward transcendence and divinization in God, and in engaging all of the polarities inherent in their persons, he believes humans become capable of moving all creation toward fulfillment. In this movement, he sees the phenomenological experience of God enter history, transforming the world into God’s kingdom. Thus, humans play an important role in his theological system as the ones who live in a spiritually significant way.

---

<sup>255</sup> Boff, *Ecology and Liberation*, 78.

<sup>256</sup> Boff, *The Path of Hope*, 34.

## (ii) Assessment

The primary contribution that Boff offers in the face of the socio-ecological crisis is precisely that very clear articulation of how and why people are to experience God in the world. In the introductory chapter I indicated that, in fact, spirituality must be experienced. Thus, Sandra Schneiders has written that “spirituality is not an abstract idea, a theory, an ideology, or a movement of some kind. It is a personal lived reality;”<sup>257</sup> and Evelyn Underhill explains that the Christian mystic “is one for whom God and Christ are not merely objects of belief, but living facts experimentally known at first-hand.”<sup>258</sup> In his work Boff repeatedly indicates that *every* person can and must be a mystic who experimentally knows at first-hand God and Christ in creation.

Nor is his account of the God-experience neglecting of the world. Indeed, Harvey Cox has aptly written that Boff is “a world-affirmer.”<sup>259</sup> Therefore, in his words about spirituality and about human beings who are so made that they must experience God in this world of polarities, he offers people a concrete way to live out their experience of God while immersed in the happenings of the world. Moreover, he offers people a reason to hope that, by immersing themselves in the experience of God – in saying yes to this experience no matter the circumstances – they will increasingly see God’s kingdom shaping the course of history toward justice and life.

## (iii) Conclusion

In a beautiful account of Jesus’ own spiritual life, Boff illustrates the spirituality he believes every human being can and should live. He writes:

---

<sup>257</sup> Schneiders, “Religion vs. Spirituality,” 167.

<sup>258</sup> Underhill, *The Mystics of the Church*, 10.

<sup>259</sup> Cox, *The Silencing of Leonardo Boff*, 34.

Jesus is not someone who encounters God only in the classic loci of religion (prayer, scriptures, temple, synagogue, and so on). He possesses a contemplative view of reality. The Father steeps him in human experiences, and he lives in every situation. He contemplates how the lilies of the field grow, and how the birds of the air soar in freedom. He knows how seed behaves when cast on different kinds of soil. He knows the growth processes of fig and vine. But in these secular realities he discerns the presence of the reign, and the activity of divine providence. ... In other words: in all things, and not just in the law and the prophets, Jesus perceives the realization or the negation of the will of God.<sup>260</sup>

As with Jesus, Boff calls all people to a contemplative view of reality. He shows that we come to know the divine presence while being steeped in human experiences, in our learning, working, living and dying. This type of living is profoundly holistic; it refuses a disjunction between life and spirituality. He shows that it is precisely when people say yes to God in their every experience of the world that God becomes palpable in history. In this time of crisis, when so much injustice and exploitation reigns, such a spirituality may prove absolutely necessary to move humanity from living by disjunctive and objectifying dualisms that enable the blind exploitation of nature and persons to a holistic, and indeed caring, relationship with the world.

---

<sup>260</sup> Boff, *New Evangelization*, 77. See Boff, *Experimentar Deus*, 121, for a similar quote.

#### **CHAPTER 4: BOFF'S LIBERATION AND ECOLOGICAL SPIRITUALITIES**

While in Chapter Three I discussed the categories and anthropology that sustain Leonardo Boff's understanding of spirituality throughout his career, this chapter explicates the particular shape this spirituality takes in his liberation and ecological theologies (with a special focus on the latter). By examining both articulations of his spirituality, I show, first, that there are some differences between them. Though his liberation spirituality is shaped by the epistemological privilege he affords to the poor and their praxis for liberation, his ecological spirituality is shaped by the privilege he affords to spirituality itself as the vehicle for global change. In his ecological theology, then, his spirituality of re-connection becomes the thing upon which all things turn.

Nonetheless, and second, one important similarity between his liberation and ecological theologies remains: they both clearly illustrate that authentic spirituality will be profoundly transformative for those who practice it. In this sense, spirituality is not an abstract phenomenon; it has concrete and historical consequences. An authentic spirituality will produce a better life. In the face of the current socio-ecological crisis when positive change is so badly needed, Boff demonstrates that the power of spirituality to transform human history should not be underestimated.

The chapter is divided into four parts. In part A I examine the basic features of Boff's Latin American liberation theology and its central epistemological commitment to the human poor and their liberative praxis, as well the spirituality he develops from this commitment. I also explicate his liberation spirituality, in which he identifies the poor as

the “privileged carriers of the Lord,”<sup>1</sup> and “true faith”<sup>2</sup> for everyone else as lived in solidarity with and for the oppressed. He writes that God’s kingdom enters history as the poor and their allies live by such a spirituality.

Shifting focus, part B delineates the basic features of Boff’s ecological theology. I elucidate three central features of this theology: ecology, the new cosmology and the global paradigm shift that he believes is arising today. I illustrate how, in each of these features, he accentuates a movement toward synergy and relationality, which he believes will change the course of global history from the individualistic and hierarchical confines of the modern paradigm to the “extraordinary new pathways”<sup>3</sup> of the new. In part C, I show that in Boff’s ecological theology the great transformation to global unity is made possible by a spiritual revolution that reconnects humans with their interior, with the world around them, and with their inner ethic of care. In other words, it is spirituality that transforms human minds to the point where they can see their incredible relationality with all that is, thus enabling new pathways into the future.

Part D summarizes the chapter, and argues that while Boff’s liberation and ecological theologies do not talk about spirituality in exactly the same way, they both illustrate the phenomenological and historical consequence of living in the spiritual experience of God. In this way, he shows that authentic spirituality *will* help life flourish.

### **A. Liberation Theology and Spirituality**

The spirituality that Boff develops in his liberation theology is explicitly focused on the needs and concerns of the Latin American poor and the allies. In this sense, his

---

<sup>1</sup> Boff, “The Need for Political Saints,” 373.

<sup>2</sup> Boff, *Faith on the Edge*, 95.

<sup>3</sup> Boff, *Essential Care*, 1.

liberation spirituality is very clearly born of the liberation theology that shaped not only his work, but also that of many Latin American theologians. In the pages ahead I briefly explicate the fundamentals of this theology, as well the spirituality that Boff articulates in correspondence with them.

**(i) Latin American Liberation Theology**

Boff's liberation theology names and nourishes the liberative praxis of the poor and those who choose to side with the poor. He puts it as follows: "Let me be clear: liberation theology is not a reflection on the theoretical subject of liberation. It is a reflection on the concrete practice of liberation engaged in by the poor and by their allies in the field of their struggle."<sup>4</sup> Thus, central to his liberation theology is the liberative praxis by and for the poor.

Central to his liberative praxis are the poor themselves. Like all Latin American liberation theologians, Boff names the poor as the locus of his theology, that is, as the ones from whose perspective he lives and writes. Noting that "every point of view is a view of point,"<sup>5</sup> he chooses to side with the oppressed in his work. He finds support for this locus in Jesus' own close relationship with the poor and oppressed (e.g. Luke 4:16-21; Matthew 25:31-46). In fact, he holds that Jesus' relationship with the poor is so important that "[i]f we do not take the side of the wretched of the earth, we become enemies of our very humanity. By losing the poor, we also lose God and Jesus Christ, who chose the side of the poor. Then we are without any historical evidence."<sup>6</sup>

Therefore, when he talks about the now famous phrase of liberation theology, "the

---

<sup>4</sup> Boff, *When Theology Listens to the Poor*, 12.

<sup>5</sup> See, for example, Boff, *Church, Charism and Power*, 46; *When Theology Listens to the Poor*, ix; *Faith on the Edge*, 40; *A águia e a galinha*, 9.

<sup>6</sup> Boff, *Ecology and Liberation*, 100.



preferential option for the poor,” he means not merely that his theology advocates *for* the poor, but that his theology is written from the epistemological location *of* the poor, from the way the poor and their allies have come to understand and live their relationship with God in the world.

Underlying this locus on the poor is the assumption that to write theology, any theology, is to take a political stance: to articulate the concerns of the status quo or of the periphery, to advocate for the desires of the status quo or for the needs of the periphery.<sup>7</sup> Neutrality is impossible. Thus, Boff writes that liberation theology “takes sides rather than cloistering itself in some allegedly neutral position. Any such claim to neutrality is really an admission of support for the established order that benefits a small portion of the population and marginalizes the vast majority.”<sup>8</sup> In granting epistemological privilege to the poor and oppressed he does not mean to idealize the poor; rather, he means to make a clear socio-political statement: the God of Jesus Christ does not stand for the kind of unjust oppression, non-personhood, and premature death to which two-thirds of the human population are subjected.

Negatively speaking, then, Boff locates his theology in the epistemological location of the oppressed because he wishes to advocate for the struggles, needs, and strengths of the oppressed, and not that of the oppressors. Positively speaking, however, he locates his theology in the poor because he believes that the poor have an especially important evangelizing potential. As Boff writes: “Through the poor, his [God’s]

---

<sup>7</sup> Indeed, Boff writes: “The theological debate about liberation theology is irrelevant. It serves to hide the actual debate, which is political. What we really need to know is which side Christianity is supporting in the balance of historical forces, now: the side of those who want to maintain the existing order because it favors them; or the side of those who see to change it because it punishes the poor excessively” (*Ecology and Liberation*, 99).

<sup>8</sup> Boff, *Liberating Grace*, 67.

demands for solidarity, identity, justice and dignity, are being heard.”<sup>9</sup> That is, “[f]rom the standpoint of the poor, we realize to what extent current societies are exclusionary, to what extent democracies are imperfect, to what extent religions and churches are tied to the interests of the powerful.”<sup>10</sup> While people blinded by their privilege may remain complacent even amid severe injustice, the oppressed highlight, by the very circumstances in which they live, the necessity for revolutionary changes. As such, Boff explains:

... the poor are not just poor; they have a power of utopia, in thought and action; they are historical agents; they are capable, together with others, of transforming the perverse society under which we are suffering. This vision goes against the grain of historical ‘charity’ of churches working *for* the poor but never *with* the poor and from the viewpoint *of* the poor.<sup>11</sup>

Therefore, Boff privileges the epistemological location of the poor, as he believes the God of Jesus does, because he wants to advocate for the needs of those who suffer, and very importantly, because he believes in the power of the poor to bring about historical liberation not only for themselves but for all people with them. As for all those who stand in a position of privilege or power, it is their role to undergo a “[c]onversion to the poor and to evangelical poverty,” so that they may participate in the revolutionary changes the poor necessitate, for their own good and for the good of all.<sup>12</sup>

Both in his epistemological privileging of the poor and in calling the powerful to conversion, Boff is consonant with other Latin American liberation theologians. In fact, he and his brother, Clodovis Boff, have insisted that “there is one, and only one, theology

---

<sup>9</sup> Boff, “The Need for Political Saints,” 370.

<sup>10</sup> Boff, *Cry of the Earth*, 107.

<sup>11</sup> Leonardo Boff, “The Contribution of Brazilian Ecclesiology to the Universal Church,” in *Brazil: People and Church(es)*, ed. José Oscar Beozzo and Luis Carlos Susin, trans. by Paul Burns (London: SCM Press, 2002), 79.

<sup>12</sup> Boff and Boff, *Liberation Theology: From Confrontation to Dialogue*, 30. See also Boff, *Jesus Christ Liberator*, 267.

of liberation. There is only one point of departure – a reality of social misery – and one goal – the liberation of the oppressed.”<sup>13</sup> To write liberation theology is to write from the praxis and perspective of the poor, in order to move toward their historical liberation.

This is done not in addition to other theological concerns, but as the starting point of *all* theological concerns. As Leonardo Boff explains:

Liberation is not just one item on the theologian’s list. It is a horizon against which everything is illuminated, a plane in which everything has a position and acquires meaning. In other words, liberation is not just an entry in an encyclopedia alongside other entries. It is a perspective from which all the other terms are understood, analyzed, and explained.<sup>14</sup>

All Latin American liberation theologians share the praxic and epistemological locus in the poor, including Leonardo Boff. This does not mean that all liberation theologies are exactly alike, but rather that irrespective of the subject matter and particular characteristics of each work, they all remain firmly grounded in the social location and liberation of the oppressed. Boff is no exception to this rule. As we saw in the previous chapter, though he wrote about multiple subjects in his liberation theology, he consistently approached these subjects from the praxis and perspective of the poor as they sought their structural-historical liberation. This consistent grounding in the liberationist dimensions of the Christian faith is also key to understanding the way he appropriates spirituality in his liberation theology.

---

<sup>13</sup> Boff and Boff, *Salvation and Liberation*, 24.

<sup>14</sup> Boff, “The Originality of the Theology of Liberation,” trans. Francis McDonagh, in *The Future of Liberation Theology: Essays in Honor of Gustavo Gutiérrez*, ed. Marc H. Ellis and Otto Maduro (Maryknoll: Orbis Books: 1989), 38.

## (ii) Liberation Spirituality

Boff often states that what sustains liberation praxis and theology is a spiritual encounter of the poor with the Lord.<sup>15</sup> This encounter constitutes the very roots from which liberation arises, and it comprises the spiritual experience without which liberation theology would become “mere panting – religious breathlessness.”<sup>16</sup> His brother Clodovis summarizes this point well when he writes: “It may well be in *spirituality* that liberation theology has produced its most valid and useful reflection. Nor should this be any cause for astonishment, since the *ultimate root of the theology of liberation is of a mystical order: the encounter with God in the poor.*”<sup>17</sup> The spirituality that Leonardo Boff discusses in his liberation theology proceeds on the assumption that God communicates with the poor in a special way, for through them God teaches all peoples that the good news of the Gospel is compromised where suffering is allowed to continue.<sup>18</sup> Thus, at the heart of liberation theology’s epistemological privileging of the poor is a privileging of their spiritual experience: “everything else proceeds from that all-encompassing experience, trying to work out a translation within the framework of a historically determined reality.”<sup>19</sup>

---

<sup>15</sup> See, for example, Boff, “The Need for Political Saints,” 369; and *Faith on the Edge*, 80.

<sup>16</sup> Boff and Boff, *Salvation and Liberation*, 2.

<sup>17</sup> Boff and Boff, *Liberation Theology: From From Confrontation to Dialogue*, 29-30. Stated another way: “A *liberation spirituality* is the spiritual moment that gives rise to the theology of liberation” (Boff and Boff, *Salvation and Liberation*, 25). Thus, when in 1985 Rome issues the very critical *Instruction on Certain Aspects of the “Theology of Liberation”* without acknowledging the role of spirituality in the this theology, the Boff brothers react in astonishment: “The document has not one word about the movement of spirituality that has provided liberation theology with its actual matrix” (*Liberation Theology: From From Confrontation to Dialogue*, 50).

<sup>18</sup> Boff, “The Need for Political Saints,” 370.

<sup>19</sup> Boff, “The Need for Political Saints,” 369. See also Boff, *Faith on the Edge*, 80; and “The Originality of the Theology of Liberation,” 40.

As we saw in the previous chapter, Boff privileges the spiritual experience of God in all his theology. However, it is important to note that in his liberation theology he privileges the spiritual experience of the poor in particular, and inasmuch as they abide with the poor, of all those who work for historical liberation. In that light, he talks about spirituality in two interrelated ways. On the one hand, spirituality is the experience of God by the actual poor. On the other hand, spirituality is the faith experience of those who would undergo a “[c]onversion to the poor and to evangelical poverty” in their practice for integral liberation.<sup>20</sup> He speaks of the first in terms of the poor as sacraments of God’s self-communication, and the second in terms of *contemplativus in liberatione* (contemplative in liberation). The first refers to the epistemological privileging of the poor; the second refers to the depth of liberation praxis. I will explain each below.

**a. *The Poor As Sacraments of God’s Self-Revelation***

Boff writes that “[a]ny spiritual experience means an encounter with a new, challenging face of God, emerging from the great challenges of historical reality.”<sup>21</sup> In Latin America, he believes that this new face of God is entering history with the poor:

In recent years, it seems to us, God has burst upon our continent like an erupting volcano. The divine will has prioritized the poor as the sacrament of this self-communication. The ruler of the universe assures us that our poor hear the divine call for solidarity, identification, justice, and dignity. And the particular churches have obeyed that call ... In the face of the scandal of poverty, God urges us all to act in behalf of the poor against poverty, to the end that we may all enjoy the fruits of justice.<sup>22</sup>

---

<sup>20</sup> Boff and Boff, *Liberation Theology: From Confrontation to Dialogue*, 30. See also Boff, *Jesus Christ Liberator*, 267. By integral liberation, he means that liberation must encompass the economic, political, cultural, pedagogical, and religious ways in which the poor have been oppressed and the wealthy have been granted the privilege of remaining blind to their role as oppressors (see Boff, *When Theology Listens to the Poor*, 19).

<sup>21</sup> Boff, *Faith on the Edge*, 81.

<sup>22</sup> Boff, *Faith on the Edge*, 81. See also Boff, “The Need for Political Saints,” 370.

He repeatedly calls the poor the sacrament of God's self-communication, the ones through whom a challenging God enters history and demands justice. Moreover, he calls them "privileged carriers of the Lord ... with the potential for evangelizing all nations and the church as a whole,"<sup>23</sup> and the ones in whom Christ is present "in an especially concentrated sacramental way."<sup>24</sup>

To speak of the poor as sacramental points, in Boff's liberation theology, to the Christ of history who proclaimed liberation in "the gospel, the good news, of the Life and Love that are God."<sup>25</sup> Holding to the central importance of proclaiming "the liberation brought by Jesus Christ in a way that will be meaningful for people today,"<sup>26</sup> he argues that the key to making the gospel contemporary is the poor:

Today's human being is not an abstract universal. It is people who, like us in Latin America, live in a more or less pervasive situation of captivity on the outskirts of the great decision-making centers of the world where cultural, economic, political, and religious questions are decided.<sup>27</sup>

As excluded and oppressed people seeking their historical liberation, Boff holds that today the poor are sacramental signs of the Christ who identified himself with the poor, who suffered on the cross as a consequence of his practice for liberation,<sup>28</sup> and who in the resurrection indicates the "definite triumph of justice."<sup>29</sup> Thus, in their being poor, in their situation of captivity on the outskirts of society, and in their struggle for justice, they

---

<sup>23</sup> Boff, "The Need for Political Saints," 373.

<sup>24</sup> Boff, *Faith on the Edge*, 85.

<sup>25</sup> Boff, *Passion of Christ, Passion of the World*, 129. As most of his liberation theology is, Boff's liberation spirituality is Christocentric in the sense that it focuses on the human Christ. He explains: "For my part, on the strength of my spiritual formation and basic option alike, I follow the Franciscan school – the synoptic, Antiochene, and Scotist tradition. I find God precisely in Jesus' total, complete humanity" (Ibid., xii).

<sup>26</sup> Boff, "Christ's Liberation via Oppression," 100. Thus, he argues that faith and tradition "should always be concerned to break through the limiting framework of Jesus' own concrete situation and find the perduring transcendent meaning that is articulated there; for that meaning must now be turned into history in our own present-day context" (Ibid., 103).

<sup>27</sup> Boff, "Christ's Liberation via Oppression," 100.

<sup>28</sup> See Boff, *Passion of Christ, Passion of the World*, 129.

<sup>29</sup> Boff, *Via-Sacra da justiça*, 8-9.

are sacramental signs of Christ's presence in history. Indeed, he writes that "Christ identifies with the poor in order to be served and welcomed *precisely in them*."<sup>30</sup>

In *Sacraments of Life and Life of the Sacraments*, Boff holds that the sacramental structure of the world means that all reality is a sign of another Reality: God.<sup>31</sup> When in his liberation theology he says that the poor are sacraments of God's self-communication and that "Christ has a sacramental density among the poor,"<sup>32</sup> he means to say that the poor are signs of God's will for solidarity, identification, justice and dignity, which Jesus lived and now the poor proclaim. With the poor, a new, challenging face of God emerges in history, and this is very important because it pushes all Christians to work for the historical and integral liberation of the oppressed. Thus, in his liberation theology everything is a sign for God, but most especially the poor. He writes that in "the subjective moment of experience" when the poor encounter God in their struggle for liberation, and when the privileged recognize God in that struggle, God's own desire for self-communication and for self-revelation enters concrete history.<sup>33</sup>

#### ***b. Contemplativus In Liberationis***

The above statement means that it is very important in Boff's liberation theology that people of privilege undergo a "conversion" to the poor by way of joining in their struggle for historical liberation. In so doing, they must draw from a particular form of spirituality, which he names as contemplativus in liberarione or "being contemplative

---

<sup>30</sup> Boff, *Faith on the Edge*, 86.

<sup>31</sup> Boff, *Sacraments of Life*, 2.

<sup>32</sup> Boff, "The Need for Political Saints," 373.

<sup>33</sup> Boff, "The Need for Political Saints," 370. See also Boff, *Faith on the Edge*, 81.

while working toward liberation.”<sup>34</sup> He holds that unlike traditional monastic spirituality that stressed prayer over work, and the contemporary Western approach that now stresses work over prayer (he thinks both tendencies fall into a form of monophysitism<sup>35</sup>), liberation spirituality seeks “a synthesis of prayer *in* action, prayer *within* action, prayer *with* the deed.”<sup>36</sup> In other words, refusing too stark a distinction between the poles of prayer and action, Boff argues that liberation spirituality “articulate[s] the two poles dialectically, treating them as two spaces that are open to one another and imply each other.”<sup>37</sup> More concretely:

The activity of service to our sisters and brothers, in solidarity with their struggles for liberation, springs from the depths of the prayer that reaches the heart of God. . . . Conversely, the pole of liberating practices refers us to the pole of prayer, that nourishing, supportive wellspring of strength for the struggle.<sup>38</sup>

Thus, being a contemplativus in liberatione “consists of prayer offered in the very process of liberation, when we experience an encounter with God in our sisters and brothers.”<sup>39</sup>

Liberation spirituality, according to Boff, means contemplating in action and acting in contemplation.

---

<sup>34</sup> Boff, “The Need for Political Saints,” 370. He expresses a similar idea in an earlier article – see Leonardo Boff, “Religious Life within the Latin American Setting: a Challenge and an Opportunity,” in *Witnessing to the Kingdom in a Dehumanizing World*, ed. Carlos Palmes et. al. (Canadian Religious Conference, 1975), 143.

<sup>35</sup> Boff explains that in both the classic formulation of monastic spirituality – *Ora et Labora* – and the contemporary formulation of Western Christian spirituality, too stark a distinction is made between prayer and action. Consequently, with *Ora et Labora* the distinction leads to a privileging of prayer over action (“Only the nature of prayer redeems the profane nature of toil”), and with contemporary spirituality the distinction leads to a privileging of action over prayer (“Prayer has its place and value. But the authenticity of prayer is measured by its expression in true, ethically correct practice”) (Boff, *Faith on the Edge*, 83). Both of these, he argues, are products of a type of monophysitism – in the former, Jesus is understood as having “a predominance of divine over human nature” (Ibid.); in the latter, there is implicit a “spiritual monophysitism,” with “the ‘nature’ of physical work predominating over that of the spirit” (Ibid., 84). He argues that both understandings of prayer and action are profoundly dualistic.

<sup>36</sup> Boff, *Faith on the Edge*, 84. See also Boff, “The Need for Political Saints,” 372.

<sup>37</sup> Boff, “The Need for Political Saints,” 373. See also Boff, *Faith on the Edge*, 86.

<sup>38</sup> Boff, *Faith on the Edge*, 87.

<sup>39</sup> Boff, *Faith on the Edge*, 84.



However, though he holds that the two poles of contemplation and action must be held in dialectical union, he concedes that of the two, the pole of contemplation, which he sometimes refers to as prayer, receives priority.<sup>40</sup> He writes:

Through prayer, human beings express what is noblest and most profound in their existence. Through prayer they rise above themselves, transcend all the grandeurs of creation and history, assume an “ecstatic” position by which they “stand out” from themselves, strike up a dialogue with the supreme mystery and cry, “Father!” Not that they leave the universe behind. On the contrary, they sweep it up and transform it into an offering to God. But they do deliver themselves from all bonds of earth: they denounce all historical absolutes, relativize them, and stand naked and alone with the Absolute, with whom they can proceed to create history.<sup>41</sup>

Here we are reminded of the spirituality discussed in Chapter Three, where we saw that for Boff, God becomes phenomenologically present in history when human beings – who are themselves a dialectical tension between body and soul, human and divine – actually *experience* God’s presence in the world.<sup>42</sup> The pole of contemplation or prayer or faith, as he sometimes calls it in his liberation theology, is precisely the sacramental posture of experiencing God in all things. Thus, he writes that faith is first and foremost “a vital experience of all things in the light of God.”<sup>43</sup> This means, he goes on, that “[f]or the person of faith, reality is not primarily profane or sacred. It is simply sacramental. Creaturely reality reveals God, evokes God, comes steeped in the divine reality.”<sup>44</sup> Indeed, “[a]s a way of life, the living faith implies a contemplative stance towards the world: it finds the touch of God everywhere.”<sup>45</sup> It is in the contemplative stance of

---

<sup>40</sup> Boff, *Faith on the Edge*, 86; “The Need for Political Saints,” 373.

<sup>41</sup> Boff, *Faith on the Edge*, 86-87.

<sup>42</sup> See Chapter Three, part B (i) c for phenomenology; and part C (iii) for humans as dialectical.

<sup>43</sup> Boff, *Faith on the Edge*, 85.

<sup>44</sup> Boff, *Faith on the Edge*, 85. See also Leonardo Boff, *De la espiritualidad de la liberación a la práctica de la liberación: Hacia una espiritualidad latinoamericana* (Bogotá: Into-American Press, 1981), 23.

<sup>45</sup> Boff, “The Need for Political Saints,” 372.

experiencing the touch of God in all things that humans can then “sweep it up” and transform all things into a historical offering to God.

Boff shows that in the context of liberation, the contemplative view of God in all things is inextricably tied to the praxis of and for the oppressed:

Action in the service of our brothers and sisters and in solidarity with their struggles for liberation grows from within the very midst of the prayer which reaches God’s heart. Prayer aids the believer to see the sacramental presence of the Lord in the poor and in every variety of exploited people. Without prayer, rooted in faith, our sight becomes blurred and superficial; it cannot penetrate into that depth of theological mysticism in which it enters in communion with the Lord, who is present among the condemned, humiliated and offended peoples of history.<sup>46</sup>

In the context of liberation, the contemplative view gives people the eyes to see Christ’s sacramental density among the poor and the poor as the sacramental self-communication of God, urging them to join in the struggle for historical liberation. Thus, while he holds that “[f]or persons of faith, absolutely everything is a vessel of God’s design. Everything is a sacrament of his presence,”<sup>47</sup> he also asserts that “[t]rue faith is faith that moves out from an attitude of unconditional surrender and dedication to God to an attitude of dedication to our brothers and sisters, in the form of service, solidarity with them in their need, and the molding of relations of partnership and justice among human beings.”<sup>48</sup>

True faith, or true contemplation, is lived in service to the oppressed. He explains:

Only a faith like this is faith in the biblical God, in the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. Only a faith like this serves and implements the plan of God, which is to create a world of reconciliation and justice and thereby to inaugurate God’s Reign, beginning right here in this world and culminating in heaven. And the Reign of God begins to form where love flourishes, where justice appears on the earth, where partnership and communion are inaugurated, and where liberty gains strength and

---

<sup>46</sup> Boff, “The Need for Political Saints,” 374.

<sup>47</sup> Boff, *Faith on the Edge*, 94.

<sup>48</sup> Boff, *Faith on the Edge*, 95.

substance. God is encountered only when these values are experienced and lived.<sup>49</sup>

In other words, God's liberating presence – or the Reign of God – becomes phenomenologically present in history when people experience not only God in all things, but most especially God in the poor and in the struggle for their structural, historical liberation.

The contemplative view gives people the eyes to see Christ's sacramental density among the poor, and the impetus to bring about historical change. Thus, without contemplation, liberation theology could not be.<sup>50</sup> Without liberative praxis, on the other hand, contemplation would cease to be, as Boff puts it, "true." In this sense, the only true contemplative is the one who dedicates his/her life to the liberation of and with the oppressed.

### **(iii) Conclusion**

Whether he is talking about the poor as sacraments of God's self-revelation or of contemplativus in liberationis, the spirituality Boff describes in his liberation theology hinges on the praxis and epistemological locus of the human poor. Stated differently, his articulation of spirituality – or mysticism, as he sometimes calls it<sup>51</sup> – always hinges on his commitment to the historical liberation of the oppressed in Latin America. It is

---

<sup>49</sup> Boff, *Faith on the Edge*, 95.

<sup>50</sup> Boff explains: "But the correctness of theological discourse is not enough. This discourse must express, in articulate fashion, a faith experience, a contemplative, mystical vision of socio-historical realities. It is not enough to say that there exists within these realities an objective dimension of salvation/perdition. Theology also has the duty of *actualizing* this dimension on the level of this faith experience. But this is possible only if this faith experience exists. And it exists only if the space of faith is created and nurtured in ongoing fashion by prayer, meditation on the scriptures, and, finally, by Christian praxis. This praxis interiorizes the faith dimension, thereby creation the "eyes" by which we discern that, in socio-historical realities, the kingdom of God is realized or frustrated, here on earth" (*Salvation and Liberation*, 65). See also, Boff, "The Originality of the Theology of Liberation," 46.

<sup>51</sup> For example: "All this is not academic theology, but the life and mysticism of many Christians today" (Boff, "The Need for Political Saints," 376).

through the poor that the challenging new face of God enters history, and it is in solidarity with the poor that faith becomes “true.” In this way, Boff’s spirituality is very clearly forged in the central concerns of Latin American liberation theology.

In his ecological theology, he continues to assert that the human poor have the power of utopia inasmuch as they demand solidarity, justice, and dignity.<sup>52</sup> He also continues to imply that true faith, or true spirituality, moves people to solidarity with the oppressed, or more broadly speaking, to ethical commitments on behalf of those who suffer. However, the explicit epistemological commitment to the poor and to the praxis of liberation fades in his ecological work. Consequently, the articulation of his spirituality broadens beyond the bounds he set in his liberation theology.

### **B. Ecological Theology**

As Boff transitions to his ecological theology, he does not relinquish his identification with liberation theology. Thus, in *Cry of The Earth; Cry of the Poor* (1995), while he joins the cry of the human poor with the cry of nature, he continues to insist that the human poor are “the most threatened beings of creation,”<sup>53</sup> and that human poverty is “liberation theology’s starting point for considering ecology.”<sup>54</sup> However, it is worth noting that Boff dedicates exactly one out of eleven chapters to explicating the special role of the human poor in his ecological theology (ch. 5), while he dedicates much of the rest of the book to explaining the new cosmology (ch. 1-2), the ecological crisis (or crisis in the paradigm of modernity) (chs. 3-4), the new paradigm (ch. 6) and the new spirituality from which it arises (chs. 7-10). Even as he discusses the poverty of Saint

---

<sup>52</sup> For example, Boff, *Cry of the Earth*, 107.

<sup>53</sup> Boff, *Cry of the Earth*, 111. See also Boff, *Ética da vida*, 120.

<sup>54</sup> Boff, *Cry of the Earth*, 112.

Francis, the fervent call for Christians to become poor in solidarity with the poor – a call that was very strong in his 1981 book, *Saint Francis; A Model for Human Liberation*<sup>55</sup> – is softened as he equates poverty with an attitude of humility.<sup>56</sup>

This is not to say that Boff's commitment to the human poor has diminished, but rather that the scope of his concerns has widened to such an extent that his epistemological focus on the human poor wanes in the explicit articulation of his theology. Consequently, the focus of his ecological theology shifts from immediate advocacy for the Latin American poor to drawing people across the socio-economic and cultural spectrum to a global societal transformation.

In order to elucidate the most important features of Boff's ecological theology, I examine, first, his understanding of ecology as most basically about relationality. Second, I explicate the new cosmology that he thinks is bringing to consciousness the understanding of the immense relationality between all things – in the human, in the Earth and all the cosmos. Finally, I explain the nature of the global paradigm shift that he believes is coming about as people become aware, through the lessons of the new cosmology and by the movement of spirituality, of their interrelationality with all things. In explaining these three aspects of his theology – ecology, the new cosmology and the global paradigm shift – I set the stage for examining, in part C of this chapter, the spirituality that he believes enables the global transformation of humans.

---

<sup>55</sup> See Chapter Three (iii) c for my discussion of Francis and poverty.

<sup>56</sup> Boff writes: "Poverty becomes a synonym for essential humility, which is not one virtue among others but an attitude by which we stand on the ground alongside things. From this position we can be reconciled with all things and begin a truly cosmic democracy" (*Cry of the Earth*, 216).

### (i) Ecology

In his ecological theology Boff stresses relationality. Indeed, he holds that ecology is fundamentally about relationship. That is:

Ecology has to do with the relations, interaction, and dialogue of all living creatures (whether alive or not) among themselves and with all that exists. This includes not only nature (natural ecology) but culture and society (human ecology, social ecology, and so on). From an ecological viewpoint everything that exists, co-exists. Everything that co-exists, pre-exists. And everything that co-exists and pre-exists subsists by means of an infinite web of all-inclusive relations. Nothing exists outside relationships. Ecology reaffirms the interdependence of beings, interprets all hierarchies as a matter of fiction, and repudiates the so-called right of the strongest.<sup>57</sup>

Thus, he goes on to write, “we may define ecology as the science and art of relations and of related beings.”<sup>58</sup>

He holds that in stressing relationality rather than hierarchy, ecology is eminently theological because it mirrors the perichoritic relationality of the Trinity. He had already held in his earlier work that, as made in the image of the Triune God who is in infinite communion of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit (*perichoresis*), human beings are best understood as knots of relations stretching out in all directions. With his turn to ecology, he begins to see that not only humans but “[t]he entire universe emanates from this divine relational interplay and is made in the image and likeness of the Trinity.”<sup>59</sup> It is not only humans but the entire universe that is relational. Therefore: “Ecological discourse is

---

<sup>57</sup> Boff, *Ecology and Liberation*, 7.

<sup>58</sup> Boff, *Ecology and Liberation*, 11. Elsewhere he writes: “Ecology is accordingly a knowledge of the relations, interconnections, interdependencies, and exchanges of all with all, at all points, and at all moments” (Boff, *Cry of the Earth*, 3).

<sup>59</sup> Boff, *Ecology and Liberation*, 11. Also: “The cosmos is shown to be an interplay of relationships, because it is created in the likeness and image of the God-Trinity” (Boff, *Cry of the Earth*, 167).

structured around the web of relationships, interdependencies, and inclusions that sustain and constitute our universe.”<sup>60</sup>

Ecology is about relationality and it encompasses several different dimensions of life. As such, Boff speaks about ecology in four ways: environmental, social, mental and integral.<sup>61</sup>

**a. *Environmental Ecology***

Environmental ecology, he writes, “is concerned with the environment and the relations that various societies have with it in history, whether they are easy or harsh on it, whether they integrate human beings into or distance them from nature.”<sup>62</sup> He explains that, on its own, this form of ecology tends to place the human being outside of nature, and from outside, to focus on humanity’s responsibility for the natural world, particularly as they strive to maintain the quality of life of all life forms, to preserve species from extinction, and to respect the dynamic balance of the Earth established through millions of years of evolution.<sup>63</sup> It also usually favors technological solutions for producing new, less polluting technologies.<sup>64</sup>

Though Boff does not think the externalized and technological solutions of environmental ecology will ultimately remedy the ecological problems we now face, he holds that they are nonetheless important because they at least seek to mitigate the unbridled voraciousness of world industrialism, “which always implies high ecological

---

<sup>60</sup> Boff, *Cry of the Earth*, 155.

<sup>61</sup> Boff draws on F. Guattari, *As Três Ecologias* (Campinas: Papirus, 1988), for environmental, social, and mental ecology. (see Boff, *Cry of the Earth*, 227, nt. 2).

<sup>62</sup> Boff, *Cry of the Earth*, 105.

<sup>63</sup> Boff, *Ética da vida*, 26.

<sup>64</sup> Boff, *Ética da vida*, 26.

costs.”<sup>65</sup> Environmental ecology alone may pose a minor challenge to ecological degradation, but he believes that in relation with social ecology a more powerful outcome may result.

### ***b. Social Ecology***

Assuming that humanity’s relationship with the natural world passes first through social relationships (that is, that environmental wellbeing requires first of all a right relationship between human beings), social ecology deals with establishing a more just human society.<sup>66</sup> Thus, social ecology prioritizes the suffering of poor humanity – who, Boff holds, are the most threatened beings in creation<sup>67</sup> – in the belief that “[o]nce this basic level of social justice (social relationship between human beings) has been achieved, it will be possible to propose a possible ecological justice (relationship of human beings with nature).”<sup>68</sup> At the heart of social ecology is the belief that humans stand within nature and not outside it.<sup>69</sup> Therefore, it holds that in working toward a more just human society, we will also come to understand how to work toward a more just ecological world.

Indeed, Boff believes that in working for social justice – or “right relationship between persons, roles, and institutions”<sup>70</sup> – people will come to understand that the “Earth is also crying out under the predatory and lethal machinery of our model of

---

<sup>65</sup> <http://www.leonardoboff.com/site-eng/lboff.htm>

<sup>66</sup> Boff, *Cry of the Earth*, 105. This includes working on beautification projects in cities, prioritizing basic sanitation, developing good school systems and decent health plans. (See *Ética da vida*, 27-28).

<sup>67</sup> See Boff, *Cry of the Earth*, 110-113; and *Tempo de transcendência*, 90.

<sup>68</sup> Boff, *Cry of the Earth*, 112.

<sup>69</sup> See Boff, *Ética da vida*, 27.

<sup>70</sup> Boff, *Cry of the Earth*, 105.



society and development.”<sup>71</sup> In the process, we may come to see the suffering of the human oppressed and the suffering of the Earth as “two interconnected cries” produced by the same types of thought patterns and behaviors,<sup>72</sup> or as he argues throughout his ecological theology, by the same societal paradigm of modernity. The main point of social ecology is that the way of environmental justice goes through social justice. As a liberation theologian concerned with the plight of the human poor, Boff often states that social ecology is the starting point of his ecological work.<sup>73</sup> However, he also recognizes that without a movement toward healthy mental ecology, even social ecology becomes impossible, and this leads him to a *de facto* privileging of mental ecology.

### *c. Mental Ecology*

Mental ecology begins from the assumption that the state of the world is connected to our own state of mind. At times calling this mental ecology *deep* or *internal* ecology,<sup>74</sup> Boff argues that the cause of the Earth deficit is not found only in the type of society that we currently have, but also in the type of mentality that prevails.<sup>75</sup> That is: “If the world is ill, this is a sign that our psyche is also ill. Aggressions against nature and the will to dominate exist because visions, archetypes, and emotions that lead to exclusion and violence are at work within the human psyche.”<sup>76</sup> Influenced by his considerable reading of depth psychology, Boff knows that a healthy society and world requires healthy human minds.

---

<sup>71</sup> Boff, *Cry of the Earth*, 112.

<sup>72</sup> Boff, *Cry of the Earth*, 112.

<sup>73</sup> See, for example, Boff, *Cry of the Earth*, 113.

<sup>74</sup> For mental ecology as deep ecology, see Boff, *Ética da vida*, 29, and *Cry of the Earth*, 139. For mental ecology as internal ecology, see Boff, *Ecology and Liberation*, 32. For deep ecology in the more traditional sense of the phrase, see Boff, *The Tao of Liberation*, 63-67.

<sup>75</sup> See Boff, *Ética da vida*, 29-30.

<sup>76</sup> Boff, *Cry of the Earth*, 6. See also *Ibid.*, 105.

By mental ecology he does not mean mental health in individualistic terms, but rather refers to it as a societal phenomenon. He holds that the collective unconscious, formed by the “positive, traumatic, and inspirational experience that the human psyche has undergone in the course of its long history,” forms each and every individual today.<sup>77</sup> Shaped by capitalistic assumptions and desires, and stuck in individualistic conceptions of the world, he holds that the modern mind – the collective unconscious of people today – is ill.<sup>78</sup> In the face of this illness, mental ecology aims to alter human consciousness by exposing what shapes our assumptions and behaviors (in our unconscious), and by bringing to consciousness a more holistic and relational way of being. Holding that humans are knots-of-relations stretching out in all directions, Boff argues that the intimate caring and relational way is, in fact, more true – or more “essential” – to human beings than the mental corruption that has taken place with the dualistic and materialist conceptions of the Enlightenment.<sup>79</sup> Therefore, he writes that mental ecology “tries to recover the original state of maimed human intimacy ... [and] to recharge the positive psychic energy of the human being needed to confront the onerous challenge of existence and the contradictions of our dualistic, macho, and consumerist culture.”<sup>80</sup>

Boff believes that healthy social and environmental ecologies require a healthy mental ecology because:

When reconciled with ourselves (mental ecology), we can, without coercion, live with our own kind (social ecology), and also with all other creatures (environmental ecology), as, indeed, brothers and sisters. Then humanity will behave with the respect and concern needed to promote a new era and the possibility of greater happiness for all.<sup>81</sup>

---

<sup>77</sup> Boff, *Ecology and Liberation*, 32.

<sup>78</sup> See Boff, *Ecology and Liberation*, 32-35.

<sup>79</sup> See, for example, Boff, *Essential Care*, x.

<sup>80</sup> Boff, *Ecology and Liberation*, 35.

<sup>81</sup> Boff, *Ecology and Liberation*, 78.

He firmly believes that relationality and care are ontological to human beings.<sup>82</sup> These traits are truer to who we are than the dualistic, anthropocentric, and hierarchical way of being that has dominated since the time of the Enlightenment. In this sense, he sees the modern paradigm as a “veil” that must be lifted.<sup>83</sup> When lifted, when we are reconciled with ourselves and with who he thinks we truly are as relational and caring, then it follows that humanity *will* behave with the respect and concern needed, without coercion because, again, it will arise from *who we are in actuality*. Mental ecology is the sphere in which the veils of modernity are lifted and the reconciling with ourselves begins. It is with mental ecology, then, that a shift in social and environmental ecologies takes root. Therefore, he writes, “without a revolution of the mind, it will not be possible to bring about a revolution in relations between humankind and nature.”<sup>84</sup>

#### ***d. Integral Ecology***

Integral ecology refers to the vision of the world that arises with the new cosmology, and which provides the external impetus for moving mental ecology to the realization of interrelationality and care. Boff says that the integral ecology of the new cosmology gives humans a sense of the grandiosity of the universe and a fascination for the complexity of relations. Very importantly, it also produces reverence for the Earth, a small and fragile planet, placed in exactly the right distance from its sun to produce life, in one galaxy among billions of galaxies, in a universe that may be one of innumerable

---

<sup>82</sup> For more on Boff’s stance that relationality and care are ontological to human beings, see part C (i) d in this chapter.

<sup>83</sup> See Boff, *Ecology and Liberation*, 58.

<sup>84</sup> Boff, *Ecology and Liberation*, 36. See also Boff, *Ética da vida*, 138.

parallel universes.<sup>85</sup> In the vastness of the galaxies and universes, things conspired to bring life to this little planet Earth; and in the realization of how delicately balanced all things had to be to enable this life, a new enchantment for Earth arises.<sup>86</sup> People begin to see the Earth as a single living superorganism, and come to understand that we are an integral part of it.<sup>87</sup> Moreover, recognizing the importance of our own consciousness in the superorganism Earth, humans come to understand that our role is not one of dominance but rather one of responsibility for the Earth's flourishing.<sup>88</sup>

For Boff, the new cosmology as integral ecology is a powerful influencing force in the formation of healthy mental ecology because it provides the cosmological vision necessary to help humans remember or unveil our interrelationality with all things and our responsibility to care for them. If mental ecology enables healthy social and environmental ecologies, it is integral ecology that pushes humans to the mental revolution necessary "to bring about a revolution in relations between humankind and nature."<sup>89</sup> That is, integral ecology pushes human beings to understand themselves and the world better, and consequently, to treat each other and to live in a more compassionate and sustainable relationship with all of creation.

---

<sup>85</sup> Boff, *Do iceberg à Arca de Noé*, 69.

<sup>86</sup> Boff, "Earth as Gaia," 24.

<sup>87</sup> Boff, *Cry of the Earth*, 112.

<sup>88</sup> Boff, *Do iceberg à Arca de Noé*, 69-70.

<sup>89</sup> Boff, *Ecology and Liberation*, 36. See also Boff, *Ética da vida*, 138. Scott Dunham has criticized Boff for the importance he grants to modern science – or the new cosmology (integral ecology) – in his ecological theology, and the relative lack of importance he grants to scripture and the Christian tradition. He thinks Boff's project would be strengthened by incorporating more of the latter. See Scott Dunham, "Leonardo Boff's Ecological Theology and Christian Tradition," *Toronto Journal of Theology* 23 no. 1 (2007): 35-46.

*e. Ecology and Spirituality*

However, for Boff, the new cosmology as integral ecology is not simply an important new understanding of the universe, nor is mental ecology just a matter of changing minds. In both cases, he is touching on something much deeper, because he knows, on the one hand, that the profound mental transformation, or unveiling, that needs to take place with mental ecology is far too profound to be merely intellectual; on the other hand, he knows that for the new cosmology to reshape human consciousness to the extent he thinks it must, this cosmology needs to touch on something which is innate to human beings. In both cases, he shows that spirituality is implicated.

In order for there to be a mental revolution, or a paradigm shift in the way people understand themselves and the world, Boff holds that a spiritual revolution must first take place. He writes:

Without a spiritual revolution it will be impossible to launch a new paradigm of connectedness. The new covenant finds its roots and the site where it is verified in the depth of the human mind. That is where the lost link that reconstitutes the chain of beings and the vast cosmic community begins to be refashioned. This link in the chain is anchored in the sacred and in God, alpha and omega of the principle of the self-organization of the universe. This is where all sense of connectedness is fostered and this is the permanent basis for the dignity of the Earth.<sup>90</sup>

Recall that Boff's most consistent understanding of spirituality is as the experience of God in every experience of the world.<sup>91</sup> He believes that under the hegemony of the modern paradigm, humans forgot how to experience God in this way. In this forgetting, they lost their sense of connectedness with God and the world, as well as their propensity for care. I will discuss this matter in much more detail in the pages ahead, but for now it

---

<sup>90</sup> Boff, *Cry of the Earth*, 139.

<sup>91</sup> See Chapter Three, part B.

is important to note that the returning of mental ecology to health, or the unveiling and becoming reconciled with ourselves that needs to happen with mental ecology, happens through spirituality. For Boff, we become reconciled with ourselves with a spirituality that, through the experience of God (“alpha and omega of the principle of the self-organization of the universe”), re-connects all things anew in the human mind. Without spirituality, then, a mental revolution is not possible; and without a mental revolution, social and environmental ecology cannot succeed.

In this light, Boff shows that integral ecology is important because it awakens people to a life of spirituality. That is, it provides the external impetus not merely for moving mental ecology to the realization of interrelationality and care, but more specifically, for moving humans into a spirituality that is capable of re-connecting all things anew. He writes:

This integral ecology seeks to integrate everything, re-connect [re-ligar] all things with their divine Fount, live religion [re-ligião] as a re-connecting [re-ligadora] force of creatures with Creator, of the conscience I with a deep I, of the person with nature and of nature with the rest of the universe. The human being feels, not as the center of everything, but as that point where the universe itself feels, thinks, loves and becomes open to praise the Creator and Originator of all things, with that Love that moves the heavens, all the stars and our hearts.<sup>92</sup>

The new cosmology as integral ecology offers the scientific verification for the new paradigm of connectedness that Boff means to “water and fertilize” in his ecological

---

<sup>92</sup> “Esta ecologia integral procura integrar tudo, re-ligar todas as coisas com sue Fonte divina, viver a re-ligião como força re-ligadora das criaturas com o Criador, do eu consciente com o eu profundo, da pessoa com a natureza e da natureza com o restante do universo. O ser humano sente-se, não como o centro de tudo, mas como aquele ponto onde o próprio universo se sente, se pensa, se ama e se abre à louvação do Criador e do Ordenador de todas as coisas, com aquele Amor que move o céu, todas as estrelas e os nossos corações” (Boff, *Do iceberg à Arca de Noé*, 70). Notice how Boff plays on the words for reconnect (“re-ligar”) and religion (re-ligião). I address the role of religion in Boff’s ecological theology in part C (ii) of this chapter.

theology.<sup>93</sup> It provides the external grounding for the spirituality of re-connection that enables mental ecology to become revolutionized, and which revolutionizes all forms of ecology so as to inaugurate a new way of living on planet Earth. Therefore, Boff believes that integral ecology is powerful because it triggers a spirituality of connectedness and care in human beings, thus precipitating a new societal paradigm by which we may live today.

*f. Summary*

The four forms of ecology that Boff discusses in his ecological theology highlight relationship, between each other and between all things in the universe. They point to the fact that how we treat the environment (environmental ecology) is influenced by the way we treat each other (social ecology); and how we treat the environment and each other is influenced by the way we think (mental ecology). With the new cosmology (integral ecology), Boff highlights a very important vision that is arising in the sciences today and which, if properly heeded, will push mental ecology toward interrelationality and care.

However, Boff indicates that what revolutionizes mental ecology to interrelationality and care, and what makes integral ecology a powerful vehicle for transformation, is their relationship with spirituality. Human beings come to perceive their connection with all things and their essence of care by experiencing God in the world. The new cosmology is powerful precisely because it provides external verification for the unity and responsibility Boff thinks we must (and do) experience with spirituality. Thus, healthy ecology – integral, mental, social, and environmental – depends on humanity's willingness to become spiritually engaged.

---

<sup>93</sup> See Boff, *Cry of the Earth*, xii.

Before turning to a more extensive explanation of Boff's eco-spirituality, I explain in more detail the new cosmology and global paradigmatic shift that figure so prominently in his ecological work.

### **(ii) The New Cosmology**

Boff explains that the new cosmology is shaped by “the theory of relativity of Einstein, the quantum physics of Bohr, the determinacy principle of Heisenberg, the findings in theoretical physics of Prigogine and Stengers, and the contributions of depth psychology (Freud and Jung), transpersonal psychology (Maslow, P. Weil), biogenetics, cybernetics, and deep ecology.”<sup>94</sup> He states that while the cosmology of antiquity saw the world as static and hierarchical yet also sacred, and the modern cosmology saw the world as a machine and God as the great Architect, the new cosmology understands the world as fundamentally holistic, non-hierarchical, relational, and infused with spirituality.<sup>95</sup>

Drawing from quantum physics and the new biology, the new cosmology recognizes that the “universe consists of a highly complex network of relationships in all directions and in all forms,” where everything influences everything else, even in a non-linear way. That is, all things influence each other irrespective of time and space, to such a degree that, Boff writes, “all are inter(retro)related as though in a dance or in a game, giving rise to universal connectedness.”<sup>96</sup> To be inter(retro)related means that everything that has existed, currently exists, and will exist is part of one big interrelated web. Neither time nor space can limit it. In simplest terms, then, inter(retro)related means that

---

<sup>94</sup> Boff, *Ecology and Liberation*, 63.

<sup>95</sup> See Boff, *Ecology and Liberation*, 63; and *Global Civilization*, 26-27.

<sup>96</sup> Boff, *Cry of the Earth*, 40-41; See Boff, *Ética da vida*, 128-129 for a very similar quote.



“everything has to do with everything in all points and in all moments,” and “nothing exists outside this panrelationality.”<sup>97</sup>

Boff explains that in this understanding of profound relationality that the new cosmology produces, “everything is dynamic. Everything vibrates. Everything is in process in a permanent dance of energy and elements.”<sup>98</sup> Everything is dynamic and dynamically interconnected. As such, Boff writes that it is “neither rhetoric nor romanticism to call, like Saint Francis did, all beings brothers and sisters. There is a physical and chemical basis to the relationship between beings. In fact, we are all cosmic brothers and sisters,”<sup>99</sup> whether we are living or non-living.<sup>100</sup> The main point of the new cosmology is, then, that the universe as a whole is inherently interrelational and (non-linearly) dynamic, much like, Boff argues, the perichoretic God-Trinity in whose likeness and image the world is created.<sup>101</sup> Therefore, he holds that the most fundamental law of the universe is “synergy, solidarity, and cooperation.”<sup>102</sup>

#### ***a. The New Cosmology and the Earth***

Addressing this new cosmology in terms of the Earth, he writes that the most recent research in biology and etiology has shown that evolution has been governed principally, not by survival of the fittest as Darwin argued, but rather by “a huge

---

<sup>97</sup> “... tudo tem a ver com tudo em todos os pontos e em todos os momentos; tudo está inter-retro-relacionado e nada existe for a desta panrelacionalidade” (Boff, *Do iceberg à Arca de Noé*, 101).

<sup>98</sup> Boff, *Ecology and Liberation*, 40. Indeed, he holds that “[e]verything implies everything, nothing exists outside a relational situation, and relationship constitutes reality as a whole and altogether” (Ibid.).

<sup>99</sup> Boff, *Global Civilization*, 31-32.

<sup>100</sup> See Boff, *Global Civilization*, 26. Elsewhere Boff explains: “... we are all brothers and sisters: elementary particles, quarks, stones, snails, animals, humans, stars, galaxies ... We make up a great cosmic community” (*Cry of the Earth*, 45).

<sup>101</sup> See, for example, Boff, *Cry of the Earth*, 167.

<sup>102</sup> Boff, “The Poor, the New Cosmology and Liberation,” 117.

synergetic process based on collaboration and solidarity among creatures.”<sup>103</sup> He argues that the Earth is composed of such an intricately balanced relationship of its various parts, that it is best conceived of as “a single complex system, . . . a living organism: Gaia.”<sup>104</sup>

In other words, the Earth is not a machine composed of watertight blocks that are separate and in competition with each other, but is rather “a supra-organism that maintains the right balance of physical, chemical and energetic elements through its dynamic powers in such a way that life and evolution are enabled and supported.”<sup>105</sup>

Following James Lovelock, then, Boff often refers to the Earth as Gaia, as a single living organism, so tightly knit that it is best regarded as one body in the vast cosmic chain. As such, the Earth is not merely a network of relationships, but best understood as a single living body.

His favorite image for this understanding of Earth is that described by astronauts who have looked at it from outer space. In one instance Boff explains:

As Isaac Asimov said in 1982, celebrating twenty-five years since the launching of Sputnik, which opened the space age: the legacy of this quarter century of space activity is that, viewed from spaceships, the Earth and humankind make up *a single entity*. Note that he did not say that they make up a unity resulting from a set of relationships. He is saying much more; namely, that we make up a single entity, that is, a single being, complex, diverse, contradictory, and endowed with enormous dynamism – but in the end, a single complex being that many are calling Gaia.<sup>106</sup>

---

<sup>103</sup> Boff, *Ecology and Liberation*, 86.

<sup>104</sup> Boff, *Ecology and Liberation*, 41.

<sup>105</sup> Boff, *Global Civilization*, 31.

<sup>106</sup> Boff, *Cry of the Earth*, 13-14. See also Boff, *Ética da Vida*, 31-33; and Boff and Arruda, *Globalização*, 28-29. It is interesting to note that McFague does not like this NASA image of the Earth because she thinks it overrides our engagement with the particular bodies of creation, and encourages a spectator view of the world rather than the touch and being touched way of knowing worldly bodies that the subject-subjects model demands (see, for example McFague, *Super, Natural Christians*, 80). For more about McFague’s position on how Christians should know the earth, see Chapter Two, part C (i) of this dissertation.

From this viewpoint, Boff writes that the differences between rich and poor, East and West, and neoliberals and socialists are erased; human beings emerge as one entity.<sup>107</sup> Moreover, the Earth emerges as one synergetic and unified body in this complex, dynamic, and interconnected cosmos in which we live. Human beings play a very important role in this body.

***b. The New Cosmology and Humans***

Drawing from Teilhard de Chardin and biochemists and biophysicists like Prigogine, Stegers, and others, Boff argues that “the more the evolutionary process advances, the more complex it becomes; the more complex it becomes, the more consciousness it has; and the more consciousness it possesses, the more self-conscious it becomes.”<sup>108</sup> This means that the evolutionary process of the Earth is not only characterized by synergy, but also, very importantly, by a movement toward greater complexification, and through complexification, toward greater self-consciousness. He shows that on this Earth it is specifically in human beings that complexity has reached self-conscious expression. This means that humans have a special role to play: “We are the most complex and unique expression of the Earth and the cosmos thus far. Man and woman are the Earth – thinking, hoping, loving, dreaming, and entering into the phase in which decision is no longer by instinct but conscious.”<sup>109</sup> Human beings are unique because they are self-conscious. But this self-consciousness is not merely for the sake of

---

<sup>107</sup> He says this often. See Boff, *Ética da vida*, 31-33 for one instance in which he makes this argument.

<sup>108</sup> Boff, *Cry of the Earth*, 29.

<sup>109</sup> Boff, *Cry of the Earth*, 106. Because we can be conscious, Boff holds that we are the only ones capable of ethics: “O ser humano é o único ser ético da natureza, pois é capaz de fazer-se responsável pelo destino de si mesmo e pelo dos outros” (*Ética da vida*, 210).

humans, for they are not distinct from the Gaia organism but rather that part of the organism that thinks, hopes, loves, and dreams.

Boff is at pains to point out – in light of the modern Western tendency to think of humans as somehow distinct or at an objective distance from the Earth – that we are in fact an integral part of the Gaia organism. To illustrate this point, he highlights an interesting coincidence in the calibration of the human body and that of the Earth: the human body “contains more or less the same proportion of water as the surface of planet Earth (71%)” and the salt level in human blood “is the same as in the ocean (3.4%).”<sup>110</sup> He holds that these and other such examples indicate that “we are not wayfarers, passengers from somewhere else who belong to other worlds. We are sons and daughters of Earth.”<sup>111</sup> We are native to this planet, the result of an evolutionary process that has moved toward ever greater complexification and self-consciousness. As Boff sees it, then, “we are not just *on* the Earth; we *are* the Earth – feeling, thinking, loving, and revering.”<sup>112</sup> In other words, “[w]e are the Earth itself; we are the Earth that in its evolutionary process has reached the stage of feeling, comprehension, will, responsibility and veneration. In short: we are Earth in its moment of self-realization and self-consciousness.”<sup>113</sup>

Therefore, he holds that the fact of our unique self-consciousness is not cause for anthropocentrism, but rather points to our special responsibility to move evolution forward on this Earth. He explains: “Human beings were created for the universe and not *visa versa*, in order to bring about a higher and more complex stage of universal

---

<sup>110</sup> Boff, *Cry of the Earth*, 17.

<sup>111</sup> Boff, *Cry of the Earth*, 14. See also Boff, *Ética da vida*, 113.

<sup>112</sup> Boff, *The Prayer of Saint Francis*, 78.

<sup>113</sup> Boff, *Essential Care*, 43.

evolution.”<sup>114</sup> Because humans are self-conscious, capable of intervening in nature, they have the responsibility to shape the Earth toward intentional community and care. In fact, Boff calls humans “the co-pilots in the evolutionary process within which they themselves evolved jointly.”<sup>115</sup> More succinctly, he holds that we are the “created creator.”<sup>116</sup> He talks about our co-piloting and our responsibility toward the Earth as an ethical imperative for human beings. With the new cosmology, then, Boff shows that the synergy apparent in the evolutionary process must be brought to a new level of cooperation and care in human beings who are self-conscious.

### *c. Summary*

With the new cosmology, Boff points to the incredible extent to which all things in the cosmos are related, irrespective even of time and space. He shows that Saint Francis’ imperative to treat all things as brothers and sisters is absolutely necessary given just how interrelated we all are. Moreover, he points to the fact that with the new cosmology a new vision arises of the Earth as the single living organism Gaia, the complex, diverse and dynamic organism of which humans are a part. Highlighting the self-consciousness of human beings, he writes that it does not provide justification for human domination, but rather points to the realization that in our self-consciousness we are Gaia as it feels, thinks and loves. Humans are the consciousness of the Earth, and because of this, we have special responsibility to ensure its flourishing.

The new cosmology plays an important role in the societal paradigm shift that Boff envisions and which, as we have seen, begins with a conversion in mental ecology.

---

<sup>114</sup> Boff, “Liberation Theology and Ecology,” 75.

<sup>115</sup> Boff, “The Poor, the New Cosmology and Liberation,” 120.

<sup>116</sup> “criado-criador” (Boff, *A voz do arco-íris*, 90).

In the pages ahead I describe in more detail this paradigm shift that he believes is coming to pass.

### **(iii) Paradigm Shift**

As we saw in Chapter Three, Boff widens his scope in his ecological theology to include not only the human poor but also the entire Earth as it is made to suffer. He explains the reasons for this widening as follows:

Today, it is not only the poor who are protesting. Soil, water and air are screaming, together with forests and animals, all submitted to depredatory and destructive forms of use. ... The option for the poor (a hallmark of liberation theology) must be complete: viewing all the poor with all their different faces, and the Great Poor that is the Earth, seen as Gaia, Pachamama and the Great Mother.<sup>117</sup>

Boff now sees that the two forms of oppression are interconnected. He holds that “[t]he logic that exploits classes and subjects people to the interests of a few rich and powerful countries is the same as the logic that devastates the Earth and plunders its wealth.”<sup>118</sup>

Therefore, addressing the comprehensive problem in the way privileged people treat not only the human poor (social ecology) but also the Earth (environmental ecology), and with the help of the new cosmology (integral ecology), he calls for a paradigm shift in the mentalities and worldviews (mental ecology) that dominate today.

Drawing from Thomas Kuhn, he explains that a paradigm is “the entire constellation of beliefs, values, techniques, and so on shared by the members of a given community,” which establishes the systems by which the community orients itself and organizes the whole of its relationships.<sup>119</sup> The paradigm that Boff believes dominates today is borne of the European Enlightenment and is characterized by a “will to power,”

---

<sup>117</sup> Boff, “The Poor, New Cosmology and Liberation,” 121.

<sup>118</sup> Boff, *Cry of the Earth*, xi.

<sup>119</sup> Boff, *Cry of the Earth*, 9-10.

positivism, individualism and materialism.<sup>120</sup> Moreover, he holds that this paradigm is anthropocentric and patriarchal.<sup>121</sup> It has shaped everything from the modern sciences (in the style of Francis Bacon), to our education systems, to the economic systems that have influenced the globe around.<sup>122</sup>

Boff holds that at base, this paradigm is problematic because it is profoundly dualistic; the dialectical tension of life has been severed and codified.<sup>123</sup> He writes:

Capital has been separated from labor, work from leisure, person from nature, man from woman, body from spirit, sex from affection, efficiency from poetry, wonder from organization, God from the world. One of these two poles has come to dominate the other, thereby giving rise to anthropocentrism, capitalism, materialism, patriarchy, machismo, secularism, and monarchical un-trinitarian monotheism.<sup>124</sup>

He argues that the community that is shaped by this dualistic paradigm is very broad, for materialist realism and its accompanying economic systems have spread throughout the entire globe.<sup>125</sup> Boff is most critical of the particular shape this modern paradigm has taken in the form of Western capitalism, but he also recognizes that even socialism abides by the same dualistic assumptions which harm the superorganism Earth.<sup>126</sup> Therefore, he has called for a paradigm shift that must encompass all the cultures and religions of the world. He knows it will require radical change, “indeed cultural, social, spiritual and

---

<sup>120</sup> Boff, “The Poor, the New Cosmology and Liberation,” 115.

<sup>121</sup> See, for example, Boff, *A voz do arco-iris*, 97-101.

<sup>122</sup> Boff explains: “We hear much today of the many crises we face: the economic crisis, the energy crisis, the social crisis, the educational crisis, the moral crisis, the ecological crisis, the spiritual crisis. In reality all these individual crises are part of a larger crisis of the society we have created over the past four hundred years. This is a global crisis in that this model of society has been transmitted to or imposed on practically the entire globe.” (“Social Ecology,” 235).

<sup>123</sup> For the dialectical tension in Boff’s anthropology, see Chapter Three, part C (iii) of this dissertation. Boff believes that only humans, but also all of life is dialectical.

<sup>124</sup> Boff, *Cry of the Earth*, 68.

<sup>125</sup> See Boff, *Global Civilization*, chs. 1 & 2, pgs. 6-29; and “Social Ecology,” 235.

<sup>126</sup> Boff, *Cry of the Earth*, 67-68.

religious transformations.”<sup>127</sup> But he is hopeful that this shift will indeed happen, for the paradigm of modernity of now in crisis.

*a. Paradigm of Modernity in Crisis*

First, it is in crisis because the dominance of economics in this paradigm is dehumanizing and unsustainable:

... the axis on which a modern society turns is its economy, seen as the whole set of powers and tools for creating wealth; this means nature and other human beings are exploited. Through the economics of growth, nature is degraded to the level of mere “natural resources,” or “raw materials,” at the disposal of humankind. Workers are seen as “human resources” and as a mere function of production. Everything is governed by an instrumental and mechanistic vision: persons, animals, plants, minerals. All creatures, in short, lose their relative autonomy and their intrinsic value.<sup>128</sup>

The paradigm strips people and nature of their intrinsic worth; their value is deemed on economic terms instead. Furthermore, it revolves around the false assumption that we can continue along the path of economic development and progress as if the Earth’s resources and its capacity to endure humanity’s pollution were infinite.<sup>129</sup> As a result, “[w]hen a conflict arises between development and ecology, the decision is usually taken in favor of development at the cost of ecology. It would seem that capitalist greed is incompatible with the conservation of nature.”<sup>130</sup> Economic growth reigns while two-thirds humanity suffers under oppressive poverty, the Earth is stretched to its limits, and the possibility of future generations of Earth inhabitants living well grows slimmer by the

---

<sup>127</sup> Boff, *Cry of the Earth*, 9.

<sup>128</sup> Boff, *Ecology and Liberation*, 24. Boff argues that this economic paradigm functions as a form of fundamentalism today (see *Fundamentalism, Terrorism and the Future of Humanity*, 27).

<sup>129</sup> Boff, *Cry of the Earth*, 2. See also Boff, “Social Ecology,” 236.

<sup>130</sup> Boff, *Ecology and Liberation*, 22.



day.<sup>131</sup> Given this reality, Boff believes we are at a breaking point: “We now find ourselves at the crossroads of extraordinary new pathways.”<sup>132</sup>

Second, the modern paradigm is in crisis because it has underestimated both Gaia and the human spirit. Boff writes, for example, that some analysts say that Gaia may eliminate the human species in order to reestablish balance in the planet so that other species “might live and continue the cosmic thrust of evolution.” He continues: “If Gaia has had to rid itself of myriad species over its life history, who can assure us that it will not be forced to rid itself of our own? Our species is a threat to all other species; it is terribly aggressive and is proving to be a geocide, an ecocide, and a true Satan of the Earth.”<sup>133</sup> In other words, he understands the Earth to be much more than the lifeless machine modernity supposed it to be; he understands it to be a great organism that has the power to extinguish our species if it becomes necessary for its flourishing.<sup>134</sup>

However, it is clear that Boff believes the human species will transform itself before such extinction becomes necessary. As he sees it, the human spirit is now revolting under the confines of a modern capitalist paradigm which has underestimated

---

<sup>131</sup> Boff explains: “The utopia of improving the human condition has worsened the quality of life. The dream of unlimited growth has brought about the underdevelopment of two-thirds of humankind, and our delight in optimally using the Earth’s resources has led to the exhaustion of vital systems and to the breakdown of environmental balance” (*Cry of the Earth*, 8).

<sup>132</sup> Boff, *Essential Care*, 1. While Boff sees a role for technology in developing more eco-friendly ways of living on this Earth, he does not think that technology is the ultimate solution to the socio-ecological crisis because he believes it only attacks the consequences and not the causes of the crisis. He explains that relying exclusively on eco-technologies “is tantamount to grinding down the wolf’s teeth without changing his wolfish nature” (Boff, *Ecology and Liberation*, 20). Therefore, he thinks it is imperative that we develop a fundamental critique of modern society, trying to discern the cause behind the illness, in order to propose real comprehensive, “new pathways” kind of change.

<sup>133</sup> Boff, *Cry of the Earth*, 19. Elsewhere he writes: “We are thus at war against Gaia. And this is a war that will not be won by us, but rather by Gaia, because whenever one species threatens the whole, it is doomed to extinction, rejected like a cancerous cell. This is why we need another paradigm of relationship with the earth” (Boff, “The Poor, New Cosmology and Liberation,” 122).

<sup>134</sup> Boff, *Cry of the Earth*, 68.

the human need for more than material growth. Writing about development and growth in the modern paradigm, he explains:

What is sought is not development in the sense of the flourishing of human potentialities in their various dimensions, especially that spiritual dimension proper to *Homo sapiens (demens)*, ever tied to the global interactions of human beings with the cosmos or the Earth in its immense diversity and in its dynamic equilibrium. Only the potentialities that serve the interests of profit are sought. Development in this model is merely material and one-dimensional-mere growth.<sup>135</sup>

Boff holds that as open-ended, the human spirit longs for growth, and this growth is found only in connectedness to everything else.

This brings us to what Boff considers to be the most damaging consequence of the modern paradigm, and the main reason why it is currently in crisis. He writes: “The worst has indeed happened: human beings have become separated from the cosmic community and have forgotten the web of interdependencies and the synergy of all the cosmic elements that enabled them to emerge in the cosmic process.”<sup>136</sup> The modern paradigm has caused human beings to forget their interconnectedness with everything that exists. He believes that this lack of connectedness is tantamount to a spiritual “lobotomization,”<sup>137</sup> which has, in the words of Andrew Dawson, “progressively uncoupled the human being at an existential level from its constitutive ontological foundation.”<sup>138</sup> Since his earliest writings Boff has talked about the human as a knot of relationships that branch out in all directions. Now separated from our relational ontological foundation, we have forgotten that our primary ethic is that of care; and, writes Boff, “[w]hen human beings lose the essential care and the blessed memory of this

---

<sup>135</sup> Boff, *Cry of the Earth*, 67.

<sup>136</sup> Boff, *Cry*, 68-69. For a similar statement, see also Boff, *Essential Care*, 9.

<sup>137</sup> Leonardo Boff, *Saber cuidar: Ética do humano – Compaixão pela Terra* (Petrópolis: Editora Vozes, 1999), 21; as quoted in Dawson, “Mystical Experience as Universal Connectedness,” 156.

<sup>138</sup> Dawson, “Mystical Experience as Universal Connectedness,” 156.

spiritual reconnection,” peace is lost.<sup>139</sup> Separated from our ontological foundation, or true mental ecology, we behave unjustly and become unable to live in peace.

Yet Boff believes that the separation caused by the paradigm of modernity has also created a great hunger in people today. This hunger presents itself most clearly in a desire to experience God or the Mystery that “is involved in everything, penetrates everything, shines in everything, and sustains everything.”<sup>140</sup> He explains: “People want to experience God. They are tired of being catechized, of listening to religious authorities speak of God, and of theologians proffering traditional doctrine in mere updated language.”<sup>141</sup> To experience God they look not to doctrine but to spirituality. And in spirituality, in the actual experience of what the new cosmology teaches, they re-discover “a strand running through all beings and joining them like pearls so as to form a magnificent necklace.”<sup>142</sup> Thus, the limited way in which the modern paradigm deals with being human leads people to hunger for God or Mystery or depth, their hunger for God leads them to spirituality, and this spirituality leads to their being re-connected with everything. Thanks in great part to the findings of the new cosmology, Boff believes this desire for God or Mystery and the experience of interconnectivity it leads to is now a global phenomena.<sup>143</sup>

---

<sup>139</sup> Boff, *The Prayer of St. Francis*, 33. He explains that this lack of connectedness is a radical denial of who we are (ontologically speaking) as a “node of relationships in all directions,” and that this denial amounts to an “*original sin* or *sin of the world*” (see Boff, *Cry of the Earth*, 81). Yet he remains ever hopeful: “Nevertheless, all spiritual traditions and religions of humankind hold that the last word is not that of disruption and solitude but of connection and connectedness, not original sin but original grace” (Ibid., 85).

<sup>140</sup> Boff, *Ecology and Liberation*, 43.

<sup>141</sup> Boff, *Ecology and Liberation*, 59. He says something very similar in *Ética da vida*, 169.

<sup>142</sup> Boff, *The Prayer of Saint Francis*, 32-33.

<sup>143</sup> See Boff, *Global Civilization*, 43-44. Meanwhile, Boff believes that the bells are now tolling for the philosophical view called materialist realism (*Essential Care*, 9).

**b. *The New Paradigm***

In fact, he believes that with this spirituality of reconnection the present crisis is actually leading humanity (and through humanity, the Earth) into an entirely new paradigm. With this new paradigm, he holds that we are moving into a new, higher stage of evolution. (Drawing from Teilhard de Chardin, Boff often calls this higher stage of evolution the noosphere, a time when the spirit of communion and love will reign<sup>144</sup>).

Despite the many contradictions we face today – the injustice, the ecological degradation – he is quite certain that a positive outcome to the crisis is not only possible but probable.

He writes:

Possibly, out of this current crises – and I am sure of this – a new and more cordial humanity will be born. The bursting out of the noosphere, so dreamed of by Teilhard de Chardin, will be able to happen. Just as the lithosphere emerged when the Earth solidified and the mountains appeared, just as afterwards the atmosphere emerged, and then the hydrosphere, and the biosphere, and the atmosphere, and finally for us Christians the Christ-sphere; just as all these have emerged, so it will be with the noosphere that Teilhard de Chardin predicted in the 1930s. We are going to become a noosphere, that is, the minds and the hearts will be connected together and there will be a development of excellence on a unified planet Earth.<sup>145</sup>

Boff is not optimistic by accident. He intentionally cultivates hope for the future, and requires the same of his readers, for he believes that if we do not have hope that the best may happen, we will not be willing to undergo the internal or mental revolution that is first necessary for the revolution in societal paradigm to occur.<sup>146</sup>

---

<sup>144</sup> See, for example, Boff, *Ética da vida*, 117-118; *A voz do arco-íris*, 98; *Do iceberg à Arca de Noé*, 48; and *Global Civilization*, 92-93.

<sup>145</sup> Boff, *Fundamentalism, Terrorism and the Future of Humanity*, 89. For this crisis as a moment of profound opportunity, see also Boff, *Ética da vida*, 21, 104; *Ethos Mundial*, 11-17; and *Essential Care*, 89.

<sup>146</sup> Boff, *Tempo de transcendência*, 92.

At the heart of the new paradigm is a spiritual posture that is capable of seeing at all moments the sacramental Mystery that unifies all things. While the old paradigm separates and codifies all things from each other, the new relies on living in the polarities by seeing the connections between all things. It is spirituality that gives us this sight by restoring a healthy mental ecology. Hence, as we have seen, Boff writes that “[w]ithout a spiritual revolution it will be impossible to launch a new paradigm of connectedness.”<sup>147</sup> Yet without hope he thinks that we may not be willing to undergo the spiritual-mental revolution necessary for the new societal paradigm to become phenomenologically present in history. Thus, Boff hopes, and encourages his readers to do likewise, that the new paradigm will take hold on a unified planet Earth. Such hope is, he argues, the only way to attract and capture the unexpected when it comes to pass.<sup>148</sup> In the next part of the chapter I will explain in more detail the spirituality that enables the shift into a new societal paradigm of connectedness. For now, however, I discuss some of the defining features of this new paradigm that Boff hopes, and in fact believes, will come to pass.

### **(1) The New Cosmology**

What are some of the defining features of this new paradigm that Boff hopes, and in fact believes, will come to pass? First, he says that the new paradigm fully integrates the teachings of the new cosmology. Living in this new paradigm, people acknowledge that “we cannot understand ourselves as separate from the Earth nor can we continue with the classic vision that regards the Earth as a lifeless planet.”<sup>149</sup> Instead, we recognize that the Earth “does not contain life. It *is* life, a living superorganism, Gaia,” and that the

---

<sup>147</sup> Boff, *Cry of the Earth*, 139.

<sup>148</sup> Boff, *Ética da vida*, 22.

<sup>149</sup> Boff, *Cry of the Earth*, 119.

human species is the Earth as it becomes self-aware, “the thinking Earth, the loving Earth, and the Earth celebrating the mystery of the universe.”<sup>150</sup> Therefore, with enough humility to recognize that our self-consciousness is not distinctly for humanity but for the entire cosmos, and in the recognition that where consciousness is at play things must remain open and ready for continual transformation (for “new forms of self-realization are continually being born”<sup>151</sup>), people living under the new paradigm abide by the responsibility of their self-consciousness to realize, in thought and action, the dynamic interconnectivity of the world in which they live.

## (2) Globalization

Second, living in the new paradigm, people take the current trend of globalization to a new level of unified consciousness. Boff argues that currently globalization is happening in the fronts of technology, market forces, and the rise of a new global consciousness. While he offers serious criticism of the first two fronts,<sup>152</sup> he believes that through them globalization takes a very important positive step in unifying the consciousness of human beings.<sup>153</sup> This consciousness arises when people realize that, as the astronauts looking at the Earth from outer space did, the Earth is one body, one superorganism composed of many different but unified parts, and that humans are the

---

<sup>150</sup> Boff, *Cry of the Earth*, 119.

<sup>151</sup> Boff, *Cry of the Earth*, 120. This open-endedness is, as I noted in Chapter Three, part C (ii), an important aspect of Boff’s anthropology.

<sup>152</sup> See Boff, *Global Civilization*, chs. 1 & 2, pgs. 6-29.

<sup>153</sup> Boff explains: “Are we not today creating the conditions for a higher level of humanization with the increasing complexity of the means of communication, the growing interdependence between entities, the feeling of unification that humanity is experiencing and the accelerated process of globalization? Are we not creating today the conditions for a global and complex web of interlinked minds?” (*Global Civilization*, 34). Boff says that through the globalization of conscience we are truly becoming “a world wide web,” where every person is a neuron in the brain of great Gaia (see Boff, *Ethos Mundial*, 23). As such, the movement toward globalization provides a very special opportunity for the unification of consciousness: “O ser humano é essencialmente um nó-de-relações. A globalização permite realizar sua vocação essencial de uma forma muito mais radical que em qualquer outra época anterior” (Boff and Arruda, *Globalização*, 30).

conscious part of the Earth. In global consciousness we realize that “[t]here is a web of inter-relations between human societies, the biosphere, the surface of our planet, the mountains, the oceans, the atmosphere and life and potential life.”<sup>154</sup> In other words, globalization helps lead to the realization that we are all in it together.

As such, the starkness of our distinctions on this planet Earth begins to recede.

Boff writes:

... we are experiencing today what H. Gadamer called years ago the fusion of horizons or *Horizontverschmelzung*. Different religious traditions and perspectives of the world are meeting each other. Instead of emphasizing differences there is a tendency today of underlining the similarities. ... And, as such, they slowly constitute a new meaningful perspective of creative and enriching syncretism. This new perspective is neither Western nor Eastern; it is simply human and global.<sup>155</sup>

In this unification of consciousness, Boff believes we are not only progressing in our evolution, but in fact making a “jump in evolution” toward something altogether new.

That is, “[w]e are at the dawn of an event that has never been before in the history of our planet. That is to say, that one of the elements of our planet, human beings, is on the verge of forming an organic unity.”<sup>156</sup> He believes we are at the dawn of transition that moves us from the national to the global and from the global to the cosmic. While he acknowledges many difficulties and injustices in this process of globalization, he maintains that “great changes are at our doors. That a new global civilization will emerge, and that we are moving towards a convergent communication between consciousness,

---

<sup>154</sup> Boff, *Global Civilization*, 30-31.

<sup>155</sup> Boff, *Global Civilization*, 32. Boff never mentions any tension between the broadening of horizons that has characterized his own theological evolution (see Chapter Three, part A of this dissertation) and the fusion of horizons he discusses here. I would guess, in fact, that the latter requires the former: It is as people come to understand the global scope of the social and ecological problems today (which requires a broadening movement from seeing only their particular context and situation to understanding the broader, global implications of human action), that a fusion of horizons (which entails cooperation across religions and cultures) becomes possible.

<sup>156</sup> Boff, *Global Civilization*, 34-35.

namely, noosphere.”<sup>157</sup> Indeed, he writes that “[d]espite the contradictions, the reality of globalization and of a higher level of collective consciousness is unavoidable.”<sup>158</sup> Thus, the new paradigm that is arising is characterized by a higher unified consciousness among human beings. He believes this unification of consciousness happens not only through knowledge, but also especially through love, which is, again, why spirituality is so important.<sup>159</sup>

### (3) Ecologico-Social Democracy

Finally, Boff holds that the unification of consciousness in the new paradigm presents itself as a form of global democracy “that is not only participatory and social, but ecological.”<sup>160</sup> He argues that this ecologico-social form of democracy is not so much a system of government as a universal spirit and a set of values characterized by “participation, solidarity, equality, difference, and communion.”<sup>161</sup> This democracy seeks the participation of all peoples and cultures, especially that of the poor whose voice the old paradigm silenced, and recognizes the citizenship and rights of all things in nature, especially that of living beings. Recognizing differences among creation, it assigns different roles to the various species according to their capacity. As the self-conscious of creation, it assigns humans the role of moral entity capable of co-piloting evolution.

---

<sup>157</sup> Boff, *Global Civilization*, 42. Elsewhere he explains: “A globalização cria as condições para um salto qualitativo da antropogênese, a irrupção daquilo que Teilhard de Chardin chamou de noosfera: a criação de uma nova harmonia entre os humanos na qual técnica e poesia, produção e espiritualidade, coração e pensamento encontram uma nova sintonia, mais alta e mais sinfônica. (Boff, *Do iceberg à Arca de Noé*, 40).

<sup>158</sup> Boff, *Global Civilization*, 73.

<sup>159</sup> Boff, *Global Civilization*, 34-35.

<sup>160</sup> Boff, *Ecology and Liberation*, 84.

<sup>161</sup> Boff, *Ecology and Liberation*, 106. Boff says that this social democracy arises from the popular base (see *A voz do arco-íris*, 62-63).



Nonetheless, a ecologico-social democracy also recognizes that “all beings in nature are citizens, have rights, and deserve respect and reverence.”<sup>162</sup> Therefore:

We may accordingly conclude that there is a political need for an ecological education that will lead human beings to live together with their cosmic brothers and sisters in the same society. On the day when such a planetary ecological and social democracy prevails, the conditions for a covenant of brotherhood and sisterhood with nature will have been established.<sup>163</sup>

Boff believes that if we do not abide by this new form of democracy, “living together with the stones, the plants, the waters, and the clouds, as brothers and sisters,” we may face catastrophe: “And this time there will be no Noah’s ark to save anyone, capitalist or socialist, atheist or believer.”<sup>164</sup>

With the globalization of consciousness, then, Boff holds that a concrete and political recognition arises that we are all global citizens – not merely citizens of this or that country, and no longer exclusively human – who live a common destiny.<sup>165</sup> In the recognition of our common destiny, the new paradigm produces a democracy that allows Gaia, with all her living and non-living parts, to flourish.

### *c. Summary*

Boff believes the modern paradigm is in crisis because it is false in very important ways. It is false in the way it causes people to treat the Earth as though its capacity to endure humanity’s pollution were infinite. It is false in the way it leads humans to understand themselves and the world in dualistic ways. It is false because it has stunted the capacity of humans to be open-ended by too often limiting their development to

---

<sup>162</sup> Boff, *Cry of the Earth*, 133.

<sup>163</sup> Boff, *Cry of the Earth*, 133.

<sup>164</sup> Boff, *Ecology and Liberation*, 114.

<sup>165</sup> Boff, *Global Civilization*, 33.

material one-dimensional growth. Finally, Boff believes the modern paradigm is especially false because it has caused people to forget the web of interdependencies that defines them as humans as well as the cosmos as a whole. Thus, he holds that the paradigm of modernity is unsustainable not only because it is devastating to the human and Earth poor, but because it is forcing everyone to live under a belief structure, a “veil,” that is contrary to who we are. Consequently: “It is not only the poor and oppressed that must be liberated; today all humans must be liberated. We are hostages to a paradigm that places us – against the thrust of the universe – *over* things instead of being *with* them in the great cosmic community.”<sup>166</sup>

Boff argues that, in fact, people today are waking up to who they are with the help of the new cosmology and in their hunger to experience God, or the Mystery that connects the universe. As the crisis of the paradigm of modernity makes way for the new paradigm of re-connection, Boff sees a globalization of consciousness – a fusion of horizons – taking hold, and with it, the rise of an ecologico-social democracy that encompasses everyone and everything in this one planet Earth. Without eliminating diversity or personal autonomy, he nonetheless stresses unity as the primary mark of the new paradigm.<sup>167</sup> He very intentionally hopes, indeed believes, that with the aid of the new cosmology and by the movement of the spirituality in people today, the current crisis is leading us not into disaster but rather to an evolutionary jump into Teilhard’s magnificent noosphere.

---

<sup>166</sup> Boff, *Cry of the Earth*, xii.

<sup>167</sup> Boff always aims to retain the dialectical tension. If he stresses unity to a greater extent than diversity, for example, it is intended as a corrective to the modern paradigm. However, he makes clear that if the modern paradigm is to be sustainable, then it must encompass polarities. Thus, he writes that the new paradigm is characterized by such things as wholeness/diversity, interdependence/connectedness/relative autonomy, complementarity/reciprocity/chaos, shared destiny/personal destiny; cosmic common good/particular common good, and creativity/destructiveness. (see *Cry of the Earth*, 31-34).

#### (iv) Conclusion

In his discussion of ecology, the new cosmology, and the paradigm shift, Boff highlights a global problem with a global solution. As with his liberation theology, his ecological theology remains committed to the poor – though now it encompasses both the human and Earth poor – and it continues to work for the historical liberation of the oppressed. However, now seeing a profound connection between the way people treat the human and Earth poor, and influenced deeply by the new cosmology coming from contemporary science (integral ecology), he begins speaking in terms of global paradigm shifts that must revolutionize the mental ecology of humans in order to avoid total destruction in our planet. Hence, he writes:

The issue is no longer: what is the future of the poor? Or, what is the future of technology and science? Or, what is the future of Christianity, liberation theology or the papacy? They will all guarantee their future only insofar as the earth and humankind have a future. This must be built up on supportive bases, otherwise we may meet the same fate as the dinosaurs.<sup>168</sup>

The liberation he now seeks is global and its purpose is to save Gaia.

Moreover, his ecological theology aims to change not merely societal structures, but more importantly the structures of the human mind from which it is decided whether the self-conscious of the Earth will proceed in care (in the *symbolic* and *sapiens* dimensions of the human) or injustice (the *demens* and *diabolic* dimension of the human). He aims to liberate all people from the corrupting force of the modern paradigm in order to free them to live their role as “co-pilots of nature in the process of creation”<sup>169</sup> and as

---

<sup>168</sup> Boff, “The Poor, The New Cosmology and Liberation,” 117.

<sup>169</sup> Boff, *Global Civilization*, 43.

“ethical beings assuming responsibility for bringing the entire planet to a happy fate.”<sup>170</sup>

He believes the time is now ripe for this global transformation.

### **C. Ecological Spirituality**

As Boff sees it, spirituality is that force by which the very important transformation in human mental ecology takes place, and therefore the force upon which the “happy fate” of the entire planet depends. Spirituality is, in fact, the element that re-connects all those things that have become severed in the minds and hearts of humanity under the paradigm of modernity. Precisely because spirituality re-connects in this way, it becomes the force by which globalization of consciousness and the ecologico-social democracy of the new paradigm become possible in Boff’s ecological theology. While the spirituality he discusses in his liberation theology is defined by its locus in the human poor, then, his ecological spirituality is defined most clearly by its ability to re-connect all things anew.

#### **(i) Spirituality as That Which Re-Connects**

He shows that spirituality re-connects in three important ways: humans with their interior, with the world around them, and with their essential ground in the ethic of care. In this three-fold sense of unity that the experience of God produces, he believes we are moving from crisis into the new paradigm of connectedness throughout the Earth.

##### ***a. Humans with their Interior***

One important way Boff describes spirituality in his ecological theology is as re-connecting of humans with their interior. He writes: “Spirituality means that capacity

---

<sup>170</sup> Boff, *Cry of the Earth*, 106.

that human beings, men and women, have of connecting with their most inner and deep thoughts, and enter into a state of harmony through the pleas that come from their interior.”<sup>171</sup> He holds that deep in the human psyche glows the archetype of the Absolute or God,<sup>172</sup> and that when we come to know this Absolute in our depths – a process he calls individuation<sup>173</sup> – we discover the source (Fount) of peace, hope, and reconnection. In this way, by connecting human consciousness with the Absolute within, spirituality begins to restore human mental ecology.

Boff argues that in the perception of the Absolute or Mystery in our depths, we find peace in the midst of social and existential dissolution,<sup>174</sup> and become capable of sustaining hope in this time of global crisis.<sup>175</sup> More importantly, he explains that in perceiving God within ourselves, in actually experiencing God in ourselves, we come to experience God in all things. Thus, spirituality is an encounter “with the Being that brings with it an inner meaning to life and to history and that deciphers the Mystery of the world, the reason for evolution, and the passage of time.”<sup>176</sup> In other words, in the inner experience of the Absolute, or God, or the Fount (all names Boff uses), we come to experience the whole world as filled to the depth with God.

Therefore, when he talks about spirituality in terms of human beings becoming aware of the pleas that come from their interior, he means that it is from the interior perception of God that God also becomes present in their experience of the world.

---

<sup>171</sup> Boff, *Global Civilization*, 26.

<sup>172</sup> Boff, *Cry of the Earth*, 137. He says that Viktor Frankl calls this dimension the spiritual unconscious. Boff also calls it “the *profunda Dei* [depth of God] (1 Cor 2:10)” (Ibid., 192).

<sup>173</sup> Boff, *Cry of the Earth*, 192.

<sup>174</sup> Boff, *Espiritualidade*, 18.

<sup>175</sup> Boff, *Cry of the Earth*, 136.

<sup>176</sup> Boff, *Global Civilization*, 56.

**b. *Humans with the World***

As human beings experience God in the world, Boff believes they come to understand just how interconnected all things are. In the God experience, they begin to perceive that God is the Fount and thread that links all things together. Therefore, he writes that with spirituality:

... human beings are able to re-connect themselves to the original source of all life, create an unexplainable link that connects the whole universe and re-unifies all things in a totality of dynamic inter-retro-relations that drive development forward.”<sup>177</sup>

Likewise, he defines spirituality as follows:

[S]pirituality is that attitude by which the human being feels connected to everything, perceives the thread that connects and re-connects all things that form the cosmos. That experience allows the human being to name that thread, dialogue and enter in communion with it, for he/she detects it in every detail of the real. Humans call this thread by many names, Originating Fount of all things, Mystery of the world, or simply God.<sup>178</sup>

Through the spiritual experience, he believes people come to perceive that God is the strand that unifies all creation “like pearls so as to form a magnificent necklace.”<sup>179</sup> With spirituality, then, humans, who are knots-of-relations in a universe characterized by webs of relations, recapture the interconnectivity of all things.

This spiritual sense of re-connection is fundamentally important for establishing the unification of consciousness that Boff describes in his ecological theology. That is, inasmuch as it brings to light our interconnectivity with all things, spirituality becomes capable of moving globalization from a merely technological or market phenomena to the

---

<sup>177</sup> Boff, *Global Civilization*, 86.

<sup>178</sup> “... a espiritualidade é aquela atitude pela qual o ser humano se sente ligado ao todo, percebe o fio condutor que liga e re-liga todas as coisas para formarem um cosmos. Essa experiência permite ao ser humano dar um nome a esse fio condutor, dialogar e entrar em comunhão com ele, pois o detecta em cada detalhe do real. Chama-o por mil nomes, Fonte Originária de todas as coisas, Mistério do Mundo ou simplesmente Deus.” (Boff, *Ethos Mundial*, 102).

<sup>179</sup> Boff, *The Prayer of Saint Francis*, 32-33.

fusion of horizons that exists under the new paradigm. Boff holds that spirituality is a “mystic experience of unity with the Divine and will all things.”<sup>180</sup> Because it so unifies, he writes that spirituality is initiating an entirely new era, which he calls “ecozoic-spiritual,” and characterizes a “a new agreement of respect, veneration and mutual collaboration between Earth and humanity.”<sup>181</sup> Whether he is talking about the ecozoic-spiritual era or the globalization of consciousness, the result is the same: through spirituality, people live by a spirit of mutual cooperation and respect. In this way, he writes, “spirituality will help to guarantee a promising future for planet Earth and for all the tribes that inhabit it.”<sup>182</sup>

### *c. Humans with their Inner Ethic*

Spirituality guarantees a promising future by re-connecting humans not only with their ontological foundation as knot-of-relations, but also with their ontological grounding in the ethic of care. In his ecological theology, Boff writes that “to care” is “at the very root of the human being,” “part of the nature and of the constitution of the human being,” the aspect without which “the human being ceases to be a human being,” a “basic existential-ontological phenomenon.”<sup>183</sup> Human beings are “essentially” caring.<sup>184</sup> He argues that under the modern paradigm humans forgot their innate

---

<sup>180</sup> Boff, “Ways of Experiencing God Today,” 147.

<sup>181</sup> Boff explains: “A idade acozóico-espíritual representa a culminação da idade humano-social da globalização. Sua característica básica reside no novo acordo de respeito, veneração e mutual colaboração entre Terra e Humanidade. É a idade da ecologia integral – daí o nome ecozóica. Pelos valores que comporta, ela contém grande densidade espiritual. Por isso a denominamos ecozóico-espíritual” (*A voz do arco-íris*, 47).

<sup>182</sup> Boff, “Ways of Experiencing God Today,” 147.

<sup>183</sup> Boff, *Essential Care*, 15. To stress the point again, Boff writes: “We do not *have* care. We *are* care. This means that care possesses an ontological dimension that is part of the human constitution. It is a way-of-being unique to men and women. Without care we are no longer human beings” (Ibid., 56).

<sup>184</sup> Care is essential in the sense that it is part of human essence. Boff explains: “I nurture the profound conviction that care, by the fact that it is essential, can be neither suppressed nor discarded. ... I emphasize: if it were not like this, then it would not be essential” (*Essential Care*, x). He draws his

propensity to care.<sup>185</sup> As a consequence of the disconnect, ethics became nothing more than “moralism”<sup>186</sup> and “codified precepts of rote behavior.”<sup>187</sup> That is, people had to rely on the moral precepts which their religions and cultures formulated. Though he believes that these morals were born from the essence of care, they are limited because they are mere translations of it.<sup>188</sup> However, what he thinks is arising today is not a regional or cultural translation of anything but rather a direct perception of the ethic of care, not merely as a way to behave, but as something innate to who humans are. It is through spirituality that this direct perception becomes possible.

Boff often says in his ecological theology that from a new vision (*ótica*) arises a new ethic (*ética*).<sup>189</sup> As we have seen, the new vision today is “erupt[ing] from a deep plunge in the experience of Being, and from a new perception of everything as connected and reconnected in all its parts and with the original Fount from which all existence emanates.”<sup>190</sup> As people become re-connected with their interior and with everything else in the world, he holds that they also reawaken to their ontological foundation in the ethic of care. Moreover, he argues that from this direct perception of care, a whole set of ethics – or an “ethos,” as he sometimes calls it<sup>191</sup> – arises directly in the human heart.

---

conviction that care is essential to human beings from Martin Heidegger, who, Boff says, held that “‘to care’ is at the very root of the human being” (Ibid., 15).

<sup>185</sup> See Boff, *Essential Care*, 2-5.

<sup>186</sup> Boff, *Cry of the Earth*, 136.

<sup>187</sup> Boff, *Ecology and Liberation*, 36.

<sup>188</sup> As mere translations, he holds that the validity of these morals is then limited to the culture and region where they were formulated. Boff explains: “Até agora predominava uma ética traduzida nas várias morais, próprias de cada cultura ou região do planeta. ... Todas nasceram da reflexão humana sobre o *ethos*, que é de natureza universal. ... Esse *ethos* básico se traduz em morais ligadas ao regional e ao cultural e, por isso, com validade limitada ao regional e ao cultural.” (*Ethos Mundial*, 21).

<sup>189</sup> See, for example, Boff, *Essential Care*, 6; *Ethos Mundial*, 17; and *A voz do arco-íris*, 48.

<sup>190</sup> “E toda nova ótica irrompe a partir de um mergulho profundo na experiência do Ser, de uma nova percepção do todo ligado, religado em suas partes e conectado com a Fonte originária donde promanam todos os entes” (Boff, *Ethos Mundial*, 17).

<sup>191</sup> Instead of speaking of an ethic, Boff sometimes writes “ethos,” a “the collection of principles that govern human behaviour in all cultures” (*Essential Care*, 147).



This set of ethics is characterized by “cooperation, co-responsibility, compassion and reverence,”<sup>192</sup> or as he writes elsewhere: “co-citizenship, conviviality, synergy, cooperation, partnership, mutuality, subsidiarity, simplicity, compassion, a preference for the small and natural, [and] a complementarity and inclusion of all.”<sup>193</sup>

These are ethical principles that arise as people experience God in themselves and in the world. As such, it is living in the experience of God – and not primarily in learning from the ethical principles of a particular community – that people initiate the ecologico-social democracy where “participation, solidarity, equality, difference, and communion” reign.<sup>194</sup> In other words, it is the spiritual experience that initiates the kind of global society that Boff sees developing under with the new paradigm. Inasmuch as it re-connects and re-awakens people to their essential care, spirituality gives Boff strong reason to hope that we will come out of the present crisis a new and better humanity.

#### *d. Summary*

For Boff, the fact that spirituality re-connects humans with their interior, with the world and their essential capacity to care means that it will produce life. He holds that “everything that produces life, expands life, defends life, organizes itself for the function of life, is spirituality.”<sup>195</sup> He argues that authentic spirituality produces life in every

---

<sup>192</sup> “O Ethos, traduzido em cuidado, cooperação, co-responsabilidade, compaixão e reverência, salvará, ainda uma vez, a humanidade, a vida e a Terra.” (Boff, *Ethos Mundial*, 10).

<sup>193</sup> “Outros valores dão corpo a esse novo paradigma, como a importância da con-cidadania, a convivialidade, a sinergia, a cooperação, a parceria, a mutualidade, a subsidiariedade, a simplicidade, a compaixão, a preferência pelo pequeno e natural, a complementaridade e a inclusão de todos. (Boff, *Ética da vida*, 121). For more on the global ethic that he believes is arising, see Boff, *Do iceberg à Arca de Noé*, 85, 94-99.

<sup>194</sup> Boff, *Ecology and Liberation*, 106.

<sup>195</sup> “Tudo o que produz vida, expande vida, defende a vida, se organiza em função da vida, é espiritualidade” (Boff and Betto, *Mística e Espiritualidade*, 48).

sense: biological, social, and existential.<sup>196</sup> In other words, spirituality is not a neutral phenomena; its authenticity can be judged on the extent to which it helps life flourish.

When Boff writes that spirituality re-connects people with their interior and with the world around them, then, he shows how this sense of re-connection leads them to “respect, veneration and mutual collaboration between Earth and humanity.”<sup>197</sup> When he writes that spirituality re-awakens people to their essential care, he indicates that an entire ethos is also awakened in them which will help guarantee “a promising future for planet Earth and for all the tribes that inhabit it.”<sup>198</sup> Thus, as was the case with his liberation spirituality, his ecological spirituality has phenomenological consequences. Through the spiritual experience of God, Boff shows that God enters history in a palpable way, breathing life into the new paradigm of connectedness and bringing about the noosphere.

The question remains as to how he thinks people will learn to live by such a life-giving spirituality. For the answer to this question, we turn to his understanding of religion and the role of the human poor.

## **(ii) Religion as the Vehicle for Spirituality**

Boff occasionally uses the terms “spiritual,” “mystical” and “religious” interchangeably, so that for example, the spiritual or mystical experience is very much the same thing as the religious experience.<sup>199</sup> He also occasionally uses “spirituality” and “religion” interchangeably. Thus, he writes that like spirituality, religion “is located in

---

<sup>196</sup> Boff, *Ecology and Liberation*, 36-37.

<sup>197</sup> Boff explains: “A idade acozóico-espiritual representa a culminação da idade humano-social da globalização. Sua característica básica reside no novo acordo de respeito, veneration e mutual colaboração entre Terra e Humanidade. É a idade da ecologia integral – daí o nome ecozóica. Pelos valores que comporta, ela contém grande densidade espiritual. Por isso a denominamos ecozóico-espiritual” (*A voz do arco-íris*, 47).

<sup>198</sup> Boff, “Ways of Experiencing God Today,” 147.

<sup>199</sup> See Chapter Three, part B (i), for the way Boff interchanges these terms.

the realms of imagination, feeling, and desire,<sup>200</sup> and connects and re-connects everything anew.<sup>201</sup>

However, when he talks about religion he usually means the institution of religion, with all its faults and potential blessings. Religion as an institution is not spirituality, but is rather what derives from, and what leads people back to, spirituality.<sup>202</sup> Therefore, he holds that the proper role of religion is to bring people to the spiritual experience of God (or to the original experience of the mutual transference of God and world). He writes:

Inasmuch as religion has arisen out of spirituality and the experience of the faith encounter with divinity, its function is to continually renourish this spirituality and encounter. It cannot replace the striving of the human being for ultimate Reality and encountering that Reality. Religion cannot enclose religious persons in dogmas and cultural representations. It must serve as an organized place where people may be initiated, accompanied, and aided in having the experience of God.<sup>203</sup>

Stated differently: “The function of religion is to create the condition so that every person can realize his/her ground in Being and to find him/herself with God, Uterus of infinite comfort and peace.”<sup>204</sup>

Boff believes that *all* religions can bring people to this original spiritual experience of God because they all originate there. Every religion is an articulation of the experience of God, expressed in different cultural settings and languages. Thus, he

---

<sup>200</sup> Boff, *Ecology and Liberation*, 57.

<sup>201</sup> See, for example, Boff, *Cry of the Earth*, 193; *The Prayer of Saint Francis*, 24; *A voz do arco-íris*, 170; and *Global Civilization*, 43-44, 56.

<sup>202</sup> Boff explains: “*Espiritualidade tem a ver com experiência, não com doutrina, não com dogmas, não com ritos, não com celebrações*, que são apenas caminhos institucionais capazes de nos ajudar na espiritualidade, mas que são posteriores à espiritualidade. Nasceram da espiritualidade, podem conter a espiritualidade, mas não são a espiritualidade. São água canalizada, não a fonte da água cristalina.” (*Espiritualidade*, 66).

<sup>203</sup> Boff, *Cry of the Earth*, 193.

<sup>204</sup> “Função da religião é criar as condições para que cada pessoa possa realizar seu mergulho no Ser e encontrar-se com Deus, Útero de infinito aconchego e paz” (Boff, *A águia e a galinha*, 89).

writes that the religions are expressions of the divine experience “in the cultural codes of all ears,”<sup>205</sup> or “the cultural expressions of the encounter with divine Mystery,”<sup>206</sup> or “expressions of the encounter with God within the codes of different cultures.”<sup>207</sup> The original spiritual experience is one; the religious expression of that experience is multiple.<sup>208</sup> Indeed, he argues that “[e]ach path is a path to the fount. Therefore, for as diverse as the religions are, they all speak about the same thing, the mystery of God.”<sup>209</sup>

Two implications follow from the premise that all religions originate, and hence must point to, the experience of God. First, when the religions over-identify with their particular cultural expressions of the God-experience – e.g. “in the realms of understanding (creeds and doctrines) and practices (ethics), in symbolic or ritual expressions (liturgy), or in the esthetic dimension (sacred art, churches, monuments, music, and so on)”<sup>210</sup> – they run the risk of falling into the fundamentalist trap.<sup>211</sup> That is, they confuse their particular expression with the truth, as though their beliefs and practices were the end of religion.

Boff holds that in fundamentalism the religious content trumps the God experience; people stop at belief about God not realizing that they can experience God, the Mystery and Fount. Caught up in belief, followers of a fundamentalist religion then

---

<sup>205</sup> Boff, *Ecology and Liberation*, 79.

<sup>206</sup> Boff, *Cry of the Earth*, 192.

<sup>207</sup> Boff, *Essential Care*, 112.

<sup>208</sup> See chapter Three, part B (ii) for more on what Boff means by the “original experience.”

<sup>209</sup> “Cada caminho é caminho oara a fonte. Por isso, por mais diversas que sejam as religiões, todas elas falam do mesmo, do mistério, de Deus” (Boff, *Tempo de transcendência*, 73). Likewise, Boff writes: “A Deus, chegamos por todos os cominhos: o da umbanda, do candomblé, do zen-budismo, dos protestantes, dos católicos, da secularização hoje, do discurso científico como o de Einstein. Deus está em cada encruzilhada. Topamos com ele em cada caminho. É arrogancia pretender ter o monopólio da verdade e achar que só o nosson caminho atinge Deus e que os demais atingem ídolos. Não é verdade. ... Todos estamos debaixo desse arco-íris de Deus.” (*Mística e Espiritualidade*, 86).

<sup>210</sup> Boff, *Cry of the Earth*, 193.

<sup>211</sup> Boff believes the Roman Catholic Church has fallen in this trap too many times – see, for example, *Global Civilization*, 40-42.

insist “that they alone possess the truth and that only those who follow their path may find salvation.”<sup>212</sup> He writes that “religious fundamentalism of this kind – essentially, a religious ideology of monoculture – has often led to discrimination, marginalization, conflicts, and violence.”<sup>213</sup> When religions refuse their role as initiating agents to the God-experience, division becomes the norm and violence ensues.

Second, however, when religions abide by their role as communicators of the God-experience, when they “seek personal and communitarian experience of a new immersion in the utterly absorbing mystery of God,”<sup>214</sup> they have the power to “re-connect everything in the widest sense, [serving as] a thread that can sew together all experiences, all knowledge, all spiritual traditions, all politics, all humanity, and help us forge a new global reality that is united, dynamic and inclusive.”<sup>215</sup> The experience of God in all things connects and re-connects. He holds that inasmuch as religion initiates people into that spiritual experience, which is universal, it has the power to thread the globe together.

Boff believes in the power of religion, as one of the most ancient expressions of the spiritual experience,<sup>216</sup> and as “the most popular and most long-lasting metaphysics in history.”<sup>217</sup> Though he recognizes that people may come to the spiritual experience of God the Fount, and to the re-connection of all things, through avenues other than the religious (e.g. he considers the new cosmology a viable route), the prominence of religion throughout history means to him that most people will fulfill their spiritual hunger in their

---

<sup>212</sup> Boff and Hathaway, *The Tao of Liberation*, 336.

<sup>213</sup> Boff and Hathaway, *The Tao of Liberation*, 336.

<sup>214</sup> Boff, *Ecology and Liberation*, 59.

<sup>215</sup> Boff, *Global Civilization*, 56.

<sup>216</sup> See Boff, *A voz do arco-íris*, 170.

<sup>217</sup> Boff, *Cry of the Earth*, 193.

various religious traditions. Thus, he holds that most of the re-connection that spirituality engenders will happen through religion. He writes:

Deep down, what is the glue that holds a society together? Is it not the deep convictions, basic attitudes, and traditions shared in common? And what ought to connect and re-connect [*re-ligar*] all these factors, bring about sociability, relative harmony, and ways of keeping conflicts under control if not the *re-ligions*? The mission of religion or of a spiritual path is to keep alive the sacred memory of the central axis binding and re-connecting [*re-liga*] everything; it is to reinforce the perception that things are not thrown together randomly, but that everything is interconnected, everything forms a whole and participates in one cosmic, earthly, and human history; and finally, it is to give a name to the Fount of being and meaning, origin of all, from which everything springs and toward which everything is journeying, whether it be called by a thousand names or simply God.<sup>218</sup>

Boff believes that if the religions abide by their role as initiators into the spiritual experience, a new religion (composed of the distinct though now unified religions) will arise, “whose mission is to reconnect all human experiences, thereby a new meaning and direction to civilization.”<sup>219</sup> In other words, the new societal paradigm will arise to a great degree from the unity of religions.

Nonetheless, he is adamant that this can only happen if the religions show people how to experience God the Fount and Thread that ties all things together. He states: “The crucial point does not have anything to do with religions; the crucial point has to do with the spirituality that underlies religions, which unites, connects, reconnects and integrates. Spirituality, and not religion, helps the designing of a new paradigm of civilization.”<sup>220</sup> Spirituality connects and re-connects. Inasmuch as religion is a vehicle for that spirituality, it becomes also the vehicle by which people enter into the new paradigm of connectedness that is arising today.

---

<sup>218</sup> Boff, *The Prayer of Saint Francis*, 24.

<sup>219</sup> Boff, *Cry of the Earth*, 166. For a similar statement, see also *Ética da vida*, 213.

<sup>220</sup> Boff, *Essential Care*, 6.

### (iii) The Poor As Guides

Finally, Boff repeatedly states that all people must look to the poor for guidance on this path of re-connection. He says that the poor have not been as susceptible to the trappings of the modern paradigm; therefore, they have preserved a spiritual and mystical character to their lives by maintaining a sense of magic, happiness, and hope.<sup>221</sup> He believes that indigenous and black populations of Brazil are exemplary by the way they have continued living in kinship with all things.<sup>222</sup> He repeatedly highlights the mystical dimension of the religious poor and the symbolic/sacramental awareness that allows them to experience God always.<sup>223</sup> In this way, he encourages proximity with the poor, not as an act of charity, but as a form of education for those who have lost their way under the hegemony of the old paradigm.

He argues that being near the poor is important not only for developing and sustaining a sacramental vision of the world,<sup>224</sup> but for understanding the need for societal transformation. He writes: “The Kingdom first materializes itself in beings who are in danger and in the human beings who are more oppressed and marginalized.”<sup>225</sup> For example, he argues that in fighting for their own rights, the poor show everyone the need for a more humane globalization. Speaking more specifically about the poor in Porto Alegre, Brazil, who organized themselves to advocate for a form of globalization driven from the bottom-up and for global solidarity and human rights, he says that they offer an

---

<sup>221</sup> Boff, *Ética da vida*, 193, 170.

<sup>222</sup> See, for example, Boff, *Do iceberg à Arca de Noé*, 53-56; *A voz do arco-íris*, 129-132; and Boff and Betto, *Mística e Espiritualidade*, 94. He focuses especially on those who practice the Afro-Brazilian religion, Candomblé.

<sup>223</sup> Boff, *A voz do arco-íris*, 159-164.

<sup>224</sup> See Chapter Three, part B (iii) for more on Boff’s understanding of the relationship between poverty and sacramental vision.

<sup>225</sup> Boff, *Global Civilization*, 41.

alternative vision capable of re-routing the Earth from the catastrophic collision toward which it is currently headed.<sup>226</sup> Because of their suffering and their need to fight for a better world, they show everyone the many ways – environmental, social and mental – in which we must alter the ecologies within which we live. As such, he writes that “the brutal fact of their poverty ... is the trigger for new paradigmatic reflections, spurring alternative practices that may prove our salvation.”<sup>227</sup>

In his ecological theology, then, the poor are important because they point to the need for immense global transformation and because they provide guidance in the spiritual path that Boff believes will enable the transformation to take place.

#### **(iv) Conclusion**

Boff’s ecological spirituality is defined primarily by the way it heals and re-connects everything – all of life with all its polarities – in the minds and hearts of human beings. In this capacity, spirituality has the ability not only to unveil the severing quality of the paradigm of modernity but also to usher in the new global paradigm and even the noosphere. Whether he defines spirituality in terms of human interiority, re-connection of all things, or as awakening of a global ethic, Boff shows that spirituality is the means by which immense transformation in every aspect of ecology is happening today.

Meanwhile, religion serves the special role in initiating people to the re-connecting experience of God, and the poor become teachers and guides in the movement toward the new spiritual paradigm. As I indicated in previous parts of this chapter, the new cosmology also plays an important role in bringing people to spirituality today, for it

---

<sup>226</sup> Boff, *Do iceberg à Arca de Noé*, 37-40.

<sup>227</sup> Boff, “The Poor, New Cosmology and Liberation,” 123. For a similar argument see also Boff, *Ética da vida*, 64-68.



provides the external verification of the unity that we come to know in the actual experience of God. That said, for as important as the new cosmology, religion and the poor are in his ecological work, their theological significance hinges on the extent to which they can awaken people to spiritual re-connection and transformation today.

The spirituality of re-connection is the force that makes possible everything that Boff hopes and advocates for in his ecological work, from the transformation of mental ecology, to the globalization of consciousness and the formation of an ecologico-social democracy. Thus, whereas his liberation spirituality hinged on the praxis and epistemological locus of the human poor, it is the case that everything (including the Earth and human poor) now turns on the force of spirituality itself. Boff now places his hope on the power of spirituality to unify and bring forth justice not only for the Latin American poor and their allies, but for all the Earth as it moves from crisis into “extraordinary new pathways.”<sup>228</sup>

#### **D. Chapter Summary and Assessment**

This chapter has illustrated the role that spirituality has played in Boff’s liberation and ecological theologies in moving people toward solidarity with the poor and justice on this Earth. Though in different ways, he returns over and over to the point that the experience of God does not end with that experience but rather becomes a powerful force in producing social and ecological wellbeing, or a world where God is palpably present. Thus, spirituality is not a neutral force; it *will* have life-producing consequences.

---

<sup>228</sup> Boff, *Essential Care*, 1.

### (i) Summary

Boff's liberation theology is marked by his epistemological commitment to the Latin American poor and their allies, and to their liberative praxis for liberation. As such, he talks about the poor as sacraments of God's self-revelation, and argues that as they work for justice and dignity in their lives, they bring a challenging new face of God into history, one that calls for solidarity and identification with the oppressed. Moreover, he calls those who would undergo a conversion to the poor "contemplativus in liberationis." By this phrase he means that those who struggle with the poor for the historical liberation of the oppressed must be "contemplative[s] while working for liberation,"<sup>229</sup> praying in the very process of liberation, experiencing God in the experience of struggle for liberation. Though he explicitly privileges the pole of contemplation – where humans "strike up a dialogue with the supreme mystery and cry, 'Father!'"<sup>230</sup> – he also makes clear that true contemplation is lived in service to the oppressed. In this way, spirituality leads to a phenomenological reality where God becomes palpable in history through solidarity with, and justice for, the human poor.

With his ecological theology, his horizons are widened to include the Earth among the poor and to regard global transformation as necessary for the survival of our planet. By expounding on Boff's understanding of ecology, the new cosmology and the global paradigm shift, I have indicated that his ecological theology is marked by a push toward the unification of human consciousness with itself and all creation. Humans play an important role here: As we are once again re-connected with all things that the modern paradigm has separated and codified, he believes we move all creation toward the

---

<sup>229</sup> Boff, "The Need for Political Saints," 170.

<sup>230</sup> Boff, *Faith on the Edge*, 86-87.

noosphere (a time when the spirit of communion and love will reign). Spirituality is the primary force by which this re-connection takes place and therefore the force by which the whole Earth moves from crisis to transformation and fulfillment.

Boff defines ecology in terms of relationality, “as the science and art of relations and related beings.”<sup>231</sup> He then delineates four interrelated forms of ecology: environmental, social, mental and integral. Of these, he prioritizes mental ecology, for, “[w]hen reconciled with ourselves (mental ecology), we can, without coercion, live with our own kind (social ecology), and also with all other creatures (environmental ecology).”<sup>232</sup> With integral ecology, or the new cosmology, he provides the external impetus for moving mental ecology toward reconciliation with the human foundations of interrelationality and care. The new cosmology points humans toward interrelationality precisely because it understands the world in fundamentally holistic, nonhierarchical, and inter(retro)related ways. Moreover, with the new cosmology, the Earth comes to be seen as a single living superorganism (Gaia), and humans – who came into being and became self-conscious through the course of Gaia’s evolution – come to understand themselves as the “co-pilots in the evolutionary process”<sup>233</sup> and responsible for her wellbeing.

Boff believes that under the paradigm of modernity, our constellations of beliefs and values have become profoundly dualistic, anthropocentric and patriarchal, causing us to behave in ways that are devastating to both the human and Earth poor. But now, pushed to the point of crisis, exhausted by the ways the old paradigm has limited our self-development and disconnected us from our ontological base as knots of relations, challenged by the findings of the new cosmology, and empowered to new life by an

---

<sup>231</sup> Boff, *Ecology and Liberation*, 11.

<sup>232</sup> Boff, *Ecology and Liberation*, 78.

<sup>233</sup> Boff, “The Poor, the New Cosmology and Liberation,” 120.

experiential spirituality capable of reconnecting all things anew, he argues that humans are awakening to a new paradigm on this Earth. This new paradigm is marked by the unification of human consciousness and an ecologico-social democracy where “all beings in nature are citizens, have rights, and deserve respect and reverence.”<sup>234</sup> With this, a new and unprecedented stage of evolution begins and the noosphere arises.

In his ecological theology, then, Boff talks about spirituality as a very important force by which the human is reconnected with the Absolute within, with all things in the cosmos, and with their inner ethic of care. In the experience of God, all things that were disconnected under the paradigm of modernity are reunited in the human mind, enabling profound transformation. Religion serves a very special role as the vehicle for this spirituality, and the poor take on the special role as guides in this process of experiential and unifying spirituality. Through spirituality, and with the help of religion and the poor, Boff shows in his ecological theology that God enters history and thus enables the new paradigm of connectedness to arise throughout the planet.

## **(ii) Assessment and Conclusion**

One of the points I stressed with regard to his spirituality in Chapter Three was the fact that, according to Boff, the experience of God invariably makes God palpable in history. In this chapter I have elucidated some important distinctions between his articulation of spirituality in his liberation and ecological theologies, but I have also emphasized that irrespective of these differences, he has continued to assign special power to spirituality for transforming human beings, and through them, historical reality. In this way, this chapter is illustrative of a point I made in Chapter Three – that

---

<sup>234</sup> Boff, *Cry of the Earth*, 133.

spirituality, as the experience of God, will have concrete and phenomenological ramifications.

As such, the greatest contribution that I think this chapter offers to contemporary Christian spirituality is precisely its illustration of the many ways in which authentic spirituality acts as a force for great change in human experience and behavior. In this time of crisis, when change is so imperative, Boff's liberation and ecological theologies provide very concrete reasons to believe that, in turning our attention to the experience of God, we will be transformed into a more just and unified humanity.

## **CHAPTER 5: MCFAGUE AND BOFF**

In this chapter I offer a final summary and assessment of McFague's and Boff's contributions to Christian spirituality in this time of socio-ecological crisis. I begin with a brief summary of each of the preceding chapters.

### **A. Crisis and Spirituality Today**

In the opening chapter of the dissertation I indicated that the crisis we now face as a global society is both social and ecological in nature. Thus, the same modes of behavior that have led to such ecological problems as pollution, the extermination of species, and climate change have also aggravated the long-standing problem of social and economic inequality among humans. I pointed to the culture of consumerism as a major culprit in producing these injustices, not only because it causes people to act in ways that benefit neither the earth nor the majority of the human population, but also because it has enticed most everyone to desire living by its lifestyle even when they cannot do so because they are poor. In this way, consumerism attracts and distracts people the globe around, limiting their vision and imagination until only one major conception of the "good life" remains, namely, one that entails a constant pursuit of material things irrespective of its consequences.

The consumerist life is so enticing – indeed, so much "the way things are" particularly for those living in privilege – that seeing the ways in which it has caused suffering in nature and among humans can be difficult for many. I have pointed to spirituality as important in the face of the socio-ecological crisis precisely because it can

help people see what they must and give them the strength to move into the future with fresh imagination and hope.

I have shown that while it is difficult to define spirituality, those writing on Christian spirituality have generally agreed on three broad points. First, there is an innate restlessness in human beings, which some have called the anthropological side of spirituality, that leads people to ever seek fulfillment. This pursuit can be misdirected to lesser things – for example, “a process of never-ending consumption”<sup>1</sup> – or can, in a much more life-giving way, be directed to the God who can fulfill us. Second, then, the theological side of spirituality says that human beings have a restlessness in them precisely so they will seek their satiation in that Mystery which Christians have called God. However, there is also a sense that just as God does not neglect the world, a spirituality seeking fulfillment in God does not neglect the world either. Hence, by directing our attention to the presence of God, we come to know God’s “presence in others, the social and natural world.”<sup>2</sup>

Third, finally, spirituality is experiential; it entails an actual *lived experience* of communion with God. In the experience of God, a profound sense of awareness is born in the person that allows her or him to see, when the time is right, the constructed nature of social institutions, of religious doctrines and even of the self. I have indicated that with this growing awareness comes the ability to change those constructions that have proven destructive.

Thus, Christian spirituality entails an innate human drive, directed to God (though not at the neglect of the world), and consciously sought in the ongoing experience of

---

<sup>1</sup> Sung, “Spirituality and the Market,” 77.

<sup>2</sup> Aguilar, *Contemplating God*, ix.

communion with God. To the extent that it can direct our attention to God and God's presence in the world, and can bring to awareness the constructed nature of worldly reality, Christian spirituality enables great transformation in human beings. In this time of socio-ecological crisis, spirituality may make the difference between continuing down a disastrous path or making a decisive change in the way humans live on this planet.

Both Sallie McFague and Leonardo Boff adhere to this three-fold understanding of Christian spirituality to different degrees. Yet they say more than can be contained by this simple definition. Hence, in order to fill out the question – what are the characteristics of a Christian spirituality capable of helping people to clear vision and transformation and hope in this time of crisis? – I have examined their work at length. I have not investigated their ecological theologies and spiritualities alone. Rather, assuming that their own theological development – and experience of spirituality through the course of this development – would thicken not only our understanding of the theologians themselves but also of their contribution to spirituality in this time of crisis, I have incorporated in this dissertation works from the breadth of their careers.

### **B. Sallie McFague**

Through much of her career McFague has in fact said little about spirituality. As I showed in Chapter One, she is best known for her metaphorical approach to theology, with its insistence that all God talk is by necessity indirect, both true and untrue, and imagistic. She explains that metaphorical language never describes reality-as-it-is, nor does it get at metaphysical or ontological truth directly. All attempts to speak or even think of God and any element of reality-as-it-is always “misses the mark.”<sup>3</sup> Nonetheless,

---

<sup>3</sup> McFague, *Models of God*, 23.



she argues that the power of metaphorical language lies in its ability to produce semantic innovation. That is, by describing “this” as “that,” using a word or phrase to describe something “*inappropriately*,”<sup>4</sup> metaphors and models have a way of shocking people into new insight and action. Hence, she comes to stress the functional ability of metaphorical language to help people live differently on this planet. Indeed, she holds that “true knowledge is not basically correspondence with ‘reality-as-it-is’: rather, it is [that which] contribute[s] to fulfillment of life in its many forms.”<sup>5</sup>

McFague remains firmly committed to this metaphorical approach throughout her career, as she develops from her early hermeneutical stage focused on Scripture, to her heuristic and constructivist stages focused on the needs and knowledge of our time. In her later stages she becomes progressively bolder, speaking of shy ontological claims and ways people might become increasingly certain. Yet even then she continues to insist that her metaphorical theology makes “few pretensions to metaphysical truth.”<sup>6</sup> Instead, she explains that the certainty of metaphorical theology lies “not in its assertions but in the opportunity it provides to live differently.”<sup>7</sup>

McFague argues that because the metaphors we use for God and creation will always miss the mark, we should be willing to play with them, “sucking the juice out of them and throwing them away”<sup>8</sup> when they are no longer useful or relevant to the knowledge and needs of our time. She occasionally writes that this process of using and disposing of metaphorical language is commensurate with what the psalmists and mystics

---

<sup>4</sup> Recall: “A metaphor is a word or phrase used *inappropriately*. It belongs properly in one context but is being used in another” (McFague, *Models of God*, 33).

<sup>5</sup> McFague, “Response,” 42.

<sup>6</sup> McFague, “Intimations of Transcendence: Praise and Compassion,” 155.

<sup>7</sup> McFague, *A New Climate for Theology*, 120.

<sup>8</sup> McFague, *A New Climate for Theology*, 108.

have done, as they felt “conviction at the level of experience, at the level of worship, but great uncertainty at the level of words adequate to express the reality of God.”<sup>9</sup>

However, an important difference remains: the mystic or psalmist plays with language as a result of the extraordinary experience of the mystery of God, whereas she does so primarily for functional reasons, that is, to help people think and live differently. God is not as accessible in McFague’s work; she has to settle for constructions.

Nonetheless, inasmuch as she challenges attachment to any particular language for God and world, I have stressed that her methodology corresponds in some sense with a spirituality that, in the words of Mark McIntosh, “is inherently oriented towards discovery, towards new perceptions and new understandings of reality,” in such a way that a person is unable to “rest in a reassuring self-image [or] to languish in the prison of a false social construction of oneself.”<sup>10</sup> I have indicated that, whether she has intended it or not, the very process of seeing and changing language for that which cannot be ultimately named, is a form of spirituality, or in the very least points people to the type of spirituality that refuses to rest in the prison of false social constructions.

For as important as the process of discovery is for spiritual growth, it is interesting that McFague has herself moved into a lived understanding of the spiritual experience of God by living within one of her metaphorical constructions in particular. That is, she has become capable of experiencing the presence of God and of speaking more explicitly about spirituality only in allowing herself to be seduced by her model of the world as God’s body.

---

<sup>9</sup> McFague, *Metaphorical Theology*, 1.

<sup>10</sup> McIntosh, *Mystical Theology*, 6, 5.

As I showed in Chapter Two, she originally constructs the body model with the functional purpose of showing Christians that earthly bodies matter very much, “that they are indeed the main attraction.”<sup>11</sup> She then builds a theological system from the model, indicating that God is embodied in every particular body of creation, that Jesus is in fact paradigmatic of God’s incarnation in all bodies, and that as humans willingly consent to care for these earthly bodies – particularly the most vulnerable – we become “the mind and heart as well as the hands and feet of the body of God on our planet.”<sup>12</sup> With the model of the world as God’s body, then, she means to indicate not only that worldly bodies matter, but that humans must be willing to live their role – because they are the self-conscious ones of creation – as “the guardians and caretakers of our tiny planet.”<sup>13</sup>

However, the functional model of the world as God’s body also becomes the vehicle for great spiritual growth in McFague’s own life and work. Through many years of meditating on this model – which, in correspondence with the common creation story, requires meditating on the unique and interconnected bodies of this world – she grows both in appreciation for this world and in the feeling that God’s love infuses every aspect of it. Moreover, with the help of this model and its focus on worldly bodies, she comes to articulate, in her ecological, constructivist stage, how Christians should engage spirituality today.

She begins this latest stage by discussing spirituality in terms of how Christians should love the bodies of this world: pay attention to the particular body before you; recognize its uniqueness by treating it as a subject in its own right; observe it not from a distance but with a sensibility akin to touch; let your love for this particular body spread

---

<sup>11</sup> McFague, *The Body of God*, 18.

<sup>12</sup> McFague, *The Body of God*, 148.

<sup>13</sup> McFague, *The Body of God*, 109.

in concentric circles to encompass other bodies; perceive God's presence in these bodies but never in a way that will bypass them or their needs. In the second half of her constructivist stage, realizing that love alone will not make things better, she turns her attention to the sacrifices the privileged must make for the wellbeing of bodies other than their own. Hence, she indicates that "[w]hen one is concerned with one's stomach, it is materialism, but when one is concerned with other people's stomachs it is spirituality."<sup>14</sup> She discusses "cruciform living" as the privileged drastically cutting down their consumption,<sup>15</sup> and kenosis as having both "ego" and "eco" implications: "What is widespread in religions as personal practice – taking up less 'ego space' – is reflected at the planetary level as the demand that we diminish our ecological footprint."<sup>16</sup> She asserts that with cruciform living and ego/eco kenosis, a deep sense of abundance, gratitude, and an odd kind of hope in fact arises in God. Resting in the body of God, loving God in all earthly bodies even to the point of self-sacrifice, she now writes that "faith, not in ourselves, but in God, can free us to live lives of radical change."<sup>17</sup>

With these two chapters, then, I show that McFague's contribution to our understanding of Christian spirituality before the socio-ecological crisis is twofold. On the one hand, her metaphorical approach continually challenges people to see the constructed nature of their realities. In so doing, she pushes us to really notice the many ways in which our present constructions – and the consumerist construction in particular – are neither life-giving nor ultimately desirable. Inasmuch as she challenges the notion that "the way things are" is the way they must be, I have argued that she touches –

---

<sup>14</sup> McFague, *Life Abundant*, 34.

<sup>15</sup> See McFague, *Life Abundant*, 22-23.

<sup>16</sup> McFague, *A New Climate for Theology*, 137.

<sup>17</sup> McFague, *A New Climate for Theology*, 171.

however inadvertently – on a spirituality that refuses to rest in false social constructions and is instead oriented toward discovery and growth.

On the other hand, with her body model she discusses in no uncertain terms how to live and love within a spirituality that honors both God and world. The advantage here is very practical: If, as I indicated in the Introduction, Christian spirituality must be directed to God but not at the neglect of the world, McFague's spirituality of the world as God's body provides clear instructions for such a way of life. Of course, the disadvantage to this body spirituality is that it rests to a great degree on a metaphorical construction and not in a deep seated experience of reality-as-it-is (though certainly she has experienced God as love through this construction). Nonetheless, the strength of her body model lies in the clarity she provides for those wanting to direct their spirituality to God *and* world, which is certainly important today given the tendency of even sincere privileged Christians to participate in systemic abuses of vulnerable humanity and nature.

### **C. Leonardo Boff**

For as much as Boff agrees with McFague about the limitations of our language and comprehension with respect to Mystery, he does not ask his readers to deconstruct and reconstruct their language for God and world. Rather, he continuously pushes them to seek and experience the Mystery behind all their words, thoughts and life events. In this push is the faith that, as humans experience God in their every experience of the world, God (the heart of Mystery) will transform them into more just and ethical beings.

In Chapter Three, then, I explained that the most consistent trait of Boff's theological system is his reliance on an experiential spirituality capable of discerning the signs of God's presence in the world. Certainly his theological focus has shifted through

the course of his long career. Hence, I indicated that his work may be divided into three subsequent stages – liberal Christian humanist, liberationist, and ecological – and that his progression through these stages is marked by a gradual broadening of horizons. For as much as there is transition in his work, however, he is remarkably consistent in his reliance on experiential spirituality.

He frequently speaks of the spiritual experience as the foundation of theology and as the means through which God becomes phenomenologically present in history. From his earliest works to his latest, he discusses the mutual transference of God and world to indicate that it is important to experience God in our experiences of the world precisely because God is diaphanous in, and intends to be known through, God's creation. He also repeatedly expounds on Saint Francis' sacramental vision to show people how to experience God in creation, namely, through intuition and emotion, in the recognition of our fraternity with all things, and "on the ground, in the earth,"<sup>18</sup> with the poor. Through his continuous engagement with the categories of experience, transference and sacramentality, then, Boff clearly demonstrates the importance of experiencing God in the world and indicates how people should go about experiencing God in this way.

Moreover, in consistently describing human beings as knots of relations (ontologically relational), as open-ended (fundamentally seeking union with God), and dialectical (consisting of polar opposites), he shows that humans are especially equipped to experience God in the world, and with this experience, of making God palpable in history. To the extent that humans seek God, in fraternal and emotional proximity with others (especially the poor), and engaging of every polarity of life, their movement toward openness in God moves all creation toward God's kingdom of justice and the

---

<sup>18</sup> Boff, *Saint Francis*, 39.

fulfillment of evolution. Thus, with his words on spirituality and anthropology, Boff illustrates through the course of his many works that humans must experience God, and in that experience, allow God to shape the course of our history.

However, for as much as he is consistent in calling people to experience God in the world, in Chapter Four I explained that his understanding of what this experience entails does vary somewhat between his liberation and ecological theologies. In his liberation theology he is primarily committed to the epistemological locus of the human poor and to their liberation. As such, he privileges the spiritual experience of the poor and those who undergo a conversion to solidarity with the poor and their praxis for liberation. Furthermore, he argues that God's reign becomes phenomenologically present in history as the poor (the "privileged carriers of the Lord,"<sup>19</sup>) call everyone to solidarity, and as all those who respond to their call learn to recognize God's presence in their every struggle for liberation.

On the other hand, in his ecological theology Boff is primarily concerned with watering and fertilizing a global transformation that he thinks is necessary if we are to move from planetary crisis to noosphere (a time when the spirit of communion and love will reign). He now regards the Earth as among the poor and seeks a comprehensive transformation in the way people relate to all living and nonliving things. As such, he criticizes the paradigm of modernity because it has separated and codified all things in the human mind, and advocates for a movement toward interrelationality and re-connection in human beings. He argues that social and environmental ecology become healthy only as human mental ecology is reconciled with itself and recognizes the relationality of all things. He appropriates the new cosmology, or integral ecology, to

---

<sup>19</sup> Boff, "The Need for Political Saints," 373.

stress the inter(retro)relations of all things in the universe and on the Earth (Gaia), and to highlight human responsibility in its interrelated wellbeing. He advocates for the globalization of consciousness (in which human beings, the consciousness of Gaia, form an organic unity throughout the globe) and ecologico-social democracy (where all beings in nature are recognized as citizens and have rights). In his ecological theology, Boff fundamentally believes that as humans re-member their ontological nature as knots of relations and recognize that the universe is a web of interdependencies, they become capable of forming a more compassionate and synergistic way of life than has ever been seen before.

This re-membering that Boff stresses in his ecological theology hinges on the movement of spirituality. He explains that spirituality reconnects humans with their interior, with the Absolute in their depths, and thus enables them to perceive God's presence in themselves. Through this inner perception they then are able to experience God, "the original source of life,"<sup>20</sup> in their experience of the world, which in turn teaches them – at the level of experience – that all things are unified "like pearls so as to form a magnificent necklace"<sup>21</sup> in God. The perception of God in themselves and in all things also awakens, according to Boff, the human ontological grounding in the ethic of care. With the recognition that care is "part of the nature and of the constitution of the human being,"<sup>22</sup> he believes that a global ethic (or ethos) arises – not as a learned but rather an experienced phenomenon – that is marked by "cooperation, co-responsibility, compassion and reverence."<sup>23</sup> Thus, inasmuch as spirituality harnesses the experience of

---

<sup>20</sup> Boff, *Global Civilization*, 86.

<sup>21</sup> Boff, *The Prayer of Saint Francis*, 32-33.

<sup>22</sup> Boff, *Essential Care*, 15.

<sup>23</sup> Boff, *Ethos Mundial*, 10.



interrelationality and care, it becomes the condition for the possibility of the new paradigm where the globalization of consciousness (marked by unity) and ecologico-social democracy (marked by cooperation and care) reigns.

His articulations of spirituality in his liberation and ecological theologies are somewhat different. Nonetheless, one thing remains perfectly consistent between them: in both cases spirituality – the experience of God – transforms historical reality into something entirely more life-giving and just. Thus, authentically experienced spirituality is not a neutral phenomenon (and it cannot be privatized), for its consequences are social, historical and communal. For Boff, true spirituality will transform toward love and life whatever is in its wake.

As with McFague, then, the strength of Boff's contribution to contemporary spirituality is twofold. First, believing that human beings can and must know the Mystery behind every word, object and experience, he develops a theology that systematically explains the experiential side of Christian spirituality. In the Introduction I wrote that Christian spirituality entails the ongoing experience of communion with God in the world. It is through this experience that false social constructions fall away, not merely as an intellectual exercise, but as felt at the level of intuitive conviction. Boff's theological system teaches his readers to delve into the experience of that Mystery which is diaphanous in, and yet transcendent of, our every experience of pain, struggle, joy and love. In this time of socio-ecological crisis, he indicates that the good life requires the symbolic and sacramental vision to see God, the other side of reality, and the willingness to be transformed in its light.

Second, though in different ways in his liberation and ecological theologies, he indicates very clearly that spirituality authentically lived will have concrete socio-ecological consequences. Spirituality will produce life. That is, as humans experience God and as they become transformed in God's love, he shows that they in turn transform their relationships and actions, and thus the course of history. For Boff, spirituality is the impetus for great change, which points, once again, to the necessity of engaging spirituality as we seek new pathways for living on this planet.

#### **D. Comparison and Contrast**

Together, McFague and Boff highlight and deepen our understanding of the theological and experiential aspects of Christian spirituality. They also show the importance of spirituality in bringing about socio-historical change. They make some of these arguments in ways that are similar or complementary, but there are also some important differences, even disagreements, between them. In the pages ahead I explain their similarities and differences, ultimately highlighting a preference for Boff's approach.

##### **(i) Similarities**

There are several similarities between McFague's and Boff's theologies and spiritualities that are worth mentioning. First, they are both deeply cognizant of the human poor, who suffer the greatest consequences of ecological degradation even though they are not responsible for causing it, and who *must* remain poor because the Earth cannot sustain everyone living as the wealthy minority live. As a Latin American liberation theologian, Boff writes from the perspective of the human poor and advocates

on their behalf. As a North American Ecofeminist, McFague addresses the wealthy minority among whom she lives, calling them to awareness of the high costs of their consumerist lifestyles, and asking them to restrict their consumption in order to make space and place for the poor. Together, they operate as two sides of the same coin, calling attention to oppressed humanity from different angles, one from among the poor and the other from among the wealthy who must change.

A second similarity worth noting is that they both include the Earth and Earth others (e.g. creatures, plants, rocks) among the poor in their ecological theologies.<sup>24</sup> By doing so, they challenge an anthropocentric approach to ecological matters, for they recognize that the Earth was not created for the benefit of human beings alone but rather for the sake of everything existing on this planet. This means that the preservation of the Earth and its ecosystems is necessary not merely so that future generations of humans may enjoy them, but for the wellbeing of the Earth itself. Thus, they show that a river, or a tree, or a mountain is to be honored and preserved for its own sake. Looking at the entirety of their work, we could say that Boff tends to focus more on the human poor while McFague tends to keep most of her attention on nature (trees, turtles, fish). Nonetheless, in their ecological theologies they both adamantly agree that the privileged must care for *both* poor humanity *and* the Earth poor to a much greater degree than they have done, particularly since the dawn of the industrial revolution.

Third, they both emphasize that human beings have a special responsibility to care for the Earth. On the one hand, they point to reasons why humans must be humble. They point to the fact that humans came late in the evolutionary process, which indicates

---

<sup>24</sup> For McFague, see Chapter Two, part A (iv) b. For Boff, see part A (iii) of Chapter Three.

to them that the whole of creation could not have been entirely for our benefit.<sup>25</sup> They both highlight the ways in which humans are part of the Earth, connected to this planet by the very structure of our physical makeup,<sup>26</sup> and dependent on other life-forms for our very survival, e.g. plants.<sup>27</sup> Finally, they stress the radical interdependence between humans and all creatures and things in the Earth.

On the other hand, they argue that there is something very special about human beings, namely, our self-consciousness. Because of our ability to be self-reflective, or to “know that we know” as McFague puts it, we have become the Earth as it feels, thinks and loves, as Boff puts it. Thus, they speak of humans as “partners in creation” (McFague), and “created creators” (Boff), capable of shaping, or co-piloting, the future of evolution. This gives humans the very special responsibility of being the guardians and care-takers of this planet. Hence, they both stress humanity’s dependence on and special responsibility for the Earth in their ecological theologies. Moreover, they agree that humans must live their special role in close proximity especially with the suffering of the Earth, in relationships of akin touch (McFague) and being “on the ground, in the earth, at the side of all things”<sup>28</sup> (Boff).

Finally, for both McFague and Boff, contemporary science plays an important role in their ecological theologies and spiritualities. Hence, for example, they both utilize evolutionary science to describe humans as interdependent with all of creation and as

---

<sup>25</sup> For McFague, see Chapter Two, part A (ii). For Boff, see *Cry of the Earth*, 20-22.

<sup>26</sup> Boff writes that it is no coincidence that the human body “contains more or less the same proportion of water as the surface of planet Earth (71%)” and that the salt level in human blood “is the same as in the ocean (3.4%)” (*Cry of the Earth*, 17). See Chapter Four, part B (ii) b, for my first reference to this matter.

<sup>27</sup> McFague writes: “the plants can do very nicely without us, in fact, better, but we would quickly perish without them” (*The Body of God*, 106). See Chapter Two, part A (ii), for my first reference to this quote.

<sup>28</sup> Boff, *Saint Francis*, 39.

having special responsibility for the care of the Earth. McFague's reliance on science takes the form of the common creation story, which she builds from broad features of contemporary science, and which she draws on to build new Christian models and to reformulate doctrine when necessary.<sup>29</sup> As we have seen, Boff draws heavily from the new cosmology, which he sometimes refers to as integral ecology, and which operates in his ecological theology as an external verification of the spirituality of re-connection.<sup>30</sup> In both cases, their reliance on contemporary science leads them to stress, on the one hand, the uniqueness of every aspect of creation, and on the other, the amazing interrelationality of everything that exists.

## **(ii) Differences**

Irrespective of these similarities, there are some disagreements between them. First, while it is true that both McFague and Boff discuss the importance of recognizing *both* the unity in *and* the differences within creation in their theological spiritualities, Boff tends to stress unity while McFague stresses difference. Consequently, for example, Boff uses the picture of the Earth from outer space as a symbol for the kind of unification to which he wants all people to move, and McFague repeatedly talks about how that picture is problematic because it paints over the many and beautiful ways in which things are distinct from each other.<sup>31</sup>

In her ecological theology McFague describes the "Protestant" prophetic approach to creation as one that notices "differences, divergences, and deterioration," and she describes the "Catholic" sensibility as "symbolic, seeing connections, similarities, and

---

<sup>29</sup> See Chapter One, part B (iii).

<sup>30</sup> See Chapter Four, part B (ii).

<sup>31</sup> See Chapter Four, nt. 106.

unity among all parts of the whole.”<sup>32</sup> She situates her theology somewhere in between these two positions, but she clearly favors the Protestant stress on difference. She would likely place Boff’s ecological theology somewhere in between the two positions as well (as she is sympathetic to his theology), but he inevitably favors the Catholic stress on connection. Perhaps due to the fact that McFague is indeed Protestant and Boff is Catholic, or because her approach is postmodern (e.g., suspicious of unifying ontologies) and his is modern and sacramental (e.g., unafraid of a unifying metaphysics), the stress of their respective theologies and spiritualities does differ.

The fact that McFague stresses difference while Boff stresses unity leads to a second disagreement between them. Both theologians talk about love and knowledge as inseparable. However, while McFague writes that “*we cannot love what we do not know*,”<sup>33</sup> Boff writes that “*we only know what we love*.”<sup>34</sup> Again, McFague is explicitly writing from a postmodern perspective that is intent on keeping the Christian gaze on the particular and distinct bodies of creation. She insists, as she puts it, that we “*hold on hard to the huckleberries*.”<sup>35</sup> Hence, she stresses that if we want to love these very special and particular bodies, we must first study them, learn about them, and know them. Love is the product of careful attention to the unique bodies of creation.

With Boff, however, the formula is reversed. Writing from the sacramental or mystical perspective, he highlights the overwhelming knowledge of our interconnectedness that comes as we allow ourselves to plunge into God’s loving presence. In this sense, we can only know what something or someone truly is through

---

<sup>32</sup> McFague, *Super, Natural Christians*, 53.

<sup>33</sup> McFague, *Super, Natural Christians*, 29. As always, these are her italics.

<sup>34</sup> Boff, *Cry of the Earth*, 143.

<sup>35</sup> McFague, *Super, Natural Christians*, 102.

the lense of God's unifying love. It is the clarity of vision which God's love provides that allows us to truly know another.

Both paying attention to the particular bodies of creation and plunging into God's loving presense are important if Christian spirituality is to help people truly see and care more deeply for creation. As such, I regard their respective emphases as largely complementary, though I believe Boff is getting at something deeper. With the next two differences between them, I argue that Boff's approach to theology and spirituality warrants even greater precedence.

As I mentioned in footnote 198 in Chapter Three, while both theologians talk about sacramentality as both vertical (directed to God) and horizontal (directed to creation), they do not do so exactly in the same way. McFague actually adopts the concept of vertical and horizomal sacramentality from Boff, but when she appropriates it she stresses the horizontal dimension to a much greater degree. She is concerned that too much stress on vertical sacramentality will distract people from their horizontal attention to the bodies of creation. In fact, she believes that it has been the tendency of Christians to pay too little attention to creation, and therefore she writes that "[t]he Christian eye does not need training to see God but to see other things, especially earth others – and *then* to see God."<sup>36</sup>

For Boff, however, the vertical points to the horizontal and visa versa. He holds that when we truly perceive God we come to an appreciation of the world, and when we truly experience the world we come to an appreciation of God's presence there. He does agree with McFague that the conventional spirituality of the churches has tended to

---

<sup>36</sup> McFague, *Super, Natural Christians*, 197.

“leave the universe, nature, and daily life outside the realm of spiritual existence.”<sup>37</sup> But his sacramental theology demonstrates that this traditional spirituality could not truly be delving into vertical sacramentality, because if it were, it would necessarily engender respect and veneration for the Earth among people. Thus, for Boff, the vertical dimension of sacramentality points to the horizontal just as the horizontal reflects the vertical.

McFague makes such a distinction between the vertical and horizontal dimensions of sacramentality that the vertical can become a threat to the horizontal. Consequently, there is an inherent dualism between the two forms of sacramentality in her ecological spirituality. No such duality exists in Boff’s conception of vertical and horizontal sacramentality; they mutually reinforce one another. While both theologians make it expressly known that they intend to move beyond dualism with their work, it would seem that Boff is more successful in doing so.

This tendency becomes even more apparent in the next disagreement between them. That is, for Boff people can know something of God through their experiences of the world. Even though she talks about experiencing God as love in her latest works, McFague never accepts such experiences as anything more than faith – and, she makes clear, “faith is not knowledge.”<sup>38</sup> Hence, there is a real inaccessibility to God in her metaphorical theology. Consequently, though both theologians uphold the distinction between God and creation, as all Christian theologians must, the division between God and world is far more pronounced in McFague’s work.

---

<sup>37</sup> Boff, *Cry of the Earth*, 189.

<sup>38</sup> McFague, *Life Abundant*, 60.



Even as her model of the world as God's body stresses God's embodiment in the world to the point of risking pantheism, the fact of its metaphoricity ends up highlighting the inaccessibility of God. The world as God's body is, after all, a metaphorical construction that is functional, built on wagers and "back-side" attempts to imagine the depths of divine radiance. McFague must depend on wagers and metaphors because she holds that "*there is no way now or ever to have strange truth directly.*"<sup>39</sup> She does not try to go to the Mystery behind the metaphors because she sees no way to do that. Moreover, as we have seen, she even cautions against such an attempt because she believes that, in seeking the transcendent reality-as-it-is ("God's face"), people will too often bypass creation ("God's back side") to the great detriment of the world.<sup>40</sup> Insisting that the world and God must be understood through the screen or grid of metaphor, she is simply very careful about *which* metaphors she encourages with her theology and spirituality. This metaphorical approach demands that theologians "guard and encourage right thinking about God and ourselves."<sup>41</sup> Theologians must guard right thinking because right thinking is all we really have access to; after all, the God experience is ultimately unreliable, indeed, mostly inaccessible. In this way, McFague's theology and spirituality inadvertently point to an irreducible divide between God and creation.

On the other hand, Boff continuously pushes his readers to experience the Mystery behind their constructions. He stresses that God is diaphanous in creation, and therefore that people are meant to know God in their experiences of the world. He firmly

---

<sup>39</sup> McFague, *Speaking in Parables*, 41.

<sup>40</sup> As I explained in Chapter Two, part B (i) b, McFague insists that we must "meet God not face-to-face, but by way of God's 'back side,' the world, in its sticky, deteriorating, suffering condition. It is a prophetic cry to attend to a dimension of the divine, the world, that desperately needs our total attention and energies" (*A New Climate for Theology*, 117).

<sup>41</sup> McFague, "Global Warming," 112.

trusts that when it is lived authentically, the experience of God will encourage and nourish people to new life and to caring more deeply about the wellbeing of creation.

Inasmuch as Boff's spirituality is consistently holistic and McFague's remains at least implicitly dualistic, I believe his approach is more valuable for Christian spirituality. Boff moves toward trust in God's transformative presence in the world. He offers Christians the unequivocal assurance that the spiritual experience is not only available to them but is also imperative for their wellbeing and the fulfillment of the Earth. Thus, though I have no intention of dismissing McFague's significant contributions to Christian spirituality, I hold that Boff's experiential spirituality must take precedence if it is truly deep transformation we seek today.

#### **E. Further Questions**

As we come to the conclusion of this chapter one more point about their spiritualities remains to be made. Despite McFague's and Boff's differences, their approaches to spirituality share a common trait, which functions as both a contribution to Christian spirituality and a deficit of sorts. That is, they are both very explicit about Christian spirituality's ties to a more ethical existence in humans. As we have seen, McFague develops her body model with the functional purpose of helping privileged Christians to live in more just and sustainable ways. With her body spirituality, then, whether she is talking in terms of love or self-restraint, she indicates very clearly that this spirituality is meant to encourage the care of, and making space for, the wellbeing of earthly bodies other than our own.

While Boff pushes his readers to experience the Mystery behind their every moment and situation, he is also always clear that this experience will have ethical

implications. As Dawson explains: “Boff understands the mode of authentic existence provoked by mystical experience of the sacred principally in ethical terms.”<sup>42</sup> Hence, as we have seen, in his liberation theology he argues that spirituality births and nourishes solidarity with and liberation for oppressed humanity; and in his ecological theology he indicates that spirituality awakens an ethic of care and an ethos of cooperation, co-responsibility, compassion and reverence for poor humanity and Earth.

Irrespective of their differences, then, McFague and Boff agree that the authenticity of spirituality may be evaluated on its intended politico-ethical outcome. Positively speaking, they together pose a direct challenge to all those who would privatize their spirituality and in the process make it irrelevant for the way they live in the public sphere. In this time of socio-ecological crisis, McFague and Boff both indicate that that spiritual life will be a life of prophetic and compassionate justice.

More problematically, though, by their very emphasis on the outcome of the spiritual experience, I believe they may be limiting what an authentic Christian spirituality may actually produce. After examining these two important theologians, I still wonder, in fact, if a more radical shift than they articulate is necessary to bring about the socio-ethical results they envision. Is the deconstruction and reconstruction of metaphorical language sufficient for producing the spiritual and ethical outcomes McFague hopes for? Might spirituality produce more pronounced transformations in human consciousness than Boff – who tends to focus on the ethical and socio-historical outcomes of the experience of God – explicitly names?

If spirituality is to be transformative of our understanding of God and world, and truly effecting of our actions, it would seem that this spirituality would have to transform

---

<sup>42</sup> Dawson, “Mystical Experience as Universal Connectedness,” 162.

humans at the deepest levels of consciousness, and indeed imagination. If, as I argued in the introductory chapter, the culture of consumerism limits human imagination, could it be that spirituality would have the opposite effect? Could spirituality open and transform the very source of our imagination so that new and unprecedented visions for the future may arise? If so, what type of practice would such a spirituality entail?

In the final chapter of the dissertation I engage the work of Constance FitzGerald precisely because she calls people to the practice of contemplative yielding to God so that God's own imagination may transform human consciousness. I argue that in her call to contemplative waiting on God, she offers the most radical reason to hope that the world which McFague and Boff envision – or perhaps a just world as yet unimaginable – may come to pass.

## CHAPTER 6: FITZGERALD AND THE CONTEMPLATIVE YIELDING TO GOD

Chapter Six engages Constance FitzGerald to the extent that she challenges people to yield to God in this time of socio-ecological crisis. This chapter is not meant to be an exhaustive treatment of her work. Rather, it engages the particular aspect of her writing that encourages contemplative yielding in order to elucidate how Christian spirituality may transform the depth of human consciousness today. In this way, I sketch an important further possibility for the more just and sustainable spirituality which I have advocated throughout this dissertation.

Writing as a Carmelite contemplative, FitzGerald argues that Saint John of the Cross' dark night of the soul is not only a personal experience but also a societal phenomenon.<sup>1</sup> She holds that Americans are currently undergoing an experience of deep societal impasse brought on by the cry of the poor and by the very real possibility "of the death of humanity as a species and the death of the earth as our home."<sup>2</sup> Naming this socio-ecological crisis a societal "impasse" or societal dark night, then, she indicates that the only way past this dark night is through it, and through it precisely by means of a contemplative waiting upon God. As with any crisis (etymologically understood), she indicates that the impasse of dark night is a profound moment of opportunity. This is especially true for the socio-ecological crisis we now face because the stakes are so very

---

<sup>1</sup> John of the Cross was a 16<sup>th</sup> century Spanish mystic and Catholic saint who worked to reform the Carmelite order, and with St. Teresa of Avila, founded the Discalced Carmelites. He is well known for the mystical poems he wrote while imprisoned by members of his own Carmelite order (who considered him a renegade and troublemaker) and soon thereafter. These poems include *The Spiritual Canticle* and *The Dark Night*. For a short biography of John of the Cross, see Bernard McGinn, *The Doctors of the Church: Thirty-three Men and Women Who Shaped Christianity* (New York: Crossroads, 1999), 148-152. For a biography and compilation of his written work, see John of the Cross, *The Collected Works of Saint John of the Cross*, trans. Kieran Kavanaugh and Otilio Rodriguez, with revisions and introductions by Kiaren Kavanaugh (Washington D.C.: ICS Publications, 1991).

<sup>2</sup> FitzGerald, "The Desire for God," 208.

high. She indicates that if we can truly yield to our current societal dark night in contemplation, a new imagination in God will arise, and through this development in our consciousness we will enter a new and unprecedented stage of evolution.

FitzGerald has been a member of the Baltimore Carmel community for over fifty years, since she was eighteen years old.<sup>3</sup> Her theological development and work have taken place largely within the monastery. FitzGerald's contemporary interpretations of Carmelite figures such as Edith Stein,<sup>4</sup> Teresa of Avila,<sup>5</sup> and especially John of the Cross,<sup>6</sup> have been influential for many theologians, members of religious communities and writers of Christian spirituality.<sup>7</sup> Her early essay, "Impasse and Dark Night," which I engage at some length in this chapter, has been especially instrumental in establishing a hermeneutical key through which others have interpreted contemporary relational, ecclesial, societal, political, ethical, scientific, economic, environmental and cultural impasses.<sup>8</sup> She continues to write with growing depth and insight on the subject of impasse and dark night today.

---

<sup>3</sup> See <http://baltimorecarmel.org> for more information on the Baltimore Carmel community.

<sup>4</sup> See, for example, Constance FitzGerald, "Passion in the Carmelite Tradition: Edith Stein," *Spiritus* 2 no. 2 (2002): 217-235.

<sup>5</sup> See, for example, Constance FitzGerald, "A Discipleship of Equals: Voices from Tradition – Teresa of Avila and John of the Cross," in *A Discipleship of Equals: Towards a Christian Feminist Spirituality*, ed. Francis A. Eigo (Villanova: Villanova University Press, 1988), 63-97.

<sup>6</sup> See, for example, Constance FitzGerald, "Impasse and Dark Night" (1984); "The Desire for God and the Transformative Power of Contemplation" (2000); "Transformation in Wisdom: The Subversive Character and Educative Power of Sophia in Contemplation," in *Carmel and Contemplation: Transforming Human Consciousness*, ed. Kevin Culligan and Regis Jordan (Washington D.C.: ICS Publications, 2000), 281-358; and "From Impasse to Prophetic Hope: Crisis of Memory" (2009).

<sup>7</sup> FitzGerald's article, "From Impasse to Prophetic Hope: Crisis of Memory," was initially an invited plenary address given to the annual convention of the Catholic Theological Society of America, the largest professional learned society in the Catholic world. She was also the first (and only) person without a doctoral degree in theology to be invited to give a plenary address to this convention – a mark of the esteem and influence of her work.

<sup>8</sup> In "From Impasse to Prophetic Hope," 21, nt. 3, FitzGerald points to the following works which have appropriated her explanation of impasse as a hermeneutical key: Sandra Schneiders, *Finding the Treasure: Locating Catholic Religious Life in a New Ecclesial and Cultural Context* (Mahwah: Paulist Press, 2000), 153-183; Nancy Sylvester and MaryJo Click, *Crucible For Change: Engaging Impasse Through Communal Contemplation and Dialogue* (San Antonio: Sor Juana Press, 2004); Beverly Lanzetta,

There are some important similarities between FitzGerald and the two theologians whose work I examined in chapters one through five. Like Boff, she is deeply influenced by the work of Pierre Teilhard de Chardin and by the new cosmology; consequently, she assigns a special role to humanity as the “cosmos come to consciousness,” and as the ones who will move the entire earth, in a sort of “Quantum Leap,” to a new and unprecedented stage of evolution.<sup>9</sup> Like McFague, her work is influenced by feminist concerns and exemplifies a particular desire to move socio-economically privileged North American Christians to greater solidarity with vulnerable humanity and the earth.<sup>10</sup> Like both theologians, she is deeply concerned with human poverty and ecological degradation, and she is troubled by contemporary tendencies – particularly within the United States – toward unlimited development and possessive individualism.<sup>11</sup> As with McFague and Boff, her work is meant to help people face the crisis at hand with transformative vision and hope.

Despite these similarities, FitzGerald’s approach to the present crisis differs in the extent to which she calls people to contemplative yielding so that God’s own imagination may arise in the consciousness of human beings. In this way, she fills an important lacuna in McFague’s and Boff’s articulations of spirituality, particularly as they evaluate its authenticity primarily on a very particular vision of the world and ethical outcome.

---

*Radical Wisdom: A Feminist Mystical Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005); Kristine M. Rankka, *Women And The Value of Suffering* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1998), 218-222; Bruce H. Lescher, “Spiritual Direction: Stalking the Boundaries” in *Handbook of Spirituality for Ministers*, vol. 2, ed. Robert J. Wicks (New York: Paulist Press, 2000), 324; Mary Catherine Hilkert, *Naming Grace: Preaching and the Sacramental Imagination* (New York: Continuum, 1997); M. Shawn Copeland, *The Subversive Power of Love: The Vision of Henriette Delille* (Mahwah: Paulist Press, 2009). To this list I would also add: Bradford E. Hinze, “Ecclesial Impasse: What Can We Learn from Our Laments?,” *Theological Studies* 72 no. 3 (2011): 470-495; and Bryan Massingale, “Healing a Divided World,” *Origins* 37 no. 11 (2007): 161-168.

<sup>9</sup> FitzGerald, “Transformation in Wisdom,” 339; “The Desire for God,” 214-215.

<sup>10</sup> See, for example, FitzGerald, “Impasse and Dark Night,” 105.

<sup>11</sup> See FitzGerald, “The Desire for God,” 210-211.

While such visions and ethics are undoubtedly important for authentic spirituality and most especially for spirituality in the face of the present crisis, FitzGerald illustrates more clearly than either theologian that spirituality must in fact transform the very center of human consciousness if real and lasting, as well as radical, transformation is to occur.

This chapter is divided into five brief parts explaining, in this order, FitzGerald's understanding of the dark night of the soul, her explication of societal dark night, and her explanation of what the act of contemplative yielding entails, first personally and then on a societal level. I conclude with an assessment of her contemplative approach in this time of socio-ecological crisis.

### **A. The Impasse of Dark Night**

FitzGerald's contribution to this discussion on spirituality turns on her interpretation of John of the Cross' concept of "dark night of the soul."<sup>12</sup> She articulates this classic concept through her understanding of "impasse."

She explains that one can know that she or he has entered an impasse of dark night when "there is no way out of, no way around, no rational escape from, what imprisons one, no possibilities in the situation."<sup>13</sup> When a person enters the impasse of dark night, the "usual way of functioning, or relating, provides no satisfaction and does not work."<sup>14</sup> The old way of doing things no longer has any meaning, the system on which one depends breaks down, certainty and pleasure give way to ambiguity, misunderstanding, dryness and boredom, and lack of vision and failure of imagination

---

<sup>12</sup> The phrase "dark night of the soul" comes from John's poem, *The Dark Night*, where "he asserts that active purification alone is insufficient for attainment of union" with God. Thus, the dark night of the soul is a time of passive purification of both the senses and the spirit by God. (See *The Collected Works of John of the Cross*, 353).

<sup>13</sup> FitzGerald, "Impasse and Dark Night," 94.

<sup>14</sup> FitzGerald, "Impasse and Dark Night," 99.



take over. Consequently, she writes that “in a true impasse, every normal manner of acting is brought to a standstill, and ironically, impasse is experienced not only in the problem itself but also in any solution rationally attempted.”<sup>15</sup> In other words, “the more action one applies to escape it, the worse it gets. The principles of ‘first order change’ – reason, logic, analysis, planning – do not work.”<sup>16</sup> Neither the situation nor the solution allows the person release from the prison of impasse.

She indicates that every God relationship, every significant human love, every marriage, and every relationship between a person and a community will at some point come to this moment of impasse.<sup>17</sup> However, she explains that the inevitability of the dark night of the soul is no reason to despair, because it is precisely in this dark night that the profound moment of opportunity arises. “Paradoxically, a situation of no potential is loaded with potential, and impasse becomes the place for the reconstitution of the intuitive self.”<sup>18</sup> However, impasse becomes the place for reconstitution of the intuitive self only *if* one can yield in the right way. That is, the impasse can be a condition for creative growth and transformation:

... *if* the experience of impasse is fully appropriated within one’s heart and flesh with consciousness and consent; *if* the limitations of one’s humanity and human condition are squarely faced and the sorrow of finitude allowed to invade the human spirit with real, existential powerlessness; *if* the ego does not demand understanding in the name of control and predictability but is willing to admit the mystery of its own being and surrender itself to this mystery; *if* the path into the unknown, into the uncontrolled and unpredictable margins of life, is freely taken when the path of deadly clarity fades.<sup>19</sup>

---

<sup>15</sup> FitzGerald, “Impasse and Dark Night,” 94.

<sup>16</sup> FitzGerald, “Impasse and Dark Night,” 96.

<sup>17</sup> FitzGerald, “Impasse and Dark Night,” 98.

<sup>18</sup> FitzGerald, “Impasse and Dark Night,” 95.

<sup>19</sup> FitzGerald, “Impasse and Dark Night,” 96. As always in this dissertation, the italics in the quote are in the original text.

She adds that any attempt to escape the impasse of dark night will not only fail, but it will lead the person attempting to escape down a destructive and deadening path. She writes: “We close off the breaking in of God into our lives if we cannot admit into consciousness the situation of profound impasse we face.”<sup>20</sup>

FitzGerald is clear that if, rather than surrendering to the impasse of dark night, we deal with it by illusion, repression, denial and apathy – as she thinks society teaches us to do – destructive tendencies such as anger, confusion and violence will continue to build. Indeed: “Frustrated desire fights back.”<sup>21</sup> If, on the other hand, the person can yield to impasse in the right way, surrendering to the existential powerlessness of impasse and relinquishing control of its outcome, this moment becomes “the birthplace of a vision and a hope that cannot be imagined this side of darkness.”<sup>22</sup>

## **B. Societal Impasse**

This yielding becomes especially important when she considers the societal impasse Americans find themselves in. She explains that we are experiencing the impasse of dark night in two distinct though interrelated ways. First, we are experiencing impasse in the growing and painful recognition of the presence of the poor – in “the abandoned, the tortured, the martyred, the refugees, the rejected, the starving, the marginalized, and the abused,”<sup>23</sup> in “the battered people and the scarred earth.”<sup>24</sup> In “the poor,” she writes, “our violence is unveiled.”<sup>25</sup> Second, we are experiencing impasse as we become aware of the failures of “our national ethos of unlimited development” and

---

<sup>20</sup> FitzGerald, “Impasse and Dark Night,” 105.

<sup>21</sup> FitzGerald, “Impasse and Dark Night,” 106.

<sup>22</sup> FitzGerald, “Impasse and Dark Night,” 102. See also 98.

<sup>23</sup> FitzGerald, “The Desire for God,” 208.

<sup>24</sup> FitzGerald, “The Desire for God,” 210.

<sup>25</sup> FitzGerald, “The Desire for God,” 210.

“excessive, possessive individualism.”<sup>26</sup> Impoverised humanity and the deteriorating earth expose our violence as a nation, and “[w]e experience desire gone awry and the failure of our national vision.”<sup>27</sup> Making matters worse, we find no way out of our technological and materialistic prison, for “[o]ur faith in the god of reason, progress, and finally technology, has left us without transcendence, without meaning, and without hope.”<sup>28</sup>

FitzGerald holds that we now face a true societal impasse, overwhelmed as we are by signs of death, yet – she insists – filled with the possibility of profound transformation. For this impasse to be a moment of transformation, however, she recognizes that we must overcome our own training: “As Americans we are not educated for impasse, for the experience of human limitation and darkness that will not yield to hard work, studies, statistics, rational analysis, and well-planned programs.”<sup>29</sup> We are used to fixing things, coming up with reasoned solutions, and fighting our way to victory. She argues that the only way through this darkness is by yielding to it, and yielding to it precisely in contemplation. So she writes: “Can we hear God calling us to a more contemplative time when we will be able to see and appreciate a new vision, hear within ourselves a new voice, experience a new faith and love capable of creating new paradigms for living as a part of all life on earth and in the universe?”<sup>30</sup>

---

<sup>26</sup> FitzGerald, “The Desire for God,” 210-211.

<sup>27</sup> FitzGerald, “The Desire for God,” 211.

<sup>28</sup> FitzGerald, “The Desire for God,” 212. Indeed, in the same page she asks: “What kind of unconscious hopelessness drives those who do not even care about, much less provide for, the next generation or future generation?”

<sup>29</sup> FitzGerald, “Impasse and Dark Night,” 105.

<sup>30</sup> FitzGerald, “The Desire for God,” 213.

### C. Contemplation

The contemplative time is a time of yielding to God. She explains that contemplation is a “*waiting upon God*,”<sup>31</sup> a “surrender[ing] in faith and trust to the unfathomable Mystery that beckons onward and inward beyond calculation, order, self-justification, and fear,”<sup>32</sup> a “giving away [of] one’s powerlessness and poverty to the inspiration of the Spirit”<sup>33</sup> so that God may completely fill and shape the person. Thus, contemplation is not a technique, but an attitude of continuous surrender to the Mystery to which God calls us in this pain of dark night. It is a day-to-day practice of allowing God to do what God will do.<sup>34</sup> In the deepest stages of contemplation, it becomes a “prayer of no experience,” a “silent unknowing” and a “dark empty space of encounter with God” in which the memory is purified so that “a vision of a different kind of future than the one we want to construct from our limited capacities” and previous experiences may be born.<sup>35</sup>

Underlying FitzGerald’s understanding of what happens in the contemplation of dark night is a particular anthropology. She explains:

For John of the Cross the human person is seen as an infinite capacity for God. As long as one is preoccupied with filling the great *caverns* of the mind, heart, memory and imagination with human knowledge, loves, memories and dreams that seem to promise complete satisfaction, or at least more than they can ever deliver, the person is unable to feel or even imagine the vast hollowness one is. Only when one become aware of the illusory and limiting character of this fullness in the face of the breakdown of what/whom we have staked our lives on, the limitations of our life project and relationships, the interruption of our unclaimed memories, and

---

<sup>31</sup> FitzGerald, “The Desire for God,” 216.

<sup>32</sup> FitzGerald, “Impasse and Dark Night,” 103.

<sup>33</sup> FitzGerald, “Impasse and Dark Night,” 104.

<sup>34</sup> In a conversation with FitzGerald in the Baltimore Carmel Monastery on January 21, 2011, she explained that at this point Centering Prayer may be appropriate because it can help the person cultivate the posture of waiting upon God.

<sup>35</sup> FitzGerald, “From Impasse to Prophetic Hope,” 35.

the shattering of our dreams and meanings, can the depths of hunger and thirst that exist in the human person, the infinite capacity, really be experienced.<sup>36</sup>

The dark night of the soul has a way of putting to death all those things which were once held dear, and, dwelling in the emptiness that remains, a person becomes aware of her/his infinite capacity for God. Hence FitzGerald writes that “[o]ur gods have to die before we reach for the God who is beyond all our human images and projections and who waits over the brink of the known in the darkness.”<sup>37</sup> In other words, in contemplative yielding, the dark night strips down desires,<sup>38</sup> images, ideas,<sup>39</sup> and even memories<sup>40</sup> to such an extent that something very radical happens: we become capable of drawing from the perspective and imagination of that very Mystery which we call God. In contemplative yielding, she writes, “[o]ne’s basic perspective changes. One ‘has God’s view of things.’”<sup>41</sup>

---

<sup>36</sup> FitzGerald, “From Impasse to Prophetic Hope,” 24. She has a similar passage in “Transformation in Wisdom,” 303.

<sup>37</sup> FitzGerald, “Desire for God,” 218. Elsewhere she writes: “Death is involved here – a dying in order to see how to be and to act on behalf of God in the world.” (“Impasse and Dark Night,” 107).

<sup>38</sup> FitzGerald calls this stripping down of desire a type of “affective education” (“Impasse and Dark Night,” 97; “Transformation in Wisdom,” 291), or a “transfiguration of affectivity” in which “desire is being purified, transformed, and carried into deeper, more integrated passion” (“Impasse and Dark Night,” 102). It effects a “gradual transference of desire to Jesus Christ” (“Transformation in Wisdom,” 291), or a “movement from a desire, or love, that is possessive, entangled, complex, selfish, and unfree to a desire that is fulfilled with union with Jesus Christ and others” (“Impasse and Dark Night,” 97).

<sup>39</sup> FitzGerald explains: “The contemplative love experience, which is beyond conscious control and is not given on demand, is concerned not for the image of God, as political theologians are, but with God, who does in the end transcend our images and expectations” (“Impasse and Dark Night,” 112).

<sup>40</sup> FitzGerald calls this the “unraveling or loss of memory” that occurs in the deepest stages of contemplation and which is necessary because, obsessed with the past and debilitated by “unforgettable suffering over losses and evil inflicted,” humans “block the limitless possibilities of God by living according to an expectation shaped, not by hope, but by our own desires, needs and past experiences” (“From Impasse to Prophetic Hope,” 23, 24, 32).

<sup>41</sup> FitzGerald, “The Desire for God,” 220. She references John of the Cross’ *The Living Flame of Love* 1.32 here.

#### D. Societal Contemplation

Therefore, in the face of the American societal impasse, FitzGerald does not call for “hard work, studies, statistics, rational analysis, and well-planned programs,”<sup>42</sup> but rather contemplation. She calls for contemplation, a form of awaiting that she associates with words such as “resting, tasting, ecstasy, being, delight, joy, and Lover/Beloved.”<sup>43</sup> These are words that, she recognizes, Americans are not used to living by. Nor will it be easy when, through the process of dark night, which can be painful, Americans come to understand the many ways in which their national vision has failed not only themselves individually, but also humanity as a whole and the earth itself. It is in dark night that they will hear the cry of the poor and oppressed, and in that cry, they will have to enter a time of “painful knowledge and deep purification of national desire and resolve.”<sup>44</sup> For as difficult as resting in the contemplative awaiting on God and for as painful as the purification of desire may be, FitzGerald writes that this time of dark contemplation is actually “an omen of radical revolution.”<sup>45</sup> In this time of contemplation God is emptying our collective caverns of desire, intellect and memory, and filling them with God’s own Self. What may arise through this contemplative revolution is impossible to even imagine on this side of darkness.

For as much as FitzGerald emphasizes the waiting upon or yielding to God in the impasse of dark night, there is one clear action she says this time necessitates: the educating of people, starting with young children, for contemplation. In fact, she proposes that “contemplation be seen as integral to human self-understanding and as an

---

<sup>42</sup> FitzGerald, “Impasse and Dark Night,” 105.

<sup>43</sup> FitzGerald, “Transformation in Wisdom,” 337.

<sup>44</sup> FitzGerald, “The Desire for God,” 216.

<sup>45</sup> FitzGerald, “The Desire for God,” 216.

absolute imperative of American education.”<sup>46</sup> How else will Americans learn to move through impasse? How else will they come to understand that beyond the principles of “first order change” there is the possibility for a much broader transformation of self and society? FitzGerald holds that we are at the cusp of an evolutionary leap that will allow us to proceed as an entirely new humanity,<sup>47</sup> but it can only happen through the personal and collective contemplative yielding to God:

Certainly without contemplative prayer and the transformation it really can effect, the deepest dimension of the human person and of humanity itself lies forever dormant and beyond our reach. But even more, without it the true evolutionary possibilities completely dependent on the inbuilt purpose and aspirations of the human soul are beyond us.<sup>48</sup>

The stakes are high. Should Americans – and by implication, the people of any nation – choose to continue to proceed solely on the principles of first order change – that is, only by hard work, studies, rational analysis, and well-planned programs – and refuse to move into a contemplative awaiting, FitzGerald sees the unfolding of destruction:

I often feel that only if we are prepared for transformation by contemplation and thereby given a new kind of consciousness and imagination will humanity and the earth, with its various eco-systems survive.<sup>49</sup>

She believes that if we can yield in contemplation, a jump in evolution is possible. If we refuse, our very survival is threatened. Thus, she holds that contemplation must be an absolute imperative in our educational system, and not only there, but in all societal life.<sup>50</sup>

---

<sup>46</sup> FitzGerald, “The Desire for God,” 221. There are organizations that are taking FitzGerald’s call to education for contemplation seriously (for example, see the “Institute for Communal Contemplation and Dialogue” – [www.iccdinstitute.org](http://www.iccdinstitute.org)), though these seem to be geared more toward adults than children.

<sup>47</sup> See FitzGerald, “The Desire for God,” 213-217.

<sup>48</sup> FitzGerald, “The Desire for God,” 215.

<sup>49</sup> FitzGerald, “The Desire for God,” 203.

<sup>50</sup> Thus she ends her essay, “Transformation in Wisdom,” with the following questions: “We are faced with a question repeatedly raised through the centuries by the contemplative tradition and repeatedly muted, suppressed, or ignored by the churches and society: is it time for a public contemplation, public education for contemplative prayer, that is, the integration into public life and education of a societal

### E. Assessment

FitzGerald's argument is radical in the extent to which it calls for contemplative yielding as the birthplace of an entirely new consciousness in humans. In contemplative yielding, she argues, a vision and a hope arise "that cannot be imagined this side of darkness."<sup>51</sup>

In the introductory chapter I explained that one of the major problems with the culture of consumerism is that it has a way of limiting our vision and imagination until only one major conception of the good life remains. This limitation of imagination, of what is conceivable, keeps us trapped in many of the unjust structures within which we live today, whether they are related to gender, race, economics, or ecology. In this sense, "the way things are" becomes the way things must inevitably be. If spirituality is to address this limitation of vision and imagination, then, it must do more than direct humanity to more sustainable and just ways of life. It must, in a very real way, altogether alter the realm of the conceivable so that new ways of understanding and living in the world arise – and in the case of the socio-ecological crisis, arise quickly (for we do not know how much longer the Earth can sustain our present practices).

Both of the theologians I have investigated in this dissertation understand the need to alter human vision and imagination. Hence McFague cautions us to be careful how we

---

understanding of the contemplative process of transformation, rather than a contemplative life largely hidden in the cloisters, hermitages, and ashrams of the world, muted by those who fear, however unconsciously, not only Divine Sophia but the evolutionary power of mystical transformation? And what would we have to do to achieve this if we believed it? What would educators in our schools and colleges do? What would business leaders meeting to discuss how to break the cycle of violence and bolster the economic vitality of our cities do? What agenda would politicians pursue? What would women's groups do? Where would Church leaders put their energies? What would each one of us do if we believed in the enormous power of contemplative transformation, transformation in Beloved Sophia?" (346-347; in this essay she discusses Jesus in terms of Divine Sophia/Wisdom).

<sup>51</sup> FitzGerald, "Impasse and Dark Night," 102.



interpret God and world – saying that “It *is* like that”<sup>52</sup> – and constructs metaphors and models that she believes will help us to more ethically minded visions of worldly reality. Meanwhile, Boff shows us that in the experience of God extraordinary new pathways to human consciousness are opened, namely, ones that involve unity, justice, and an ethos of care throughout the Earth. Though in different ways, then, both theologians’ spiritualities aim to move human beings from one type of vision that is pronouncedly individualistic, dualistic and hierarchical, to another type of vision that is attentive, interrelational, caring and responsible toward worldly life.

For as much as she may very well sympathize with these theologians’ conceptions of the new vision and ethical life to which we must move in this time of crisis,<sup>53</sup> FitzGerald ultimately proposes something more radical about what must happen to our vision and imagination today. She does not simply advocate that one vision be replaced with another – though indeed she believes this will happen – but rather asks that before we formulate our solutions and try to imagine new possibilities for the future, that we simply wait upon God. In this awaiting, when the ego stops demanding understanding in the name of control and predictability, when the path of deadly clarity fades, when the unfathomable Mystery beckons us onward and inward beyond calculation and fear, and when our collective caverns of desire, intellect and memory are filled with God’s own Self, she writes that a “vision of a different kind of future than the one we want to construct from our limited capabilities” arises.<sup>54</sup> Indeed, she holds that through

---

<sup>52</sup> McFague, *Life Abundant*, 66-67.

<sup>53</sup> Indeed, FitzGerald writes that in yielding to God in contemplation, humanity may very well move into something very much akin to what McFague and Boff hope for in their theologies: “the next evolutionary era when the universe will be experienced not as a collection of objects for human use and mastery but rather as an intimate, interconnected, and diverse communion of subjects” (“Transformation in Wisdom,” 284).

<sup>54</sup> FitzGerald, “From Impasse to Prophetic Hope,” 35.

contemplative yielding, God fills us until we are transfigured into the very shape – the “mirror”<sup>55</sup> or “shadow”<sup>56</sup> – of God. Through this transformation, we begin to operate by God’s imagination, which produces visions entirely unimaginable this side of darkness.

Thus, FitzGerald’s contemplative approach to spirituality moves us not from one human vision to another, but rather from human visions to “God’s view of things.”<sup>57</sup> She moves us even from the experience of God and into the realm of becoming as God is. In this way, she advocates not merely for the altering of imagination, but rather for its absolute metamorphosis in God. In her articulation of the contemplative awaiting and the profound transformation of imagination it does engender, then, she indicates that spirituality in the face of the socio-ecological crisis must be patient and persistently willing to be shaped by God’s grace into a better image and likeness of our creator. In turn, this spirituality may lead to a qualitatively different kind of humanity, one that lives by justice-filled visions and Earth-sustaining practices that can scarcely be imagined.

---

<sup>55</sup> FitzGerald, “Transformation in Wisdom,” 327-328.

<sup>56</sup> FitzGerald, “Transformation in Wisdom,” 340.

<sup>57</sup> FitzGerald, “The Desire for God,” 220.

## CONCLUSION

As we reach the conclusion of the dissertation, it should be evident that authentic Christian spirituality is powerful precisely because it can transform the very structure of human imagination. Its practice can precipitate the transition from being blinded and stuck in “the way things are,” to inhabiting a new consciousness and vision in God.

### A. Process

I came to perceive that the power of Christian spirituality hinges on imagination only slowly through the writing of this project. I could see that the spiritual drive – that fire and eros that we discussed in the introductory chapter – was intrinsic to human beings. Enough scholars agreed with this assumption to warrant naming it as a basic premise about spirituality in my dissertation. There was also significant consensus among Christian theologians that spirituality must be directed to God if it is to be healthy and life-giving, and thus I named this as my second premise about spirituality. As we have seen, both Sallie McFague and Leonardo Boff repeatedly articulate this second premise in their own theologies. But they are also very careful to show that a spirituality truly directed to God cannot neglect the world because God does not neglect it. I have argued that one of the special strengths of McFague’s body spirituality in particular is the very clear way in which she shows how Christians may live in and love both God and world, never one without the other.

Finally, I found significant agreement among scholars that Christian spirituality must be intentionally experienced for it to become transformative in people’s lives. Hence I named the ongoing experience of communion with God as my third premise regarding Christian spirituality. Though both McFague and Boff exemplify this aspect of

spirituality to some degree in their autobiographical statements and theologies, Boff is the one who most clearly and consistently explains how to experience God as the Reality and Mystery behind our every experience of the world. With Boff, moreover, it became clear that such an experience would be transformative not only of people but also of history. Thus, I came to see that spirituality, as an innate human drive, directed to God (though not at the neglect of the world), and consciously sought in the ongoing experience of communion with God could drastically move this world toward something better.

Nonetheless, it was only in reading Constance FitzGerald that I became truly cognizant that the transformation of people and history happens precisely because the experience (or no-experience) of God has a very special way of reshaping human consciousness and imagination. Moreover, with FitzGerald I began to see clearly that yielding and contemplative awaiting would be necessary if we were to begin operating by God's imagination rather than from our own limited egos and plans.

In truth, Boff talks about the transformation of human consciousness in his ecological theology as much as FitzGerald. Drawing from the new cosmology, they both also agree that as the new consciousness takes hold in human beings a "jump in evolution" will occur.<sup>1</sup> But to a great degree, Boff has already determined the outcome of this transformation, showing that the experience of Mystery in all things will lead people to an ecologico-social democracy dominated by an ethic of care. As I mentioned in Chapter Five, Boff seems to determine the validity of the mystical experience based on whether it produces the desired ethical and political consequences. He does not go as far as McFague who develops her theology, and consequently her spirituality, based on the

---

<sup>1</sup> For Boff, see Chapter Four, pg. 249. For FitzGerald, see Chapter Six, pg. 306.

functional outcome she wants it to produce. Boff privileges the spiritual experience more than the outcome. But he has determined the outcome.

I favor FitzGerald's approach to spirituality in this time of crisis above the respective approaches of McFague and Boff for the simple reason that she advocates yielding to God so that God's own imagination may determine the future. She illustrates clearly that regardless of our good intentions, a plan established prior to the purification of dark night remains a product of our own desires, images, ideas and memories. If we are to have "God's view of things," then our first step must be the contemplative awaiting that FitzGerald discusses. No matter how good the plans that McFague and Boff propose in their theologies are, they do not sufficiently account for the fact that before any good metaphor is established and before the outcome of the God experience can be determined, the contemplative surrender to God's imagination must take place.

Moreover, FitzGerald assures people that through the contemplative waiting upon God we *do* have access to God's own imagination. This assertion may stretch people's assumptions about what is possible in this life. But for FitzGerald this contact with "God's view of things" is the only way forward; our true evolutionary potential depends on it, as does the very survival of the planet. We know profound changes in human consciousness and behavior must take place in the face of the socio-ecological crisis. So far this change has not occurred to the degree it must. If humans are truly to be God's partners in creation (as McFague writes) and the created-creators (as Boff argues), then we must allow the caverns of our minds and hearts to be filled with God. We must surrender in the faith that, as FitzGerald argues, God's imagination will awaken in human consciousness.

Therefore, it is both her call to yielding and her radical faith that humans can live by divine consciousness that make FitzGerald so compelling in this time of socio-ecological crisis. However, I firmly believe that it would be a mistake to dismiss McFague's and Boff's significant contributions to spirituality. Indeed, looking at all three authors together, we see that Christian spirituality is capable of producing clear vision, transformation and hope inasmuch as (1) it challenges false social constructions; (2) orients people to loving God while caring for the wellbeing of the world; (3) shows them how to experience God's presence in their lives and understands the power of this experience to transform the course of history; and, most radically, (4) teaches people to yield to God so that God's own vision for the future may arise in human consciousness. I have argued that such a Christian spirituality is well equipped for birthing a new humanity – a new imagination – through the present socio-ecological crisis.

That said, the progression of the dissertation is not accidental. This project intentionally moves from McFague's tentative metaphorical approach in which God is never unqualifiedly known, to the bold metaphysical approach of Boff in which God is known in every experience of the world, to FitzGerald's contemplative approach in which God is not merely known but becomes the One through whom people know. With this, I do indicate that Boff more than McFague, and Fitzgerald more than Boff, illuminate the radical approach to Christian spirituality that is necessary given the present crisis. The more radical the approach to spirituality, the more radical its transformative power for human consciousness and imagination. For as much as I wish to hold all contributions in tension, then, I also mean to indicate that FitzGerald's contemplative approach is the most viable way to the drastic new beginnings required today.

## **B. Contributions**

Turning to the contribution I hope to have made with this dissertation, then, I point to three hopes. First, in the most basic sense, I hope to have brought about a deeper understanding of McFague's and Boff's theological systems, and their spiritualities in particular. To date, I have found no other study that addresses the development of their spiritualities throughout their theological careers, nor have I seen an extensive study of McFague's eco-spirituality. Therefore, this project offers an original contribution to the analysis of McFague's and Boff's work.

Second, with this dissertation I hope to challenge theologians, and all Christians, to keep the socio-ecological crisis at the forefront of their faith reflections. As McFague, Boff and FitzGerald all point out in different ways, love for God is inseparable from love for neighbor (both human and in nature). In order to face this crisis with clear vision, we have to recognize that the suffering of our Earth and human neighbors is no accident; that unjust structures are in place that privilege a few and stigmatize the many. Love of neighbor, then, means seeing the ways in which we have helped cause, through our participation in unjust structures, the oppression of our neighbors. It also means proceeding with the willingness to change these structures even if it means losing some of our own privilege in the process.

Finally, I hope this project has effectively pointed to the importance of Christian spirituality for helping people face the present crisis not only with clear vision, but also with transformative imagination and hope for a more compassionate and equitable future on this planet. I hope, in fact, that in some small way, this dissertation contributes to an understanding of abundance in God that far surpasses the abundance of things that comes

with excessive material consumption. In pointing to the importance of Christian spirituality, then, this dissertation aims to show that the hope and fresh imagination which the present crisis necessitates, arises in the experience of God's abundant love.

### **C. Future Questions**

More remains to be said. As I reflect on what areas I would like to pursue in future research, I see two possibilities especially. First, both theologians that I examined in this dissertation argue that there is something about the post-Enlightenment West that has precipitated our present socio-ecological crisis. In this dissertation I focused on the culture of consumerism as an immediate culprit of the crisis, but I recognize that this culture is itself the product of greater forces that make such behavior, in a sense, inevitable, or "the way things are." I am interested in examining what these greater forces are.

For example, I would like to consider further what Boff describes as the predominance of Logos (mental, analytical reason) and the lack of Pathos (feeling, intuition) and Eros (passion) in the way people have interacted with the world in the last four hundred years. Another way to say this is that there has been a dominance of the "masculine" (the head) and a suppression of the "feminine" (the heart). Boff shows that intellectual reason without its corresponding heart to help people feel empathy and compassion has resulted in mental dualisms, hierarchies, and the codifying and dividing of life until only a few can thrive. He encourages far more Pathos and Eros (the feminine) today so that a better balance between the mind and heart may come into being. I believe there is much wisdom in this argument. I would like to study the relationship between feeling/intuition and spirituality, or the way that spirituality, as the movement of



intuition, may balance and bring to health the mental reasoning which has so dominated in the last several hundred years.

Second, as I move beyond this project, I would like to investigate at a much deeper level the relationship between Christian spirituality and the transformation of human consciousness. This may involve further exploration into the theology of Teilhard de Chardin and the new science or new cosmology, which have profoundly influenced ecological theologians and contemplatives (including those investigated in this dissertation) to understand the nature and power of consciousness. My investigation into consciousness will also require a more profound reading of Christian contemplatives such as FitzGerald. These contemplatives write with a deep knowledge of the mystics who preceded them and they embody lives steeped in the spiritual experience (or no-experience) of God. As such, they become capable of revolutionizing our understanding of what our consciousness is capable of when surrendered to God's shaping. It is with such contemplatives that I would like to keep intellectual and spiritual company as I reflect on the imagination that we might enter as we move into the future.

Furthermore, I would like to investigate practical questions with respect to spirituality and consciousness. For example: How does spirituality shape and re-shape human consciousness? How might such a spirituality be practiced in the churches? How might this spirituality give us the eyes to see structural injustice and the imagination to re-conceive our ways of being in this world? In this way, my work would be not merely for the sake of intellectual curiosity, but so that others may practically benefit from and be transformed by whatever contribution my work may produce.

As I pursue any of this research, whether with respect to the socio-ecological crisis or human consciousness, there is a practice I wish to maintain. I wish to live a contemplative life, and to let this life shape my theology.

I have long been intrigued by the words of the Indian teacher and mystic, Paramahansa Hariharananda, who said: “Most people fail to find the Truth because they become lost in the forest of theology and travel from one thicket of theory to another.” Theologians are in the business of creating forests of theories around that which can never entirely be named, and it is indeed easy to get lost in these thickets of theories. Yet what are we to do if we still wish to speak about that which cannot be named, and if in that speaking we wish to point to the unnamable Truth? It would seem to me that theology can be a distraction just as it can be an important tool for pointing to the Truth. I believe that one important difference between a theology lost in itself and one transparent to God’s presence is that the latter is conceived in the contemplative waiting upon God.

In 2008 FitzGerald ended her keynote address to the Catholic Theological Society of America by saying: “From within the mystical tradition, you are being challenged to be contemplative theologians willing to be stretched beyond yourselves toward a new epiphany of the Holy, incomprehensible Mystery.”<sup>2</sup> This challenge stands not only for Catholic theologians, but for theologians of every denomination and creed. We are being challenged, through this crisis and by the contemplative tradition, to be stretched beyond ourselves so that our theologies may be shaped by God’s own imagination. It is my sincere hope that any theology I communicate remains steeped in contemplation. I would encourage other theologians to do the same.

---

<sup>2</sup> FitzGerald, “From Impasse to Prophetic Hope,” 42.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

## 1. PUBLICATIONS BY LEONARDO BOFF

“A Absoluta Frustração Humana.” *Vozes* 75 (1971): 68-72.

*A águia e a galinha: Uma metáfora da condição humana.* Petrópolis: Vozes, 1997.

*América Latina: Da conquista à nova evangelização.* São Paulo: Ática, 1992.

“A Christology Based on the Nazarene.” *Voices from the Third World* 30 no. 1 (2007): 21-27.

“Christ’s Liberation via Oppression: An Attempt at Theological Construction from the Standpoint of Latin America.” In *Frontiers of Theology in Latin America*, edited by Rosino Gibellini, 100-132. Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1979.

*Church, Charism and Power: Liberation Theology and the Institutional Church.* Translated by John W. Diercksmeier. New York: Crossroad, 1985.

“The Contribution of Brazilian Ecclesiology to the Universal Church.” In *Brazil: People and Church(es)*, edited by José Oscar Beozzo and Luis Carlos Susin, translated by Paul Burns, 78-83. London: SCM Press, 2002.

*Crise: Oportunidades de crescimento.* Campinas: Verus, 2002.

*Cry of the Earth; Cry of the Poor.* Translated by Phillip Berryman. Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1997.

*De la espiritualidad de la liberación a la práctica de la liberación: Hacia una espiritualidad latinoamericana.* Bogotá: Indo-American Press, 1981.

*Do iceberg à Arca de Noé: O nascimento de uma ética planetária.* Rio de Janeiro: Garamond, 2002.

*El destino del hombre y del mundo: Ensayo sobre la vocación humana.* Translated to Spanish by Juan Carlos Rodríguez Herranz. Bilbao: La Editorial Vizcaina, 1980.

*E a Igreja se fez povo; Ecclesiogênese: a Igreja que nasce da fé do povo.* Petrópolis: Vozes, 1986.

“Earth as Gaia: An Ethical and Spiritual Challenge,” translated by Paul Burns. In *Eco-Theology*, edited by Elaine Wainwright, Luis Carlos Susin, and Felix Wilfred, 24-32. London: SCM Press, 2009.

“Ecclesiogenesis: Ecclesial Basic Communities Re-Invent the Church.” *Midstream* 20 no. 4 (1981): 431-488.

*Ecology and Liberation: A New Paradigm*. Translated from Italian by John Cumming. Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1995.

*Encarnação: A humanidade e a jovialidade de nosso Deus*. Petrópolis: Vozes, 1977.

“La Era del Espíritu,” translated to Spanish by Antonio Pintor-Ramos. In *Panorama de la teología latinoamericana*, edited by Maximino Arias Reyero, 91-102. Salamanca: Ediciones Sígume, 1975.

*Espiritualidade: Um caminho de transformação*. Rio de Janeiro: Sextante, 2001.

*Essential Care: An Ethics of Human Nature*. Translation and notes by Alexandre Guilherme. London: SPCK, 2007.

“The Ethic of Care,” translated by Phillip Berryman. In *A Voice for Earth: American Writers Respond to the Earth Charter*, edited by Peter Blaze Corcoran and A. James Wohlpart, with editorial assistance by Brandon P. Hollingshead, 129-145. Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 2008.

*Ethos Mundial: Um consenso mínimo entre os humanos*. Rio de Janeiro: Sextante, 2003.

*Ética da vida*. Brasília: Letraviva, 1999.

*Ética e moral: A busca dos fundamentos*. Petrópolis: Vozes, 2003.

*O Evangelho do Cristo Cósmico. A realidade de um mito; O mito de uma realidade*. Petrópolis: Vozes, 1971.

*Experimentar Deus: A transparência de todas as coisas*. Campinas: Verus, 2002.

*Faith On The Edge: Religion and Marginalized Existence*. Translated by Robert R. Barr. San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1989.

*Feminino e masculino: Uma nova consciência para o encontro das diferenças*. (With Rose Marie Muraro). Rio de Janeiro: Sextante, 2002.

*Francisco de Assis: Saudades do paraíso*. Petrópolis: Vozes, 1985.

*Fundamentalism, Terrorism and the Future of Humanity*. Translation and notes by Alexandre Guilherme. London: SPCK, 2006.

*Global Civilization: Challenges to Society and to Christianity*. Translated by Alexandre Guilherme. London: Equinox, 2005.

*Globalização: Desafios socioeconômicos, éticos e educativos; Ima visão a partir do Sul.* (With Marcos Arruda). Petrópolis: Vozes, 2001.

*Holy Trinity, Perfect Community.* Translated by Phillip Berryman. Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2000.

*Homem: Satã ou Anjo Bom.* Rio de Janeiro: Editora Record, 2008.

“I Changed to Stay the Same (Why I Left The Priesthood),” translated by Francis McDonagh. In *Any Room for Christ in Asia?*, edited by Leonardo Boff and Virgil Elizondo, 144-148. Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1993.

“In the Chair of Galileo Galilei.” *Catholic New Times* 28 (Oct. 10, 2004), 12.

*Introducing Liberation Theology.* (With Clodovis Boff). Translated by Paul Burns. Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1990.

“Is the Cosmic Christ Greater than Jesus of Nazareth?,” translated by Paul Burns. In *Pluralist Theology: The Emerging Paradigm*, edited by Luis Carlos Susin, Andrés Torres Queiruga, and José María Vigil, 57-64. London: SCM Press, 2007.

*Jesus Christ Liberator: A Critical Christology for Our Time.* Translated by Patrick Hughes. Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1978.

*Liberating Grace.* Translated by John Drury. Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1979.

“Liberation Theology and Ecology: Alternative, Confrontation or Complementary?,” translated by Paul Burns. In *Ecology and Poverty: Cry of the Earth, Cry of the Poor*, edited by Leonardo Boff and Virgil Elizondo, 67-77. Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1995.

*Liberation Theology: From Dialogue to Confrontation.* (With Clodovis Boff). Translated by Robert R. Barr. San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1986.

“Masculino e feminino: O que é? Fragmentos de uma ontologia.” In *A mulher na igreja: presença e ação hoje*, edited by Jeanne M. Tierny et. al., 29-50. Petrópolis: Editora Vozes, 1976.

*The Maternal Face of God: The Feminine and Its Religious Expressions.* Translated by Robert Barr and John W. Diercksmeier. San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1987.

*Mística e Espiritualidade.* (With Frei Betto). Rio de Janeiro: Editora Rocco, 1994.

“The Need for Political Saints,” translated by Linde Rivera and León King. *Cross Currents* 30 no. 4 (Winter 1980-81): 369-376, 384.

*New Evangelization: Good News to the Poor.* Translated by Robert R. Barr. Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1991.

*Nova Era: A civilização planetária; Desafios à sociedade e ao cristianismo.* São Paulo: Ática, 1994.

*O oração no mundo secular: Desafio e chance* (with Ademar Spindeldreier and Hermógenes Harada). Petrópolis: Vozes, 1975.

“The Originality of the Theology of Liberation,” translated by Francis McDonagh. *The Future of Liberation Theology: Essays in Honor of Gustavo Gutiérrez*, edited by Marc H. Ellis and Otto Maduro, 38-48. Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1989.

*Passion of Christ, Passion of the World: The Facts, Their Interpretation, and Their Meaning Yesterday and Today.* Translated by Robert R. Barr. Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1987.

*The Path to Hope: Fragments from a Theologian's Journey.* Translated by Phillip Berryman. Maryknoll: Orbis, 1993.

“The Poor, the New Cosmology and Liberation,” translated by Carolyn Brissett and Berma Klein Goldewijk. In *Religion, International Relations and Development Cooperation*, edited by Berma Klein Goldewijk, 113-125. Wageningen: Wageningen Academic Publishers, 2007.

*The Prayer of Saint Francis: A Message of Peace for the World Today.* Translated by Phillip Berryman. Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2001.

*Praying With Jesus and Mary.* Translated by Theodore Morrow and Phillip Berryman. Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2005.

“Religious Life with the Latin American Setting: a Challenge and an Opportunity.” In *Witnessing to the Kingdom in a Dehumanizing World*, edited by Carlos Palmes et. al., 131-144. Canadian Religious Conference, 1975.

*Sacraments of Life; Life of the Sacraments.* Translated by John Drury. Washington D.C.: Pastoral Press, 1987.

*Saint Francis: A Model for Human Liberation.* Translated by John W. Diercksmeier. New York: Crossroad, 1982.

*Salvation and Liberation: In Search of a Balance between Faith and Politics.* (With Clodovis Boff). Translated by Robert R. Barr. Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1984.

“Salvation in Jesus Christ and the Process of Liberation,” translated by J. P. Donnelly. In *The Mystical and Political Dimension of the Christian Faith*, edited by Claude Geffré and Gustavo Gutiérrez, 78-91. New York: Herder and Herder, 1974.

“Social Ecology: Poverty and Misery.” In *Ecotheology: Voices From South and North*, edited by David G. Hallman, 235-247. Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1995.

“Society Doomed Without People of Vision,” translated by Alberta Piccolino. *National Catholic Reporter* (April 10, 1992): 2.

*The Tao of Liberation: Exploring the Ecology of Transformation*. (With Mark Hathaway). Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2009.

*Tempo de transcendência*. Rio de Janeiro: Sextante, 2000.

*Teología del cautiverio y de la liberación*. Translated to Spanish by Alfonso Ortiz García. Madrid: Ediciones Paulinas, 1978.

*Trinity and Society*. Translated by Paul Burns. Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1988.

“Um balanço de corpo e alma.” In *O que Ficou: Balanço aos 50*, edited by Leonardo Boff et. al., 11-29. Petrópolis: Vozes, 1989.

“The Uncompleted Vision of Vatican II: The Church – Hierarchy or People of God?,” translated by Paul Burns. In *The Non-Ordination of Women and the Politics of Power*, edited by Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza and Hermann Häring, 31-39. Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1999.

*Via-Sacra da justiça*. Petrópolis: Vozes, 1980.

*Vida segundo o Espírito*. Petrópolis: Vozes, 1981.

*A voz do arco-íris*. Brasília: Letraviva, 2000.

“Ways of Experiencing God Today,” translated by Hugh Hazelton. In *Religion in a Secular City: Essays in Honor of Harvey Cox*, edited by Arvind Sharma, 142-147. Harrisburg: Trinity Press International, 2001.

“What are Third World Theologies?,” translated by Paul Burns. In *Convergences and Differences*, edited by Leonardo Boff and Virgil Elizondo, 3-14. Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark LTD, 1988.

*When Theology Listens to the Poor*. Translated by Robert Barr. San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1988.

## 2. SECONDARY MATERIAL FOR LEONARDO BOFF

- Cleary, Edward L., ed. *Born of the Poor: The Latin American Church Since Medellín*. Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1990.
- Coakley, Sarah. "Mariology and 'Romantic Feminism': A Critique." In *Women's Voices: Essays in Contemporary Feminist Theology*, edited by Teresa Elwes, 97-110, 168-171. London: Marshall Publishing, 1992.
- Conn, Marie A. "The Sacramental Theology of Leonardo Boff." *Worship* 64 no. 6 (1990): 523-532.
- Cox, Harvey. *The Silencing of Leonardo Boff: The Vatican and the Future of World Christianity*. Oak Park: Meyer Stone Books, 1988.
- Dawson, Andrew. "Mystical Experience as Universal Connectedness: Leonardo Boff's 'Trans-Cultural Phenomenology.'" *Journal of Contemporary Religion* 19 no. 2 (2004): 155-169.
- Dunham, Scott. "Leonardo Boff's Ecological Theology and Christian Tradition." *Toronto Journal of Theology* 23 no. 1 (2007): 35-46.
- Eagleson, John and Philip Scharper. *Puebla and Beyond: Documentation and Commentary*. Translated by John Drury. Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1980.
- Forcano, Benjamín, ed. *Leonardo Boff: Teología de la liberación; Textos básicos; Proceso en Roma – Entrevistas; Situación actual*. Madrid: Editorial Nueva Utopía, 2007.
- Gutiérrez, Gustavo. *A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics, and Salvation*. Translated and edited by Sister Caridad Inda and John Eagleson. Revised 15<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Edition with a new introduction by the author. Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1988. Page references are to the 1988 edition.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *We Drink From Our Own Wells: The Spiritual Journey of a People*. Translated by Matthew J. O'Connell. 20<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Edition with a forward by Henry Nouwen and a new introduction by the author. Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2003. Page references are to the 2003 edition.
- Hebblethwaite, Peter. "Boff Leaves Priesthood and Order for 'Periphery.'" *National Catholic Reporter* (July 17, 1992): 12-13.
- Isherwood, Lisa. *Liberating Christ: Exploring the Christologies of Contemporary Liberation Movements*. Cleveland: The Pilgrim Press, 1999.



- Kadavil, Mathai. *The World As Sacrament: Sacramentality of Creation from the Perspectives of Leonardo Boff, Alexander Schmemmann and Saint Ephram*. Leuven: Peeters Leuven, 2005.
- Keller, Catherine. Review of *Ecology and Liberation: A New Paradigm*, by Leonardo Boff, and *Sustaining the Common Good: A Christian Perspective on the Global Economy*, by John B. Cobb. *The Journal of Religion* 78 no. 1 (1998): 134-137.
- McAfee Brown, Robert. "Leonardo Boff: Theologian for all Christians." *Christian Century* 103 no. 21 (Jl. 2-9, 1986): 615-617.
- Nordstokke, Kjell. *Council and Context in Leonardo Boff's Ecclesiology: The Rebirth of the Church among the Poor*. Translated by Brian MacNeil. Lewiston: The Edwin Mellen Press, 1996.
- Rivera Rodríguez, Luis R. "Anthropogenesis: The Theological Anthropology of Leonardo Boff." Ph.D. diss., The Harvard Divinity School, 1993.
- Schubeck, Thomas L. *Liberation Ethics: Sources, Models, and Norms*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993.
- Tamayo Acosta, Juan José. *Leonardo Boff: Ecología, mística y liberación*. Bilbao: Desclée de Brouwer, 1999.
- Vásquez Carballo, José Mario. *Trinidad y Sociedad: Implicaciones éticas y sociales en el pensamiento trinitario de Leonardo Boff*. Salamanca: Secretariado Trinitario, 2008.
- Westphal, Euler Renato. "O pensar sacramental em Leonardo Boff." *Vox Scripturae* 16 no. 1 (2008): 74-91.
- Zachariah, George K. "Towards a Theology of Life: Ecological Perspectives in Latin American Liberation Theology with Special Reference to the Theology of Leonardo Boff." *Theologies and Cultures* 4 no. 1 (2007): 87-118.

### 3. PUBLICATIONS BY SALLIE MCFAGUE

- Blessed Are the Consumers: Climate Change and the Practice of Restraint*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2013.
- The Body of God: An Ecological Theology*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993.
- "Conversion: Life on the Edge of the Raft." *Interpretation* 32 no. 3 (1978): 255-268.

- “Cosmology and Christianity: Implications of the Common Creation Story for Theology.” In *Theology at the End of Modernity: Essays in Honor of Gordon D. Kaufman*, edited by Sheila Greeve Davaney, 19-40. Philadelphia: Trinity Press International, 1991.
- “An Earthly Theological Agenda.” *Christian Century* 108 no. 1 (Ja. 1-9, 1991): 12-15.
- “An Ecological Christology: Does Christianity Have It?” In *Christianity and Ecology: Seeking the Well-Being of Earth and Humans*, edited by Dieter T. Hessel and Rosemary Radford Ruether, 29-45. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000.
- “The Ethic of God as Mother, Lover and Friend.” In *Feminist Theology: A Reader*, edited by Ann Loades, 255-274, 317-321. Louisville: John Knox Press, 1990.
- “Global Warming: A Theological Problem and Paradigm.” In *Shaping a Global Theological Mind*, edited by Darren C. Marks, 109-112. Aldershot: Ashgate, 2008.
- “God as Mother.” In *Weaving the Visions: New Patterns in Feminist Spirituality*, edited by Carol P. Christ and Judith Plaskow, 139-162. San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1989.
- “God’s Household: Christianity, Economics, and Planetary Living.” In *Subverting Greed: Religious Perspectives on the Global Economy*, edited by Paul F. Knitter and Chandra Muzaffar, 119-136. Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2002.
- “Holy Spirit.” In *Dictionary of Feminist Theologies*, edited by Letty Manderville Russell and J. Shannon Clarkson, 146-147. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996.
- “Human Beings, Embodiment, and Our Home the Earth.” In *Reconstructing Christian Theology*, edited by Rebecca S. Chopp and Mark L. Taylor, 141-169. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1994.
- “Human Dignity and the Integrity of Creation.” In *Theology That Matters: Ecology, Economy, and God*, edited by Darby Kathleen Ray, 199-212. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2006.
- “Ian Barbour: Theologian’s Friend, Scientist’s Interpreter.” *Zygon* 31 no. 1 (1996): 21-28.
- “Imaging a Theology of Nature: The World as God’s Body.” In *Liberating Life: Contemporary Approaches to Ecological Theology*, edited by Charles Birch, William Eakin, and Jay B. McDaniel, 201-227. Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1990.
- “Imaging God and ‘A Different World.’” In *A Different World Is Possible*, edited by Luiz Carlos Susin, Jon Sobrino and Felix Wilfred, 42-50. London: SCM Press: 2004.

- “An ‘Intermediary Theology’: In Service of the Hearing of God’s Word.” *Christian Century* 92 no.23 (Jn. 25-Jl. 2, 1975): 625-629.
- “Intimate Creation: God’s Body, Our Home.” *Christian Century* 119 no. 6 (Mr. 13-20, 2002): 36-45.
- “Intimations of Transcendence: Praise and Compassion.” In *Transcendence and Beyond: A Postmodern Inquiry*, edited by John D. Caputo and Michael J. Scanlon, 151-168. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2007.
- “Is God In Charge? Creation and Providence.” In *Essentials of Christian Theology*, edited by William C. Placher, 101-116. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2003.
- “Learning for the Whole Person,” *Religion in Life* 45 no. 2 (1976): 161-173.
- Life Abundant: Rethinking Theology and Economy for a Planet in Peril*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001.
- “The Loving Eye vs. the Arrogant Eye: Christian Critique of the Western Gaze on Nature and the Third World.” *The Ecumenical Review* 49 no. 2 (1997): 185-193.
- Metaphorical Theology: Models of God in Religious Language*. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1982.
- “Models of God for an Ecological, Evolutionary Era: God as Mother of the Universe.” In *Physics, Philosophy, and Theology: A Common Quest for Understanding*, edited by Robert J. Russell, William R. Stoeger, and George V. Coyne, 249-271. Vatican City State: Vatican Observatory, 1988.
- Models of God: Theology for an Ecological, Nuclear Age*. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987.
- “Mother God.” In *Motherhood: Experience, Institution, Theology*, edited by Anne Carr and Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, 138-143. Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1989.
- A New Climate for Theology: God, the World, and Global Warming*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2008.
- “Parable, Metaphor, and Narrative.” *Homiletic* 2 (1977): iii-vi.
- “Response.” *Religion and Intellectual Life* 5 no. 3 (1988): 38-44.
- Speaking in Parables: A Study in Metaphor and Theology*. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1975.

“A Square in the Quilt: One Theologian’s Contribution to the Planetary Agenda.” In *Spirit and Nature: Why the Environment Is a Religious Issue: An Interfaith Dialogue*, edited by Steven C. Rockefeller and John C. Elder, 40-58. Boston: Beacon Press, 1992.

*Super, Natural Christians: How We Should Love Nature*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997.

“The Theologian As Advocate.” *Theological Education* 25 no. 2 (1989): 79-97.

“The World as God’s Body.” *Christian Century* 105 no. 22 (Jl. 20-27, 1988), 671-673.

#### 4. SECONDARY MATERIAL FOR SALLIE MCFAGUE

Barbour, Ian G. *Religion In An Age of Science: The Gifford Lectures 1989-1991*. Vol. 1. New York: Harper & Row, 1990.

Black, Max. *Models and Metaphors: Studies in Language and Philosophy*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1962.

Bracken, Joseph A. “Images of God Within Systematic Theology.” *Theological Studies* 63 no. 2 (2002): 362-373.

Brennan, Margaret. “Christology and Spirituality.” *Toronto Journal of Theology* 16 no. 1 (2000): 27-38.

Bromell, David J. “Sallie McFague’s ‘Metaphorical Theology.’” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 61 no. 3 (1993): 485-503.

Bryant, David J. “God’s Body or Beloved Other? Sallie McFague and Jürgen Moltmann on God and Creation.” In *Theology as Conversation: The Significance of Dialogue in Historical and Contemporary Theology*, edited by Bruce L. McCormack and Kimlyn J. Bender, 179-193. Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 2009.

Carroll, B. Jill. “Models of God or Models of Us? On the Theology of Sallie McFague.” *Encounter* 52 no. 2 (1991): 183-196.

Chapman, G. Clarke, Jr. “Speaking of God in a Nuclear Age.” *Anglican Theological Review* 73 no. 3 (1991): 250-266.

Dehmlow Witt, Cynthia Beth. “Epistemology in the Theological Writings of Rosemary Radford Ruether, Sallie McFague and Carter Heyward.” Ph.D. diss., The Claremont Graduate School, 1995.

Finger, Thomas. "Trinity, Ecology and Panentheism." *Christian Scholar's Review* 27 no. 1 (1997): 74-98.

French, William C. "The World as God's Body: Theological Ethics and Panentheism." In *Broken and Whole: Essays on Religion and the Body*, edited by Maureen A. Tilley and Susan A. Ross, 135-144. Lanham: University Press of America, 1994.

Gerhart, Mary and Allan Russell. *Metaphoric Process: The Creation of Scientific and Religious Understanding*. Fort Worth: Texas Christian University Press, 1984.

Haraway, Donna. "Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective." *Feminist Studies* 14 no. 3 (1988): 575-599.

Harding, Sandra. *Whose Science? Whose Knowledge? Thinking from Women's Lives*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991.

Immink, F. G. "Theism and Christian Worship." In *Christian Faith and Philosophical Theology*, edited by Gijsbert van den Brink, Luco J. van den Brom and Marcel Sarot, 116-136. Kampen: Kok Pharos Publishing House, 1992.

Kaufman, Gordon D. "Models of God: Is Metaphor Enough?" *Religion and Intellectual Life* 5 no. 3 (1988): 11-18.

\_\_\_\_\_. *The Theological Imagination: Constructing the Concept of God*. Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1981.

Kimel, Alvin F., Jr., ed. *Speaking the Christian God: The Holy Trinity and the Challenge of Feminism*. Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1992.

Kwok Pui-Lan. "Response to Sallie McFague." In *Christianity and Ecology: Seeking the Well-Being of Earth and Humans*, edited by Dieter T. Hessel and Rosemary Radford Ruether, 47-50. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000.

Lakoff, George and Mark Johnson. *Metaphors We Live By*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1980.

Long, D. Stephen. "Fetishizing Feuerbach's God: Contextual Theologies as the End of Modernity." *Pro Ecclesia* 12 no. 4 (2003): 447-472.

McWilliams, Warren. "Christic Paradigm and Cosmic Christ: Ecological Christology in the Theologies of Sallie McFague and Jürgen Moltmann." *Perspectives in Religious Studies* 25 no. 4 (1998): 341-355.

Need, Stephen W. "Language, Metaphor, and Chalcedon: A Case of Theological Double Vision." *Harvard Theological Review* 88 no. 2 (1995): 237-255.

- O'Connor, June. "Sensuality, Spirituality, Sacramentality." *Union Seminary Quarterly Review* 40 no. 1-2 (1985): 59-70.
- Peters, Ted. "McFague's Metaphors." *Dialog* 27 no. 2 (1988): 131-140.
- Ray, Darby Kathleen, ed. *Theology That Matters: Ecology, Economy, and God*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2006.
- Ress, Mary Judith. *Ecofeminism in Latin America*. Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2006.
- Reynolds, Terrence. "Two McFagues: Meaning, Truth, and Justification in *Models of God*." *Modern Theology* 11 no. 3 (1995): 289-313.
- Ricoeur, Paul. "Biblical Hermeneutics." *Semeia* no. 4 (1975): 29-148.
- Ricoeur, Paul. "Creativity in Language: Word, Polysemy, Metaphor." *Philosophy Today* 17 no. 2 (1973): 97-111.
- Ricoeur, Paul. *The Rule of Metaphor: Multi-Disciplinary Studies of the Creation of Meaning in Language*. Translated by K. McLaughlin and J. Costello. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1977.
- Ruether, Rosemary Radford. "Models of God: Exploding the Foundations." *Religion and Intellectual Life* 5 no. 3 (1988): 19-23.
- Runzo, Joseph. Review of *Models of God for an Ecological, Nuclear Age*, by Sallie McFague. *Faith and Philosophy* 7 no. 3 (1990): 364-368.
- Schaab, Gloria L. "Of Models and Metaphors: The Trinitarian Proposals of Sallie McFague and Elizabeth A. Johnson." *Theoforum* 33 no. 2 (2002): 213-234.
- Schrein, Shannon. *Quilting and Braiding: The Feminist Christologies of Sallie McFague and Elizabeth A. Johnson in Conversation*. Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1998.
- Smith Holt, Sally. "Practicing Spiritual Disciplines in Relationship to Creation." *Review and Expositor* 102 no. 1 (Winter 2005): 25-46.
- Tatman, Lucy. *Knowledge That Matters: A Feminist Theological Paradigm and Epistemology*. Cleveland: The Pilgrim Press, 2001.
- Tracy, David. "Metaphor and Religion: The Test Case of Christian Texts." In *On Metaphor*, edited by Sheldon Sacks, 89-104. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1978.
- \_\_\_\_\_. "Models of God: Three Observations." *Religion and Intellectual Life* 5 no. 3 (1988): 24-28.

Webb, Stephen H. "Should We Love All of Nature? A Critique of Sallie McFague's *Super, Natural Christians*." *Encounter* 59 no. 3 (1998): 409-419.

Wells, Harold. "The Flesh of God: Christological Implications for an Ecological Vision of the World." *Toronto Journal of Theology* 15 no. 1 (1999): 51-68.

Westley, Claire Marie. "The Spirit of Life: The Pneumatology of Jürgen Moltmann in Dialogue with the Feminist Theologies of the Spirit of Elizabeth A. Johnson and Sallie McFague." Ph.D. diss., The University of St. Michael's College and Toronto School of Theology, 2006.

Wheelwright, Philip. *Metaphor and Reality*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1962.

## 5. OTHER MATERIAL

Aguilar, Mario I. *Contemplating God, Changing the World*. London: SPCK, 2008.

Coakley, Sarah. *Powers and Submissions: Spirituality, Philosophy and Gender*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2002.

Curry, Patrick. *Ecological Ethics: An Introduction*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2006.

Dreyer, Elizabeth and Mark S. Burrows, ed. *Minding the Spirit: The Study of Christian Spirituality*. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2004.

Egan, Harvey. *Christian Mysticism: The Future of a Tradition*. New York: Pueblo Publishing Company, 1984.

FitzGerald, Constance. "A Discipleship of Equals: Voices from Tradition – Teresa of Avila and John of the Cross." In *A Discipleship of Equals: Towards a Christian Feminist Spirituality*, edited by Francis A. Eigo, 63-97. Villanova: Villanova University Press, 1988.

\_\_\_\_\_. "From Impasse to Prophetic Hope: Crisis of Memory." *CTSA Proceedings* 64 (2009): 21-42.

\_\_\_\_\_. "The Desire for God and the Transformative Power of Contemplation." In *Light Burdens, Heavy Blessings: Challenges of Church and Culture in the Post Vatican II Era*, edited by Mary Heather MacKinnon, Moni McIntyre and Mary Ellen Sheehan, 202-222. Quincy: Franciscan Press, 2000.

- \_\_\_\_\_. "Impasse and Dark Night." In *Living With Apocalypse: Spiritual Resources for Social Compassion*, edited by Tilden H. Edwards, 93-116. San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1984.
- \_\_\_\_\_. "Passion in the Carmelite Tradition: Edith Stein," *Spiritus* 2 no. 2 (2002): 217-235.
- \_\_\_\_\_. "Transformation in Wisdom: The Subversive Character and Educative Power of Sophia in Contemplation." In *Carmel and Contemplation: Transforming Human Consciousness*, edited by Kevin Culligan and Regis Jordan, 281-358. Washington: ICS Publications, 2000.
- Gnanadason, Aruna. *Listen to the Women! Listen to the Earth!* Geneva: WCC Publications, 2005.
- Goizueta, Roberato S. *Caminemos Con Jesús: Toward a Hispanic/Latino Theology of Accompaniment*. Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1995.
- Gottlieb, Roger S., ed. *This Sacred Earth: Religion, Nature, Environment*. New York: Routledge, 2004.
- Hinze, Bradford E. "Ecclesial Impasse: What Can We Learn from Our Laments?" *Theological Studies* 72 no. 3 (2011): 470-495
- John of the Cross, *The Collected Works of Saint John of the Cross*. Translated by Kieran Kavanaugh and Otilio Rodriguez, with revisions and introductions by Kieran Kavanaugh. Washington D.C.: ICS Publications, 1991.
- Johnson, Elizabeth. *Consider Jesus: Waves of Renewal in Christology*. New York: Crossroad, 2004.
- Massingale, Bryan. "Healing a Divided World," *Origins* 37 no. 11 (2007): 161-168.
- \_\_\_\_\_. "The Scandal of Poverty; 'Cultured Indifference' and the Option for the Poor Post-Katrina." *Journal of Religion and Society* Supplement Series 4 (2008): 55-72.
- McGinn, Bernard. *The Doctors of the Church: Thirty-Three Men and Women Who Shaped Christianity*. New York: Crossroad, 1999.
- McIntosh, Mark A. *Mystical Theology: The Integrity of Spirituality and Theology*. Malden: Blackwell Publishers, 1998.
- Petrella, Ivan. *Beyond Liberation Theology: A Polemic*. London: SCM Press, 2008.
- Rolheiser, Ronald. *The Holy Longing: The Search for a Christian Spirituality*. New York: Doubleday, 1999.



- Ruffing, Janet K., ed. *Mysticism and Social Transformation*. With Forward by Robert J. Egan. Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2001.
- Schneiders, Sandra M. "Christian Spirituality: Definition, Methods and Types." In *The Westminster Dictionary of Christian Spirituality*, edited by Philip Sheldrake, 1-6. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005.
- \_\_\_\_\_. "Religion vs. Spirituality: A Contemporary Conundrum." *Spiritus* 3 (2003): 163-185.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Written That You May Believe: Encountering Jesus in the Fourth Gospel*. With study guide by John C. Wronski. New York: Crossroad, 2003.
- Sung, Jung Mo. "Theology, Spirituality and the Market." In *Another Possible World*, edited by Marcella Maria Althaus-Reid, Ivan Petrella, Luiz Carlos Susin, 67-79. London: SCM Press, 2007.
- Sustainable World Coalition. *Sustainable World Sourcebook*. Hiawatha: J&A Printing, Inc., 2010.
- Underhill, Evelyn. *The Mystics of the Church*. New York: Schocken Books, 1964. First published in 1925 by James Clarke & Company, Ltd. Page references are to the 1964 edition.
- Wright, Wendy M. *The Essential Spirituality Handbook*. Liguori: Liguori Publications, 2009.