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[Religion](#), [Christianity](#)



Kevin Noble 12/03/12 Models of God Critical Analysis For my final essay assignment I have chosen to analyze Sallie McFague and her book, Models of God. She discusses many points in her book, starting with the world at large. McFague, being a Feminist post modern theologian, questions the way our faith is viewed today as well as tries to come up with her own explanation of what we view as religion and religious ideas today. She questions the decisions of society as a whole, much as Reinhold Niebuhr did as well. I feel her theology most closely relates to that of Niebuhrs compared to the rest of the books we read in class this semester. I say this because McFague really strongly believes in this metaphorical theology. Niebuhr also had an abstract idea with his social group theory and the herd mentality. These both are applied to other people and the way they are thinking rather abstractly. This is quite interesting and the reason I chose to write about Sallie McFagues Metaphorical Theology. I'd like to use all of her ideas expressed in the book to help explain how broad her theology really is with the label of metaphorical theology. She uses metaphors to describe the relationship between spirituality and the individual. These metaphors spread across an array of topics, from the world being God's body, to Gods relationship with each human being as either a mother, lover, or friend. It is quite radical compared to old school thought and makes perfect sense for the twentieth and twenty first centuries. McFague begins with a short introduction where she introduces her motivation for creating this theology as well as her reasoning for it. She begins to tell the reader how she believes that currently the two greatest challenges facing our world are the human destruction of the environment and the threat of nuclear holocaust. Her theology must take

these issues into account as it attempts to make the Christian faith understandable and relevant for the contemporary world. Specifically, theology must ask itself what role it has played in the development of the situation we now face and what impact it will have on these two issues in the future. One way theology could speak in a relevant manner to these pressing issues would be to develop a new understanding of the relationship between God and the world that can transform human attitudes towards nature. Her new school method gives a new systematic way of imagining the relationship between God and the world through her metaphorical theology. McFague's alternative purpose in the introduction is to show the relation between her theology and the issues pressing the world today. With that, I will try to analyze the way her Metaphorical Theology shines through in each aspect of her book. The second chapter in the book begins to explain McFague's Metaphorical Theology. This is the overlying theme to her whole theology I feel. It drives the other aspects of her thought and is the structure for her other ideas such as God as the Body, Lover, Mother, and Friend. According to McFague, what we know of God is a construction, and must be understood as exactly and only that, an interpretation. God as father, as shepherd, as friend, but not literally any of these. Although these habits of language can be useful as many people view God in a more personal sense. They can also become constricting when there is an insistence that God is always and only like this. She sets the table with what she feels a proper religion might entail, citing pg 32 where she says, " A credible theology for our time must be characterized by a sense of our intrinsic interdependence with all forms of life, an inclusive vision that demolishes oppressive

hierarchies, accepts responsibility for nurturing and fulfilling life in its many forms, and is open to change and novelty as given of existence. " She feels while her metaphorical theology does a decent job of constructing a metaphorical enterprise to base ones religious decisions off of, it may not be acceptable to cover the character of individuals theologies. I found this interesting as her theology does a good job of outlining a plan for people who follow. It allows for the bible to still be the center of the religion and a guide. She wants people to think of the bible and her metaphors in a new way though, one in which people are searching for contemporary life and images to help describe their theological metaphors rather than expressing their Christianity in a uniform " old school" way. She wants everyone to be individuals. On top of this, McFague believes that religious language has lost its experiential context in todays world. The words, concepts and models we use in traditional christian theology no longer apply to life today. This is where modernity comes into play again. Like I previously described, McFague wants the reader to use her metaphors to guide their own decisions to become more modern rather than than invoke decisions from older times. When we no longer experience the world in the same manner as in the past and yet continue to use the same images, religious language, as well as sometimes the religion or theology itself, becomes irrelevant. McFague feels we have made language too literal when it comes to referring to God. She proposes that all language about God must be seen as metaphorical. Names and titles like " Father" are metaphors for how we as humans perceive God to act in the world. They say almost nothing about God ontologically because we cannot know God in himself, yet we do know that there is a reality behind

the metaphors. This faith behind the metaphors is the backbone to her theology. Without faith, her metaphors would be pointless. I don't think she does a spectacular job of showing this in the book, but it is inferred from her importance on metaphors. We use these metaphors to strengthen our trust that there is a reality behind the great idol of God or Jesus Christ. When using the metaphors we use to describe God in a literalistic fashion, we begin to make an idol of the metaphor we worship or the model of God we worship, instead of God Himself. The models traditional Christianity uses to describe God (like father or king) are simply metaphors that have become properly institutionalized and well known. There is nothing wrong with using these models to help us worship God, as long as we worship God instead of the model itself. McFague wants to use metaphorical theology to provide a multiple examples of metaphorical models for understanding God. Not only this but examples to describe the relationship between God and the world in ways that are meaningful to the modern world of today. Using metaphors and images is one way to resist the tendency to make theology ever more abstract and philosophical. Christian theology derives its power to inspire from its use of images and concepts that are taken from everyday life. She embraces this with her metaphorical theology and wants exactly that. Such a theology, according to McFague, is constructive. It seeks to establish metaphors that refer in a meaningful comprehensive way to a reality that we cannot otherwise understand. By this she means the metaphors should be used only to describe things that wouldn't be describable without them, not to already drawn out ideas. However, it must also be recognized that metaphors are never sacred. All metaphors may not apply in some aspect,

and as time goes on many metaphors can begin to seem obsolete.

Metaphorical theology experiments with different ideas and combinations to find those that are most convincing. It does not accept things based on authority but draws from and expands upon what it finds convincing for the contemporary world. Metaphorical theology uses the resources of scripture and tradition, but it also includes insights from human experience, the natural and social sciences, art, literature and other non-religious sources. The use of models in natural science provided the inspiration for McFague's metaphorical models. There are parts of science that cannot be described conventionally, so metaphors that draw on elements we do understand are used to picture that which we cannot. One of the points that McFague makes repeatedly is that metaphorical theology is exactly that, metaphorical. It is hypothetical, tentative, and open-ended. Its results will not be definitive for all time but are useful only for the time in which they are constructed.

Metaphorical theology's ability to use the imagination and create action through use of imagery makes it suitable for this ecological and nuclear age of rapid change and uncertainty. Not only is it suitable for our age and our problems, it can be used to help rationalize any problems that may occur in the future with theology seeming to be ever changing. Another problem McFague has with traditional Christian theology is that it uses a monarchy model to show the relationship between God and the world. God is seen as the great king and the world is his sovereign domain. God may rule over the world with power and/or benevolence, but she believes this image has become unsuitable for this ecological and nuclear age. God's use of power to control the earth, even in a benevolent manner, encourages humans to act

in the same way towards the earth and contributes to an apathetic attitude towards dealing with our ecological and nuclear problems. This creates the problematic thought of, if God is going to look after everything in the end, why should we do anything to try to salvage ourselves or earth now?

McFague's image of the relationship between God and the world is designed to encourage a caring, loving and nurturing attitude towards the world. The criteria McFague sets for her models of God are that they must fit the postmodern context in which we live. With this she feels we need to stop using the monarchical view we did before. She suggests that we view the world as God's body instead. This is just another one of her many metaphors I aforementioned, which falls under her Metaphorical Theology. Her Metaphorical Theology see through the world as God's body comes with numerous positive implications. One benefit of imagining the world as God's body is the stress it places on immanence. Christianity has always been religion which uses the idea of incarnation, so the idea of God being or living in the world is not as radical as it seems. Identifying God with the world gives all things a sacramental quality; there is nothing that cannot express some aspect of God. Yet God is transcendent over the world just as each person is transcendent over their own bodies. Just as humans are more than the sum of their physical reality, God is more than the sum of all reality. Another benefit from this idea are the implications this image brings to ecology and anthropology. If the world is God's body then our treatment of the world is a reflection of our treatment of God. Loving and caring for the environment becomes an act of worship. It emphasizes the importance of our own physical reality. How we meet or neglect the physical needs of other humans

reflects on our treatment of God. A new conception of God's relationship with the world will bring with it a new conception of how humans should act in and towards the world. A third benefit is the attitude this model attributes to God in relation to the world. If the world is God's body, then God's attitude towards the world must be one of great care and concern. Whatever happens in and to the world impacts God in a meaningful way. Pain and suffering on earth produce pain and suffering in God. This immanence produces a greater sympathy and intimacy between God and everything that makes up the world, including human beings. It is important to remember that metaphorical theology does not identify the model with the reality behind the model, so that imaging the world as God's body is not to say that the world is in fact God's body. God is not a physical being, therefore the world cannot literally be God's body. This model is an experimental way of describing God that will contain both true and false ideas. McFague finds it more satisfactory than the monarchial model because the way in which it portrays God and the world can inspire a change in attitudes to better deal with the issues we face today. McFague not only described the theology as a whole metaphorically, but she also goes on to talk about her three personal metaphors which help compose her metaphorical theology. These separate metaphors rely on the individual viewing God as a Mother, God as a Lover, and God as a Friend. These were broken up by her to help show the specific relationship between God and the world. McFague's three models, Mother, Lover and Friend, correspond to the three members of the trinity (Father, Son and Spirit), to three significant Christian ideas (creation, salvation and eschatology), and to three elements of ethics (justice, healing and

companionship), which I found quite strange and compelling. I think it is quite genius for McFague to break these up in such a way. It is relatable to all walks of life and can be viewed from the most religious of perspectives as well as the completely secular perspective without changing the importance of "The Trinity" whether viewed religiously or not. McFague's three models of God are an out working of her metaphorical theology from her ecofeminist perspective. She uses these ideas to constantly expand her thought process and knowledge of the subject. I really enjoyed trying to piece together her theology and make everything fit metaphorically. I think that was the idea behind her theology. She just wanted a new way to express her feelings and connect spiritually with a higher being. She is constantly looking for a new way to describe each situation that presents itself in her life. Using her life as the ultimate model is key in my eyes, as she helps show the proper way to make models as well as the correct way to worship and see through these models to what they really are. Emphasizing the parental rather than patriarchal aspects of God the Father (or Mother or Parent) provides a new understanding of the nature of God's love for created humanity. The model of God as Lover expresses well the radical desire God has for humanity and the extreme nature of God's love. It uses a metaphor to show how spirituality should guide you through your life with God's touch and God's love. God as Friend is a model that places a large weight on the idea that God desires our companionship and the companionship we will experience in final judgement relate to the ways we treat others and view our relationships with God as well as other humans. This is the ultimate metaphor from her theology in my eyes. It really questions your faith and requires you to trust in the metaphor

and believe that God is really there for you. It is the backbone of most Christianity and helps keep the faith. McFague, being a woman of broad knowledge follows scientific theories as well, such as the general evolutionary theory. One of the central principles of evolutionary theory, which McFague actually points out, is the survival of the fittest in a non equality based society. The strongest survive and the weakest die off becoming food for the strong. This can also be seen as a metaphor in her theology as the end to belief. It can show the ending to the metaphor and the dying of the idol. Once an idol we follow shows to be untrue or misguided we must find a new one, also showing a slight amount of incarnation. Death is a huge part of an evolutionary perspective, yet McFague explains that she sees the world as generally favorable for life. The image of God that emerges from the model of the world as God's body is an unfavorable to say the least in this situation. If the universe as we see it is not particularly nice, benevolent or even conducive to life in general, why should we expect a God that is so closely related to the world to have these characteristics? The other question I have for McFague stems from the relationship of humanity and God. McFague attempts to make God more noticeable by explaining the world with God's body. Yet, by removing the possibility of a personal relationship between an individual human and God, she makes God even more remote. From this idea it seems she is stating humans can encounter God only through the physical world, and only as a part of that world and not one of spirituality. There is no provision for God to relate to individuals except as a part of the whole when the world is viewed as his body. It is important to know that McFague's emphasis on metaphorical theology is not

an attempt to define the reality it talks about but, instead to use metaphors to emphasize certain aspects of God to make God more fully understood. It is also important to remember the abstract point of this theology, and how it must not be taken completely literally. It is a theology that can be used alongside more traditional theological methods to provide elements that have been missing in another Christian theology. Yes, it is quite metaphorical, extensive, and at some places almost hypocritical in a sense, but when analyzing this one must realize what her goal actually is. McFague has great ideas, that I believe could be very beneficial if placed in the forefront of any sect of Christianity. I really hope to see metaphorical theology used more in the future.