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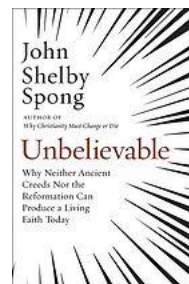
Book Review

A New Climate for Christology: Kenosis, Climate Change, and Befriending Nature

Sallie McFague

Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2021.

In 2022 a Pew Research Center Study found that “highly religious Americans – those who pray daily, regularly attend religious services and consider religion crucial in their lives -- are far less likely than other U.S. adults to express concern about global warming.”¹ While close to three-quarters of religiously affiliated Americans “say the earth is sacred,” those religious Americans who show little or no concern about climate change also believe “there are much bigger problems in the world, that *God is in control of the climate, and that they do not believe the climate is actually changing*” (emphasis added). This paradox is the theological disconnection that led Sally McFague to write her recent book *A New Climate for Christology: Kenosis, Climate Change, and Befriending Nature*. The traditional Christian story about Jesus is no longer adequate to understand the world nor to address the existential threat of the climate crisis. McFague argues, “We need a new basic model, paradigm, of the relationship of God and the world” (p. 2).



A respected and renowned eco-feminist theologian, Sallie McFague had a long teaching and administrative career at Vanderbilt University Divinity School. In 2000, McFague was appointed the Distinguished Theologian-in-Residence at the Vancouver School of Theology. Much of her work focused on the role of theological language, the importance of metaphors, and the way our narratives impact our relationship with God and the world. McFague died in Vancouver in November 2019. The final manuscript for this book was completed before she died. This timely volume brings together many of her previous themes from a lifetime of theological, feminist, and ecological thinking.

McFague begins by making a theological case for a new Christological narrative. McFague argues that the current traditional version of the Christian story arose from the experience of the Enlightenment and modernity. For McFague, the “traditional story goes something like this: Jesus, the Son of God—and hence God’s embassy—dies on a cross for the sins of all human beings, past, present, and future. Thus, the all-powerful God’s honor has been saved by his Son’s substitutionary atonement, and we human beings are granted eternal life in heaven” (p. 24).

This version of the Christian account focuses on our largely passive acceptance of the divine gift of individual redemption and hopefully leads to a life of grateful response. This traditional version, in McFague’s view, overemphasizes the transcendence of God. Such an account has an “imperial” understanding of power where God exercises salvific power over individual human beings to reconcile their broken relationship with a distinct divine transcendent being. This is a narrative found largely in the Western Christian tradition. McFague believes that such a traditional theology no longer works in the face of climate change. The sacred story doesn’t cohere with what evolutionary science understands as a

¹ Alper, Becka A. “How Religion Intersects With Americans’ Views on the Environment.” Pew Research Center, November 2022, <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2022/11/17/how-religion-intersects-with-americans-views-on-the-environment>

natural cycle of life, death, and rebirth. She finds a more appropriate narrative in the incarnation and self-giving life or kenosis of Jesus. Her proposed new Christology represents “an inversion of the power in the monarchical model in preference for a kenotic, sacrificial model, ‘a joyous, kind and loving attitude that is willing to give up selfish desires and make sacrifices on behalf of others for the common good and the glory of God’” (pp. 10–11).

McFague finds some deep resonances in the Eastern Orthodox Christian traditions for this kenotic theology. In contrast to a traditional Christian story that emphasizes transcendence, kenotic theology “demands that we start and stay with immanence,” the “worldly, fleshy, messy, despairing side of God” (p. 16). “A kenotic Christianity is rooted in the Trinitarian mystery” which is “evident in the creation and redemption of the world” (p. 23). The three persons of the Trinity are by their very nature relational.

A key difference between the traditional story and a kenotic narrative is the understanding of Jesus’s power as “expressed in weakness and vulnerability” (p. 25). In McFague’s view, a kenotic theology offers an interesting twist on the traditional understanding of the incarnation. The “incarnation is not a ‘second thought’ to repair the broken relationship between God and humans due to our sin, but it is what God planned from the beginning: that human beings (along with all other creatures) be invited to live God’s life” (p. 28).

As McFague summarizes: “while in the West, the goal of theology is redemption from sins for individuals, in the East, the goal is an invitation to the entire creation to live by participating in God’s own life.” The traditional story is largely individualistic while a kenotic story is primarily relational. With its relational emphasis, a relational kenotic Christology can speak powerfully to Christians today amidst a postmodern reality. In McFague’s argument, “... this main point is critical: we cannot live alone. In fact, both religion (Christianity) and science tell us the same thing: ‘individualism’ is a false story, whereas radical interrelationship is at the heart of both science and most religious stories” (p. 42). For McFague, “kenosis is not only an explanation of Jesus’ real humanity, but it is also the pattern of all reality” (p. 11). This is important for McFague since we encounter God in the world and nature, not in some other-worldly transcendent search. McFague grounds transcendence (God is beyond the world) in immanence (God is in everything in the world). Paul Tillich referred to this as “panentheism” whereby, he argues, “the finite is the bearer of the infinite.” For McFague this is where the sacred kenotic story and the scientific evolutionary narrative converge and align. McFague refers to Mary-Jane Rubenstein’s concept of *transimmanence*, “meaning the profound enfolding of the transcendent in the immanent,” to capture this idea (p. 55).

McFague then asks, what can be learned from postmodernism? Her answer is relationality (p. 53). McFague points out that people are both the product of the evolutionary dynamics of life, death, and rebirth as well as creators—“players”—in shaping God’s world. Citing Timothy Morton’s idea of “ecological thought,” humans move from a transcendent position outside or over nature to a “more honest place of being ‘inside’ nature” along with other creatures and beings (p. 46). McFague appeals to Karen Barad’s “agential realism” where the immanentalism operating through the dynamics of difference (diffraction) rather than sameness (reflection) leads to a world where agency involves everything that matters and where “everything is becoming.” Much like origami, our world is “folding and unfolding with the same recycled material into different shapes and modes of complexity,” an interrelated “biocracy” where creation itself has “intrinsic values and rights” (p. 53).

McFague's idea of a new worldview stresses interdependence. "Relationality" is the important measure of McFague's kenotic theology. McFague maintains that postmodernism has taught us that the "world is alive" (p. 65). Such a worldview must be accompanied by a kenotic Christology that "focuses on sacrifice and new life as the form of action that we find everywhere in the natural world" (p. 56).

In an interesting section of the book, McFague points to the importance of *touch* rather than thinking as a mark of human agency. Touch expresses the centrality of *with-ness*. McFague shifts away from Descartes's Enlightenment anthropology, "I think, therefore I am," to what she calls "a concrete, embodied sense of self, 'I am touched and touch, therefore I am'" (p. 58). Such a postmodern reorientation moves us away from an anthropocentric theology toward a panentheistic kenotic theology. For McFague, "We can no longer assume that the world is composed of us, the one living subject, with everything else objects for our use. Now we must realize that the world is composed of many subjects with whom we relate in different ways" (p. 65).

Based upon much of her earlier work, McFague suggests that the aptest metaphor for God in these postmodern times is that of "Friend." "God the Father" represents an outdated imperial model (e.g., Lord, King, Master). "God as Friend," on the other hand, is marked by the "qualities of inclusion, affection, respect, self-sacrifice, and partnership" that "underscores the adult nature of the relationship between God and human beings" (p. 72). Such a more mature "adult relationship" is necessary to enable us to address the climate crisis. As McFague writes, "God is coming, will come, can come, but only if we friends help God come, only if we hold up our end of the covenant by witnessing to the love and justice in the world" (p. 83).

If humanity in general and Christians in particular are to address the climate crisis, McFague concludes that we have to advocate a new worldview that turns us away from radical individualism toward a more Christological kenotic type of self-sacrificial and self-emptying love for others and God's world. While it may not be the only narrative, this is a sacred story worth offering in the current context.

A New Climate for Christology comes at an important time in the debate about how the world works and what our role is in preserving the kind of world God wants. McFague reminds us of some important aspects of fruitful theological deliberation.

Firstly, theology is a living discipline that needs to change and evolve while at the same time maintaining a continuity with the tradition of those before us who have struggled with similar questions. McFague notes that "Eighteenth-century Enlightenment assumptions about the value of the individual were a real gift of interpretation in contrast to the medieval worldview that buried the individual beneath hierarchies and myths" (p. 91). She does see a prior utility in the traditional story, but that theological moment has passed.

Secondly, a theology narrative that seeks meaning, purpose, and direction and a science that seeks to understand the natural world must align and cohere to be publicly credible and meaningfully useful. McFague maintains, "A religious story cannot be persuasive if it is too far from the science of its time, and for us, this means recognizing evolution and the sacrificial pattern to life that it embodies (p. 90). McFague's important reminder is that theology is a cross-disciplinary and cross-referencing exercise if it is to foster a purposeful understanding of daily life.

Thirdly, at its core McFague's *transimmanent kenotic* theological approach must offer a credible worldview (or narrative) that explains how the world works and how it ought to

work. In the face of the existential threat of the climate crisis, McFague reminds the faithful that the Christian sacred story matters today. It is tempting to dive into or lament the mechanics of the issues around the climate crisis. While the details matter, McFague warns that it is “necessary for theologians to work with the basic worldview of our time; otherwise, the story of our faith will not be credible, nor will it be effective against climate change” (p. 99).

McFague’s analysis does pose an interesting conundrum for practitioners of a panentheistic kenotic theology. The public truthfulness of such a theological approach is not in how it is enunciated, but more importantly how it is heard or received as authoritative civic wisdom. Religious polarization means the audience for such a message is much more diverse today. Research by the Christian research organization Cardus in 2022 has identified at least four “portraits of spirituality” in Canada: the Religiously Committed (16%), Privately Faithful (19%), Spiritually Uncertain (47%), and the Non-Religious (19%).² These are diverse audiences who may well hear this message quite differently. Practitioners will need to be more multi-lingual in addressing these various diverse public audiences.

A real challenge for preachers will be to move the faithful who have been steeped in the traditional narrative. Bishop John Shelby Spong (along with others) has noted the theological gap between the academy and the pew. Spong points to the problem: “clergy are either unable or unwilling to engage the great theological issues of the day because of their perception that to do so will ‘disturb the faith and beliefs’ of their people.”³

McFague’s theological shift may be disturbing. Nonetheless, many would agree that such a disruption is urgent and necessary in the current moment. McFague rightly points out: “Our planet is certainly at one of its crucial ‘turning points.’ Unless we wake up, spurn denial, and ready ourselves for serious kenotic (sacrificial) action, (all) life on our planet will deteriorate” (p. ix).

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² Pennings, Ray, and Jenisa Los. “The Shifting Landscape of Faith in Canada.” Cardus, 2022. <https://www.cardus.ca/research/spirited-citizenship/reports/the-shifting-landscape-of-faith-in-canada>.

³ Spong, John Shelby. 2018. *Unbelievable: Why Neither Ancient Creeds nor the Reformation Can Produce a Living Faith Today*. New York NY: HarperOne, 2018. Ebook, chap 1, para 7.