Reforming Metaphorical Theology?:

A critical assessment of the works of

Sallie McFague in the light of her

respondents.

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in fulfilment of the requirements for the

Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

of Cardiff University

2012

Abstract.

McFague's contributions to theology span over 40 years. Does her theological project, which aims to reform the Christian tradition, retain the coherence and consistency needed to fulfil this aim today?

Surprisingly, McFague's body of work remains coherent, consistent and viable after many years of debate in relation to her own aims and methods and the responses of critics. However her theology can, in places, be strengthened in meeting its aim by an integration of more recent research or the work of her respondents.

Developments in her thought over time remain generally consistent with her earlier work. Analysis of the basic categories of her thought shows a unity of form and content and an underlying conceptual unity. The models McFague advances are consistent as expressions of her stated method and aims. They perform the tasks set for them, if not always by the means she describes. Again the importance of the conceptual level proves greater than McFague allows.

The coherence and consistency of the greater part of her work is weaker in its interaction with the Christian tradition. Her position on this has changed most over time. Work remains to be done on integrating her models with traditional ones. Despite her own judgements, this integration is desirable to maximise the reform of that tradition as she wishes and for her theology most naturally to be seen as reforming rather than revolutionary.

But overall, McFague's work makes a valuable contribution to contemporary theology. She expounds coherent, original metaphorical models addressing contemporary concerns and a coherent theoretical framework that has largely withstood the scrutiny of respondents and developments in her field. Within this framework models may be created and assessed in creative tension with Christian tradition. However this relationship with the tradition remains to be deepened, strengthened and clarified by future research.

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I. Introduction.

Sallie McFague, a brief biography.

Sallie McFague was born 25th May 1933 in Quincy, Massachusettes. As a teenager she attended an Episcopalian Church in Boston and, although she recalls a childhood sense of wonder 'that I *was* alive – and so were myriad other creatures'[1], she cites reading Barth's *Commentary on Romans* as being the experience in which she first 'began to have a glimmer of what the word 'God' meant'[2].

Over the period 1959-1964 she completed a B.D., M..A. and PhD. at Yale Divinity School and Yale University.[3] At this point her research interests were particularly in the area of literature and theology, with a developing interest in biography. This phase of her career led to the publishing of *Literature and the Christian Life* in 1966, and at this time she was also editor of   *Soundings:An Interdisciplinary Journal.*

In 1959 she also married fellow theologian Eugene TeSelle (since divorced), with whom she had two children (and two grandchildren), and her pre-1977 publications were in the name Sallie TeSelle or McFague-TeSelle.

McFague's early theological influences were Barthian.[4] Subsequently 'She gained a different perspective from the person and thought of one of her teachers, H. Richard Niebuhr, with his appreciation of liberalism's concern for experience, relativity, the symbolic imagination and the role of the affections.'[5]

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1 Sallie McFague *Life Abundant Rethinking Theology and Economy for a Planet in Peril* Minneapolis: Fortress 2000 p4
2 *Ibid.* p5
3 The Boston Collaborative Encyclopedia of Modern Western Theology at http://people.bu.edu/wwildman/WeirdWildWeb/courses/mwt/dictionary/mwt_themes_909_mcfague.htm as accessed 18/3/08
4 McFague describes her early theological development in 'An 'Intermediary Theology': In Service of the Hearing of God's Word' *The Christian Century,* June 25, 1975, pp. 625-629
5 Wesley Wildman 'The Theology of Sallie McFague' 1988 *The Boston Collaborative Encyclopedia of Modern Western Theology* available online at http://people.bu.edu/wwildman/WeirdWildWeb/courses/mwt/dictionary/mwt_themes_909_mcfague.htm as accessed 12/07/10

McFague's *Speaking in Parables* (1975) marked the beginning of her published interest in religious language and its connections to ethical and inclusive living. In the same year, she became Dean of Vanderbilt Divinity School, where she had been a Professor of Theology for five years. She remained Dean until 1980 when she became Carpenter Professor of Theology at Vanderbilt, a post she held until 2000.

This period from 1980 saw the publication of McFague's best known works, following what she describes as her realisation that her theology 'didn't actually function'[6] in her life, and that she lacked a vocation. This vocation she found after reading an essay on environmental and nuclear issues and the urgent need for theology to address them, by Gordon Kaufmann. This led to the writing of *Metaphorical Theology* (1982) which set down the basic methodology that her work was to follow. Her following work, *Models of God* (1987), developed further particular aspects of that methodology and was awarded the American Academy of Religion Award for Excellence the following year.

A further development of the themes of *Models of God* and *Metaphorical Theology* resulted in *The Body of God* (1993), *Super, Natural Christians* (1997) and *Life Abundant* (2001), each of which has a strong focus on religious language and belief as a motivator for environmental awareness, concern and action.

McFague was Distinguished Theologian in Residence at Vancouver School of Theology until her retirement in 2000, and her latest book, *A New Climate for Theology* was published in May 2008.

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6 *Life Abundant* p5

The location and aim of this enquiry.

      Sallie McFague's work has been both influential and controversial in a number of areas of theology, including environmental theology, the dialogue between science and theology, systematics, feminist theology and pastoral theology. Although her works individually have been widely cited, engaged with and critiqued, particularly in the period 1980-1990, there appear to have been few attempts to consider her work, and especially her proposed methodology, over time or as a whole (although a few reviewers and journal articles have attempted this briefly for the books *Speaking in Parables, Metaphorical Theology* and *Models of God* – for these reviews see the bibliography, particularly the articles by Peters, Reynolds, McWilliams and Stenmark). The most thorough engagement with her thought currently available in the literature seems to be Shannon Schrein's *Quilting and Braiding* (1998) which limits itself explicitly to McFague's Christology, and compares it to that of Elizabeth Johnson.

      McFague's publishing career has spanned over 40 years. This presents the opportunity to consider her work as a whole and assess its contribution to theology, its internal coherence and development over time, and its continuing relevance, with the benefit of there having been time for a full response to her work from the academic community and for McFague to develop her work over a substantial period.

      By 'relevance' is meant here, not so much that her theology remains topical in the issues it addresses, nor that it continues to be generally of interest to theology (a presentation that has been shown to be deeply flawed may still be held to be relevant in the sense that some of its elements, or even its mistakes themselves remain interesting or illuminating for example). Rather relevance is understood here to mean that the method that McFague develops and presents in her work may itself be said to largely

endure the critique of her respondents and stand the test of time, being still today a potentially fruitful and insightful methodological direction for theology to progress in.

The aim of this enquiry is therefore to assess whether McFague's theological project, which aims to contribute to reform of the Christian Tradition, has maintained the coherence and consistency of needed to still fulfil this aim today.

This question will be answered by an examination of the whole of McFague's published work and the substantial responses and treatments that this work has received from the academic community in the English language with the following subsidiary questions in mind.

- Does McFague's work contain significant internal inconsistencies or change position radically over time?

- Is the method that she espouses consistent with the method that she appears to actually use in practice?

- Are the products of her theology (her 'models of God') valid and successful by the criteria she puts forward by which models may be critiqued in theory and by the criteria she herself appears to use to critique other theological models in practice?

- Have her respondents shown any key aspect of her work to be rationally unsustainable, logically flawed or based on false assumptions?

- Are any key elements of her methodology dependent upon positions or assumptions that have since been widely rejected?

- Can any areas of weakness in her approach be strengthened by the contributions of her respondents or by subsequent developments beyond her work?

In order to address these questions, this project will take the following approach.

Firstly, Chapter 1 to 3 will examine McFague's position on theological method, asking whether this has been consistently presented over time and identifying the ways

in which it has developed. It will also be asked whether subsequent research and the views of her respondents' support or undermine her assertions on method.

Secondly McFague's own *applications* of her method, particularly as it is expressed in her key models will be critically examined in Chapters 4 and 5. Significant responses to these applications in the literature will be noted, but the main focus will be on whether or not these models meet the criteria that McFague *herself* lays down, and whether they are an accurate reflection of her own method.

Together, these major sections will identify consistent strengths and weaknesses of McFague's theological contribution as a whole, and examine any interconnections between them. Finally these findings will be brought together to assess the continuing relevance and legacy of McFague's work (1975-2008)[7] as well as identify questions for further research.

McFague's body of work could of course be approached in many other ways and related to the work of many other contributors to theology. Indeed her work is itself very rich in that it engages with a wide range of issues and draws upon the insights of many different disciplines, within theology and far beyond it. This study will not however attempt to address the points of contact between McFague and these disciplines, nor compare her work to that of others within the theological movement in which she is most naturally located: eco-feminism. Interest here is specifically in the coherence and consistency of her methodology and its enduring relevance to theology, including systematic theology.[8]

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7   Her earliest published work, *Literature and the Christian Life*, does not form part of the same project advanced in her subsequent publications.
8   I first encountered McFague's work as part of the dialogue between science and theology, my own academic background being partly in the Natural Sciences, particularly Physics and the History and Philosophy of Science. Therefore my interest in her work was initially in the methodological similarities and differences that she explores between theology and the natural sciences. This accounts perhaps for the particular focus on methodological issues in this study.

Method.

This work is dependent upon a defined range of literature as follows: all of McFague's published work (books, journal articles and in a few cases magazine articles) available in the English language, based primarily on the bibliography published at http://www.vst.edu/pdfs/FacultyCVs/McFaguePUB.pdf as consulted 26/3/06. Secondly, those responses that could be located, again in the English language, which show *sustained critical engagement* with McFague's work (works which simply quote or follow McFague without critical engagement or cite her in passing are not included). These sources have been identified from references and bibliographies in texts consulted and online searches using ATLA, JSTOR, the British Library, Cardiff University Library and a variety of online search engines including Google Books and Google Scholar over the period 2005 to 2008.

Analysing a body of work that has been produced over time as part of an ongoing theological and communal conversation itself raises questions of method for the project here, namely the role and relevance of parallel developments in this conversation, and whether to take a synchronic or diachronic approach.

To focus and define the literature included here, consultation of secondary literature has largely been limited to those sources that directly and explicitly engage with McFague's work. Further, independent literature has been brought in only to shed light on specific questions raised by the academic dialogue with McFague, where these sources help to clarify the issues at stake, or help to resolve questions that are not answered in this dialogue. This is to avoid introducing into the discussion unnecessary controversies that fall beyond the scope of these enquiries and thus the sources introduced in this way are those that, it is believed, would be representative of broad academic consensus in the relevant fields.

This desire to limit the scope of enquiry also leads to its principal oversimplification. That is, throughout, McFague will be contrasted with or seen to be engaging with 'Christianity' or 'the Christian tradition'. It is to be fully acknowledged at the outset that Christianity is, both in the present and over time, a highly diverse religion (indeed this point forms part of the argument in conclusion) and that behind these shorthand terms there lie many levels of complexity, controversy and debate. However, where these terms are used here, they are intended to reflect the broad doctrinal similarities that can be held to exist between those historical and contemporary forms of Christianity that would broadly affirm the historic ecumenical creeds (the Nicene Creed in its 381AD form in particular), and the theologies that have sprung from these communities of faith. In the present work then, 'the tradition' may be taken to be for example those beliefs that could be found in common in the authorised liturgical texts of the Christian denominational churches – such as the Roman Catholic, Orthodox, Anglican[9], Methodist, Lutheran and Presbyterian Churches and churches in communion with them[10]. McFague herself uses the term 'the tradition' as a debating partner and in her work this term is similarly broad and undefined[11]. However she uses a similar, if more generic, description of the origins and limits of 'the tradition', (an origin which she clearly views as negative because of its authoritarian and restrictive history), when she says,

'The interpretive context within religious faiths has usually been limited to the 'tradition', meaning the church or another institution which has set the interpretative

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9   I am a practising Anglican Parish Priest in the Church in Wales and so this tradition is my tradition. Therefore I, like McFague, stand within the tradition, critiquing, viewing and experiencing it from within, and so I bring to her texts the perspectives and motivations that this prior commitment necessarily involves,

10 And also including those non-liturgical churches such as the Assemblies of God and the Baptist Churches whose formal doctrinal statements would be in broad agreement on general common theological themes and formulation with the liturgical churches listed.

11 McFague uses the expressions 'Christian tradition' or 'Judeo-Christian tradition' 34 times in *Metaphorical Theology* alone and the term traditional and related ones with great frequency.

precedents for what is proper (orthodox) or improper (heretical) religious language.'[12]

What follows therefore shares McFague's stance in choosing for convenience to engage with a caricatured entity painted with a broad brush that is referred to as 'the Christian tradition' while being aware of the many questions that this begs and complications that this passes over.

The trajectory of McFague's own publishing career, meanwhile, makes the synchronic versus diachronic issue easier to reconcile, since it is generally the case that her work moved over time from an exploration of the method for producing models, to an expounding of the models, cumulating in a further refining and more detailed presentation of the same. That is, McFague's work progresses in a cumulative fashion with each publication, building on and expanding aspects of the argument of the preceding one. Because our investigations will also move from considering method to considering specific models, their structure may appear diachronic, and much of the referenced material does appear in a roughly chronological order. However, methodologically these investigations are in fact synchronic, with the material presented, in the general case, as if it were all published at the same time. However, on those, as we shall see, rare occasions on which McFague changed or nuanced her position on a key issue over time, these changes are identified and discussed as they are relevant.

The structure of the analysis.

The first three chapters concern McFague's theological method. Chapter 1 discusses the basic positions. motivations and interests that inform her work and its

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12 She goes on to appear to further define 'traditional' interpretations as coming from the period before the rise of 'historical criticism in the last 200 years'. Sallie McFague *Metaphorical Theology: Models of God in Religious Language* (British edition) London: SCM Press 1983 p3

aims, and the basic categories of her thought. Particular attention is given to her understanding of 'idolatry' and of 'irrelevance' in religious language, and a clarification, drawing on Lakoff and Turner, of the meaning of the term 'literal' in this context. The chapter then continues with an analysis of McFague's understanding of metaphor, its properties and functions. During this discussion, McFague's interactionist understanding of metaphor is called into question. This is followed by an examination of her understanding of parable, and Jesus as parable of God, and the way in which these concepts are extended to form the concept of the 'metaphorical'.

The inter-relations between image, model, concept and theory which Chapter 1 begins to identify are expanded upon in Chapter 2 at greater length. It is at this stage that the importance of the conceptual level begins to become evident, as does the highly integrated nature of McFague's theology, with its symmetry of form and content.

Chapter 3 begins the second part of this investigation. It concerns itself with the application of metaphorical theology in practice. This chapter identifies McFague's own criteria for the assessment of models in theology and, as part of this, also examines broader questions of the relationship between McFague's theology and theology more generally and historically (an ongoing theme throughout). Chapter 3 also critically examines McFague's views on reference and epistemic justification in religious language, in the light of extensive discussions in the secondary literature, since these are relevant both to the aims of models and their assessment. The relationship between McFague's models and the context from which they arise, and to which they are addressed, is then considered. The assessment criteria identified in this chapter are then applied to McFague's treatment of the model 'God the Father', and the essential nature of McFague's project as an heuristic, reforming Christian ethical theology is summarised.

Chapter 4 then examines three of McFague's own models, God as Mother, Lover and Friend, in the light of the assessment criteria derived in chapter 3 and in the light of responses in the literature. While this assessment is generally positive in terms of the models' ability to meet McFague's criteria, concerns are raised over the relationship between these models and traditional Christian models, particularly in the areas of eschatology and Christology.

These concerns are carried forward into chapter 5, where McFague's most extensive exposition of a model, that of the world as God's body, is examined. McFague's later work is also examined with regard to the key questions identified. Here the conclusions of chapter 4 are borne out and strengthened, and attention is drawn particularly to the relationship between models and concepts, and between new models and traditional ones.

Finally our enquiries conclude in chapter 6, where the various consistent findings of the preceding chapters are brought together, connections between them are identified and a conclusion concerning McFague's continuing contribution to theology is drawn, with attention directed to questions for future research which, it is suggested, would strengthen the case for her work being able to continue to contribute to the reformation of the Christian tradition in the way that she wishes.

Chapter 1 – Beginnings: Motives, metaphors and parables.

1.1 Introduction.

In order to asses the coherence and consistency of McFague's theology, and thereby to assess its ongoing ability to contribute to the reform of the Christian tradition, her theology needs first to be broken down into its constituent parts and these parts, and their relationship to each other need to be explored, both in McFague's understanding and in the light of her respondents and subsequent analysis.

This chapter begins that process by examining the basic positions and interests that inform McFague's work. Of primary interest here is what her theology seeks to achieve (a move towards inclusivity and abundance), and avoid (idolatry and irrelevance), and the primary categories in relation to which this theology is worked out (metaphor and the metaphorical, parable and Jesus as parable of God). These preliminary discussions provide the foundations for further detailed discussion of McFague's methodology in the following two chapters, as well as providing an understanding of her intention, against which the relative success of her applications of this methodology will be judged in Chapters 4 and 5.

It happens that McFague herself presented her methodology explicitly as the first stage of her publishing career, and her later works built largely upon this base. Therefore the published works we are first and foremost interested in at this stage are *Speaking in Parables*, *Metaphorical Theology* and *Models of God* and related articles. Where her methodology has changed over time to any significant degree, these changes are discussed in the text of the following chapters as they are relevant.

McFague's theology, as expressed by her writings, is a complex and sophisticated interrelating of factors and considerations. Her thought is holistic. As we

shall see, she exhibits a high level of interconnection between her ideas, and achieves a considerable degree of symmetry between form, method and content. Her thought is not derived linearly, building directly up from a foundation, rather it is best understood using more organic metaphors which keep the whole in view while considering the parts. With this in mind, it is best to begin with a concise summary of central aspects of her thought, before moving to examine aspects of it in more detail.

The following passages, taken from *Metaphorical Theology,* highlight the main features of her understanding of theology.

'We start ...with the network of interrelated models that makes up the Christian paradigm ...The first and most basic thing to say about this network is that it breaks the silence; it makes us articulate about the mysterious...

'The Christian paradigm ...derives from the root-metaphor of the kingdom or rule of God, a relationship between the divine and the human characterized by disorientation toward conventional securities and reorientation towards security in God alone. Such a relationship is intrinsically tensive and it is, we contend, based in the parables and Jesus as parable of God. The Bible is the classic text modeling this relationship and as such is the foundational text for Christians. It is authoritative because it models this relationship; Christians have given it authority and continue to do so because the divine-human relationship it models impinges in profound ways upon their experience of being in the world ... we believe in order to understand and we understand in order to believe.[13]

'The translations of this root-metaphor ...over two thousand years are ..complex and varied ...[However] personal models of all sorts, though principally hierarchical, monarchical, and patriarchal ones, have predominated...

'We can readily see how a pattern of interlocking models is formed: how

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13 *Metaphorical Theology* p138

multimodel discourse can emerge, how models can be cross-plotted, how models can mutually qualify each other, how dominant models covering a wider range of language subsume other models under them. The major models of a theology provide the framework for envisioning the whole network with supporting models which lend substance and detail to the total system. A theology is indeed a network, principally a network of dominant and subsidiary models, and it is this network as a whole that must finally be judged adequate or inadequate.'[14]

These quotations illustrate the basic features of McFague's understanding of how her theological method works. Although she identifies its product as a network, to be judged as a whole, within this network highly related sub-networks can be identified. The four largest of these, the categories of 'images', 'models', 'concepts' and 'theory' are terms which will be examined in detail in Chapter 2.

However there are some themes and categories which can be considered even more basic, in the sense that they inform and structure both the form and the content of her theology to a high degree and thus recur regularly throughout her presentations, namely 'metaphor' and 'parable', and their abstractions and methodological outworking as 'the metaphorical' and 'Jesus as the parable of God'. These are considered later in this chapter.

But even before these beginnings of McFague's methodology it is necessary to identify the underlying motivations that inspire and shape her work. As with all of her thought, it will be seen that, for McFague, ends, as well as means, are closely, 'organically', related.

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14 *Ibid.* p139

1.2 Developing Motivations and Key Concerns.

Sallie McFague's 'career' of theological reflection spans across more than sixty years. In her book, *Life Abundant* (2000), she charts the course of this journey from childhood, and her first questions about being and non-being, to her present position. She says that this journey is marked by four 'conversions'[15], from a focus on immanence to transcendence, and then back to immanence again, followed by a move away from anthropocentric thinking to a cosmological focus, and then finally and most recently to a rediscovery of religious experience through 'practising the presence of God'.[16]

It would, though, be a mistake to see these conversions as negating what went before them. In fact, although a change of emphasis and the addition of new themes and insights (particularly the concern surrounding global warming, replacing in large part her earlier concern with nuclear weapons) is clearly discernible in her published work, this work still shows a high degree of coherence and continuity, as will be demonstrated. This observation is in line with McFague's own judgement on her work.[17] Her understanding of theological method sees it as a dynamic, provisional and evolving system, asking and suggesting answers to the questions that are, as she would say, 'of our time', but simultaneously being a system that is kept coherent and in continuity by stable underlying concepts[18]. As a result it is possible to outline her five principal, unifying, paradigmatic concerns as follows:

a) In the introduction to one of her earliest publications, McFague says,

'The purpose of theology is to make it possible for the gospel to be heard in

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15 *Sallie* McFague *Life Abundant Rethinking Theology and Economy for a Planet in Peril* Minneapolis: Fortress 2000 p4
16 *Ibid.* p8
17 *Ibid.* p6
18 See Chapter 2 below for a full discussion of the nature and role of concepts in McFague's thought.

our time.'[19]

This statement, as Bromell observes[20], implies that there is, firstly, a 'gospel', something of enduring relevance that can potentially be recognised across contexts, and secondly that the recognising of this in our time is in some way impaired and problematic.

Her theology is therefore always 'stereoscopic', attentive both to the conditions of our experienced reality and culture, and also to the 'root metaphor' of her Christian tradition, 'the Kingdom of God'[21]. The values that McFague derives from this root metaphor, exemplified particularly and most completely for her in the person of Jesus of Nazareth understood as the parable of God, can be summed up as 'inclusivity' and 'abundance'.[22] Meanwhile, the twin pitfalls of religious language as she sees them are its potential 'idolatry' (where theological statements are taken to literally describe their object) and 'irrelevance' (where theological and religious language fails to connect to contemporary concerns, needs, ideas or concepts).

In short 'the gospel' is both Jesus' message and his example of inclusivity and the abundant life, while it is the perceived idolatry and irrelevance of religious forms of speaking that prevent this gospel being heard.

It will be seen over the course of these investigations that the relationship between McFague's theology and the Christian theological traditions is a complex, evolving and contentious one, but though McFague's understanding of the details of the nature of Christianity's theological construction changes over time, a commitment to

19 Sallie McFague TeSelle *Speaking in Parables* (British Edition) London: SCM Press 1975 p1
20 David J Bromell 'Sallie McFague's 'Metaphorical Theology'' *Journal of the American Academy of Religion 61* 1993 pp485-503 p485
21 The concept of 'root-metaphor' is discussed in more detail later. For now it is sufficient to understand it as an attempt to distil a network of inter-related idea into one central and controlling metaphorical image, model or concept from which the larger complex of ideas is derived.
22 Although a whole range of paradigm-defining concepts or 'virtues' are introduced throughout her work, e.g. Love, grace, openness, these two are controlling of all the others in that they provide their locus (inclusivity) and direction (abundance). We should note here also that this progression from exemplar to metaphorical model to abstract value is a typical signature of McFague's work. This is explored more fully in Chapter 3.

this particular understanding of the person and work of Jesus remains an important constant. It is also important to the aims of our enquiries that it is noted from the outset that McFague desires to place herself *within* the Christian tradition, rather than in any other relationship to it (e.g. as opposed to only being a critic of it). Despite many of her views on Christianity as it is commonly and traditionally presented, she has set for herself a task that is in essence apologetic[23]. Despite her rejection of a Barthian theology, she is still concerned with Christian proclamation. Therefore the relationship between her thought and Christian theology more generally is a key point of focus for us.

b) In her search for a relevant but non-idolatrous way of speaking about God, McFague places much emphasis on the important role of metaphor in religious (and all) language. For her, metaphor (which is a bringing together of two apparently dissimilar entities and their associated meanings by the recognition of a previously unseen similarity) is held not just to *describe* reality, but to *shape* and *limit* reality as it is experienced. This shaping is held to occur both at the deep, personal level where available language determines what may be thought, but also on a cultural level where common metaphors influence the ways that society acts.

Consequently, she reasons that the failings, as she sees them, of the Christian tradition to make the gospel heard or to make it effective in addressing the issues of our time to practical effect, have their roots in its use of language, particularly because of a failure to appreciate the nature and usefulness of metaphor.

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23 See in particular her extended defence of a reforming (as opposed to a revolutionary) posture towards Christianity in *Metaphorical Theology* p152-167. We might also note her own self-designation as a Anglican Christian, for example at http://www.vst.edu/main/people/faculty/mcfague as accessed 8/5/12,

c) As a result of this apparently simple yet fundamental revision to religious language, McFague's reworking of the theological project is comprehensive; looking at what is asked, how it is asked, how answers are framed and communicated, and with what intended purpose.

However, her approach suggests a natural focus for theology. In an article for *Christian Century,*[24] McFague acknowledges that answering 'why are we here' questions is very difficult. Instead she suggests that we concentrate on 'here' and ask 'what is here like?' and 'what is it like to be here?' She is of course aware that questions concerning the nature of reality cannot be entirely independent from questions concerning the ultimate meaning, purpose or origin of reality, because our beliefs about *why* we and our context exist, will influence how we conceive of ourselves in relation to that context and therefore what we perceive that context to be. Notwithstanding this, she does at least wish to suggest a change of focus from 'why' to 'what' questions concerning reality.

d) Therefore, rather than focusing on models of God's relationship with the world that are essentially about the *nature of God* (e.g. God as Creator), she suggests a change to models that are principally intended to articulate the *nature of the world,* in the light of God's relationship to it. Of choosing between competing models she says, 'The question is not which is true or false but *which is appropriate to our day.'*[25]

Consequently, while there is, over the course of her work, an increasingly important role for religious experience in her epistemology, 'experience' is primarily a

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24 Sallie McFague 'Intimate Creation: God's Body, Our Home' in *Christian Century* March 13-20 2002. Although this is a recent article, it makes explicit an approach to religious epistemology that is discernible in her earliest work in which she is highly conscious of the limits of human language in expressing the nature of divine being.

25 Sallie McFague *Models of God: Theology for an ecological, nuclear age.* (British Edition) London: SCM Press 1988 p xiii (emphasis added). The criteria for determining appropriateness, along with a substantial discussion of the criteria for the assessment of a theology can be found in chapter 3 below, especially sections 3.4 and 3.5.

secular phenomenon, and the task of theology is descriptive rather than explanatory. It is about 'the way that the world is' and 'the way that the world should be' rather than why in an ultimate sense (for example, in terms of divine agency) it is that way.

e)   'The way that the world is and should be' has become increasingly of concern for McFague. In her earlier work, the exclusion, conscious or unconscious, of certain groups, and especially women, from many spheres, and the religious sphere in particular, was the central concern. Abundance and inclusivity were therefore to be sought through the reconstructing of religious language as it impacted these groups. To this concern, time has added for McFague a concern with the nuclear capability of nations to end life on earth and the more general threat to life (and thus to abundance) represented by environmental damage. Thus the task of 'making the gospel heard' became more specifically the task of harnessing the power of metaphor to bring about the changes of language and, consequently, changes of thought, that are required to effect a change of practice in relation to Creation. As she puts it:

'The purpose of theology is to glorify God *by reflecting on how we might live better on the earth*.'[26]'

This move from the evangelical to the ethical should be seen as flowing naturally from her understanding of discipleship and the Christian life at many levels. For her, right belief is only valuable, indeed only validated, by right action. What begins with personal and communal confession must end in transformation at a 'cosmic' level. It is in fact the natural extension of her concern with inclusivity and flourishing within particular individuals and sections of society, that this should ultimately emerge as a vision for the flourishing of all.

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26 *Life Abundant* p25 (emphasis added).

McFague's work, for all its increasing vision and development over time, always remains a methodologically focussed and consistent project, underpinned by the five features just noted. This focus is what makes a contribution to such a broad task possible (and she is always aware of the necessary limits of one theologian's contribution), and it is also what gives her project both continuity and unity.

McFague herself makes the following statement to this effect:

'I will be interpreting ... through a narrow lens: the little bit I know, the few beliefs I hold undeniably. For many years I have been aware that most good (coherent, interesting, plausible) theology grows from a central insight – one possible, deeply held and thoroughly embodied statement about God and the world.'[27]

Her thinking is held together at a much deeper level than simply that of general theme and desired outcome; as the quotes above show; it is united at the level of method and always directed at our underlying linguistic constructions of reality. For example, in *Models of God,* she says 'blueprints for action are not of central concern here... [rather] changes in consciousness.'[28]

The main body of McFague's work is made up of three focused and related projects which she followed and published more or less chronologically. These are:

1. The development of the method of 'Metaphorical Theology'

2. The construction and testing of a few specific models using this approach, namely God as

Friend, Lover and Mother and the model of 'The World as God's Body'.

3. The extension of the last of these into a systematic theology[29].

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27 *Life Abundant* p 11
28 *Models of God* p xiii
29 With the publication of *A New Climate for Theology* in 2008 we could also add a fourth phase taking

Each of these projects will be examined in turn, beginning with her principal objections to some contemporary theology, followed by a discussion of the key, controlling concepts of 'Metaphor' and 'Parable'.

1.3 Idolatry and irrelevance.

As mentioned earlier, religious language for McFague, runs two risks, irrelevance and idolatry. One may be said to be saying too little, the other saying too much.

Idolatry is the charge that McFague levels against the approach that tries to say too much, that which identifies speech *about God* with the actual nature *of God* in a literal (i.e. naively realist) fashion[30]. She roots this objection both in the Hebraic tradition of the God who cannot be depicted by any image and who cannot be named, and also in an understanding of God who, as the source and sum of all being, cannot be referred to directly or modelled exactly by means of parts of that being[31]. Further, her understanding of language in general, which is a non-foundationalist form of critical realism, where language, experience and reality are inextricably bound up, and there is no access to uninterpreted reality but only traditioned experience and views of reality, would make such an 'idolatrous' theology impossible[32].

She sees this idolatrous tendency not as being innate to the tradition with which she engages (arguing that early cultures avoided it by reasoning and speaking much

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in the ten years up to the present. This period has seen McFague apply a broad critique to the theories our society deploys in its self-understanding. In the light of the discussions that follow in Chapter 2 it could be argued that these four stages of her career roughly correlate with the four stages of theological construction that she herself argues for, focussing primarily on images, models, concepts and theories in turn,

30 *Metaphorical Theology* p4
31 *Ibid.* p194
32 *Ibid.* p131ff

more symbolically than we do[33]), but as deriving from a modern fear of relativism and plurality and a loss of a sacramental mentality in contemporary thought. (This sacramental mentality, she argues, depended upon classical notions of analogy deriving from the Procession of Being. The current age, she contends, is in fact characterised by a scepticism 'that anything is related to anything else'.)[34]

These positions can be summarised as describing what she calls her 'radical monotheism'.[35] While this position immediately opens up creative possibilities for theology, since it allows for plurality and new language, it also poses significant questions about the status of tradition and scripture, and the referent and mode of reference of religious discourse which will require clarification later. These questions of relationship to tradition and of the possibilities for truth and reference in religious language will emerge as central. McFague's approach also highlights contemporary problems in epistemology and the philosophy of language concerning the nature of reference and the difficulties post-modern culture has in unifying and connecting thought at a deep level.

This charge of idolatry levelled by McFague against much historic and contemporary theology has understandably been controversial. It has also on occasions been misunderstood. For example Helm says:

> 'Suppose Mr Jones believes that God is literally all knowing. Why does it follow that he must be idolatrously worshipping the proposition *God is all-knowing* or the concept of all-knowingness?'[36]

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33 *Ibid.* p12

34 *Speaking in Parables* p6 It is important to set this remark alongside her stress in later works on the organic interrelatedness of all things. Although McFague rejects the classical formulation of the analogy of being she is in fact keen to assert interrelatedness and a holistic approach over and against individualism and reductionism. Because this organic emphasis emerges later in her work than her stress on disconnectedness Peters regards this as a shift from an essentially modernist concern to a post-modernist one and there is very likely much truth in this. Ted Peters 'McFague's Metaphors' *Dialog 27* 1988 pp131-140 p140 n49

35 *Metaphorical Theology* p129

36 Paul Helm 'Review of *Metaphorical Theology*' *Religious Studies* 20 1984 pp315-316. He is followed on this point by D J Brommell 'Sallie McFague's 'Metaphorical Theology'' *Journal of the American*

The confusion here is two fold, concerning the term 'literal' and the term 'worshipping'. McFague uses 'idolatry' in a sense somewhat distinct from its biblical root as misdirected worship. Idolatry for her is not directing worship towards a statement, but holding a statement to be true in a particular way – in a way which assumes a special status for the statement, a status from which other statements are excluded.

Helm is correct in directing attention to the use of the term 'literal' as the source of such confusions when he says,

'One suspects that literalism is often conflated with the ideal of objective truth about God, and with the possibility of knowledge of such truth.'[37]

To avoid such confusions here, the term 'literal' needs a little further exploration.

While it is true that, as we shall see in detail later, McFague has substantial objections to the idea of 'objective truth', this is not the core of her argument against what she calls literalism. A literal statement is not one that refers, over and against a metaphorical statement as one that does not refer. Rather it is probable that McFague would agree with Lakoff and Turner's definition of literal (itself later than McFague's writings on the subject), in which literal usage is to be understood in terms of semantic autonomy.

A concept can be said to be semantically autonomous to the extent that it can be understood without the use of metaphors in their strict sense (and also without the use of irony, metonymy and so on). That is:

'Concepts are semantically autonomous if they are meaningful completely on their own terms...Such concepts are grounded in ... experience [and] are not mind free.

They are not somehow given to us directly by the objective world. They are instead grounded in the patterns of experience that we routinely live.'[38]

Lakoff and Turner offer the example of our understanding of a dog in terms of four legs, a wagging tail and a cold wet nose as an example of a partially semantically autonomous concept. ('Partially' because a dog can also be understood metaphorically e.g. as 'best friend'.)

Thus we can see that literal language is not to be understood as objective, with all other language having some other sense (since no language is simply objective), rather literal language is language that expresses a concept that

'can be understood and structured on its own terms – without making use of structure imported from a completely different conceptual domain.'[39]

Now 'God' (both in cognitive semantics and in McFague's work), as with all terms that designate abstract concepts, is held to be *entirely non-autonomous* semantically and this is crucial. If the concept 'God' was partially autonomous then it would follow that one could construct autonomous (literal) descriptions of God which could not be overturned and to which all other accounts would have to be held accountable (the equivalent of a legs, tail, wet nose description of God – that is a description of God derived from 'routine experience').

McFague's desire to avoid idolatry then, is a statement of the fact that the linguistic expression 'God' communicates a concept which is semantically non-autonomous ('semantically dependent'), and therefore that literal statements about God are methodologically impossible.[40]

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38 George Lakoff and Mark Turner *More than Cool Reason: A Field Guide to Poetic Metaphor* London: University of Chicago Press 1989 pp111, 113
39 *Ibid.* p57
40 Two confusions are thus to be avoided. Firstly McFague is not advocating a merely projectionist view of religious language because her understanding of literal usage is not predicated upon any stance on an objectivist theory of reference. Secondly the semantic dependency of God is a statement concerning our knowledge and language, not God's being. Since it has no direct bearing upon the

Therefore to defend McFague against Helm's example cited above, one might imagine that she would say that her objection is not that Mr Jones is misdirecting worship at a concept of all-knowingness. Rather it is just that she wishes to point out to Mr Jones that 'knowing' when applied to God is not the same 'everyday' knowing that you or I engage in; the term 'knowing' is not semantically autonomous when applied to God. God, lacking it is presumed, the physical neural structures which give rise to the human experience of knowing, does not 'know' in the same sense that we know. The 'knowing' that God does is metaphorical, in that this is a semantically dependent description of God's activity and nature, a non-literal description. Therefore, as a semantically dependent description, it cannot be held as an absolute truth in the light of which other descriptions may ultimately be judged.[41]

The second charge McFague levels against much use of religious language is its 'irrelevance'. This perceived irrelevance is multivalent. Firstly there is the significant cultural gap between the biblical source of this language and the current culture. Terms like 'principalities' and 'demons', once common currency, are so no longer, and this inhibits the appreciation of the meaning of religious speaking in these categories. On this level religious language can be generally excluding[42].

Of much more concern, however, is the case of specific exclusions whereby neither the language nor experiences of particular groups are taken into account. For McFague the language and experience of women is particularly excluded[43]. This is not

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question of God's causal or ontological autonomy from the world, it does not lead, of necessity, to pantheism.

41 That is, the term 'knowing' is being used neither univocally or equivocally across the two contexts. McFague would see this as metaphorical, as asserting that knowing both 'is and is not' the same for us and for God. We will see later that she prefers this account of similarity in difference to a traditionally analogical one, but the point here is that on either account, God talk is not to be understood to be literal, in the sense of semantically autonomous.

42 *Metaphorical Theology* p8

43 *Ibid.* p162

solely because of the predominance of masculine imagery and terminology, but also because of the inherent patriarchy she perceives within the structures of its thought at a conceptual level. These wrongs of power, dualism and exclusion are precisely what she seeks to address.

A second source of irrelevance is that the concerns which theological language is directed towards are, again, largely for cultural reasons, no longer the concerns of this age. Questions of sin and atonement are not nearly as significant in the public consciousness as questions of environmental sustainability, for example. Theology, McFague argues, must speak into a context and address the concerns of that context, if it is truly to be 'good news'. To take McFague's own argument and follow it a little deeper however, it could be argued that this sense of irrelevance is a product of the secularisation of the thought (if not always the practice) of western societies. It is because the narratives and metaphors of historical Christianity are no longer so formative in western discourse and self understanding that the questions asked and answered by these narratives are not the ones asked and answered by our culture. Therefore an important part of the task of the theologian is not only the restatement of traditional questions in a relevant fashion, but also the identification and interpretation of the root metaphors of their cultures and the questions that arise out of them, and in turn an attempt to answer these questions using the resources of the Christian Tradition. This extension of the task is one that McFague does appear to undertake, if only in the latter phases of her published work.

Meanwhile, her use of these differing senses of 'irrelevance', to mean either outdated in terms of world-view, or exclusive to individuals or groups, or addressing non-culturally relevant questions, result in a certain lack of clarity in McFague's

terminology especially in relation to the status of religious language over time, as Sontag illustrates[44]. She frequently uses terms like 'anachronistic', 'not for our day' and 'outmoded' to dispatch traditional theological motifs, and therefore it can appear in her work that 'irrelevant' and 'out of date" are one and the same. In her defence, this link between relevance and time may be explained (if not quite warranted) by the cultural factors above, and therefore Sontag's suggestion that it is to be linked to a presumed Hegelian metaphysic and an unexpressed theory of the evolution of knowledge on McFague's part is unnecessary. However Sontag is correct in cautioning that the concerns and answers of the past are not automatically to be deemed irrelevant. Further, he correctly asserts that our rejection of past interpretative categories:

> 'depends on how these terms are interpreted and reinterpreted...Our crucial terms all too often have no one agreed meaning, so that we cannot respond to her rejection of these categories without a thorough catalogue of all the ways in which they have and might be interpreted and reinterpreted. And by implication, is it intended that no scheme which reinterprets this classical set of concepts can be allowed into any theological perspective?'[45]

We will see in the course of what follows that past interpretive categories, and the concerns alleged to be those 'of a past age', cannot be so readily dispensed with. In this regard, McFague's tendency to conflate 'irrelevant' with 'the past' will be seen to be regrettable.

Meanwhile, in summary, McFague argues that what is needed in response to what she sees as the idolatry and irrelevance of religious language, is a way of religious

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44 Frederick Sontag 'The Metaphysics of McFague' *Sophia* vol 37 no 1 1998 pp117-139 p123. See also Frederick Sontag 'Metaphysical Non-Sequitur: Sallie McFague's Metaphorical Theology and Imagery for God' *Asia Journal of Theology* 11(1) 1997
45 *Ibid*. p20-35

and theological speaking which, firstly, is able to unite disparate concepts and phenomena in terms of God while avoiding a simple identification between these and God, and secondly, a way of speaking which is able to hold together genuine unity and radical differences between these disparate elements simultaneously, and thirdly a way of doing so that makes its meaning and interpretation as available and accessible as possible.

To aid this accessibility McFague holds that theology should, where possible, use 'mundane' imagery, imagery which is as familiar to as great a breadth of human experience as possible. Ultimately of course, any theology that is contextual enough to be useful will not be universally accessible in the same way to all, but the point here is simply to find a way of speaking which maximises accessibility and relevance.

Finally, such language is not to be merely descriptive but should have transformational possibilities; an ability to transform understanding and therefore to motivate and direct action. Such a form of speaking, she argues, is provided by looking to metaphor and parable, and it is to each of these that attention is now turned.

1.4 Metaphor.

McFague's thinking on the qualities and functions of metaphor inform the whole of her theology, lending her early project its name of 'Metaphorical Theology'.

It is important to note from the outset that, in her understanding, the definition of a metaphor is not a formal, grammatical one. She rejects a substitutable view of metaphor, that is a view that sees a metaphor as an illustrative literary device, an ornamentation.[46] A substitutable view would hold that something said using a metaphor

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46 This is of course not an original view but, as Peters notes, (*op. cit. p*131) she is heavily dependent on

could, in principle, just as well have been said without the metaphor, reducing the metaphor to at best a flowery way of communicating and at worst an unnecessarily complicated way of stating something much simpler. Contrary to this, McFague follows a view that regards a metaphorical statement as an exemplar, as embodying the meaning, indeed *being* the meaning of what it speaks of. Metaphors are, she holds, unsubstitutable[47]. That is, the metaphor is vital to the meaning of what is being said and this meaning cannot be restated apart from the metaphor without this meaning being changed and/or losing something in the process. This derives from the following understanding of metaphor in terms of its unique properties and functions.

A metaphor, for McFague, is a bringing together of two apparently dissimilar entities and their associated matrices of meaning – the web of related information that is connected to them – by the recognition and/or creation of a hitherto unseen similarity, or correspondence, expressed as the evident use of a term out of its natural context[48]. Her favoured example is 'war is a game of chess'.[49] In this metaphor, two very different entities, war and chess, are juxtaposed in a way which is not simple identification. Such identification would clearly be absurd and so does not need to be included in the construction of the metaphor by the inclusion of a qualifier (e.g. 'war is a bit like chess'). In contrast, the nature of the construction suggests a degree of *hitherto unrecognised* similarity despite real differences between the two.

However both war and chess have associated experiences, concepts and images of their own; we could say that they have both structure and texture. For McFague, the metaphor functions by using the structure of one domain (usually the better known or 'source') as a 'grid' or 'screen' through which the other ('target') domain is viewed and

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the philosophical debates on metaphor in the 60's and 70's.
47 *Metaphorical Theology* p50
48 *Ibid.* p36
49 *Ibid.* p37

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interpreted. (Here she is dependent particularly upon the work of philosopher Max Black who uses the image of viewing the stars through a smoked-glass screen with lines etched into it. Some stars are seen through the lines, others are screened out by the smoked glass. The lines allow particular stars and star patterns to be seen that would otherwise not be noticed, however the pattern created is not just present in the stars, it is dependent upon the lines drawn, and therefore is only really present in the interaction between the stars and the screen.)[50]

Since the viewed domain is usually less well known, the creation of the metaphor provides fresh insight by allowing exploration of this domain in terms of the features of the better known (while of course certain features are hidden or obscured by the application of such a grid).

As an example of an effective metaphor, I will use the final image from the poem *The Moon in Llelyn* by R S Thomas. Though this example is not one that McFague uses herself, it is very much in keeping with the spirit of her work, and provides an economical illustration of it (whereas McFague's own examples are chosen specifically to illustrate the subtleties of specific points rather than the general case)

> '...Even as this moon
>
> making its way through the earth's
>
> cumbersome shadow, prayer, too,
>
> has its phases.'[51]

In this metaphor, the grid is provided by the source domain of 'the moon', and this is used to interpret the, in this context, less well understood target domain of the

50 McFague *Speaking in Parables*, pp43-44 drawing on Max Black *Models and metaphors: studies in language and philosophy* Ithaca: Cornell University Press 1962
51 R S Thomas, *Selected Poems* London: Penguin 2003 p106 originally printed in *Laboratories of the Spirit* 1975

experiences of prayer. The image is clearly the juxtaposition of very different entities, but rests upon the perceived or intuited point of similarity: that both wax and wane. If this point of similarity results in a 'shock of recognition', then, the metaphor having been established, the domains can begin to interact.

The concept of 'moon' carries with it a range of associations. It has emotive texture, evoking images and associated feelings and memories of moonlit nights from romantic to chilling, and this ambiguity underscores the point of the poem. It also connects with religious usages of images of light and darkness and of the moon as God's creation set there to 'rule the night'.[52] But the moon also provides informational structure. The moon has regular, natural phases, which are entirely normal and to be expected. They are caused by its relationship to the sun, the source of life and light. They may wane but they also wax again. All of these have consequences for the way prayer, faith and disappointment are explored in a poem which seeks to be realistic about the negative experiences of struggling to pray, but that also seeks to offer hope, comfort and acceptance.

From this brief description and example it is possible to derive many of the vital conditions for the construction of a successful metaphor, re-presenting and building upon McFague's own observations in *Speaking in Parables* and *Metaphorical Theology.*

a) Familiarity – for a metaphor to be effective it needs to incorporate a relatively well known entity so that insights from this can be translated to the less well known domain. This criterion is strongly linked to one of the meanings of what McFague terms 'irrelevance', which were discussed above.

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52 Genesis 1:3

b) Structure – the term used as the source domain must bring with it an understood structure which can be applied fruitfully to the target term. For example it is evident that the metaphor 'God is a Rock' introduces a relatively small web of relevant qualities associated with rocks, while the statement 'God is a Mother' brings a much wider range of experiences and information to bear. It is also important that this structure is well defined, which is why concrete objects ('images') often make for better metaphors than generalised concepts. For instance, McFague criticises John Macquarrie's substitution of 'openness' for 'light' in the metaphor 'God is light' on precisely these grounds[53]. 'Openness' is too vague to be effective. Its ill defined structure and lack of concrete associations make it more likely to confuse than illuminate.

c) Tension – a successful metaphor is based on difference as much as on similarity. Unlike a simile or simple comparison where the emphasis is on likeness, with metaphor it is the *distance* between the domains that provides the useful insights. Thus there is a weakness in her favoured 'war is a game of chess' metaphor in that chess is itself an abstraction of war, and so similarities are to be expected and are not novel. Similarly 'lions are tigers' is a much less illuminating statement than 'lions are kings'.

The crucial feature of metaphors for McFague's purposes is their 'is and is not' quality. They speak simultaneously of connection and disconnection, unity and diversity, similarity and difference and hold these together in active relationship. Hence they offer the possibility of meeting the criteria of uniting entities in a reality that is not naively sacramental and is distrustful of any attempt to unify. Thus metaphors are dialectical rather than dualistic. They preserve the contradiction between different entities and their unique identities as well as asserting their genuine unity. This

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53 Sallie McFague *Metaphorical Theology: Models of God in Religious Language* (British edition) London: SCM Press, 1983

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provides a conceptual and aesthetic unity between McFague's method and ethic, uniting form and content in a way that is characteristic of much of her work.

This is in accord with her own aspirations, as she says

'Theology should be metaphorical both in content and in method, for if the main characteristic of metaphor – its tension – is lost, then Christianity's root-metaphor is lost as well, for it is precisely the inability to *possess* God's love that is at the heart of the relationship with God exemplified in the kingdom'.[54]

Our definition and example also highlight some of the properties of metaphors which give them their unique status. Again this presentation, while not McFague's own, is consistent with hers and draws out those elements that are significant to our attempts here to evaluate her own metaphors later.

d) Expression – metaphors are capable of conveying emotive content in a way that pure conceptual or technical language is not. This is because a well-chosen metaphor uses a commonly experienced reality which will have experiential and hence emotional associations, but these are placed in an unfamiliar context which causes them to be re-examined and encourages emotional exploration of the new domain.

e) Communication – Because a metaphor also uses the associated structure of the source domain, and 'lends' it to the target domain under consideration, it is capable of communication as well as expression. Because this structure can be applied to the target domain by any or all of tacit, empirical and logical methods, metaphors carry cognitive content but can do so in many different ways. For example the metaphor war is chess lends war the informational structure of the chess game with its highly

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54 *Metaphorical Theology* p110

developed system of rules and strategies. Meanwhile 'prayer is the phases of the moon' brings empirical observations of the moon to bear on experiences of prayer. However in both cases, specific, informational claims are being made, beyond a simple appeal to an emotional response.

f) New knowledge – A consequence of the unsubstitutablity of metaphors, coupled with their communicative ability, is that they do not simply describe reality but can re-describe it as the target domain is explored. In other words, as the new metaphor is applied and the target domain is seen afresh through it, the target domain is seen differently. This results in a transformed understanding which can genuinely be called 'new knowledge', since without the metaphor, or apart from the metaphor, the same level of understanding, both of the unknown domain and the connections between domains, would not have been reached. Thus metaphors have an active epistemological function as a *path to* knowledge, not just as a means to *communicate* knowledge. This new knowledge arises within the speaker or hearer of the metaphor, McFague argues, as a largely intuitive process – as a flash of insight, brought about through looking at the familiar through a new 'grid' and therefore perceiving it differently. In this sense, metaphors may be revelatory, but it should be understood that this revelation for McFague is not to be thought of as pre-existing knowledge being transmitted to human minds from beyond their consciousness. Rather it is the ability of those minds, themselves a part of the world, to discover and create new insight for themselves.

g)Transformation of *both* domains – This is the point at which our presentation here departs from McFague's own views. I have just argued that metaphor has a transformative aspect; that is the interaction between domains changes the way that the

target domain is seen, this is the purpose of constructing the metaphor. However, for a metaphor to function, indeed for it to be conceived in the first place, a degree of prior knowledge of the target domain is required. (If we knew nothing of war, the metaphor 'war is chess' would become a simple identification of the two with each other, it is our prior knowledge of war that supplies the crucial 'war is not chess' which is required for the metaphorical dialectic to be established). Now McFague argues that inevitably some of this already known content of the target domain will 'bleed' back into the source domain, therefore if we use the metaphor 'chess' for 'war', in McFague's view it is not only our understanding of war that is changed, but also, although to a lesser extent, our understanding of *chess* that is influenced by its association with war.

Now this an important motivator and justification for McFague's iconoclastic streak. On the basis of this theory of metaphor, which Max Black calls 'interactionist'[55], McFague argues that Mary Daly's assertion that 'If God is male then the male is God[56] is correct.[57] McFague says,

> 'God has been modelled in masculine images (excluding feminine ones) and, as a consequence, the notion has arisen that men have godlike attributes ... The interactive character of models means that men not only model God, but God in return, bestows divine qualities on men... The way to make [the point] most sharply is to state the obverse: women do not model God and, hence, do not become 'named' by God.'[58]

This is McFague's most controversial assertion from the perspective of more recent cognitive linguistic studies of metaphor. DesCamp and Sweetser have applied

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55 M. Black 'More about metaphor', in A. Ortony *Metaphor and Thought* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1979. McFague does not use the term 'interactionist' herself, but follows Black closely on the properties of metaphor, so his designation is appropriate for her approach as for his own.
56 Mary Daly *Beyond God the Father* p19 cited in McFague *Metaphorical Theology* p147.
57 This despite the assertion that Daly's work 'verges on madness' at times! *Metaphorical Theology* p159
58 *Metaphorical Theology* pp147, 149

this approach explicitly to McFague's views on metaphor, and support her position on most of the relevant points previously discussed, but they disagree on this one, namely 'interaction'.[59]

They say

'*Directionality* is the observation that the relationship between the two inputs, the source and target domains, is not symmetrical. Inferences are transferred in one direction only, from the source to the target. For instance, the statement, 'The lamp loves the door' does not mean that the lamp is physically close to the door. While the language of physical proximity can be used to describe emotional intimacy, the language of emotional intimacy is not understood to describe physical proximity. Though there are some metaphors where the source and target can be reversed (GOD IS FATHER, FATHER IS GOD), such inversions represent two different metaphors, not a single metaphor which transfers inferences in both directions Different inferences are mapped in the metaphorical concept GOD IS FATHER (e.g., *God provides all I need*) than in FATHER IS GOD (e.g., *He thinks he's infallible*.)'[60]

Thus, according to DesCamp and Sweetser, the modelling of God as male and the modelling of the male as God are two *separate* processes. Accepting one does not logically entail accepting the other. DesCamp and Sweetser illustrate this difference by representing the two metaphors discussed above diagrammatically:[61]

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59 Mary Therese DesCamp and Eve E. Sweetser 'Metaphors for God: Why and How Do Our Choices Matter for Humans? The Application of Contemporary Cognitive Linguistics Research to the Debate on God and Metaphor' *Pastoral Psychology* Vol. 53, No. 3, January 2005 pp203-238 They also disagree with McFague on the issue of 'dead metaphors', on which see later.
60 DesCamp and Sweetser p221
61 *Ibid.*

God is Father   **Father is God**
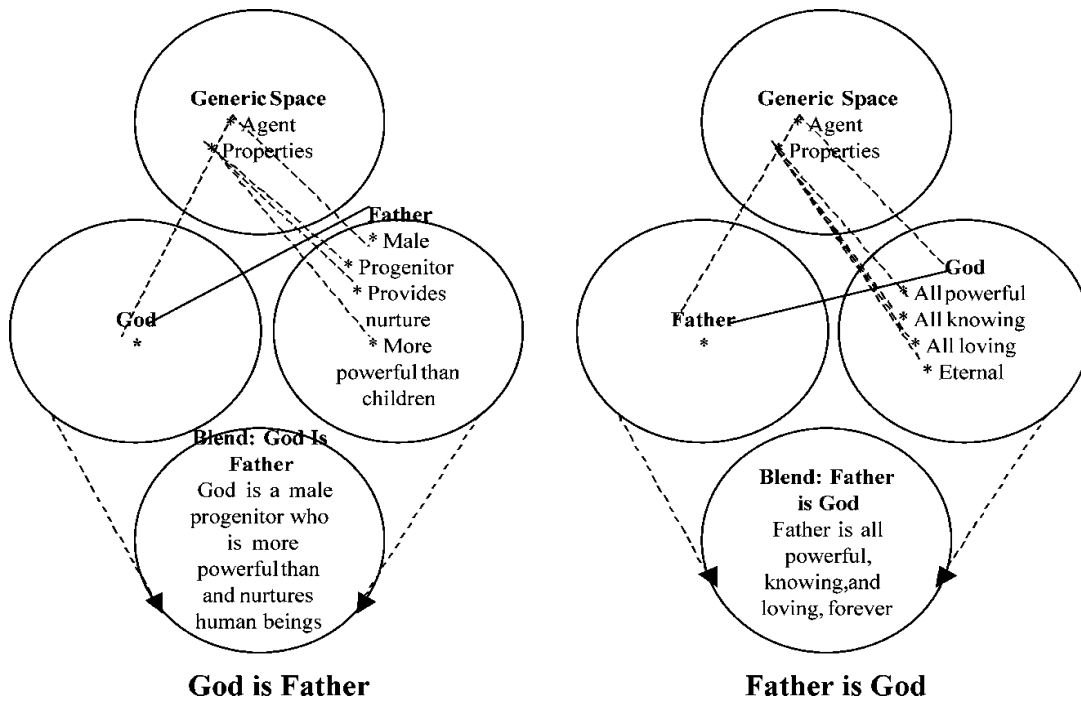
(A fuller discussion of this complex presentation follows in Chapter 6. At this point all that needs to be observed is the fact that the two diagrams are not identical, illustrating that the metaphor is not simply reversible. 'God is Father' is clearly not simply the reverse of 'Father is God'.)

Now, DesCamp and Sweetser argue,

'metaphor at both the primary and the complex level normally involves the suppression of certain features of the target domain.'[62]

That is to say that the metaphor deliberately suppresses some beliefs about what it is attempting to describe in order to create the comparison. For example 'war is chess' requires suppression of many of the features of war that make it so unpredictable, in order to call attention to the perceived underlying tactical structure suggested while the metaphor is under consideration.

McFague would agree that this suppression of features of the target domain takes

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62 p222

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place. In fact, new metaphors are called for, she argues, precisely in order to suppress common associations surrounding the term God.

However this suppression implies that

'The target is considered by means of the categories present in the source domain, not vice-versa.'[63]

In other words, the suppression of the target domain's structure means that this structure cannot significantly influence the structure of the source domain, unless a new metaphor is formed reversing the process. That is, when we conceive of war as chess, we do not immediately think of chess as violence, messy and unpredictable by association, because these are the very features of war that are being suppressed in the creation of the metaphor. In fact, as DesCamp and Sweetser were able to demonstrate in controlled experiments, the 'bleed' effect is very small indeed.

This is not to say that the effect of prolonged usage of God the Father as a metaphor for the divine has had no influence upon cultural understandings of fatherhood, only to say that such influences are not the direct, logical and/or automatic result of creating the metaphor 'God the Father'.

Instead DesCamp and Sweetser argue that,

'The problem is that the frequent use of GOD IS FATHER puts it into the cultural currency, where it can be utilized and re-worked in cognitive blending. The metaphor creates a rich generic space about power relationships and positive authority – as does the metaphor for God as king—that can be, and is, used for other blends... GOD IS ROCK or GOD IS FORTRESS does not mean that we deify stones or citadels. It is not the presence of the GOD IS FATHER metaphor per se which has led to the deification of fathers; it is the statement's existence as

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63 *Ibid.*

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a stable mental concept in cultural currency.'[64]

Consequently, and this is of considerable relevance in the light of McFague's project,

'changing the metaphors we use for God only works in so far as those metaphors begin to exert influence at the level of popular culture. ...The long-used metaphors have become cultural currency, exerting influence at pre-cognitive levels.'[65]

These modifications have several consequences for McFague. Firstly, while they support McFague's attempts to break the *cultural hegemony* of particular models, they also contradict any attempts to reject these models entirely, since, I would argue, it is the nature of their *use* rather than their actual *existence* itself which causes the problems McFague wishes to solve. This is not to avoid the central thrust of McFague's critique of the tradition, which is that masculine imagery predominates almost exclusively, it is to question the mechanism through which this domination has occurred. I would argue that the issue to be addressed within Christian theology is the historic exclusion of models that would add insight and include human identity and experience (and that of women in particular) more fully by the cultural dominance of models such as 'God the Father' and the powerful role these models play in mainstream systematic theologies. But this is not to say that any use of masculine metaphors, new or old, for God leads of logical necessity to the deification of the male.[66]

Secondly, it is similarly the case that simply forming new metaphors (such as God the Mother) will not in itself immediately rectify the problem. Pattison makes this point in a passing reference to McFague's work saying

'McFague ... proposes different metaphors and models of God as Mother, Lover

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64 *Ibid..*
65 p223
66 The potential for a hermeneutic recovery and renewed role within traditional Christianity for the specific case of 'God the Father' as a metaphor is returned to in Chapter 3.6 below.

and Friend. These, she thinks are more suitable for theology in an ecological, nuclear age. Maybe so, but most people alive today who have been exposed to the Christian religious tradition have encountered God through the images of the dominant monarchical tradition as contained in the scriptures, creeds, liturgies and prayers of the historic churches... Aspects of this tradition have helped to shape and perpetuate human shame and it is these that are explored here.'[67]

Now Pattison is in sympathy with McFague's aims, and is critical of traditional Christian metaphors from his own standpoint, but it is clear that he does not regard the remedy as being as simple as constructing new models[68].

If this observation is combined with those just made regarding the interaction theory, it can be seen that there is a need to relate new models to existing ones, and in the process to reinterpret them, rather than substituting one set of models for an old one. Our existing beliefs concerning God are culturally entrenched and therefore cannot simply be replaced, and it is cultural change that McFague is trying to effect.

It can further be argued that it is likely that this entrenchment is at least in part due to the validity (i.e. their being in accordance with McFague's own criteria) of existing metaphors in certain situations. Unless we are willing to chalk their use up *entirely* to historic patterns of male dominance and patriarchy, some degree of validity or usefulness must be presumed and consequently identified and preserved.

We have also seen that, due to our rejection of an interactionist position, existing metaphors, even if based in masculine imagery, are not dangerous in their consequences for our understanding of the masculine in and of themselves (which is fortunate otherwise the same undesirable outcomes would apply to the feminine in McFague's new female-based models) because they do not automatically or easily lead to the

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67 Stephen Pattison *Shame* Cambridge: CUP 2000 p235
68 This is, however, part of his solution as his remarks on pp305-6 indicate.

deification of the source of the metaphor.

Further, although suppressed in the formation of a new metaphor, a certain amount of existing belief concerning the nature of God is required to establish the new metaphor in the first place.

Therefore Peters is correct in highlighting the possibilities of reinterpreting and re-examining existing beliefs, a process he calls hermeneutical recovery (and which McFague only cautiously allows as a future possibility). He argues for this by drawing on the work of Ricoeur, himself one of McFague's prime sources, saying,

'Ricoeur especially presses the point that symbols ... are polyvalent and multi-leveled in meaning, so that to reduce the divine father as McFague does to 'dominance and providence' and 'merit' is to literalize it arbitrarily and to close it off. In contrast to McFague, Ricoeur's method is to explore the penumbra of connotations of the symbol to draw out further richness of meaning. Among other things, Ricoeur stresses the suffering of the divine father who can no longer be conceived as "an enemy to his sons; love, solicitude and pity carry him beyond dominion and severity." Thus, the Ricoeur method of hermeneutical retrieval is quite different from McFague's metaphorical complementarity.'[69]

However, while this method of retrieval may well be 'quite different' from McFague's heuristic approach, it may also be possible to combine the two in that the process of creating new metaphors casts considerable light upon existing ones. The difference is primarily in that McFague is more interested in exploring new metaphors than reworking the old. This lack of a synthesis and reconciliation of metaphors does though remain a significant area of weakness.

To be fair to McFague she does appear aware of this at least in the form in which Boeve raises it when he suggests that the metaphor 'God as Father' will be structured

69 Peters p133

differently in a post-patriarchal context than a patriarchal one,[70] a possibility which would be consistent with McFague's own position.

In summary then, McFague depends upon the interaction theory of metaphor which this analysis has rejected in favour of a more complex causal relationship between our religious metaphors and our understanding of their source domain. This relationship is one of gradual cultural change in the understanding of that domain (e.g. 'fathers') brought about by the continued use of a particular metaphorical term (e.g 'God the Father'), rather than a process of a changed understanding of the domain being immediately generated simply by the formation of the metaphor itself. If God is seen as male in the metaphors of a society, then a society may gradually come to see the male as God (or equally possibly, a society that already sees the male as God may choose to describe God in masculine terms), but the use of a masculine term for God does not, contra McFague, automatically in and of itself affect our understanding of maleness or its status.

Similarly McFague argues that by (for example) using the metaphor 'God is Mother', we not only change our understanding of God but that we also change our understanding of 'Mother'. In rejecting the simplicity of this assertion (and rejecting the idea that our understanding of Mother changes automatically and intuitively), we have placed enough distance between the two domains (e.g. God and Mother) to allow the process of interpreting each of them to be more complex and nuanced, allowing for more of an interaction between many sources of insight than McFague herself does. The terms 'God' and 'Mother' in our presentation here can be more easily seen as each

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70 Lieven Boeve 'Linguistica ancilla Theologiae' in Kurt Feyaerts (ed.) *The Bible through Metaphor and Translation* Oxford: Peter Lang 2003 p19 cf McFague's discussion of Jesus' use of the term Father in *Metaphorical Theology* p151ff which references Ricoeur's position. Boeve draws attention to the fact that the 'matrix of meaning' associated with a source domain changes over time and that consequently the continued use of the same term (e.g. Father) does not guarantee static meaning over time and neither does a change in language necessitate a change in meaning, rather a change in language could restore a prior meaning.

being constructed by many contributing areas of meaning than they are in McFague's presentation. This in turn opens the door for both the need and the possibility of relating new and existing metaphors to each other.

h) Limits - Metaphors, it must be remembered, offer only a partial view of their subject. It is not that a new metaphor suddenly exposes the complete truth, hitherto hidden. Because of the way in which the target domain is viewed *through* the source domain, a certain price is always to be paid for the new insights gained. By structuring what *is* seen, the grid also determines what is *not* seen. In our example of the moon and prayer, the use of an inanimate grid inevitably screens out the personal, relational qualities of prayer, indeed it may trivialise and misrepresent them if associations with talking to the 'Man in the Moon' are introduced!

Metaphors, then, provide *limited* insight, and this naturally calls for a pluralistic approach and the need for multiple metaphors to adequately explore a target domain, and its connections to the rest of knowledge and experience. This may be held to apply especially in the theological case if the principal domain is held to be the source and ground of *all* knowledge and experience!

This is similar to our argument above that existing metaphors should be held to have value. Even in a case where a new metaphor might be judged to have more relevant insights to offer, it must be remembered that the prior metaphor also established connections that the new metaphor cannot. This is again an argument for relating models to each other since the sum total of what may be validly asserted at least theoretically increases with the number of valid metaphors used[71]. This is not to

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71 This position is supported by A Thiselton *A Concise Encyclopedia of the Philosophy of Religion* MI:Grand Rapids 2002 p166*,* drawing on Iam Ramsey *Models and mystery* Oxford: OUP 1964 who argues that multiple models are necessary to qualify each other to avoid unwanted meanings being draw from metaphors in isolation. This approach Thiselton traces back as far as Tertullian (Thieselton *The First Epistle to the Corinthians: A Commentary on the Greek Text* Carlisle: Paternoster Press 2000 p819)

presume that such a process of relating models and their insights to each other is trivial or even always possible, especially when the number of metaphors in question becomes large, it is only to advance the case for attempting doing so. Therefore here again is an argument from the theory of metaphor for retaining a place for traditional metaphors, even when their current usage or interpretation is not in line with McFague's theological motives and aims. In short, McFague's own views on metaphor not only legitimate the quest for new metaphors, they can also be seen, though she does not seen to realise this, to necessitate the retention of traditional metaphors, even if reinterpreted, because the insights contained within those traditional formulations cannot be retained precisely in any new construction.

i) Indirectness– Metaphors, it has been argued above, provide genuine insight, but they do so indirectly because they see the primary domain not 'as it is in itself' but 'seen as' the source domain. War is not revealed as war in its own essential nature, it is seen as a game of chess. The poem does not offer a direct experience of prayer, only a view of it from the angle of the moon.

It is important to qualify the usefulness of metaphor in deriving new knowledge of the primary domain, especially in the religious case. In the case of God, and bearing in mind the condition of 'radical monotheism' ('semantic dependence'), McFague's approach is severely limited in how far what it says about God can actually be held to refer to God in God's being. In the case of war or prayer, we may seek access to a certain amount of semantically autonomous data: experience with which to assess the accuracy of the comparison on which the metaphor is established. McFague would argue that we have no such access to God and therefore we cannot make any judgement about whether or not a metaphor describes *what God is really like* – indeed she would

reject such an attempt as both meaningless and idolatrous. As the first phase of her work progresses she becomes much more explicit in this regard, declaring theological models as necessarily 'mostly fiction',[72] and regards metaphor as a 'strategy of desperation'.[73]

However, remembering the earlier findings concerning the interactionist approach to metaphor, if the process is seen, contra McFague, as being a several step process, the first of which is the creation of the metaphor for God, and the final and distinct step being the re-imaging of the world in the light of our metaphors for God, we may not be forced into such a 'desperate' position regarding either ontology and reference, or systematic theology concerning the nature of God.

We will encounter these fundamental questions of truth and reference again in relation to parables in the next section, and when we look at the construction of metaphorical, theological theories in chapter 2.4, At this point is should be noted just how important this limited and indirect ability to speak of God is to McFague's theology and how it connects to her understandings of the tasks of theology, outlined in 1.2 above. It is precisely the indirect nature of metaphor which allows for multiple metaphors to be used, for no one metaphor to assume a specially protected status and therefore for one metaphor to replace another as more relevant and for religious language to avoid idolatry (always being mindful of the change in meaning resulting from the change in metaphor).

j) Exploration of the source domain – As we have just seen, McFague argues that we cannot claim that our religious language is actually descriptive of God, therefore she seems to take the position that such language is more a way of re-exploring the meaning

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72 *Metaphorical Theology* p41
73 *Models of God* p33.

of the terms with which we speak about God. In other words, she seems to suggest that language about God is not to be thought of primarily as *about God* at all, but about those things which we use to refer to God. 'God the Father' for example is more about what we understand about fathers than it is about God for McFague. Chapter 3 will, however, explore the possibilities for diverging from McFague's position on reference to a degree while remaining within the general framework of her thought. In addition to the analysis here, the question of reference will be returned to in more detail in Chapter 3, where it will be shown that there are possibilities for strengthening claims for the ability of language about God to actually refer to God, even within McFague's epistomological framework.

Her claim that metaphorical religious language may be more about the source domain than the target, more about that used to *represent* God than about God in God's Being, and thus more about *our* world, *our* experience and *our* being is introduced on the very first page of *Speaking in Parables* where she says

'Theological discourse, and especially 'God-talk,' during what has been called the absence or the 'death' of God, is, as we all know, in trouble. Richard Rubenstein, the Jewish Theologian states the problem this way: 'Contemporary theology reveals less about God than it does about the kind of men we are….Today's theologian, be he Jewish or Christian, has more in common with the poet and the creative artist than with the metaphysician and physical scientist.   He communicates a very private subjectivity"[74]

 Later in the same book, she quotes Funk with approval:

'... metaphorical language brings the familiar into the unfamiliar context and distorts it, in order to call attention to it anew...'[75]

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74 *Speaking in Parables* pp3-4 citing Richard L Rubenstein, *After Auchwitz: Radical Theology and Contemporary Judaism* New York: Bobbs-Merrill Co. 1966 p x
75 Robert W Funk *Language, Hermenutics and the Word of God: The Problem of Language in the New*

Notice that this account of metaphorical language assumes that the purpose of constructing a metaphor for God is not to call attention to new features of the nature of *God* but to new features of *'the familiar'*. In other words, when we talk of Mother God we are drawing attention to the meaning of the term Mother more than we are of God.

This claim is difficult to substantiate given the findings of cognitive linguistics discussed above, where it was seen that it is in fact the meaning of the target domain that is changed by the metaphor, while the meaning of the source domain is largely unchanged.

Nevertheless, a case can still be made that metaphors *can* lead to reflection upon the source domain despite our rejection of the interactionist position. That rejection centred on the claim that reflection on the source domain was not an automatic, intuitive process resulting in a new understanding of the source domain, as it is for the target domain. This is not to say that a full exploration of the source domain is not possible of course, rather it is to say that if such a process is to be attempted, it will be a deliberate, conscious, rational process.

Now I have argued that for a metaphor to be successful, it needs to provide informational structure from its source domain. As the metaphor is explored beyond the initial insight and moment of recognition, that is as it is analysed and its meaning analysed in a more systematic way, the relevant informational structure of the source domain needs to be increasingly well worked through and expressed.

If we return to our exemplar metaphors again, we can see that just because War is Chess does not automatically mean that Chess is War, it is however likely that a detailed examination of war in terms of chess would lead to a change in one's understanding of chess to some degree because the metaphor would only be useful if it

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Testament and Contemporary Theology New York: Harper and Row 1966 p195 cited in McFague
Speaking in Parables p70n

incorporated a significant understanding of the nature of chess, and this understanding may need to be developed in particular directions as the metaphor is explored. The creation of the metaphor itself does not automatically change our understanding of chess, but we may find ourselves needing to return to and expand that understanding if we persist in attempting to articulate the meaning of the metaphor.

What is particularly significant about this process is that the more that informational structure is required of the new metaphor, the more detailed the accompanying elucidation of the source domain's properties needs to be. (The next chapter will introduce the idea of 'models' in McFague's thinking and these can be thought of as roughly equivalent with the products of just such a process.)

While our discussion here does not support McFague's apparent claim that religious language is not primarily about God, it does support the weaker position that exploring religious language by incorporating new subjects as metaphors for God does involve a deeper exploration of those subjects.

It may also be, though, that the fact that McFague does not regard her metaphors as being 'about God' is one reason why she is not concerned with relating these metaphors to existing language that purports to be 'about God'. For her, it seems, there are more insights to be gained in our understanding of motherhood from exploring the metaphor 'God is Mother' than there are insights to be gained into God from an attempt to relate 'God is Mother' to 'God is Father'. This is consistent with her stated desire quoted above to direct attention more towards 'what is here like' rather than 'why are we here'.

k) Category expansion – McFague does not herself treat this aspect of metaphor. However an understanding of this property will greatly assist in illuminating some of

her unorthodox use of language to denote categories containing diverse entities, and consequently the often changing usage and meaning of terms in her work. The following discussion builds upon a feature of metaphor that she makes the most use of, namely that metaphors establish a bond of similarity between entities, despite their apparent (or even evident) dissimilarity.

Consequently we can see that metaphors allow subjects to be added to categories to which they did not previously belong, and to which they do not seem to naturally belong. This can be deduced as follows. At one level, any classification system must allow for some diversity in order to group entities that are themselves unique objects. For example even a precisely defined mathematical set such as 'natural numbers' does not require all those numbers to be the same, merely that they correspond to some specified similarity (in this case being a positive integer).

At the next level of precision, the level of everyday language, a diverse array of objects may be grouped under one term. For example a large variety of structures fall into the category 'house' and a still larger number under 'dwelling'. These need not share a single defining or universal property but may be held together in interconnected chains with each member of the group sharing points of similarity with some others but not with all members of the category.[76]

However, allowing for metaphorical connections to be made broadens the categories still further. For example biblical parables add Christian believers to the categories 'sheep', 'fish', 'temples' and 'coins'. Clearly these categories understood in this way are quite different from, for example, a scientific taxonomic classification (which would not include Christians in the 'sheep' category!). What is important for

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76 For a fuller discussion, including a detailed treatment of some of the distributed mathematical calculations performed by a neural network to simulate these category judgements, see Steven Pinker *How the Mind Works* New York: Norton, W. W. & Company 1997 and *The Language Instinct* New York: Norton, W. W. & Company 1994.

our purposes here is that McFague is comfortable using these expanded, 'metaphorical' categories quite liberally. As we shall see, she uses them to classify Jesus as a 'parable' and as a 'metaphor'. She will similarly be seen throughout our enquires to frequently use terms like 'model' and 'metaphor' interchangeably and as if they were the same. For McFague this form of what I would dub 'category expansion' (she does not make reference to this process herself) is a natural expression of the

'positive assertion [that] metaphors point to a real, an assumed similarity between the metaphors and that to which they refer …actually and concretely (though, of course, indirectly)'[77]

Although McFague does not identify this process herself in her work, it is clearly present, and, as we shall see, is fully consistent with her general approach to knowledge and metaphor. Within the boundaries of McFague's work, our analysis suggests, two entities may be held to be 'the same' if they can be metaphorically linked, and as more links are formed, the category becomes broader, and less defined. We will see the process of category expansion take place on a number of occasions in her work and given that it is consistent with her, and our, observations on the nature of metaphor, these instances can be evaluated positively, despite the lack of terminological precision and clarity that sometimes results.

So in these discussions we have seen some of the properties of metaphors that are important to McFague and relevant here, in the light of some more recent research. Although I have expressed some doubts about McFague's reliance upon an interaction theory of metaphor and as a result we have had reason to suggest that more attention be paid to the value of existing metaphors and their relationship to new ones, it is clear that the main thrust of McFague's argument holds and that metaphors are suitable tools with

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77 *Metaphorical Theology* p19

which a theology might be constructed in the light of her particular motivations, aims and concerns.

We have seen that metaphors use a term in an unfamiliar context, and out of that interaction with this 'strangeness', this 'other', they may return us to look at the familiar with new eyes. They are transformative by a reflexive process, albeit one that may be more complex and less direct than McFague proposes. It is significant for McFague that an analogous, but strengthened, effect lies at the heart of the form and function of the genre of Parable, which builds on these features of metaphors just outlined, and intensifies them in particular ways. It is to this that we now turn.

1.5 Parable.

The form 'parable' translates the Hebrew *mashal,* meaning 'to set side by side', and etymologically from the Greek *parabolē,* 'a placing beside'[78] Thus its connections to a juxtaposition theory of metaphor are immediately apparent.

Indeed for McFague a parable may be considered, through a process of category extension, to be an extended form of metaphor. She follows Dodd, whom she quotes:

'At its simplest, the parable is a metaphor or simile drawn from nature or common life, arresting the hearer by its vividness or strangeness, and leaving the mind in sufficient doubt about its precise application to tease it into active thought.'[79]

This is not to say that McFague limits parable to a particular linguistic form, any more than she limits metaphor to such a form. As we will see, for McFague, both parable and metaphor should be thought of as related ways of approaching a subject through a creative juxtaposition of differing entities. In neither case is either to be

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78 See McFague's entry on 'Parable' in John M. Sutcliffe (ed.) *A Dictionary of Theological Education* London: SCM Press, 1984 pp252-253.
79 *Ibid.* p60 citing C H Dodd *The Parables of the Kingdom* New York: Scribners 1961 p16.

thought of as a simply defined linguistic device.

For McFague the key distinction is that parables are different from other *illustrative* narrative forms such as myth and fable in the same way that metaphors are different from mere illustrations. Like metaphors, for McFague, parables have an unsubstitutable characteristic and similarly share many of the properties of metaphors discussed above. She says

'In Max Black's terminology, the story is the screen or 'smoked glass' through which we perceive the new logic…parables…operate in the way that metaphor does. … Metaphors cannot be 'interpreted' – a metaphor does not have a message; it *is* a message. If we have really focussed on the parable, if we have let it work on us (rather than working on it to abstract out its 'meaning') we find that we are interpreted.'[80]

She argues that in a pure form, the parable is a rare breed. McFague identifies a few in the Hebrew Scriptures and in Eastern religious writings (the *koans* in Taoism would be a potential point of comparison), and in the writing of Franz Kafka[81]. Apart from these, for her, Jesus stands alone as the prime example of the consistent and defining use of the form.

A parable is a metaphor in that it juxtaposes two realities or visions of reality (two 'logics'), and unites them by a continuous plot located (usually[82]) within the familiar realm. In so doing it creates a tension between these realities, a tension which is worked out within the plot of the parable, as the familiar reality is transformed by the breaking in of the 'kingdom of God' – the reality which the parables both exemplify, and in an important sense, constitute.

McFague seems correct in emphasising the strong similarities between the features of metaphors and of parables and these are many and significant. McFague

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80 *Ibid.* p 59
81 *Ibid.* p54ff
82 The parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus, set in the afterlife, would arguably be an exception here.

gives an analysis of the features of parables in the light of the features of metaphors and shows that the parables are of significant use in constructing a theology along the lines she suggests is necessary and appropriate to our time and context.[83]

The parables are mundane. They are about concrete, everyday realities, everyday situations and relationships of universal types. These realities provide structure and cognitive content which can be applied albeit it in an unfamiliar way, as well as providing accessibility and emotive power. They illuminate and change our perception of everyday life by placing it in a radically different context, creating tension through the extravagance of its imagery which heightens the contrast. The parables are open-ended and involve their audience at a deep level, which produces the opportunity for transformation of understanding. They are also indirect and limited in what they say about God. God and the rule of God are their theme, and yet these are not specifically identified or referred to within the narrative, rather they are 'in the background', whilst the plot of the story in its everyday context provides the 'foreground', holds our attention. Consequently, the parables direct us back to our mundane realities with a fresh vision and understanding of them, and they do so by affirming the 'is and is not' character of their assertions about God and the world, the logic of the kingdom and the logic of ordinary existence. Finally, they require consent on the part of the audience, who must engage with the unfamiliarity, the reversal of expectations, and through this engagement are asked to come to a decision to accept (and so inhabit) this changed, redescribed reality, or to reject it.

The parables are also relevant in their content, providing McFague with another source of unity between form and content. Not only do the parables seek to be transformative of understanding, and therefore of life, as a *genre* but are frequently *about* transformation in their content. This is often an ethical, social and ultimately

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83 See *Speaking in Parables* Ch 3 and 4 and *Models of God* Ch 2

cosmological transformation, re-imagining the world in terms of abundance, extravagance and inclusivity.

This link between the form of the parables as transformative and their subject being transformation is an aesthetic and conceptual link rather than one of logical necessity; it would be possible for the parables to be transformative but not be about transformation, or to be about transformation but not in and of themselves be formally transformative. Thus we might say that this 'unity of form and content'[84] is an identification of similarity amongst divergent entities, which is not a simple identification or comparison of 'likeness'. This is the broad definition of metaphor that McFague uses and therefore the similarity is a 'metaphorical' connection in the broadest sense. It is this type of connection that is characteristic of the type of metaphorical symmetry exhibited by McFague's thinking and another example of category extension.

The status of the parables is also significant in legitimating McFague's theological project, and in defending the status of that project as authentically Christian. She demonstrates that this was the principal mode of teaching, of doing theology, of the founder of the tradition in which she works and which she seeks to reform.

Having set out McFague's understanding of parables, it can now be critiqued. Her interpretation of the genre of parable is dependent upon fairly recent studies in biblical scholarship, deriving from the work of Jülicher in the late 19th Century, and the subsequent work of C H Dodd, Joachim Jeremias, Robert Funk and John Dominic Crossan from the 1960's on. In this work, the mainstream scholarly understanding of parables has clearly moved away from thinking of them in terms of allegories, or moral tales, and towards the metaphorical approach outlined above.

However it must be noted that in the process of deploying 'metaphor' as a tool

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84 A characteristic goal of metaphorical theology, see *Speaking in Parables* p83

for understanding parable certain features of the parables are screened out. This, as we have seen, is inevitable, but it is potentially serious when it affects the interpretation of such a fundamental component of her theology. In other words, parables may be 'seen as' metaphors, but this should naturally alert us to the fact that parables are also therefore 'not metaphors' and that there will be other complementary and perhaps contradictory ways of understanding them.

This 'screening out' effect is evident in that it excludes from the genre of parable certain narratives that are traditionally and biblically regarded as parabolic, for instance the Good Samaritan, which McFague excludes on the grounds that it is an 'example story'.[85] This reading of the story is debatable, but in any case the question at issue is whether it matters that the criteria for what is viewed as a parable is identical with the traditional classification. I would hold that it does not matter significantly since her criteria are clear and consistently applied. Far from narrowing the available 'parabolic' material, this definition of parable extends it to include many of the sayings of Jesus, on the basis that they are also surprising, dialectical statements uniting and contrasting the two logics in a transformational way. Indeed, as we shall see below, McFague extends the category of the parabolic to include Jesus himself.

This is possible because McFague's criteria for a text being indeed a parable are, as already observed, not formal, grammatical ones, and neither are they a matter of logical, necessary entailment. Rather the criteria are an abstraction of the properties of metaphor, a process of category extension; seeing the parables, *as if* they were metaphors and carrying the necessary caveat that they are therefore also 'not metaphors'

Now McFague's presentation of how a metaphor works requires there to be two poles which combine to form the metaphor. According to McFague, these two poles

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85 *Speaking in Parables* p13 In other words she argues that this particular story is simply an example of something that could have been said in plain speech, e.g. 'Love your enemy' . It does not qualify as 'metaphorical' because it is not unsubstitutable in her view.

interact and emerge transformed. However analysis here has modified this scheme by rejecting the theory of interaction, and so a problem may arise for method if these two poles (or 'domains') are not correctly identified. Like connecting a battery correctly, the view of metaphor advanced here, contra McFague, requires clarity as to which pole is which, a point of detail that McFague, with her view of metaphor, did not need to supply. An analysis here will demonstrate that even though later research may cause us to revise McFague's view on metaphor, it is still possible for parables to be 'seen as' metaphors in a way that is consistent with that revised understanding.

In *Metaphorical Theology* McFague applies Ricoeur's view of metaphor to parable and identifies the two poles of the parable as being,

'the two ways of being in the world, one which is the conventional way and the other, the way of the kingdom.'[86]

And later:

'The plot of the parable forms one partner of the interactive metaphor, while the conventional context against which it is set forms the other.'[87]

If we take McFague's view and delve a little deeper, we can see that the parables are indeed not simple illustrative stories.

Confronted by a parable, I would argue (going beyond McFague's own position), that the audience must 'reverse engineer' the parable to discover how the world would need to be seen, what 'lens' or 'grid' they would need to look through in order to see the world that way. The parable itself does not provide the grid, it is not the grid. Rather the value of the parable is that it invites the construction of such a grid and provides a context against which such a grid might be evaluated. For example, we know that shepherds don't leave 99 sheep on the hillside to search for one, we know that

86 *Metaphorical Theology* p45
87 *Ibid.* p 45

when people find a lost coin they don't throw parties, we know that Samaritans don't stop to take care of Jews and so on, so we must ask how would one have to look at the world for those things to make sense?

It is this process that generates the didactic power of the parables since it requires the participation of the audience in constructing the 'glasses of the Kingdom' in order to view the world in a transformed way, from a new point of view.

This can be seen from the fact that if we wrote stories as illustrations reliant upon the mundane and expected features of ordinary life they would be very different stories. 'You should act as Samaritans and Jews do', 'Finding the Kingdom is like finding a coin behind a cupboard' and 'I'm the good shepherd who makes sure the 99 are OK and leaves the one to its fate.' These could be told as illustrative stories, but they would not be parables, because there would be no transformation of understanding, no new reality to be observed and understood.

McFague's understanding of how parables operate upon the hearer is rather more tied to the interaction theory of metaphor. She draws upon the idea that constructing a metaphor involves transforming our understanding of both its poles (and hence our understanding of both ordinary life and our understanding of the kingdom are held to interact and transform each other by being placed side by side in the story). Rather I would argue that what we are given in the parable is already the product of the interaction of the two domains. It is for us to extricate from that product the source domain (conventional life) and therefore reconstruct the target domain (the life of the kingdom).

For comparison, imagine two overlapping circles of colour, one red and one yellow, with the area of overlap being orange. Now remove the red circle and give the remaining yellow/orange circle to another person. In order to explain the presence of

the orange, and discover the colour of the missing piece, they would need to reconstruct the red circle.

In the same way, it is because the 'grid' or the 'metaphor' (the 'red circle') is not provided that the parable appears opaque in a way that a simple metaphor does not. I.e. rather than saying, 'war is chess' (a metaphor), saying 'There was a man who played war at weekends on a chequered board in his living room' (a parable).

Strictly speaking, this implies that the parable is not itself actually an extended metaphor – rather it is the product of the application of a metaphor. This metaphor is not explicitly stated but must be discovered or reconstructed by the reader/listener.

Even so, this slightly revised understanding of the functioning of parables remains entirely in line with McFague's general observations about the ways in which the parables reveal and conceal the kingdom; the ways in which the kingdom cannot be understood apart from them. The key insights that the features of metaphor help us understand the properties of parable still apply.

As we have seen, parables are of great importance to McFague. We have also seen that her understanding of parable as a genre is based upon a projection of the properties of metaphor onto the parables (i.e. parables are *seen as* metaphors), rather than her having a strict definition of parable based on a particular literary form. Therefore McFague's understanding of what a parable is has been expanded by the application of conceptual abstractions from the properties of metaphor (and this process has been taken further here in order to demonstrate that it still holds in the light of subsequent refinements in the literature in the understanding of the nature and working of metaphor).

Therefore it is crucial that McFague is not misunderstood to be claiming that

'parables are metaphors' in any simple sense of identification of the two, as if a parable were only to be thought of as an extended metaphor to the exclusion of other understandings . Rather, because parables may be 'seen as' metaphors, the link between parable and metaphor may itself be seen as a metaphorical one. In other words, she constructs the metaphor 'a parable is a metaphor' in the same sense that 'war is chess'. Again the symmetry of form and content in her work can be seen, as she is using her understanding of metaphor itself as a metaphor for understanding the parables.

This, however, is a consistent methodological move in McFague's work – a move of increasing abstraction as particular examples are drawn together and are abstracted into metaphors (just as particular parables are drawn together and abstracted into an account of what a parable is, with this account being a metaphor both in form and in content). These metaphors then act as 'models', which are themselves expanded into 'concepts' and 'theories'.[88] (In this case she constructs a model of what a parable is, and then abstracts the concept of 'the parabolic' and advances a theory of the nature and working of parables that ties all these things together.)

This method will be discussed in more detail in the next chapter. In the meantime we will look at two further examples of this process as McFague expands her understanding of parable to include the person and work of Jesus and expands her understanding of metaphor into the concept of the 'metaphorical'.

1.6 Jesus as the parable of God.

'I believe in Jesus, the strange, enigmatic prophet who lived two thousand years ago, as the Christ of God. In his life and death I learn who God is, and I

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88 These terms are defined and explored in detail in chapter 2.

learn that the God revealed here is incarnate also everywhere else.'[89]

This quotation, from her later work, shows the confessional nature of McFague's theology. At this later point in her career, as in her early writings, she sees herself as working within the Christian tradition and remaining within it despite being highly critical of much of that tradition. Some of the reasons for this are undoubtedly personal and experiential, however there are also reasons intrinsic to her understanding of theological task and method which make Jesus its ideal subject matter. It is likely that the high degree of metaphorical consistency between her Christology and other theological concerns has been a factor in her adherence to Christianity, even when the history and current state of that tradition has been far from her ideal. Whether or not she has given full attention to what constraints remaining within this tradition might place on theology is something which has flagged up questions regarding her own approach. We will continue to revisit these questions.

McFague claims that the Christian tradition is opposed to Cartesian dualisms of mind, body and spirit[90]. Choosing instead to view each of these dualisms as being dialectics instead, and re-imagining them through her understanding of metaphor, McFague deems them all to be 'embodied', and identifies 'embodied' with 'metaphorical' since both are concerned with the connectedness and unification of disparate entities[91]. This enables her to see human life as embodying, incarnating, metaphor itself because to be human is to bring together in one entity the tensions between spirit and body and so on. Clearly then, the metaphor of the incarnation will be, for her, the ultimate metaphor.

In the preceding pages we have seen how Jesus' characteristic genre of parable is ideally suited, both in form and content, to her understanding of a theology based on

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89 *Life Abundant* p 20
90 *Metaphorical Theology* pp76, 146
91 *Super, Natural Christians* p75

metaphor as a result of her 'radical monotheism' (her view that any language that claims to describe God is idolatrous, and that God is radically other to anything that our language can be used to describe). With regard to the scriptures from which these parables spring, McFague has a relatively low regard for their status[92]. She sees them as functioning as a classic text, as examples of the theological method, including the metaphorical method, but not as providing concrete norms for theology, or an authoritative application of the method[93]. Metaphorical theology, while taking scripture seriously as a potential fund of images, models and concepts, could, on her presentation, proceed relatively unscathed without much of the narrative of scripture. The same is not true, for McFague, of the narrative of Jesus.

This is not only because a text (e.g. a parable) cannot be fully understood without attending to its author, but because her Christology is integrated with her method in a way that allows the nature and interpretation of Jesus to function as an exemplar rather than just an illustration. In other words, for McFague, the meaning of Jesus is not exhausted by his teaching (although he cannot be understood without it), instead his meaning is inherent to his being. Like a metaphor, Jesus is unsubstitutable and therefore McFague is able to assert that Jesus is himself a metaphor (and therefore also 'is not' a metaphor – we must remember that McFague is reaching for metaphorical similarity here, not definition or identity). Again it is not a simple identification that is being claimed, but rather a metaphorical connection between two very different entities. For McFague, Jesus' meaning is abstracted, conceptualised and applied to all humanity and ultimately to the cosmos. He is not unique in his ontology, but is the paradigmatic example by and through whom we see the true nature of the world in its relationship to God. It is not that God is only incarnate in Jesus, rather that Jesus allows us to see

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92 In comparison to a traditional Protestant understanding of the inspiration and infallibility of Scripture.
93 *Metaphorical Theology* p54ff

God's incarnation in all things by standing as a metaphor for that universal divine indwelling. His status is as the source domain of a metaphor relating to the whole of creation and transforming our understanding of it, rather than his being a merely illustrative example of a universal truth. Without him, she holds, we would not see this universal incarnation and therefore it would not exist for us McFague explicitly rejects a view that sees Jesus as the paramount example of a universal phenomenon of sacramentality based on the procession of being[94]. Nevertheless, Jesus makes a 'sacramental' conception of reality possible again, albeit in a metaphorical sense. He re-describes reality by his advent. Creation is reinterpreted by and through Jesus, rather than Jesus being interpreted in light of the creation. He is parable in her expanded sense of the term, and not simply illustrative story.

This last statement recalls the features of parables which allow them to interpret their listeners by re-describing their reality, turning it inside out. It is therefore no surprise that Jesus is understood by McFague as 'the parable of God'.

In this, she is dependent upon Leander Keck who she quotes thus:

'Just as a parable does not illustrate ideas better stated non-parabolically, and so become dispensable, so Jesus is not merely an illustration for the kingdom which can be more adequately grasped apart from him – say in mystic encounters or in abstract formulations. His task was not to impart correct concepts about the kingdom but to make it possible for men to respond to it...He not only tells shocking stories but leads a shocking life towards a shocking end. Just as the parables have familiar elements in unfamiliar plots, so Jesus' life has familiar features of Palestinian life in startling juxtaposition.'[95]

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94 *Ibid.* p11-20
95 Leander Keck *A future for the Historical Jesus: The Place of Jesus in Preaching and Theology*
    Nashville: Abingdon Press 1974 pp245-246 quoted in McFague *Speaking in Parables* p82

'Jesus as a parable of God' functions for McFague in several ways. He serves as the example *par excellence* of her method, embodying the same type of metaphorical coherence for McFague as we saw that she had constructed between metaphor and parable. In terms of *form,* his life functions metaphorically in that it itself exhibits tension and indirectness resulting from a subversion of the mundane fabric and structure of life. In *content*, his life models a radical egalitarianism, a critique of power and an universal inclusivity, an abundant love and a picture of human flourishing (with a cosmic, eternal dimension added by the resurrection appearance narratives).[96] Jesus is seen as the embodiment, the incarnation, of metaphorical theology as well as its defining practitioner. Therefore he provides both formal and material continuity for theology.[97] Thus Jesus, understood and re-imagined through the 'grid' of parable and metaphor functions as one crucial locus of her theology. She is able to claim that the founding figure of Christian faith is (metaphorically!) both a parable and a metaphor, not only in what he said and did, but in who and what he was.

To analyse this beyond McFague's own presentation now, we should note that as a 'parable of God' Jesus must be regarded as unsubstitutable. This is partly a theoretical assertion based on the properties of metaphors and their application, but it receives support from the metaphorical character of his life and teaching. This unity of life and language itself embodies McFague's basic motivating contention, namely that language powerfully controls both being and doing.

Meanwhile the overarching, recurring theme of embodiment links both to her understanding of the human person as 'a body that thinks'[98] and her epistemology which is based on coherence. This coherence is to be understood as being both *within* knowledge and *between* knowledge and life as it is experienced and lived out. In short

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96 We will see in Chapter 2.3 how these concepts are derived.
97 *Models of God* p46
98 *Speaking in Parables* p15

'coherence of life' is the ultimate criterion of epistemic justification in her epistemology[99] as well as, when interpreted ethically, her ultimate motivating concern. Something is 'true' for McFague when it is able to establish a metaphorical similarity between 'how the world is' and 'how the world should be', between 'how life is lived' and 'how it might be lived in all abundance'.

By placing her model of theology in symbiotic relationship with the 'historical Jesus' as attested in the gospels, he is seen simultaneously as the origin, example and confirmation of her theology, Jesus has become the reference point, the key metaphor, the cornerstone. As Jesus is the root-metaphor of his tradition, he is unsubstitutable to it, for to change a root-metaphor is to create a new paradigm, a new tradition. For these reasons McFague could not do Christian theology at all without him. However, so integrated is he into her approach that it is virtually inconceivable that she could have any chance of articulating a publicly accessible (and consequently 'relevant') discourse (one that was not based entirely in her own religious experience) without him. Hence Jesus plays an important role in controlling and disciplining her theological reflection and model forming. As she herself says,

'...the theologian is constrained to return to the paradigmatic story of Jesus for validation and illumination[100].'

The unsubstitutability of Jesus is controlling in a particular way. It is not that it illustrates what would otherwise still be independently derivable principles that can be applied to all space and time. Rather we are offered a way of seeing, a way of interpreting, a particular place and time, a particular context. Although itself an interpretation of Jesus, its purpose is not primarily *to be* an interpretation of Jesus (making claims about the actual reality of Jesus), but as a means of interpreting

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99 See chapter 2.5
100 *Models of God* p48

ourselves and *our* experience which cannot be interpreted in this particular (and, she holds, especially desirable) way apart from Jesus.

'What is being sought is not primarily the validation of the story of Jesus as having [certain] characteristics but illumination of our situation by that paradigmatic story.'[101]

In other words, as much as Jesus stands as a metaphor and parable for God, it is more important for McFague's project that he stand as a metaphor and parable for us and for our lives, if those lives are to be lived 'right', that is in such a way as to bring about abundance for the whole of creation.

The interpretation of Jesus as parable, then, is consistent with her theological approach at the level of its motivation, the level of philosophical understanding of the nature of theological language, and at the level of its intended outcome, as well as at the levels of form and content.

It is clear, however, that in presenting Jesus as a parable of God, McFague has moved beyond formal or literal definitions of parable and has abstracted a *concept* of parable from her *model* of it and then identified commonalities between this concept and the life of Jesus read in the light of that concept. From this conceptual similarity she has then formed a concrete model of Jesus to form a Christology which is coherent to a high degree.

The following section will now look at this process again, carried much further, as we see how the concept 'metaphorical' derives from the model 'metaphor'.

101*Models of God* pp49-50

1.7 'Metaphorical'.

For Sallie McFague, not everything that is grammatically a metaphor is 'metaphorical' and not everything that is metaphorical is grammatically a metaphor (just as not everything that is called a parable is a parable by her definition, and some sayings not usually identified as parables have become so for her). This is not a 'lack of clarity' in the use of terminology as Peters argues[102], rather this distinction is clear in her writing from the use of the word 'metaphorical'. For example, while discussing a line from Dante's *Divine Comedy* she says,

'This is technically a simile not a metaphor, for it has the 'as ... so' construction; *but that is really incidental*, because metaphorical power is present.'[103].

To understand the reasoning here we need to return again to her understanding of metaphor, and observe some key points that she makes in *Speaking in Parables,* and set these in a broader context in subsequent research.

Lakoff and Turner note two variants of the 'It's All Metaphor Position'.[104] The first is the weak position, which they state thus:

'Every linguistic expression expresses a concept that is, at least in some aspect, understood via metaphor.'[105]

Given the prevalence and importance of metaphor in human reasoning, this position is probably correct.

From this it may also follow that

'*every linguistic expression* of every language is understood via metaphor, at

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102 Peters p132
103 *Speaking in Parables* p49 (emphasis added)
104 Lakoff and Turner p133-5
105 *Ibid.* p134

least in part.'[106]

However there is also a second, strong form that McFague seems to argue for, (though not consistently as we shall see).

Lakoff and Turner state this as,

'Every aspect of every concept is completely understood via metaphor.'[107]

This results in a view of language as a closed system (a position that McFague argues for) where every concept is only understood in terms of other concepts and is not grounded in any way.

However Lakoff and Turner argue that our primary source domains are semantically autonomous, and are grounded in our concrete experience, and are thus not themselves understood *completely* metaphorically. McFague also wishes to ground her religious metaphors in 'first order' experience. Indeed she seeks to do this in two ways, firstly what she wishes to express is 'primary' religious experience, and secondly she wishes to do so using images that are 'basic'.[108] Therefore it has to be asked whether McFague is advocating the strong theory at all. This question can be clarified by looking at precisely what McFague calls 'metaphorical' and how she sees language working.

Language works, McFague insists, by connecting pieces of knowledge together, by spotting patterns, likenesses amongst the dissimilar. Language orders reality, grouping it into categories. Thus the term 'chair' does not refer to any specific entity in and of itself; it is not a proper name. Rather it defines a category into which an infinite number of potentially radically different objects, which are judged to share some of a number of similarities in form or function, may be placed.

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106 *Ibid.*
107 *Ibid*.
108 See section on 'Image' in chapter 2.

McFague calls this process of categorisation 'metaphorical' and therefore regards all language as metaphorical. However here she is straining the bounds of what can be termed metaphorical without causing confusion. The claim that all language is 'metaphorical' cannot be seen as a claim that all language is of an identical type. There is clearly a distinction to be drawn between the process of conceptual categorisation of experienced entities by perceived similarities, and the cognitive reunderstanding of concepts by the introduction of structure from another source domain. Thus the statements 'this is a rock' and 'God is a Rock' are of a different type (it is just that in certain senses they are 'metaphorically the same' in that certain points of illuminating similarity between the two processes may be identified when categorisation is 'viewed as if' it were metaphor).

The key to this confusion is McFague's failure to distinguish between the comparative and juxtaposition theories of metaphor. It is a case of the category expansion process, that was identified above, running amok, and the resulting lack of category definition overwhelming the technical distinctions that could otherwise be made. The normal process of categorisation is comparative. It rests upon similarities that would be evidently held to exist in quite independent descriptions of the entities concerned, without any reference to the other. These similarities are then noted after the fact and the two are independently assigned to the same category. These categories are Lakoff and Turner's experientially grounded, semantically autonomous source domains (or 'literal language' as I have defined it).

In contrast the process of understanding a domain in terms of another domain is juxtapositive (what Lakoff and Turner call 'metaphorical' as opposed to 'literal'). Although McFague is unclear on the point, and a certain license has been allowed thus far, she is not free, *by her own understanding,* to class the process of metaphor

formation as comparative, as spotting a thread of similarity rather than creating one. Crucial for McFague is the belief that a metaphor is created in a moment of novel recognition of similarity *despite jarring difference*, and that subsequent similarity is *constructed* as the structure of the source domain is projected onto the target. Thus the similarity resulting from a metaphor is exactly *not* the form of similarity that can be drawn between independently described entities. The point of a metaphor is that the description of the target that results is one that cannot be independently derived. The description results from the juxtaposition of the two entities in question, rather than from a direct comparison between them. To allow the direct comparison would be to readmit the notion of the 'analogy of being' since it would depend on the points of comparison (say between 'God' and 'Mother') as being actual, ontological, as 'being there', as opposed to these similarities being constructed by the formation of the metaphor; seeing one 'as if' it were the other.

Calling both the process of comparative categorisation and the process of metaphorical juxtaposition 'metaphorical' is technically and conceptually within McFague's understanding of what 'metaphor' may mean when abstracted (since there are both similarities and differences between the two processes and so, if the category 'metaphorical' is sufficiently expanded, both can be accommodated within it), but it does not add clarity to her work, since it itself reads as a categorisation of the two processes as 'the same' rather than an 'is and is not' metaphorical exploration and creation of similarity in difference.

McFague is elsewhere highly aware of the need for differentiation between forms and uses of language. Consequently she terms ordinary speech, that is, that which she takes to be literal speech, as consisting of 'dead metaphors'. 'Dead' for McFague means 'devoid of metaphorical power', this power being related to a

metaphor's ability to generate new knowledge, to express emotive content and to provide a shock of recognition coupled with a shock of difference or unfamiliar context.

So the claim that everything is metaphorical is sweetened by a qualifier.

However, here again later studies of metaphor call into question McFague's position. DesCamp and Sweetser, for example, reject the idea of dead metaphors, as do Lakoff and Turner. They have shown convincingly the powerful role that these 'conventional' metaphors play in shaping human understanding, and argue that the view that such metaphors are dead comes from two mistakes. Firstly, an assumption that

'Those things in our cognition that are most alive and most active are those that are conscious.'[109]

and secondly, a failure to differentiate between metaphors which are active at the automatic, unconscious level and those statements that have, for historical reasons, simply ceased to be metaphors (they offer the example of the term 'pedigree', once an image-metaphor based on a crane's foot and now no longer carrying this sense).

Thus we can see that McFague's concern that metaphors such as 'God the Father' have become dead metaphors, in that they are not recognised as metaphors, may be judged to have missed its target. The same is true of her recommended remedy of supplying new metaphors to remind us that the old ones are indeed metaphors.[110] The issue is not fact that the metaphor 'God the Father' for example is 'dead' in the sense that it is simply not seen as a metaphor. Rather the issue may be that, through the hegemony of its usage, it has become so basic to religious thought that it informs it at the subconscious level. This strengthens our earlier case for the necessity of hermeneutical recovery – this basic information has become so central to Christian self-understanding

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109 Lakoff and Turner p129. They continue 'On the contrary, those that are most alive and most deeply entrenched, efficient, and powerful are those that are so automatic as to be unconscious and effortless.'
110 Sontag identifies McFague's argument on this point as a non-sequitur and his case is strengthened by our findings here. See Sontag 'Metaphorical Non-Sequitur' *Scottish Journal of Theology* Volume44 Issue 1 February 1991 pp1-18

that simply to replace it with another metaphor which is unsubstitutable in meaning with it seems unlikely to achieve McFague's ultimate goal of changing the way her audience thinks.

On the other hand, despite the ongoing and deep cognitive role of conventional metaphors, there is still a case to be made for *new* metaphors as a way of *extending* human knowledge. This ability is what McFague terms 'metaphor as human movement'.

'Movement' in this sense is the ability to make novel connections, the ability for knowledge to progress. It is the ability of the human mind, itself a product of nature, 'being of one substance' with creation, to discover and express the underlying unity of all that is at the level of a subject-subject relationship, through the construction of dialectics connecting known and unknown, what is with what it might be.[111]

A metaphor is capable of such movement if it has the properties outlined above in Chapter 1.2. Possessing these characteristics means being 'tentative, relativistic, multi-layered, dynamic, complex, sensuous, historical and participatory.'[112]

However, though McFague does not make this observation herself, it should be noted that this is the 'metaphorical' categorising approach just discussed above, a process of category expansion. Just as we can create the categories 'house' and 'habitable' through which to connect a range of objects together metaphorically, so we can create the category 'metaphor' and 'metaphorical' which hold together diverse forms of language which are related in certain characteristics that they display. It is this broader, expanded category, rather than a strictly, technically defined one that McFague generally refers to as 'metaphorical'.

However, she does extend this abstracting process still further. Over the course

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111 *Speaking in Parables p 56.* See also Sallie McFague *Super, Natural Christians: How We Should Love Nature* (British Edition) London: SCM Press 1997 Chapter 1.
112 *Ibid.* p62

of her thinking, the properties of metaphor in language and cognition are placed in another context, the context of human experiences and values, where they become metaphorically identified with her ethical values of social revolution, and a unifying vision across barriers of gender, culture, sexuality and ultimately, species. Therefore many diverse forms of language, activity, ideas and even people may be denoted as 'metaphorical' in McFague's usage because they are all connected by themes of unifying difference.

Again, McFague does not differentiate between them, but there is clearly a distinction to be made between in the one case, the unitive power of a metaphor in language, in another case, the philosophical uniting of mind and body, and in a third case the social process of uniting different, and sometimes opposing, groups (male/female, gay/straight etc.). It appears that what is occurring throughout her thought is that the metaphorical method is being applied across these different categories and these categories are expanded as hidden similarities are being drawn out. We have already seen this process of category extension (which may itself be deemed 'metaphorical') in relation to the parables and to Jesus.

But despite jarring dissimilarity, our analysis suggests that for McFague these diverse cases share more than a passing semblance or a purely imaginative creation of similarity, we might say, like spotting faces in clouds. She seems to imply that these similarities can be held to exist at a level between aesthetic symmetry and logical consequence, due to the basic nature of metaphor in language and human knowing.

In short, McFague asserts that all knowing is metaphorical in the broadest sense in that it involves the interconnection of disparate and diverse mental phenomena. But I would argue that just because 'all' knowing is metaphorical, this does not imply that all knowing is of an identical nature. In effect the term 'metaphorical' is being used here to

mean 'unitive', in the sense that a metaphor unites while preserving concrete differences. All knowing may be metaphorical in this sense, but not all knowing is the same, and there is no contradiction here because McFague's position is to be understood in the light of the identified properties of metaphor, not as an absolute or literal statement. That is, McFague would be likely to say that knowing both 'is' and 'is not' metaphorical. The differences must be asserted along with the similarities. The metaphorical approach must not be absolutised or allowed to become the only way of thinking about language or knowledge. It is simply one way of looking at these things, seeing knowledge and language *as if* they were 'all metaphor' with this statement itself seen as being a metaphor. But it is this particular way of 'seeing as' that both results in the particular kind of unity found of McFague's thought and also gives it its character. It also gives her approach its name: Metaphorical Theology.

1.8 Summary.

This chapter has begun to put together the basic elements of McFague's theology, having first considered the general context and motivation in which this theology is constructed. We have seen how McFague is concerned to promote inclusivity and abundance, while avoiding idolatry and irrelevance.

This she seeks to do by use of metaphor and parable. The primary, relevant features of good metaphors have been identified as familiarity, structure and tension, and the main property of metaphor itself has been identified as its unsubstitutability and therefore its ability to generate new knowledge indirectly. This discussion has, however modified McFague's understanding of metaphor by rejecting an interaction theory of

metaphor. Our attention has been directed towards the relationship between McFague's models of God and other images, models and concepts within the Christian traditions as a point of potential debate.

Two stages of abstraction have been identified underlying McFague's understanding of metaphor. It has been noted how both the parables, and the person of Jesus may be understood in the light of these. This chapter concluded by examining the process of category expansion that leads McFague from a discussion that begins with the concrete cases of the unique features of metaphors in language right up to a broad categorisation of almost everything as 'metaphorical'. The final two sections (the analysis of parable and Jesus as parable) should be seen as examples of this overarching process of category expansion. While this process does not give McFague's work forensic technical precision when it comes to consistent use of terminology, it does give her work a much broader conceptual unity and allows her insights to be applied to wide ranging themes within the Christian tradition and beyond.

Throughout, attention has been drawn to the unity of form and content that has been shown to result from the application of such a process. This unity is to be expected since it is a feature of metaphor that what is seen is inevitably coloured by the interpreting model through which it is 'seen as'. That symmetries exist then, is not in itself surprising, what is more significant is the degree to which they are present and the, at times remarkable, degree of coherence generated, especially that held together by McFague's Christology.

Although McFague does not herself give consideration to the process of category expansion, it will be seen in the following chapter that this process is not an uncontrolled or random one. Instead it will soon be seen to be the result of a process that McFague does describe and advocate, whereby a successful *model*, deriving from

initially suggestive *images*, and their related *concepts* are deployed systematically to form a coherent and productive *theory*. For this to be seen more clearly, these terms need to be unpacked in more detail. It is to this that we will turn in the following chapter.

Meanwhile, the early indications of the analysis so far are consistent with the view that McFague's theology is very largely consistent and coherent internally and over time in its most basic elements. At the same time, questions have been posed about the details of her presentation in certain small areas. It remains to be seen later to what extent these points become significant for her theology in its subsequent stages of development and application.

Chapter 2 – Means and ends:

Constructing a metaphorical theology

2.1   **Introduction.**

The preceding chapter ended by mentioning categories of image, model, concept and theory which as will now be seen are basic to McFague's understanding of theological method.   The overarching quality described as 'metaphorical' was also examined. This chapter will examine each of these fundamental categories in turn, explaining what they mean in her usage, showing not only what McFague regards as the nature of each, but how she says they should be interrelated. It will also begin to show how McFague employs these categories in her own theology, in relation to her understanding of the metaphorical and of the Christian tradition.   While a fuller discussion of each of these categories will follow below, a short definition of each is given here, since McFague can be seen to use these terms in two different but related senses, with the second being an extension, a generalisation of the first.

Firstly, McFague introduces image, model, concept and theory as stages in the process of constructing language about God. This she does explicitly.[113] In this case, an **image** is a particular example of what is being proposed as a vehicle for theological discussion (a particular father, or mother, or rock etc.). In relation to God-talk, a **model** is generalised from a number of images, for example forming an account of motherhood drawn from but generalising upon, the more concrete images of mothers. From this model, a **concept** of associated abstract properties can be constructed, for example a concept of motherliness.   Together, the whole system of images, model and concepts could be related together and to other models and so on and the system applied to a wider range of issues at the level of a **theory,** e.g. a theory of the Motherhood of God.

However, McFague in typical fashion seems to be deploying this process more

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113 Sallie McFague *Metaphorical Theology: Models of God in Religious Language (British edition)*
    London: SCM Press 1983 pp14-27

generally, leaving the specific case of the construction of language about God behind and applying the approach in other areas. She makes little specific reference to this process[114], but it may be clearly seen to underlie her approach to many subjects other than language about God, including her understandings of metaphor in general and of parable as they were presented above.

The four categories, and especially image and model are extended and in the general case the terms image, model, concept and theory are place-holders, denoting particular functions and roles within a methodological scheme. They are like roles in a play that may be played by a number of different actors.

This can be seen as follows: An **image** in this sense is no longer only a mental or physical image, literally understood, but has come to stand for any concrete example of a phenomenon. An image is therefore any typical case that informs a more general type or class – so for example, if metaphors in general are under discussion, then an 'image' in this context is a particular metaphor, such as the example used here, namely 'War is Chess'. When considering parables, individual parables would function as images of what parables are.

Meanwhile, a **model** is a generalised, but still concrete, idealisation of a set of images into a hypothetical, ordered account of the class. For example in the case of McFague's understanding of the function of metaphors in language in general (not just in language about God), the properties of certain specific metaphors are generalised and a hypothetical account of the nature of metaphors in general is constructed. Likewise the features of particular parables are generalised into a model of parables.

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114 The closest she comes to an acknowledgement of this process is in *Metaphorical Theology* in a passing reference to 'the movement from parable to conceptual thought' (p26). In this case we could read her as if she were saying 'movement from a images and models of parables to conceptual thought about them' without doing violence to her meaning. McFague is primarily interested in presenting particular, applied cases of her approach – applied to 'the Kingdom of God' or to 'the person Jesus' for example – rather than outlining a general way of approaching knowledge and understanding . However she gives sufficient examples of her method in application for us to be able to generalise on her underlying method with confidence.

A **concept** is a higher level abstraction, a further degree of generalisation that separates the qualities of a model from their particular concrete expressions and applications. For example on metaphors, the concept of what is metaphorical is an abstraction of qualities derived from the model of metaphors and the fund of specific examples which feed these models. The concept of metaphor is therefore the abstracted properties of metaphors, such as 'unification', 'creative tension', 'is-and-is not-ness' etc. In the same way, a concept of the parabolic can be derived, having similar features[115].

McFague's usage of the term **theory** is more conventional – an overarching, systematic account of a phenomenon[116], bringing together image, model concept and theory into a unified explanatory scheme – a theory of metaphor, or a theory of parables.

Although these four are presented, both here and in McFague's writing, as discrete categories, namely 'image', 'model', 'concept' and 'theory', it is important to note that she understands these as points on a continuum which simultaneously exist in a characteristically symbiotic interrelationship. She expresses this in the following passage which gives her clearest statement of the relationship between these four categories in her thought:

'Images 'feed' concepts; concepts 'discipline' images. Images without concepts are blind; concepts without images are sterile. In a metaphorical theology, there is no suggestion of a hierarchy among metaphors, models, and concepts: concepts are not higher, better, or more necessary than images, or vice versa. Images are never free of the need for interpretation by concepts, their critique of competing images, or their demythologizing of literalized models. Concepts are never free of the need for funding by images, the affectional and existential richness of images,

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115 Note that therefore that although McFague does not observe this herself, what she is in fact doing is unifying metaphor and parable at the level of the concept – that is they are the same because they are conceptually similar, not because they share common concrete properties or can be modelled in the same way. This typical feature of her thought will be seen to reoccur consistently.

116 *Metaphorical Theology* p 26

and the qualification against conceptual pretensions supplied by the plurality of images. In no sense can systematic thought be said to explain metaphors and models so that they become mere illustrations for concepts; rather, the task of conceptual thought is to generalize (often in philosophical language, the generalizing language), to criticize images, to raise questions of their meaning and truth in explicit ways.'[117]

As she says, all four levels of understanding are required; theories and concepts, although structurally dominant in the framework of epistemic organisation, cannot dispense with images or models without losing much insight along the way[118], a fact that derives primarily from the unsubstitutable nature of metaphors as remarked upon in the previous chapter. It can be said, therefore, that the relationship between the four categories is a relationship of both continuity and genuine difference, continuing, as McFague might say, the 'metaphorical' motif that seems to be omnipresent in her work.

The direction of progression from image to theory is important in that this is essentially the direction in which McFague wishes theologies, including her own, to progress (from primary religious experience to systematic theology), but there is no hierarchy of value in this progression. Rather,

'The overall goal of interpretation is to *return to the experience* the primary language expresses.'[119]

This primary language is the language of the 'image'.

2.2   **Image.**

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117 *Ibid.* p26

118 We should understand her remark that there is no 'hierarchy' in the passage quoted to refer to a hierarchy of value or importance, not hierarchy in terms of their place within an epistemic scheme – theories and concepts exist at a 'higher level' in that they order the models and images below them, but this higher place does not imply a higher value.

119 *Metaphorical Theology* p121 (Emphasis original)

As this discussion began with McFague's use of the term 'image', and later 'model', it is worth briefly revisiting the nature of McFague's 'metaphorical' (or 'category extended') use of terms in general. As will be seen, McFague uses the term image both in its basic sense of 'a pictorial representation' but also in the sense just noted as 'an exemplar of the particular class or phenomenon under consideration'. We have already seen that she has a similarly broad usage of the term 'metaphor'. It should be noted, therefore, that in what follows, she is able to refer to a metaphor as 'an image' (when it is being used as an example of a general case) and as a 'model' (when it is being used to represent an account of the features of that general case). 'Image' and 'model' are on a continuum and a metaphor may be functioning as either an image or a model depending on the role it is playing. It is not McFague's intention to create a sharp divide between them and no such divide need be created.

Images are for McFague, in the first instance, the language of worship and religious experience. As such they are the most subjective form of language and, because of this, the most evocative, emotional form. They are created temporarily to express a moment of insight, with which the image is inextricably bound up, but are not intended to convey complex, structured knowledge, and are effective largely by weight of numbers. Thus:

'In many Old Testament psalms the psalmist will pile up metaphors for God in a riotous *melee*, mixing 'rock', 'lover', 'fortress', 'midwife', 'fresh water', 'judge', 'helper', 'thunder' and so on in a desperate attempt to express the richness of God's being.'[120]

This 'desperation' is not to say that images are unimportant. Quite the opposite. By expressing religious experience, however partially, images are crucial for McFague

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120 *Metaphorical Theology* p24

because they root theology in human life as it is lived and experienced. It is also fundamental to her argument that these images do not merely illustrate religious experience but in an important sense *constitute* it. The images of a tradition are its most basic resource and they fund all its thinking, shaping religious experience as well as being shaped by it. They are the closest equivalent that religious and theological thinking has to an experimental basis.

McFague's understanding of the relationship between religious experience and imagery should not be understood as a direct cause-effect relationship however. She would surely be open to the position Bisschops advocates in arguing that pre-existing religious beliefs shape what is seen, determining religious experience as well as being determined by it.[121] This only strengthens McFague's argument since it stresses the unsubstitutability of religious images in a tradition, and also strengthens the link between a new 'way of seeing' and new religious beliefs that is a consistent theme of her work.

Bisschops also indirectly provides a further example of the importance of traditional images. As he demonstrates, religious imagery, and especially eschatology, is often very much contrary to our experience, a point that McFague herself stresses in later work. In this sense the unsubstitutability of, for example, the parables can again be seen. They embody a way of life that cannot be directly derived from experience.[122]

We saw in the previous chapter that McFague regards images as 'basic', deriving from concrete experience, and thus being accessible. Because she does not make clear distinctions between the role of terms in language and in cognition, between religious

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121 See Ralph Bisschops 'Are religious metaphors rooted in experience?' in Feyaerts (ed) *The Bible Through Metaphor and Translation* Oxford: Peter Lang 2003 p114
122 We should note though, along with Bisschops (p117 n5), that 'experience' is a term that is underdefined in the literature, and hides a number of complexities and problems.

experience and other types of experience, and between the religious practices of theological systematic reflection and worship, it is hard to pin down the precise meaning of this claim concerning images. In the light of the later research considered in the previous chapter, it can be said that images are semantically autonomous terms[123], and thus the claim that such terms are basic becomes a claim that autonomous terms are basic to cognition. Therefore McFague's insistence on the unsubstitutability of images would equate to a claim that visualisation is not just a necessary though dispensable first step in cognition: rather it is intrinsic and necessary to it. This question must be regarded as an open one in current research, but a tentative affirmative is provided for the case of the necessity of visualisation, even in the highly abstract world of quantum theory by Miller.[124]

Bisschops makes an important distinction where McFague does not which impacts upon this question. He draws a distinction between source-related experience and target-related experience. That is, experience which informs the source domain of the metaphor (the 'King' in 'God is King') as opposed to experience which provides the pre-existing structure of the target domain (the 'God' in 'God is King'). Religious experience is target-related he argues. Religious experience is held to be experience of the target domain of religious metaphors, it is experience of *God* rather than of Kings, Lords or Rocks etc. This is important because it could be seen to weaken McFague's case for the importance of religious experience, especially in *giving rise to* religious language. The experience that matters for McFague's models is primarily source-related, it is precisely experience of Lords, Kings and Rocks. However, it may be argued for her, on behalf of her own approach, that target-related experience is also

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123 That is, they draw their meaning entirely from common experience and do not need to draw in knowledge from other domains through the use of metaphors. See the discussion above p24 and 62.

124 Arthur I Miller 'Imagery and Metaphor: The Cognitive Science Connection' in Zdravko Radman (ed.) *From a Metaphorical Point of View: A multidisciplinary approach to the cognitive content of metaphor.* New York: Walter de Gruyter 1995 p199-224

important for her method since it offers possibilities (which she does not explore in detail) for grounding the reference of religious models and assessing their appropriateness, and therefore may guard against charges of pure projectionism.

Now, as noted at the beginning of this chapter, McFague herself uses the term 'image' (and indeed the terms model, concept and theory) in a specific and distinct sense which is not necessarily its common usage. In each case, her understanding of metaphor as omnipresent in language colours and informs her understanding of the term. This can, however, lead to a degree of apparent inconsistency of usage. For example, the terms 'metaphors' and 'symbols' are frequently used interchangeably with 'images'. However symbols are not themselves metaphors, as McFague herself argues. Following this argument through will help to clarify her understanding of imagistic language and its use in a theological context.

The account of symbolism that she explicitly rejects in *Metaphorical Theology*[125] is a sacramental one. The sacramental understanding is predicated upon the metaphysical assertion that, beneath the radical and genuine differentiations between phenomena, everything is connected and forms a unity because it derives its being from God. On this understanding, linguistic symbols are closely tied to their referent, and, by virtue of the participation of all being in the ultimate Unity of Being, are able also to stand for other entities, crucially including God. Sacramental symbolism is different from the metaphorical seeing of A 'as' B. Instead it sees A and B as parts of a whole related to each other by analogy. Thus its emphasis is on underlying harmony rather than diversity.

McFague argues against this understanding, because she sees it as inappropriate for our time.[126] It is important to state, though, that McFague is only rejecting an

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125 p12-16
126 *Metaphorical Theology* p13

ontological basis for analogy within a Procession of Being. She is not rejecting the linguistic or cognitive usefulness or distinctiveness of analogy. In these cases however, she would simply subsume analogy into the broad category of the metaphorical, whilst warning that analogies do not stress the *diversity* in unity she would desire.[127]

Still, this rejection of classical analogy has drawn criticism from other scholars, for example from Begley, who finds metaphor incapable of proving a particular point of view, and thus of correcting theological error.

He says

'while metaphors do have cognitive meaning, one cannot validly argue from them to further conclusions.'[128]

He also differentiates analogies from models and, crucially, claims that analogies are 'literal', in contrast to metaphors.

Following Aquinas, Begely offers the following account of metaphor,

'Aquinas examines a few examples of metaphor in Scripture - God is rock/ God is a lion. He comments that they are metaphors because it is 'part of the meaning of 'rock' that it has its being in a merely material way (as does also a lion) so these predicates cannot be applied literally to God'. On the other hand, each expresses a truth about God, that God is strong (as in the case of 'rock') and courageous (in the case of 'lion'). Neither is simply true - true in all respects - but each is true in some respect...all words used metaphorically of God apply primarily to creatures and secondarily to God. When used of God they signify merely a certain parallelism between God and the creatures.'[129]

This he contrasts with analogy thus:

127 This is the substance of Schaab's reading of McFague on metaphor and analogy. See Gloria Schaab 'Of Models and Metaphors' *Theoforum* 33 2002 p213-234 esp. p231
128 John Begley 'Metaphorical Theology' *Pacifica* 6 1993 p49-60 p56
129 Begley p 55. Contrast this with Boeve, *op. cit.* p24. Boeve demonstrates that, from a cognitive semantic approach, Aqunias' analogies are in fact examples of metonymy.

'Words which signify pure perfections such as 'life, goodness and the like' can be predicated properly or literally of God. However, they are not predicated univocally but analogically of God and creatures. If they were predicated univocally (with the same meaning) of God and creatures, this would put God on the same level as creatures - an error to be avoided. If the meaning were completely different (equivocal), only the word and not the meaning would be common. In analogical predication, the meaning is partly the same and partly different.' [130]

There are two crucial steps of this argument that McFague would reject, and her conclusion is supported here.

Firstly, classical analogies are dependent upon the dualistic assertion that 'strong' is a material property whilst 'love' or 'wisdom' are spiritual ones. It is here that McFague's point that analogy of being is 'outmoded' finds its mark.

Secondly, as Brümmer shows, this approach is dependent upon a Theory of Perfections[131] by means of which what is only partially true of humans is true of God perfectly. However as Brümmer also argues, this is a quantitative solution to a qualitative problem.

More seriously for McFague (though she does not make this point herself) is the assertion that certain terms, like love, apply most properly to God and secondarily to human beings, even bearing in mind the limited and contextual understanding of the divine nature of the proper meaning of these terms.[132] Now McFague would affirm the

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130 *Ibid.*.
131 Vincent Brümmer 'Metaphor and the Reality of God' in T W Bartel (ed.) *Comparative Theology, Essays for Keith Ward,* London: SPCK 2003
132 Aquinas says , 'As regards what is signified by these names, they belong properly to God, and more properly than they belong to creatures, and are applied primarily to Him. But as regards their mode of signification, they do not properly and strictly apply to God; for their mode of signification befits creatures' *Summa Theologiae* 1a Q13 art 3

view that one should argue from the action and nature of God to our own ethical stance, rather than the reverse, when expounding the consequences of theological models. She would hold that love derives its being (as do all things) from God. Nevertheless, she would not wish to separate the concept of love so far from the concrete images of love that we experience. One of the priorities of McFague's work is take images of human experience seriously and not to allow their particularity and subjectivity to be lost in abstract and objectifying theoretical moves. Thus, for McFague, when a theologian speaks of love it is important that (s)he is speaking out of the deepest loves humanity experiences. Images, understood as metaphors, are unsubstitutable and are used in their mundane sense.

Despite these objections though, McFague is keen to see a return to a sacramental understanding (which she also calls a 'catholic' understanding). Indeed her later works, and especially *The Body of God* can appear to come very close to a return to classical analogy. But this reconstructed form of sacramentalism comes in the form of what we might term a 'second naivety,'[133] Fowler's 5th 'Stage of Faith' in which a person returns to previously rejected beliefs and reasserts their value while maintaining an awareness of the provisional and limited character of religious speaking, acknowledging the paradoxes but being willing to work within the constraints of the language.

McFague's reconstructed sacramentalism remains mindful of the *indirectness* of metaphorical reference in post-modern understandings of language. With the question of reference greatly complicated by this indirectness, symbols require *interpretation* to mediate between them and the underlying Unity that is not only described but *constructed* by the process of interpretation. This interpretation is provided by models, concepts and theories in the manner outlined later.

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133 See James W. Fowler *Stages of Faith* San Francisco: Harper & Row 1981

Extending beyond McFague's own arguments in a way that she does not herself do, it could also be observed that the overarching context of unity in which McFague sees all being as relating looks like it has become a cognitive rather than an ontological reality.[134] That is to say that the unitive powers and processes involved appear to be, first and foremost, aspects of our cognitive processes and not a metaphysical feature of the universe. The unity is in our knowledge and is not present in the universe itself in a way which is separable from our knowledge of the universe.

Thus, it could be argued on McFague's behalf that, while there is clearly a difference between the statements, God is a Rock and God is Father, the difference is not that one is a metaphor and the other is an analogy. Rather the former involves a less complex mapping (and therefore, being simpler, the metaphor remains close to its imagistic base), while the latter involves a more complex mapping. This complex mapping moves the metaphor along the way to becoming a model, and this increases the metaphor's conceptual content. Involving, as it does, less concrete properties such as abstracted relationships, a metaphor such as God the Father is more conceptual and less basic an image.

Our observations here therefore should be seen as supporting and taking further her understanding of 'image' as an extended category, denoting an area of continuum, largely constituted of poetic metaphors, but blurring at one extreme with models and at the other with symbols (in a non-classical sense). This strengthens and extends McFague's claim that images and models exist on a continuum and also further demonstrates the coherence of her work.

McFague's 'basic' images are found at the symbols end of the spectrum. These

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134 However, I would tentatively suggest that a cognitive understanding of the basis of analogy could still make at least a 'shy ontological claim' when combined with the Tillichian depth theology of Klemm and Klink. See David E Klemm and William H Klink 'Constructing and Testing Theological Models' *Zygon* vol 38 no3 2003 p495-528 p503

images relate to concrete entities and particular experiences (i.e. to 'bread' or 'light'), in the terms introduced in the previous chapter, they are semantically autonomous. These are symbols in that the terms 'stand for' these entities. They may also act symbolically in the sense that they can be employed to 'stand for' something else (e.g. Bread can 'stand for' in the sense of 'present the possibility of seeing as' Jesus' body). However when they are employed in the latter sense they do not do so by the analogy of being, i.e. by participation in the underlying Unity, but by the creation of a metaphor. Thus the remainder of the continuum is populated by composite images; basic images placed in relation to each other (e.g. The body as bread, judgement as a storm, hope as a candle etc.) These composite images are where the category of image starts to blur with 'model' as the metaphorical character of both is brought to our attention.

Some images therefore should be understood to have the properties of metaphors outlined above. Indeed these are metaphors in their most familiar form, poetic metaphors, and tend to be found in the form of a grammatical metaphor (e.g God is light). It must be borne in mind that not all metaphors are *only* images, as shall be seen later when metaphors which are also 'models' are considered. First, though, the role images play in McFague's theology should be examined.

In relation to the Christian tradition, McFague obviously uses the images of that tradition as these have already been outlined. In fact it is striking that, despite there being no methodological restrictions limiting choice to traditional images, nevertheless virtually all of the images McFague uses are scriptural ones, rather than images derived from her own, or other contemporary, religious experience. The principal exception to this is, however, for her the most important image: that of the world as the body of God which is all but absent in 'malestream' Christian tradition.

Secondly, she draws upon images of Jesus in the form of scenes and motifs from

the gospels, from which she abstracts concepts of his mission, message and person. However, here she has begun to extend the category, because she has moved from a simple and generic image (e.g. 'bread'), to a complex and more particular image (e.g. 'Jesus breaking bread with outcasts'). This process is important in understanding McFague's view of the construction of theology which is not as proscriptive as it would be if categories like 'image' were taken only in a strict and limited sense.

From the discussion above, it can be seen that 'image,' as McFague uses it, if not explicitly in her definitions of it, can in fact be taken to refer to a particular instance or example of a phenomenon, not necessarily an image in the strict sense of a picture brought to mind. An image in this sense can be any specific case from which more general conclusions are to be drawn. The same is also true of the other terms in this theological system as will be seen for each in turn.

While the properties of images have been described in detail, there are as yet few criteria for their assessment, beyond those already outlined for a successful metaphor. Any work that is done on an image beyond the initial aesthetic and intuitive test of its appropriateness or 'fit' with the sensuous reality of experience has put the image well on the road to becoming a model. A model is, basically, a successful image which has borne a degree of interpretation. We will therefore move on to consider models in more detail.

2.3 Model.

In this section McFague's understanding and use of models is examined. Since

McFague's theology is very much concerned with the production of models it is important to explore her understanding of them in order to be able to critique and assess the coherence of her statements on method and the models that this method gives rise to and deploys.

McFague's use of models within her methodology is part of a trend in theology that came to prominence following Avery Dulles' *Models of the Church* in 1974.[135] McFague engages with and builds upon work that follows this trend, especially upon the work of Ian Barbour.[136]

McFague is aware that there are many accounts and usages of the term 'model' across different disciplines. She is interested specifically in metaphorical models in theology; models of God in relationship to all that is. Such statements are, in one sense, necessarily universal statements of unlimited scope. However it is important to understand that she does not set out to provide a *universal* account of the nature and function of models.

Other uses and senses of the term model outside her work can easily be found, for example Ian Barbour's examples of scale models, diagrams and mathematical models, and these, though sharing some broad similarities with metaphorical, theological models, are also importantly different from them.

Although Dulles does not explicitly make the point, there are two distinct uses of models in theology which are clearly discernible in his work, and which aid our comprehension of McFague's usage. McFague does not make the distinction herself in

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135 Summaries of this process and McFague's prominent place in it are provided by Stephen B Bevans *Models of Contextual Theology: (Revised and Expanded Edition)* Maryknoll N.Y.:Orbis Books 2002 (First edition 1992) p28f and Fr James H Kroeger 'Revisting Models in Theology: An Exploration into Theological Method' *Asia Journal of Theology* 15(2)2001 pp364-374

136 Ian Barbour *Myths, Models and Paradigms* London: SCM Press 1974 McFague and Barbour are in close agreement on the nature and use of models. Indeed McFague indicates that Barbour reviewed early drafts of *Metaphorical Theology* (see McFague 'Ian Barbour: Theologian's friend, scientist's interpreter' in *Zygon* vol 31 no 1 1996 pp21-28 p22*)* and Barbour's later treatment of models in his 1989-1991 Gifford Lectures is largely a representation of McFague's work on the subject. (Ian Barbour *Religion in an Age of Science* London: SCM Press 1990 p41f

her work, and yet the two uses are both to be found within it. These two uses are the comparative and the juxtapositive respectively[137]. The former use and construction of models is a kind of typology, since it is a simplified and schematic representation of diverse objects through the recognition of similarities. Understood and used thus a model is

> 'An ideal case... That is to say it is a relatively simple, artificially constructed case which is found to be useful and illuminating for dealing with realities that are more complex and differentiated.'[138]

or 'an abstraction formed from concrete positions'.[139]

Understood thus, models are hermeneutic devices, devices that aid understanding by providing a simple interpretive structure. McFague's work on Parable and on the Kingdom are examples of the deployment of this type of model[140] since in both cases she simply brings together a number of examples and draws out common features from them. These she then uses to form a comparative model, an idealised description of these common features. For example she says

> 'A parable is a judgement or assertion of similarity and difference between two thoughts in permanent tension with one another: one is the ordinary way of being in the world, the other the extraordinary way.'[141]

This statement is in effect a comparative model of parables, a summary of their common features when they are compared together. As such it provides a working definition and a criterion against which other texts may be judged for whether or not they are parables.

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137 It is not intended here to make a hard and fast distinction between the two. Rather they mark two opposite extreme cases and most models are likely to have both comparative and juxtapositive aspects.
138 Avery Dulles *Models of Revelation* Dublin: Gill and Macmillan 1983 p30
139 Bevans *op. cit.* p29
140 See Howard Snyder *Models of The Kingdom* Nashville, Ten.:Abingdon Press 1991
141 *Metaphorical Theology* p45

Such models may be semantically autonomous however. They may well draw all their features from the examples which have been compared and not bring in additional insight from other domains. Therefore they cannot be regarded as *truly* metaphorical (as opposed to merely categorising). In other words there is a clear distinction between a generalisation of the features of rocks into a model of what rocks are and using rock as a metaphorical model for some other phenomenon – such as modelling a group of people as 'men of stone'.

If we wished to take the example from McFague on parables just quoted to the next stage, we would observe (as she does) that 'the assertion of similarity and difference' present in parables is also present in metaphors. Therefore we could move on to say that, metaphorically speaking, parables can be 'seen as' metaphors and therefore a model of the second sort could be proposed, namely that 'parables can be modelled as (if they were) metaphors'.

Despite her employment of the comparative model, the majority of McFague's proposed new models of God, and the models she is most interested in, fall into the second understanding of models, that is, the juxtapositive, the 'men of stone' construction, which applies the 'metaphor' principle of significant difference to the more complex and refined instance of model. This usage brings out the heuristic and metaphorical character of models, creatively and revealingly projecting the structure of one domain onto another to re-imagine it.

This juxtapositive view of models sees them as 'logically constructed theoretical positions'.[142]

'...theoretical models, which are excogitated with the help of creative imagination, have a merely mental existence, and are used for the development of theories... they do not claim to give a literal picture of the reality under investigation. They

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142 *Models of the Kingdom* p76

are 'imagined mental constructs invented to account for the observed phenomena' and are used to 'develop a theory which in some sense explains the phenomena.'[143]

Because she is interested in novel and heuristic models of God, and because talk of God faces its own particular epistemological considerations in relation to 'data', McFague is interested in models which are not so much illustrative simplifications of a complex, but known, phenomenon (as, for example, a scale model is), but in metaphorical models which exploit the ability of metaphor to redescribe reality, and generate *new* knowledge by using a term or image out of its natural context. Thus metaphorical theology is, at the level of the model, a process of discovery, of insight, rather than of systematic presentation and classification of complex phenomena (which would in McFague's scheme, be the work of theory, not of model). This focuses our attention on the metaphorical character of theological models in McFague's understanding. Indeed it would be true to say that the account McFague provides of models is itself a model based on Black's image of a metaphor as a smoked 'grid' or 'screen'. McFague's use of 'model' is another case where her use of common term is given a modified meaning peculiar to her project, informed by her studies of the nature of metaphor.

McFague's most basic definition of the term 'model', then, is:

'a model is a metaphor with 'staying power'. A model is a metaphor that has gained sufficient scope so as to present a pattern for relatively comprehensive and coherent explanation.'[144]

Models of this sort, according to McFague above, are to be understood as developed metaphors which begin their life as images as described above. Any image

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143 Dulles p 31 quoting Barbour, *Myths* p30
144 Sallie McFague *Models of God: Theology for an ecological, nuclear age.* (British Edition) London: SCM Press 1988 p34 see also *Metaphorical Theology* p23

will have around it a network of associations. If this network meets the criteria for a successful metaphor, in particular if it provides a relatively well defined and well understood structure which may be applied to other images, so as to make it possible to speak about them in more depth (albeit speak about them not as they are 'in themselves' but 'seen as' something else), then the image has begun to function as an enhanced metaphor, that is a model. In this sense, all models are partial, and give only interpreted access to the reality they seek to model. As we saw for metaphors, seeing something as something else necessarily obscures what would have been seen if another model had been formed.

The process of reading the structure of the model into (as well as out of) that which is modelled, means that the question of the validity of the model is not trivial (for more on the truth, reference and assessment of models see Chapter 3.2 below). For this reason models alone are not enough. Although they give structure and order to what would otherwise be a chaotic assortment of images bearing little relationship to each other, they are not, in themselves, able to provide a fully comprehensive account of phenomena, hence the qualifier 'relatively' in the quotation above. It is one of McFague's key contentions that models speak only partially of what they model and do so in a way which is highly coloured by the model chosen. This contention of McFague's opens the way for models other than the traditional, dominant ones. It also directs attention to the way in which the use of one model alone can result in our forgetting the sense in which what is seen is bound up with how we see it. This colouring of the target domain by the source domain is immediately more apparent if several models are in play, because of the tensions generated between them. All of this directs us to consider the effects our ways of seeing (our dominant models), have on our lives and self-understandings, and opens up the possibility of changing this.[145]

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145 It is the combination of these three factors that give a metaphorical theology its heuristic nature, that

Yet models do allow us to speak productively and analytically about issues that were previously inaccessible, however 'coloured' this speaking.   McFague says:

> 'The development of a metaphor into a model is a movement from revelatory insight to the possibility of conceptual and systematic elaboration. Ian Barbour speaks of the distinction between metaphor[146] and model in the following way: "Metaphors are employed only momentarily ... but models are more fully elaborated and serve as wider interpretive schemes in many contexts ... models offer ways of ordering experience and of interpreting the world ... they lead to conceptually formulated, systematic, coherent religious beliefs which can be criticized, analyzed and evaluated."'[147]

The relationship between images and models is complicated, though, by the distinction above between comparative and juxtapositive models. McFague does not differentiate between them, but this distinction has been identified above.

Comparative models can be seen to allow an image to interpret other images by both finding and creating similarities between them. Where a group of images are brought together, a model may emerge as an abstraction of their common properties as seen when one of these images, or often an idealised image, is used to interpret the other images. This interpretive move is crucial though, and is one feature that distinguishes a model from an image for McFague. Thus when McFague takes a number of examples of metaphors, and finds similarities between them so as to construct a model of what a metaphor is, she is creating this sort of model. She does similar things by interpreting collections of examples of parables, the Kingdom, Jesus etc. in order to produce a

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is its ability to function as 'a system of education under which pupils are trained to find out for themselves'. See *Models of God* p36

146 Although a model *is* a metaphor for McFague, not *all* metaphors are models. Here the term is being used to denote an 'image' as opposed to a model.

147 Sallie McFague TeSelle *Speaking in Parables* (British Edition) London: SCM Press 1975 p84n citing Barbour *Myths, Models and Paradigms* pp16 and 27, her editing.

model of each of them.

A juxtapositive model on the other hand, does not seek to unify disparate but known images, but projects a single image (or small group of related images) into hitherto unrelated domain (McFague is doing this when she constructs her models of God as Mother, Lover and Friend). This is also evidently an interpretive process.

Although she does not elaborate too dogmatically on how this interpretive process should proceed, it is clear that McFague sees it, in both cases, as a process of mapping particular features, which she calls 'associated commonplaces[148]', from the matrix of meaning surrounding the term which is used to provide the model (the source) to the domain which is being modelled (the target). Thus if one were to model the world as a machine,[149] certain (though not all) features of machines, such as regularity of operation, individual parts with well defined functions etc. are mapped onto the world and matched to particular phenomena within the world that lend themselves to interpretation in this light.

However McFague's understanding of the process of modelling may be in need of nuancing to ensure its continuing relevance in the light of later studies. Bisschops, whose work was introduced above, has shown how common metaphors deploy their source domain in a way that is not consistent with the general use of that domain within language. The example he provides is 'He is treating me like a dog' where the implication is that dogs are badly treated, when in fact dogs are often spoilt by their owners.   Here we can see that although some 'commonplace' associations are being mapped (such as the concepts of ownership and hierarchy), other mappings are not commonplace but are 'merely emblematic notions' about the source.[150]

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148 *Metaphorical Theology* p39
149 It is this particular model that McFague spends much of her time arguing against, especially in *The Body of God* and *Super, Natural Christians*!
150 Bisschops p 120

In a detailed discussion of the metaphor 'Israel as Bride' from Ezekiel in relation to what can be said about its context, both literary and historical, Bisschops also demonstrates that the mappings intended by a metaphor, and those mapped by a later interpreter working on the original metaphor may be very different, in part because of different (cultural) experiences, but also and particularly because the metaphor may not be experientially grounded, in the sense of drawing either upon commonplace associations or logical entailments. Thus a metaphor may be employed in a strictly limited and controlled sense, and the purpose and context in which it is used may combine to limit the range of possible and permissible interpretations quite narrowly. In the illustration from Ezekiel the metaphor 'Israel as bride' is not intended by the author to license a range of romantic and mystical notions of intimacy, but is designed to make a few specific mappings, and these only, namely 'idolatry is adultery' and 'God is husband in the sense the God acts in a jealous-like fashion'.

Therefore we can see that the move from metaphor to model is not a straightforward one. It would seem that although Ezekiel's metaphor could have been developed into an extensive model of the relationship between God and Israel, he expressly did not wish it to do so. We also see here however the fact that model creation is not necessarily a fairly automatic, intuitive process of mapping logical or commonplace meanings between domains, as McFague's account seems to imply, but that it is a controlled, active process in which the model-maker must participate to bring about the desired outcomes. Thus Klemm and Klink say,

> 'The fact that models are constructed is important, for it means that the modeler knows the elements of the model from the inside. The modeler can therefore change and control the composition or arrangement of elements in a workable manner.' [151]

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151 Klemm and Klink 'Constructing and Testing Theological Models' p503

We will see this process of change and control at work to a significant extent in McFague's own models in chapters 4 and 5, which will confirm that this process of model creation is not as automatic and straightforward as McFague's methodological presentation seems to indicate. For now it must be noted that this is one area in which it may be that McFague's approach has been shown to be lacking in the light of subsequent research, threatening its continuing relevance for theology. However what seems to be lacking appears to be simply more detail needing to be added to her account, rather than a fundamental contradiction which would threaten the core coherence of her theological project.

Now, to return to McFague's own presentation, there are several, interconnected paths she takes from image to model; the most basic is in the extension of certain individual images, such as 'mother', 'lover' and 'friend' into models of the relationship between God and the world. The network of associations of these terms provides the structure of the model and this structure is projected upon the God-world relationship. We will follow this process through in Chapter 4. This is the basic method that she is advocating, and the purest example of the transformation of images into models.

However this process may be seen at work in a more complicated form within her justification of her method itself, and this will illustrate well the fact that models are not a neatly defined, discrete group for McFague, but constitute a part of a continuum with images.

In understanding and explaining the importance and use of metaphors, McFague constructs models of the nature and operation of metaphors. Her most frequently used model sees metaphors as if they were smoked glass screens with lines scratched into them through which one looks at the stars. The smoked glass screen is an image. It

provides a starting point to begin to make metaphor understood; it allows us to speak of the mystery, as McFague would say. However it initially provides only the most basic of structures by which to understand the nature of metaphors. We might say that this image of the screen is then turned into a model as more detail is filled in, and specific features of the image are mapped onto, and used to interpret, the features of metaphors.

The model of the smoked glass screen is not just an illustrative device, instead metaphors are treated *as if this model described how metaphors actually are*. The model has a cognitive function. The grid is not the only way metaphors may be modelled of course. Certainly there are other models such as the model of the two interacting dipoles that was employed in Chapter 1. The screen model does not enjoy any ontologically privileged access or status. However, when metaphors are being modelled as a screen for looking through, this device is not merely illustrative, rather it is determining how metaphors may be thought of for McFague.

Her central understanding of metaphors is then itself informed by a model of the nature and operation of metaphors. This model is of the imagistic sort; it is a metaphorical model based on the imagistic metaphor of lines on a smoked glass screen.

But not all her models are of this imagistic type. Although much of her work on parables draws upon the imagistic models just discussed in relation to metaphors, not all the modelling there does. Notice the difference between the two statements:

a) a particular narrative is a parable

b) Jesus is a parable.

In the first case certain definite features as well as more abstract qualities are expected to be present in the narrative. In the second, the modelling of Jesus as a parable is almost entirely conceptual, in that it is abstract qualities that are being shared by parable, and by Jesus, rather than concrete properties. We don't expect Jesus himself

to have a narrative, a plot or internal characters, any more than we expect a 'man of stone' to have veins of quartz or iron ore in his body. Thus it can clearly be seen that there is a spectrum from imagistic models such as the model of 'metaphor as a smoked glass screen' to conceptual models such as 'Jesus as a parable'.

This distinction is not explicitly drawn out[152] and worked through in McFague's work, though it is there in her account of models being a meeting place for imagistic and conceptual ways of speaking, for example:

> '...a constructive metaphorical theology insists on a continuum and a symbiotic relationship between image and concept, between the language of prayer and liturgy and the language of theory and doctrine.'[153]

In much of her earlier attempts to put her theoretical observations on the nature of theology into practical expression, it is primarily *imagistic* models with which she is working (God as Mother, Lover and Friend for example). However it is largely *conceptual* models that she uses to support her case for doing so (e.g. Jesus as parable, parable as metaphor and so on). In other words she recommends that theology progresses by deploying imagistic models but then deploys conceptual ones in support of this. This tension does not overly threaten the coherence of her argument since her actual method is still contained within the general compass of her 'metaphorical theology', but it does open up the possibility that there may be other ways of doing theology and other justifications of traditional models at the conceptual level for which she does not sufficiently and explicitly allow. It raises the suspicion that the conceptual level is more important to her than she seems to suggest. To be fair to McFague she

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152 The closest McFague comes to articulating this position explicitly is in saying 'many *kinds* of models (some more metaphorical and some more conceptual) will constitute a Christian theology.'
    Metaphorical Theology p129 For metaphorical read 'imagistic', for clarity.
153 *Models of God* p32

does repeatedly draw attention to the fact that, however strongly she can support the general applicability of her approach, she sees it as only one way to proceed and that others are allowable. She herself says:

> '[Models] are dangerous, for they can 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.'[154]

While this is true of particular models, it may well at times also be true of the whole category of 'model' as she understands it.

Our observation on McFague's thought here is particularly significant though, because it is a sign that the method she recommends for theology has not always been identical to the whole of the method that she herself employs. This may explain her move over time from focusing on her more imagistic models of mother, lover and friend to a much heavier concentration on 'the world as God's body', which receives much more systematic treatment at the conceptual and theoretical levels. We begin to see an explicit awareness of the need for this sort of approach in *Models of God* where she says:

> 'Metaphorical Theology ... as a partial account focussed especially on the imagistic foundation of theology … is but one kind of theology, not the only or proper kind. Since metaphorical theology, as I have envisioned it, is hypothetical, tentative, partial, open-ended, sceptical, and heuristic, it would be contradictory to claim that such theology is anything more than one of many needed kinds of reflective enterprises. To propose and elucidate metaphors and models of the relationship between God and the world appropriate for an ecological, nuclear age is not to reject other theological projects. Nor does a metaphorical theology, which sees itself focused principally at the level of the imagination, denounce kinds of

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154 *Metaphorical Theology* p24 Emphasis original.

theology that propose to reflect on Christian faith in other ways. I am not merely suggesting that theological tolerance is a good thing; rather, my own position within a metaphorical theology demands it.'[155]

From this it can be seen that McFague made a conscious decision to focus on the level of image and imagistic model, only because she felt that this was the most pressing need in her context. But it is important to remember that her prioritising of image and model is a personal and pragmatic choice. It is not to re-allow a hierarchy of values which would make the imagistic level primary, or worse the only arena for theology.

It is also worth exploring the way in which images, models and concepts inter-relate to enable the process of category extension that, it has been argued, consistently shape McFague's use of terms to expand their meaning in unfamiliar ways. We have seen to this point that the use of a metaphor may add new examples to a category, extending it. For example once McFague had derived a model and concept of parables from individual images (i.e. examples) of parables she was able to extend the category 'parable' to include 'Jesus as parable'. It should be noted however that it is not her model of parable that allows for the extension (and certainly not the comparative model quoted earlier, namely 'A parable is a judgement or assertion of similarity and difference…')[156]   Models in general and comparative models in particular may in fact reduce the range of reference of a category because they provide a criteria by which particular examples may be included or excluded by whether or not they share the features specified by the model. It was on this basis that McFague excluded the 'Good Samaritan' story from the category of parables on the basis that it did not, in her judgement, fit the criteria (specified by the model) required for it to be a parable.[157] This also underscores the relationship between images and models, because here we see a

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155 *Models of God p40*
156 See p84 above
157 See the discussion on p51 above

model causing particular images (i.e. examples) to be excluded from a category, that is the model determining which images are available to inform it.   In time then, a model, especially of the comparative kind, may tighten up the criteria by which it can allow another example into a particular category of images or qualities.

However several examples have already been identified of McFague's use of key terms and categories being extended by a process of category expansion, with more and more disparate phenomena being added to a category. Now if that process is not being driven by the process of modelling (which as we have just seen, may contract, not expand the category under consideration), it is likely that this expansion is being driven at the conceptual level. Indeed this can clearly be seen to be the case since it is, for example, precisely because her model of Jesus can be shown to have *conceptual* similarities with her model of parable (in that both are seen as presenting a radical way of life that creates a tension between the life of the kingdom and life as it is commonly experienced) that the two are allowed to become identified and Jesus becomes included in the category of parable. It is the abstract nature of concepts that allows them to connect more disparate entities and subjects, because concepts define a much larger range of meaning and are blind to a larger range of particular differences. For example a category whose membership is defined by the strict application of the specific features of the model 'Mother' (e.g. 'one who is a female parent') has a narrower membership than a category defined by related concepts such as 'life giving' and 'nurturing'. Conceptual models blur this distinction by incorporating specific conceptual features into the model's structure, but again it is likely that much of the work done by the model will be done by these ancillary concepts. This hypothesis will be tested in Chapters 4 and 5 when McFague's models will be evaluated in practice to see if they make much more use of the conceptual level than she herself allows. This will allow a comparison

between her methodological statements and what she actually does in practice.

All of this is a reminder that, for all the importance of models in McFague's work, they are not enough on their own which is why attention must now be given to 'concepts'. This is particularly significant for understanding McFague as it has been argued above that much of the unity, coherence and continuity of her thought is to be found at the conceptual level.

2.4 Concept.

McFague says:

'Concepts ... arise from metaphors and models; they are an attempt to generalize at the level of abstraction concerning competing and, at times, contradictory metaphors and models. By 'concept' we mean an abstract notion ... A concept is an 'idea' or 'thought'.'[158]

Concepts, then, are abstractions, but specifically in McFague's understanding they emerge from models and images. We have already seen examples of this, such as the concept 'metaphorical' arising from models and images of metaphor.

The move from model to concept is again a move along a continuum of increasing abstraction (we have just seen how at least some models are more conceptual abstractions of images than others). This move from model to concept is in the direction of particular to general, concrete to abstract, imagistic to univocal. Since this process is one of both identifying and generating similarity by constructing a device for the indirect investigation of reality, the process of concept formation is in accord with McFague's concept of the metaphorical. Because of the unsubstitutable nature of metaphors, when the metaphorical process is applied as a model to the process of

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158 *Metaphorical Theology* p26

concept formation this results in a rejection of the view that the underlying images and models from which the concept is abstracted are dispensable.

This is key for McFague's project, since, for all the importance assigned here to concepts in her work, it is images and models that she is most explicitly concerned with, it is therefore important to be clear about the relationship between models and concepts. She says:

'The relationship ... is symbiotic. Images 'feed' concepts; concepts 'discipline' images. Images without concepts are blind; concepts without images are sterile. In a metaphorical theology, there is no suggestion of a hierarchy among metaphors, models, and concepts: concepts are not higher, better, or more necessary than images, or vice versa. Images are never free of the need for interpretation by concepts, their critique of competing images, or their demythologizing of literalized models. Concepts are never free of the need for funding by images, the affectional and existential richness of images, and the qualification against conceptual pretensions supplied by the plurality of images. In no sense can systematic thought be said to explain metaphors and models so that they become mere illustrations for concepts; rather, the task of conceptual thought is to generalize (often in philosophical language, *the* generalizing language), to criticize images, to raise questions of their meaning and truth in explicit ways.'[159]

The relationship is thus, again, symbiotic. Images are necessary to give rise to the concepts which are abstracted from them. However the meaning of these images is not consumed or exhausted in the process. Concepts 'discipline' models and images by relating them to each other and prioritising them by their correspondence to the concept in question. This process of generalisation inevitably leads to loss of detail – the

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159 *Ibid.* Note that within this quote, the terms 'image', 'metaphor' and 'model' are used, if not quite interchangeably, certainly with considerable freedom and overlap of meaning.

particularity of individual models is given up in exchange for the systematising power of the concept. McFague puts it thus:

> 'Conceptual language tends toward univocity, toward clear and concise meanings for ambiguous, multilevelled, imagistic language. In this process something is lost and something is gained: richness and multivalency are sacrificed for precision and consistency. Conceptual thought attempts to find similarities among the models while models insist on dissimilarities among themselves.'[160]

Her point is evident if we compare the multivalency of images with the univocity of concepts. Concept formation brings clarity by screening out factors extraneous to the concept. Concept formation is a necessary step towards making the otherwise undisciplined mêlée of images and models intelligible, however this screening process means that particularities of the images are lost. It is also the case that theological images and models cannot, in and of themselves, be arbitrated between without the intervention of concepts. Nor can an individual model be applied to a situation without concepts to direct this application, it is concepts that suggest those applications of a model that are appropriate and those that are not.

To interpret what McFague is proposing, consider Black's model of metaphor as a smoked glass screen. For this model to provide any insight it needs to be 'mined' for conceptual similarity between the two domains. Thus some properties of glass screens like hardness, coolness or smoothness do not translate fruitfully into insights into the properties of metaphor. Others, like the ability to mediate and interpret what is viewed into a pattern defined by the screen, are more fruitful. This is because metaphor cannot be said to possess any properties that could be conceptualised as 'smooth' but does possess ones that can be conceptualised as 'seeing through'.[161]

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160 *Ibid.*
161 It is of course the case that not all models would be processed in this way. The assessment of
   physical models in the sciences would include an experimental process of the exploration of properties

But, as already stated, concepts cannot dispense with models if they are to be useful or even to have any specific reference. For example 'love' is a concept. It is a powerful concept because it is abstracted from similarities between a huge array of significant images and experiences. The concept helps interpret these experiences and allows them to relate to each other (without the concept these experiences would have no power or significance beyond themselves and the specific circumstances within which they occur). However the concept itself, as a concept, is of little value unless it is expressed in particular concrete realities. It is models and images that have the ability to express and structure the experiences of love and also apply the concept to a particular situation, to determine the course of action that would be most loving for example.

We can see what all this means more easily by considering some of McFague's other use of concepts in practice. From her account of metaphor, McFague abstracts a number of concepts such as 'tension, dialectic, openness, change, growth and relativity.'[162] She derives similar concepts from the Parables and the Kingdom of God, in conversation with her study of metaphor. But these rarely appear simply as abstracted concepts. Where these concepts are deployed as a description of metaphor, parable or the Kingdom, they are functioning as conceptual *models* and they are frequently deployed thus as a model for theology throughout her writings. In other words 'dialectic' is, in and of itself, a concept, but when this concept is deployed as 'parable as a dialectic' or 'Jesus as a dialectic' or 'theology as a dialectic', 'dialectic' is functioning as a metaphorical, conceptual model.

The most striking example of this is the career of the concept 'personal' in her work. This is derived, both in *Speaking in Parables* and *Metaphorical Theology,* from

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between the two fields, however McFague, and we, are concerned with theological models where such direct methods of validation do not present themselves.

162 *Metaphorical Theology* p64

Jesus as parable, the biblical parables and the vast majority of biblical and traditional images and models of God. McFague wishes to speak of God as 'personal'. Now this is not an attempt to actually model God as 'a person' in any concrete and definitive sense (for example one that might involve assigning a gender), rather the term 'personal' is a concept in that its meaning is that models which are (conceptually) 'personal' are to be preferred over impersonal ones when speaking about God.

We could call this a 'paradigmatic abstraction' since it is a concept which is defining of a paradigm and a concept which subordinates other concepts within that paradigm, but this paradigmatic abstraction, important though it is, is also very general and unspecific. As a concept, it is too distant from the particulars of tradition, experience, Jesus and scripture to be able to dispense with them. Thus the concept 'personal' needs to be translated into models again. These models range in their level of abstraction. At the most abstract is the key model (or 'root-metaphor', see section 2.5 below) from *Metaphorical Theology,* 'a certain kind of relationship exhibiting a certain tension'.[163] Next is the basic premise of *Super, Natural Christians*: that 'subject-subject' language (rather than 'subject-object') is most appropriate for conceiving of human relationships to all that is. [164] The most concrete, imagistic deployment of the concept 'personal' (along with many other supporting concepts also) is in her models of God as Mother, Lover and Friend (in *Models of God*).

Thus we see that, although McFague's thinking is funded by images and models and ultimately results in the production of the same, it is in fact frequently *conceptually* driven. The unity of her thought and its points of continuity with the Christian tradition are at the conceptual level, whereas much theology is continuous with the tradition at the level of the model (e.g. continuous by virtue of sharing an established model of the

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163 *Metaphorical Theology* p109
164 *Super, Natural Christians* pp35-37 and pp107-109

atonement, or of scripture or of the Trinity)[165]. The unity drawn out by a metaphor is very often also at this conceptual level as has already been observed.

This places a question mark over quite how 'earthy' and 'incarnational' theology can be, as well as how imagistic it can remain at least for 'theologians', those who produce the images and models rather than simply apprehend and make use of them. McFague is concerned that theology is too abstract, but rectifying this may actually be a question of the *expression* of theology in chosen forms and genres which seek to employ concrete, basic and hence accessible imagery and models, rather than the heart of theological method which may need to remain somewhat abstract, or at least be open to engaging in abstract and conceptual thought.

The idea that the conceptual level in McFague's thinking requires revisiting has been highlighted by one of her respondents in particular. Referring to *Models of God*, Kaufmann questions whether models alone (which he understands to be principally imagistic ones) can provide the necessary complexity required by theology. He argues,

'is it only when we move to the order of concepts that we are able to hold before the mind the sort of complexity with which we are here concerned? (If there is any doubt that matters of great complexity can be dealt with more adequately with concepts than with images, consider the fact that we have no difficulty whatsoever in conceiving very precisely the difference between a pile of sand consisting of two million grains and another of two million and one; but it is difficult indeed to see how the image of two million grains of sand differs a whit from the image of two million and one.'[166]

Now this example is slightly misleading, because it appears to be pitting image

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165 McFague is at pains, however, especially in later writings to avoid talk of a 'timeless essence' of Christianity. Ultimately the continuity of a theology with the Christian tradition appears to be located for McFague in continuities of person, community, time, place and text.
166 Gordon Kaufmann 'Models of God: Is metaphor enough' *Religion and Intellectual Life 5* 1988 pp11-18 p17

and concept against each other directly, rather than using the concept of model as an intermediary as McFague does, and allowing that such models may tend towards either the conceptual or the imagistic (in other words two million and one grains of sand is not actually a concept in McFague's usage because it is particular, and this despite the difficulties in precise visualisation). Still Kaufmann is very likely correct in going on to say

> 'Highly complex realities can be entertained conceptually but hardly imagistically, (however indispensable our images may be in much of our thinking.) If we are to think of God, then—the creator or ground of all other reality, or the all-inclusive organic whole within which all other reality emerges and is sustained— it may be that concepts like 'evolutionary process' or 'life' or 'creativity' or 'universe' must be given centrality instead of powerfully evocative personal images of the sort that Sallie McFague (along with our ancient traditions) has suggested. I do not wish to make a dogmatic claim here, but I have some serious doubts that we have any images complex enough to do the work required. If we are serious about developing an adequate conception of God for our time, we will need to draw our metaphors from the conceptual order as well as from the imagistic order of bodies, mothers, and lovers.'[167]

McFague's response to Kaufmann sees conceptual models as complementary to her more imagistic ones but insists that the images must remain if theological constructions are not to 'lack imaginative power ... As they say in the South 'It won't preach'.'[168]

Both writers are correct that there is a need for a balance between the imagistic and the conceptual. However it is possible that theology is a more complex, multi-stage

167 *Ibid.*.
168 Sallie McFague 'Response' *Religion and Intellectual Life 5* 1988 pp38-44 p42

process than McFague sometimes allows for, as in the views of several commentators. Images, models and concepts may have differing degrees of importance in and for different stages of the process. This, however, is to anticipate matters treated later. In order to substantiate these suspicions first the following chapters will examine McFague's 'models of God' themselves and identify the actual roles played by image, model and concept in these constructions.

That the unity of McFague's thought exists at the conceptual level may also raise a problem for method, since as already observed, concepts can be paralysed by their own generality if lacking the intervention of mediating models. We can see this paralysis in her own work for example when discussing whether philosophy is itself metaphorical she says:

> 'Kenneth Burke points out that 'abstraction' means 'drawing from', the drawing out of similar strains and motifs from dissimilar situations. The principal tasks of conceptual thought— analysis, classification, and synthesis— all depend on this process of 'drawing out' similarities within dissimilars. ... When we interpret, that is, when we analyze, classify, and synthesize a series of events, structures, objects, or whatever, we suppress the ways in which they are dissimilar because we have discovered significant similarities among them. It goes without saying that what we find to be significant is so from our own limited perspective: metaphorical thinking, which is to say, all thinking, is intrinsically perspectival. We say 'this' is like 'that,' but we realize that it is also not like 'that' and that other ways of linking up the similarities and dissimilarities are possible.'[169]

Here the concept of the metaphorical has become so abstract and so general as to be of little practical use; if all thinking is metaphorical this result must be a

169 *Metaphorical Theology* p36

generalisation at such a level of abstraction (if it is to include 'all thought') that it has disregarded the important differences between different ways of speaking, such as analysis, classification and synthesis versus poetry and storytelling. Thus the assertion that 'all thought is metaphorical' becomes a finding of little value, it is an example of category expansion going so far that the category itself becomes so ill defined it is of little practical use. This illustrates both the need for concrete models to make concepts practically useful and also the fact that concepts cannot dispense with the models that give rise to them.

Now McFague clearly realises this, at least when it comes to her outworking of her theology in practice. This is why she is so focussed on models, as indispensable to the framing of the conceptual, saying:

> 'We will focus on models because, as mediators between metaphors and concepts, they partake of the characteristics of each and are an especially fruitful type of expression to investigate for a metaphorical theology .. .The tasks of a metaphorical theology will become clear: to understand the centrality of models in religion and the particular models in the Christian tradition; to criticize literalized, exclusive models; to chart the relationships among metaphors, models, and concepts; and to investigate possibilities for transformative, revolutionary models.'[170]

And,

> 'what are interesting and important are the particular metaphors, models, and concepts which make God's saving power a concrete reality for particular peoples in particular times and places. Our primary datum is not a Christian message for all time which becomes concretized in different contexts; rather, it is experiences of women and men witnessing to the transforming love of God interpreted in a

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170 *Metaphorical Theology* p28

myriad of ways.'[171]

Above it was contended that McFague's theology is often conceptually driven. This remains true but it is important that this statement is always held together with the latter of the preceding quotations, which stresses its need for concrete expression. McFague's method requires her to pass through a conceptual phase before returning to models but this is not a quest for a timeless essence of Christianity, that is for a set of universal Christian concepts. Rather this search for conceptual unity and continuity with tradition is:

> 'Always a partial, limited account of the contours of the salvific power of God in a particular time in light of the paradigmatic figure of Jesus of Nazareth.'[172]

However it is important to our purposes that the unity of her thought is at conceptual level and not at another level. McFague is of course setting out to change Christianity both through a process of addition and subtraction. The relative benefits of these losses and gains is of course a subjective evaluation and one which will be revisited throughout our discussions of McFague's proposed models. Speaking of one historically and currently dominant traditional model for example, McFague says

> 'The problem does not lie with the model of 'God the father,' for it is a profound metaphor and as true as any religious model available, but it has established a hegemony over the Western religious consciousness which it is the task of metaphorical theology to break …. [therefore] we will look at new religious images and models…'[173]

> She is seeking

> 'a significant reformation of the paradigm, a reformation both meaningful to

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171 *Models of God* p 44
172 *Models of God* p 45
173 *Metaphorical Theology* p29

feminists and in continuity with the root-metaphor of Christianity.'[174]

The main point to note here is that McFague locates herself *within* Christianity, as a reformer within that tradition, not as a revolutionary trying to establish a new religion, not even a new religion based upon Jesus. But she is aware that the reformation of the paradigm (of Christianity itself) may become a revolution, that is it may become a wholly new paradigm (a new religion), unless it is mindful of its points of continuity. However the possibilities of maintaining this continuity depend, she says

'both on the profundity of the basic models of a tradition and a tradition's flexibility in admitting new options.'[175]

It is important to identify where she sees her points of continuity with Christianity in order to assess whether her work is consistent and succeeds on its own terms, as well as making, as she wishes, a continued contribution to theology (a contribution which is only possible if the interface between McFague's theology and other theologies is clear). However, the quotes above indicate a level of equivocation in McFague as to where continuity with the tradition is maintained – is it through 'flexibility' and the co-existence of new models with traditional ones? Is it through preserving a 'root-metaphor' or through the durability of 'basic models'? These questions are explored in more detail in the next section.

At this stage, as consideration is given to the role of concepts in her thought it is important to note that the conceptual level of McFague's work does provide the meeting place for models from disparate fields, such as Philosophy of Language and Christology. We see this clearly in the fusing of concepts arising from reflections on Jesus, on parable and on metaphor and the way in which these three become unified into

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174 *Ibid.* p147
175 *Ibid.* p146

a single coherent account, held together by consistent conceptual connections. Although this fusion is especially convincing in its conceptual coherence because Jesus taught so heavily in parables, (and so there is a direct line connecting the three together), this approach of conceptual harmonising and resultant deploying of models across disciplines could perhaps be used more widely than McFague attempts to do. It could be used for example to relate her models to traditional ones.

This means that McFague's theological project could perhaps be further legitimised on its own terms as reforming and not revolutionary if a synthesis at the conceptual level was attempted between pre-existing theological models and the proposed new images and models.

Chapters 4 and 5 will put these features of McFague's theology to the test. Indeed here one of the key tests has been identified, a conceptual continuity of relationship with Christianity, however defined, that avoids revolution and enables reformation within that religious tradition as McFague herself aspires to. The relationship between McFague's constructive theology and traditional models will be examined as also will the modifications made to that tradition by the process of the interpretation of these new heuristic metaphorical constructions. Close attention will be given to the role that concepts play in her constructive theology as her method is expressed in concrete examples since several reasons have been advanced here for giving more weight to the role of conceptualisation and conceptual reasoning in theology than McFague may allow for.

In this section, we have begun to see how McFague's thoughts on theological method are integrated to form an overarching 'theory' which must be treated and judged as a whole as well as in its interrelating parts. Therefore we will now look at her

observations on 'theory' and at the theory of theology that she advances.

2.5 Theory.

Concepts, as we have just seen, relate models and images by finding and generating similarities. Concepts also direct the application of models. However concepts, as concepts alone, cannot arbitrate between models or arrange models hierarchically into more comprehensive and ordered systems. This process of arranging and relating models critically is the process of theory formation.

McFague defines theory as follows:

'by theory we mean a speculative, systematic statement of relationships underlying certain phenomena. A concept is an idea or thought; a theory organises ideas into an explanatory structure. Concepts, unlike metaphors, so not create new meaning, but rely on conventional, accepted meanings. Theories, unlike models, do not systematise one area in terms of another, but organise concepts into a whole…. All… theories are metaphorical in the sense that they too are constructions; they are indirect attempts to interpret reality, which can never be dealt with directly…[They] are at the far end of the continuum and rarely expose their metaphorical roots.'[176]

'Systematic thought tries to organise all the dominant models in a tradition into an overarching system with a key model of its own. For instance, for Paul, it was justification by grace through faith, for Augustine, the radical dependence of all things upon God…Each of these is a radical model, which could be called a 'root-metaphor'[177].

A theory then, is a network of models and images related by concepts but also, crucially, by one or more 'key models'. These models are themselves likely to be quite

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176 *Metaphorical Theology* p26
177 *Ibid. p27*

abstract and conceptual and they are variously named as follows in her writing with little substantial difference between them. Therefore the terms 'root-metaphor',[178] 'key model' and 'material norm[179]' should all be understood as playing the same role, though each may be subtly different in its location along the continuum from basic image to concept.

McFague defines a root metaphor as:

'a 'root metaphor' is the most basic assumption about the nature of the world or experience that we can make when we try to give a description of it.'[180]

She also defines a paradigm as

'the most basic set of assumptions within which a tradition…functions. It is the unquestioned framework or context for its normal operations.' [181]

But a paradigm is also:

'the tradition that sets the limits on the range of acceptable models…[and] root-metaphors are the content that specifies these limits'.[182]

Therefore we can see that McFague seems to use 'root metaphor' to define both 'theory' and 'paradigm', giving both terms similar senses, though with a paradigm being the broadest, most general and basic case of theory. Therefore the two will be considered together.

At this point it is important to note the difference between a 'theory of theology' (e.g. metaphorical theology) and a 'theological theory' (e.g. the world as the body of God). There is a clear difference between the types of key models used in the two cases, a difference which is due to the tension outlined in the previous section between an understanding of the nature of theology itself as finding unity and continuity at an

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178 *Ibid.* p28
179 *Models of God* p45
180 *Metaphorical Theology* p28
181 *Metaphorical Theology* p108
182 *Ibid.* p109

abstract conceptual level, and the need for theology to make this intelligible in more concrete and imagistic output.

McFague's theological theories are explored in detail in chapters 4 and 5, here, however, concern is with her theory of theology itself. Because this first, basic stage is determining of all that follows on from it, attention is primarily on her paradigm. Paradigm formation is, as was said above, the most generalising case of theory formation. The key models in her understanding of the Christian paradigm therefore unsurprisingly tend towards the simple and abstract. They are much more conceptual models.

We shall look at what these key paradigmatic models are shortly. Firstly, though, it is worth recalling the distinction made in the Introduction between criticisms of a theology that share the same paradigm as that theology and criticisms which do not share its paradigm. For reasons of space and focus, attention here is devoted to the former only. Therefore no attempt will be made to evaluate McFague's key paradigmatic models in relation to other potential models. Rather, the following account of McFague's Christian paradigm should be seen as the initial foundation or reference point in relation to which McFague's models of God will be assessed; other Christian paradigms could doubtless be defined.. The following section, therefore, forms a prelude to our more detailed examination of criteria for the assessment of a metaphorical theology in the next chapter.

Before considering the content of McFague's Christian paradigm, which has remained fairly constant throughout her career, first it should be asked how her understanding of the status of this paradigm has developed over time.

Metaphorical Theology contains an unresolved tension which is only fully faced in *Life Abundant*. The former, along with *Speaking in Parables*, seems to find the

continuity within Christianity (and thus between her theology, other potential metaphorical theologies, and Christianity) existing at the conceptual level but being expressed in certain constant, paradigm-defining root-metaphors. This is evident in the quotation with which Chapter 1 began, where the theologian is described as one who makes the gospel heard in their time. The strongest statement of this position is the assertion that, if we change the root metaphor, we change the religion[183].

However *Metaphorical Theology* also appears to claim that the continuity is to be located not so much in a defining root-metaphor, but in the continuities of individual persons and human communities and their identities, experiences and texts. She says for example

'Christians confess their faith by telling a story or a series of stories…a religious tradition…is transmitted more by *the memory of its exemplars* than by a set of explicit principles'[184]

These two positions are partially unified by an appeal to the person of Jesus, whose story it is that is transmitted and who also embodies the root-metaphor but this does not itself entirely resolve the issue. We may still ask of McFague whether it is a particular timeless model or concept derived from Jesus or the retelling and reliving of the story of Jesus in a particular context that is the point of continuity for Christianity?

In *Metaphorical Theology* most weight seems to be placed on the role of 'root-metaphor' and a particular account of this 'root-metaphor' as 'a new quality of relationship, a way of being in the world under the rule of God…. [a way of being that is]…highly metaphorical – abjuring identification, possession, absolutism, stasis, conventionality, and spiritualism.'[185]

This approach, while faced with difficulties preventing a timeless 'essence' of

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183 *Metaphorical Theology* p110
184 *Ibid.* p111
185 *Ibid.* p109

Christianity being reintroduced to the discussion from whence McFague had sought to banish them, does at least 'set the limits on the range of acceptable models' and provides us with a criterion by which models may be judged as falling within the tradition.

However in the later work, *Life Abundant,* McFague appears to have opted for the second of these positions, saying that the matter of what is 'Christian':

'...is an empirical, not a foundational question.'[186]

However, even if it is an empirical question, certain distinctions need to be made between what is, and is not, Christian, and a basis must be provided for making this distinction. Ultimately it may appear that she has opted for the latter, socio-historical (rather than conceptual or dogmatic) basis for the continuity by directing attention to the 'the Christic lens' with which Christianity operates[187]. This would suggest that the defining characteristics of Christianity are its ways of seeing the world in continuity with the historical person of Jesus of Nazareth. But the choice of the term 'Christic' is significant, since it implies a certain reading of Jesus. Historical Jesus studies make a clear distinction between Jesus of Nazareth, and the Christ as the interpretation of him (which stands in contrast to Jewish or Islamic interpretations of him for example). Thus it appears that the continuity of her thought is indeed really to be found at the conceptual level and that the tension between this and her desire not to exclude any understanding of Christianity, or absolutise another, remains ultimately unresolved.

This tension should not be judged to be fatal for her project, though it does leave McFague open, as will be seen later, to being quickly dismissed as 'unchristian' by critics[188]. It can be partially resolved by following her later movement towards a

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186 Sallie McFague *Life Abundant Rethinking Theology and Economy for a Planet in Peril* Minneapolis: Fortress 2000 p60

187 *The Body of God* pp160-8   For a full discussion of 'The Christic Lens' see Shannon Schrein *Quilting and Braiding:The Feminist Christologies of Sallie McFague and Elizabeth Johnson in Conversation* Minnesota: The Liturgical Press 1998 p46f

188 See for example Paul D Molnar *Divine freedom and the doctrine of the immanent Trinity: in dialogue with Karl Barth and contemporary theology* London: Continuum 2005 p7

position which advocates that the task of branding something Christian or not is a matter of discernment for a Christian community. This is in line with her practical concerns – ultimately for McFague her theology is validated if it changes the thought, and therefore the behaviour, of real, living Christians, so its reception by that community is central. She is not interested in deriving a technical definition by which she may judge her own work in a vacuum as being 'Christian'. This does not solve the issue, rather it transfers responsibility for solving it to the receiving community! However since it is likely that any such community would draw upon the person of Jesus and the narratives concerning him, as well as their own traditioned experience, we can see that the requirement for the community to 'embody the tension' fits well with McFague's beliefs concerning the ultimate nature of theology as provisional and tentative. After all she says

'Christianity will be lost…if the tensive qualities of the parables and Jesus as parable are lost.'[189]

Meanwhile what is most significant for our purposes here in the argument that McFague is putting forward, is that in *neither* case is continuity to be located solely at the level of any one particular *model*. Thus there are no absolute models which are above criticism, there is no model whose use by itself guarantees the status of a theology as Christian and there is also 'space' for new models.

For our purposes here, then, McFague's Christian paradigm should be treated as defining Christianity for *her*, in her *particular* place in time, in personal development and as a member of a community. Thus, with Christianity defined for her by controlling metaphors, which are themselves expressions of foundational concepts, her desire to accommodate other paradigms established upon other concepts and root metaphors amounts in reality to little more than a statement of the provisional and tentative nature

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189 *Metaphorical Theology* p110

of her own paradigm. Ultimately she provides no philosophical framework for uniting or relating the multiple paradigms that she insists Christianity (as an historical, communal entity) can work with. No attempt will be made here to provide such a framework but we will look instead at her particular definition of the Christic lens and work within it. We are interested in whether or not McFague's work is coherent on its own terms, and therefore, as part of this, whether it is Christian on its own terms, rather than when judged against an external definition of what is Christian.

Having located the boundaries of her paradigm for her theology, we should therefore look at its content. McFague's key paradigmatic models derive from common concepts found in her ethical position and imperatives, her study of metaphor and the parables and her understanding of Jesus which links all these together. Jesus is defining of the paradigm because her reading of him is such that not only do his teaching and life connect her ethics and understanding of metaphor together but also because the traditional doctrine of the incarnation resonates at the conceptual level with both of these. Through the metaphorical model of the incarnation God is 'seen as' a fully human being who teaches and lives a life which itself re-images the world by a dynamic and dialectic tension between a logic of hierarchy, limitation domination and exclusion and a logic of radical equality, grace, self-offering and abundant life. As the highest point of conceptual cohesion, Jesus is deployed as the key model in the Christian paradigm as she understands it. This has the following consequences for the derivation of root-metaphors to which all her theological 'output' that follows must be held accountable.

Firstly, as we have seen, relational models will predominate because Jesus was a person and spoke of relationships and conceived of God in relational terms. We have already seen how this root-metaphor appears in various forms. This is not to say that impersonal models are ruled out, indeed McFague advocates the exploration of such,

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rather it is to say that it is personal models, and ultimately the model of God as personal, that will predominate and it is these to which impersonal models must be held accountable.

Secondly, this relationship must be a relationship of a certain type and exhibit a certain tension. This is conceptually expressed in *Models of God* as 'the transforming love of God'. In terms of models this love is exemplified by Jesus according to the reading of him given by liberation theology.

This is of course a partial reading of Jesus as is to be expected. Seeing Jesus through this 'grid' necessarily excludes other features that would be seen through other grids. However this is the grid that McFague chooses because it is the one that she feels produces, not a defining message for all time, but the necessary message for her time and context.

The principal features of this reading of Jesus are, firstly, a destabilising, reorienting stance with respect to conventional understandings of divisions and dualisms of value, secondly a tendency to inclusivity, to include those conventionally accorded lesser value by virtue of these divisions and dualisms and thirdly an anti-triumphalist and anti-hierarchical compassion for those it seeks to include by empathy and solidarity with the same.

This, then is the key model of Jesus which is defining of her theological theory and it will be outlined further in Chapter 4. It also provides the basis for the criteria for the criticism of models outlined in chapter 3. We should remind ourselves that for McFague it is emphatically *not* the case that this key model says all that can or must be said by a theology. This model simply provides a reference point and the possibilities of order and assessment for the whole network of images, models and concepts which are required to give expression to the fullness of the human, lived experience in the light of

God.

McFague herself provides a clear account of how these four points on the continuum, from image through model and concept, to theory, function in practice, with reference specifically to, say, the theology of St Paul[190]. (This is of course a very quick sketch of Paul's thought, but it does serve to sum up the basic nature of the theological method with which McFague is working.)

Paul, she contends, generalises upon the Kingdom of God as it is expressed in the images and models of the parables. This produces the concept of 'justification by faith'. This concept is in continuity with the parables, but it in no way reduces the parables to illustrations of itself, nor is it the only concept that can be drawn out of them. Rather this concept is then applied, by means of key models of the atonement, that express the concrete meaning of 'justification by faith' in relation to which other themes in Paul's thinking are derived or ordered.

Taken together, then, this network of images, models and concepts related to its key concept and resultant models form a 'justification theory' of the Christian life.

2.6 Summary.

This chapter has distinguished between McFague's theory of theology and its application in particular models. Exploration of the relationship between these has identified both in theory and in application the nature, roles and interrelationships of images, models, concepts and theories.

We have seen how McFague uses examples (or 'images' in its expanded sense) of metaphors in order to derive a particular model of what metaphors are. This model in turn gives rise to concepts of 'the metaphorical' and these inform a theory of metaphor

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190 *Metaphorical Theology* p27

which brings all of the previous levels together into a coherent whole.

The originality of McFague, and what makes her a theologian rather than a philosopher of language, is that this movement from image to model to concept to theory with respect to her understanding of metaphor is always being *integrated* with the same process being carried out in relation to her religious experience, to scripture and its accounts of Jesus, to the historic Christian tradition and also her discernment of the ethical agenda of her context.

We see a good example of this integration in *Metaphorical Theology* where she describes the life of the Kingdom as 'metaphorical' in that it:

> 'abjur[es] identification, possession, absolutism, stasis, conventionality and spiritualism.'[191]

Here her method and associated models (i.e. her understanding of metaphor) are being united with her theological understanding and lived experience of a root-metaphor of the Christian tradition, namely the Kingdom of God, at the conceptual level. It is this sort of coherence that is one test of a theology as McFague understands it.

Her theological theories are therefore, it can be argued, informed at many points by her theory of theology not only in form (as would entirely be expected) but also in *content*. In the following chapter we will see this in more detail as the criteria and process by which theological models are to be assessed are more firmly set out. It will be seen that these criteria are deeply informed by McFague's theory of theology itself in that the key concepts and models used to *assess* the content of such models also *provide the conceptual content* of the models themselves.

We will continue to see that she is able to provide an integrated account of a theological approach that enables her to construct God-talk which is thoroughly 'metaphorical' both in its form and its content as she seeks to do. It is 'metaphorical' in

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191 *Metaphorical Theology* p109

the sense that her understanding of metaphor is deeply integrated into the process by which God-talk is created, the literary forms in which it is expressed, the criteria by which it is assessed, the root-metaphor it seeks to embody and the content of that God-talk as being about a quality of transformative tension which unites disparate entities.

This chapter has also sought to develop and clarify McFague's explicit methodological statements. This has been done for two reasons. Firstly to assess the coherence of McFague's proposed theological methodology, particularly in light of insights from selected later sources and secondly to enable us to proceed to an assessment of whether or not the method McFague advocates is in fact the method which she employs. Important questions raised in this regard were as follows:

A discussion of images raised questions about the role of personal experience.

The section on models raised questions surrounding the relative importance of the conceptual level, the roles of heuristic and hermeneutical models and the precise nature of the modelling process.

The discussion of concepts generated several questions for the consistency of McFague's method with its application. These centred on the role and importance of the conceptual level in metaphorical theology and in locating the points of continuity between McFague's models and the Christian tradition, broadly understood.

Discussions of theory returned attention again to the question of the relationship between McFague's models and the existing Christian tradition, showing the ambivalence in McFague's position between a link based on 'root-metaphor' and one based on continuities of community.

This critical process is continued in the next chapter. Meanwhile, the following passage from McFague provides a good summary of the ground we have covered thus

far.

'The aim of a metaphorical theology, as we recall, is to envision ways of talking about the relationship between the divine and the human which are nonidolatrous but relevant: ways which can be said to be true without being literal; ways which are meaningful to all peoples, the traditionally excluded as well as the included. Such a theology, I believe, is appropriate to the Protestant sensibility and I have suggested clues to its character from the parables of Jesus and Jesus as parable. In this framework, moreover, models are critical because models are dominant metaphors: they retain the tension of metaphor—its 'is and is not' quality which refuses all literalization. Models are also dominant metaphors: they are dominant within a tradition both because they have earned that right as 'classics' which speak to people across many ages and because they have usurped that right to the false exclusion of other metaphors. Both their right and their usurpation of right must be taken into account.'[192]

Again though, despite these small criticisms of McFague, we have seen the high degree of coherence and consistency at this more complex level of her thought as well as in its basic elements considered in Chapter 1. We have also seen that while again subsequent research has suggested a direction for the modification of one aspect, the larger part of her theological project itself endures this research, detailed analysis and the scrutiny of her respondents. These observations continue to support the view that that her theology is indeed still able to meet its aims today.

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192 *Metaphorical Theology* p28

Chapter 3 – Critiquing models in practice.

3.1 Introduction.

This chapter looks at both theoretical and practical criteria for assessing models of God in metaphorical theologies in light of McFague's work, in order to derive the criteria used to assess her models of God in relationship with the world in the following chapters.

It begins by looking at the relationship between 'metaphorical theology' and theology more generally, showing how McFague's approach is located within the discipline while remaining distinct from it in its emphases and style. It will also show that it is not necessary to look outside McFague's own work in order to assess it for its consistency since she provides criteria for assessment as part of her method. However these criteria are not themselves alien to theology more widely. This discussion will also support the conclusions reached in the preceding chapter where we saw that considerable work needs to be done in order to understand more clearly the relationships between theories that are structured around different key models. Do these define different and irreconcilable paradigms, or may they be integrated with each other in some way?

We will then move to consider the question of the truth and reference of models in McFague's theology. This is necessary since these questions are of central importance for the assessment of her theology. The nature of any attempt to assess theological models will naturally depend upon the understanding of truth and reference used by that work. (For example, a naively realist theology would be in principle open to straightforward empirical confirmation or denial.) It will be seen that these questions of truth and reference are not trivial but that the 'shy ontological claims' made by models in metaphorical theology are in fact secondary in the practice of assessing them, with

pragmatic factors being more to the fore and experience playing a more subtle role is this assessment process than straightforward verification. It will also be observed that McFague can appear equivocal about the ability of her models to refer to God. In drawing upon the work of other researchers in relevant fields, potentially fruitful directions towards a remedy of this dilemma will be advanced. Questions will also be raised concerning the adequacy of pragmatic criteria alone as grounds for verification. This will suggest a question mark over the precise link McFague makes between models and ethics and between her models and the Christian tradition and scriptures. It will also be argued that if the ability of religious language to refer to God is taken seriously, this also requires more attention to be paid to relating models to each other.

Over the course of this chapter, formal and substantial criteria for choosing between models will be drawn from McFague's work and these, along with the accompanying questions just outlined will be investigated in practice in the following chapters.

This will be followed by a brief examination of these criteria in action in McFague's hands as we look at her critique of one principal model in the Christian tradition, God as Father. This section will illustrate how McFague's criteria operate in practice and it is also important for clarifying her relationship to traditional Christianity, which she sees as a 'reforming' one rather than a 'revolutionary' relationship.

Finally all these observations over this chapter and the two preceding will be drawn together. These encompass McFague's relationship to the Christian tradition and set out ways in which this relationship will be evaluated in the remainder of our enquiries.

3.2 Theology and metaphorical theology.

Is all theology metaphorical? Or is only 'metaphorical theology' metaphorical? The answer to these questions is, typically, both yes and no.

All theology, McFague would argue, is metaphorical at least in the sense that all language is metaphorical (see our discussion of radical metaphor in Chapter 1) and thus all human discourse is metaphorically based. Further all theology is metaphorical given her radical monotheism which rejects any pretensions of theological models to achieving the status of literal descriptions or definitions of the divine. She strongly rejects the view that this reduces all reality to a 'game', seeing the error of deconstructionism as its failure to allow that there is any reality beyond metaphor.[193] By this she means that,

> 'the 'games' we play with language make a difference in what we understand reality to be and how we conduct our lives in relation to other beings, both human and non-human.'[194]

The universality of metaphor has two consequences for McFague then. The first is that it means for her that no one discourse can claim ultimate superiority over all other possible ones by a claim to be an absolute and literal representation of reality. This clears sufficient space for her project. On the other hand, it does not imply that 'anything goes'; it is still possible to advance reasons for holding one position and not another, and crucially such arbitration is necessary and desirable.

On what basis this arbitration should proceed is another question, although important pointers towards an ethical basis for arbitration are already evident in the quotation above. An exploration of this process of arbitration comprises much of this

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193 *Models of God* p26ff The position she takes here implies a basic premise of realism but links this
realism strongly to ethics and human behaviour. For more on this, see below.
194 *Models of God*

chapter, but, before we turn to this, there are still a number of points to be made about the relationship between metaphorical and other forms of theology.

As noted in chapter 2, the understanding of all language as metaphorical exists at such a level of abstraction as to be of little material use and does not take into account real differences in the usage of language. It is also clearly the case that while there are some forms of theology that McFague seeks to reject which do not correspond to the metaphorical approach, there are also other forms of theology which she seeks to affirm and see as complimentary to her own. Where these latter theologies can be seen simply as using alternative but equally valid key models they cause little problem, and such is the way that McFague seems to regard many of the great theologies of Christian history. However the difficulties are more substantial if the 'metaphorical' method that we outlined in chapter 2 is not taken to be *normative for all theology*. On this question McFague is more equivocal as already seen.

Therefore, if not all theology is metaphorical theology, and not all non-metaphorical theology is illegitimate, then the relationship between metaphorical and non-metaphorical theology at least requires exploration in future research. However questions of this nature fall outside our area of focus. What at least needs to be said here is that the precise structure of the relationship between the metaphorical and non-metaphorical approaches is not clear from McFague's writing. Despite this it can be observed that firstly she wishes to engage with, and indeed participate in, the discipline and traditions of Christian theology and secondly she regards herself as speaking to and answerable to this community. She therefore sees some need for continuity with this community in terms of the form and content of her theology as well as a sociological continuity based on personal participation with this community.

She also sees a distinction, at least in degree, between her form of 'constructive theology' and others. She says, for example, that 'metaphorical theology' is 'more experimental, imagistic and pluralistic',[195] while other constructive theologies are more 'systematic, comprehensive, conceptual'.[196] Although attention has been, and will continue to be, drawn here to the fact McFague's theology is far more conceptually based than she herself seems to allow, the point can be conceded to some extent because 'metaphorical theology' draws upon metaphor and parable *in its content as well as its form*. The use of metaphor, not only as a methodological constraint but as itself a key model in both the construction and the content of theology, and the fusing of this understanding with a rejection of absolutism and dualism in life and ethics, means that 'metaphorical theology' is not to be seen primarily as a normative, prescribed *method* but as an *ethos*, a value system. Thus, it may be say that even if all theology is in some sense metaphorical, this does not make it all 'Metaphorical Theology'.

In the light of this, the criteria for the assessment of theological models become less a case of formal application of rules for deciding 'right' models from 'wrong' models, and more a subjective, personally involving, experience-based assessment of the content of models, as being comparatively better or worse suited (than other competing models) for producing the sort of vision of reality and way of life advocated by metaphorical theology.

This would appear to be making theology, of necessity, comparative. That is to say that theological models, on this understanding, must be regarded as better or worse for particular purposes than another given model. This is very likely the reason for McFague's extensive critical engagement with mainstream (or 'malestream') Christian models, such as Father, Lord and King and may be a considerable reason for her desire

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195 *Models of God p37*
196 *Models of God* p196

to participate in the Christian theological community; it gives her the alternative models required by her own account of the justification of beliefs and consequently her models can be supported, not in any ultimate sense as being demonstrably 'true', but as being better (in the sense of 'more suited to certain purposes') than other, prior models.

Thus Metaphorical Theology should be seen as engaging with the models of the Christian theological community, but doing so using a hermeneutic which is distinctive and yet still congruent with the root-narrative of that community: the story of Jesus Christ. This hermeneutic arises from the unity of formal understanding and material content in McFague's theology. The major strength of her theology is that she incorporates the theological and philosophical problems of language into her approach in a holistic and organic way; she makes them central and integrated into the form *and content* of her theology rather than leaving then as a peripheral auxiliary hypothesis. 'Metaphorical' therefore denotes a value system as well as a theological method; it is an attempt to unify at the conceptual level both theological means and theological ends. It is the universal nature of problems of language that leads to the apparent claims of metaphorical theology to be the only possible, or at least most beneficial, type. However such an absolute claim is also against the ethos of metaphorical theology itself. It is this tension that results in the lack of clarity and the need for further research identified above.   Below we will see that this tension ultimately derives from a failure by McFague to distinguish between a model's *verifiability* in relation to 'objective reality' and its capacity to potentially *depict* or *reference* that reality.

Of course all of this is to presuppose that the question of the truth and reference of models is not simple. If it were to be the case that the models were taken to be a direct and literal representation of reality it would be relatively easy to judge between them by determining objectively which model bore the closest resemblance to 'the truth'.

However, as we shall see in the following section, things are not so simple and the role played by 'data' and 'experiment' in the assessment of theological models is more subtle.

3.3 Truth and reference in metaphorical theology.

At the heart of McFague's understanding of metaphor is the simultaneous 'is' and 'is not' of the metaphorical way of speaking.   Both are important.   Metaphorical statements do seek to refer beyond themselves. They are realist in their intention, but they refer only indirectly. Whatever is seen, is not seen 'as it is in itself,' but by being 'seen as' something else. Thus the reference of a metaphorical statement is indirect. According to McFague herself, this places her epistemology in the 'critically realist' camp[197]. This is to be distinguished from 'naïve realism' which sees its statements as directly referring to reality and as therefore being literally true (or false). It is also to be distinguished from instrumentalism and positivism. The former would hold that models are heuristic fictions, useful in the construction of theories, but ultimately dispensable. This is contrary to McFague's views on models which are based on the unsubstitutability of metaphor, and hence of models, and also to her view that metaphors do indeed refer, albeit indirectly. The fourth position, positivism, prioritises observation and sees theoretical speculation as simply the ordering of observations. This is clearly a long way from McFague's views on the theory-laden nature of observation and the need for interpretive categories which are inseparable from observation.

For McFague then, theological models do refer, and they do so in such a way that the divine-human relationship to which they refer 'bear[s] description in some ways

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197 *Metaphorical Theology* p132

and not others.'[198]

This quotation suggests one of her principal arguments in support of her critically realist position. These arguments are firstly, that observations are theory-laden but not theory-determined. That is to say that what is seen is highly influenced by who is looking and how, but nevertheless the observer's preconceptions, assumptions or heuristic devices do not *fully* determine what is seen. Events have their own 'depth' or 'substance', a consistency across observers and an independence from them. Something of what is seen is determined by factors outside the observer and intrinsic to what is being observed. She says,

> 'Hunger, fear, and suffering unite beings, both human and non-human, in a wordless community where a cry of pain is a universal word.[199]

By holding certain experiences to be universal and perceivable across contexts it is clear that she is arguing for a degree of reality underlying language and not entirely determined by it.

Secondly she argues that models have the ability to influence behaviour and change the way we see the world and live in it and that some do so more effectively than others. From this it may be inferred (though not of course proved) that the statements which have such an effect must refer to entities which genuinely exist. She quotes two philosophers who make this point. One is Max Wartofsky who says

> 'If the argument runs: "I don't really take the entities in the model to exist, but it is useful to think of them that way...," then I would raise the question as to what makes it useful to think of it that way at all, if there were not some sense in which the model mirrored some aspect of what it was taken to be a model of. In short, the existence claim of a model may be limited in scope and applicability ... but to

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198 *Metaphorical Theology* p133
199 *Models of God* p28

deny it such a claim makes a mystery of its significance altogether.'[200]

The second is Frederick Ferré, thus:

'But if language literally based on certain models of great religious responsive depth found within human experience is capable not only of synthesizing our concepts in a coherent manner but also of illuminating our experience — moral experience, sense experience, aesthetic experience, religious experience — we may ask why this happens to be the case. And if some models are capable of providing greater coherence and adequacy than others, we may begin to suspect that this tells us something not only about the models but also about what reality is like: reality is of such a character that a metaphysical system based on model X is more capable of interpreting our experience and unifying our ideas than a metaphysical system based on model Y.'[201]

Following McFague's understanding then, models do refer but this does not mean that there are simple true/false decisions to be made. Rather the effect of the theory-laden nature of observation means that a) no model can be tested in isolation but only as a part of the network of images, models, concepts and theory to which it belongs and b) decisions can only be made about the usefulness of models relative to each other and in relation to a particular context. This is because of the indirect way that theological models refer.

Recalling our discussion of metaphor in Chapter 1, metaphors, and hence metaphorical models, refer by the re-description of reality. Thus not only does existing theory influence what is seen, but the *process of forming the model* itself affects what is

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200 *Metaphorical Theology* p132 citing M.W. Wartofsky *Models:Representation and the Scientific Understanding* Boston: D. Reidel Pub. Co. 1979
201 *Metaphorical Theology* p142 citing Ferre 'Metaphors, models and religion' p341-2 in Gill (ed.) *Philosophy and Religion: Some contemporary Perpectives* Minneapolis: Burgess 1968.

seen *in the same moment* that the insight is gained; indeed in a sense the insight is only gained through this moment of transformation. Discovery and invention, reality and construction are therefore inseparably bound up.

> 'Theological models are re-descriptions of reality in the sense that they offer new ways of being in the world.'[202]

This is why it is not possible to separate 'truth' from construction but only to talk comparatively about constructions and this comparison is firmly located within a particular context. McFague says,

> 'Are such statements 'true'? Obviously not if judged by a crude correspondence view – that our statements 'correspond' to God's reality. We have no way of judging that. All that we can say is that from our own experience and within the parameters of our tradition, we have been persuaded to stand on this or that carefully thought-through interpretation of God's relation to the world. The theologian will say, 'I believe it. I believe it is Christian. I believe it is good for the world."[203]

This last quote is a good, if brief, summary of McFague's position on the truth and reference of her models and it provides the starting point for our discussion in the following section of her formal criteria for arbitrating between models. But first there is a crucial question that must be addressed if what we have said in this section is to hold. Throughout the argument here it has been assumed that the distinction between epistemology and ontology can be made at least in principle and in theory in the case of religious language. A realism has been assumed and inferred here which, while not explicitly used in judging between models is used as the justification for employing

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202 *Metaphorical Theology* p134
203 *Life Abundant* p29

them at all and has been inferred to lie behind their effectiveness at least in part. But is it in fact meaningful to distinguish between the god of our language and models and 'God' the ultimate reality beyond all our words? Can the latter be held to exist if nothing of any certainty may be known or said about this reality; if all religious language is in no sense univocal?

McFague wrestles with this question in some detail in an endnote to *Models of God* and it is worth quoting this vital passage extensively.

'But what is the relationship between our constructs of God and God, or in our postmodern, decontructionist era is that distinction even appropriate? That is, do our constructions refer to anything, anyone? Is not talk of the 'real God' or 'Being-itself' also metaphorical or symbolic? For instance, is not God a metaphor central for the West, whereas other religious traditions are based on other foundational metaphors? To the extent that I think that there is something, someone to which our metaphors refer, my belief falls into Ricoeur's notion of a wager that, as I phrased it earlier, 'the universe is neither indifferent nor malevolent, but there is a power (and a personal power at that) which is on the side of life and its fulfillment. . . .' 'This is indeed the central metaphor of the world view of the West, but it is not *necessarily* only that. Yet, how the metaphor refers we do not know— or indeed, even if it does. At the most one wagers it does and lives as if it does, which means that the main criterion for a 'true' theology is pragmatic, preferring those models of God that are most helpful in the praxis of bringing about fulfillment for living beings. The other issue, however, the issue of the referent of the model, not to our world but to God, will not disappear, and here the question arises of whether metaphorical thinking ought to be applied to the idea of God itself. The basic point of metaphorical assertion is that something is there that we

do not know how to talk about and which we have no access to except through metaphors. If then, we apply metaphorical thinking to the reality that is the referent of our metaphors, what would, could, that mean? I think it means most basically that we say God both 'is' and 'is not.' Metaphorical theology applied to the 'being of God' agrees with the tradition of the via negativa and the deconstructionists in stressing the absence of God over our presumptuous insistence in Western religious thought on the presence of the divine. God is not, not just in the sense of being unavailable to us or absent from our experience but as a basic aspect of the being of God. I think something like this is necessary both to include the very different notions of other major religious traditions and to preserve a sense of the mystery of the divine, whatever our hopes, beliefs, or wagers might be. It is a recognition of the 'privacy' of God, of the dark side of the divine that the mystics speak of ... To affirm all this, however, does not mean there is not a reality (nor does it mean there is), though the presumption of metaphorical discourse – as evidenced by the conflict of metaphors, the competing 'versions' of reality that metaphors project — is that these metaphors, these versions, are of something, or there would be no point in arguing for one another.'

On the basis of passages like this, it seems that, for McFague, metaphors are actually held to refer, if only out of practical necessity, for it is only if they are held to refer that they can have the transformative power that she desires them to have. Her realism therefore appears simply pragmatic, and is ethically driven, as much as it is critically and philosophically grounded. However the equivocation McFague shows here, along with some strong statements she makes concerning the relative character of models, has led some scholars to see her position as ultimately non-realist and

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projectionist, despite her own self-designation as a critical realist.

For example Achtmeier characterises McFague as claiming that

'God is the great Unknown and that therefore human beings must invent language for God that can be changed at will'.[204]

Meanwhile Gunton has McFague saying that

'Metaphor is a form of indirect characterisation of a kind that *does not really speak of reality at all.'*[205]

However such characterisations tend to focus on McFague's weaker ontological claims and not deal with the, admittedly sometimes ambivalent, reference claims that she does in fact make for her models.[206]

Reynolds has closely and extensively investigated McFague's equivocation on this point and a number of his findings are significant here[207]. He concludes that McFague does indeed intend a weak realism and indeed that 'it is hard to see what more could be asked' of her account of realism.

His work makes several important distinctions. Firstly, he differentiates between 'relative with regard to justification' and 'relative with regard to truth'.[208] This means that while a writer may note the importance of context, its influence upon the justification of beliefs and the fact that there is no neutral ground from which conflicting beliefs may be assessed, this does not necessarily imply that such beliefs cannot be held to have any ability to depict reality in a transcendent or universal way. Such claims to reference must, given the context-relative nature of justification, remain

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204 Elizabeth Achtemeier 'Exchanging God for 'no gods': A discussion of Female Language for God' in Alvin Kimel Jr *Speaking the Christian God: The Holy Trinity and the Challenge of Feminism* Leominster: Gracewing 1992 pp1-17 p5

205 Colin Gunton 'Proteus and Procrustes: A Study in the Dialectic of Language in Disagreement with Sallie McFague' in Kimel Jr. *op. cit.* pp65-80 p73 Emphasis original.

206 For a further example see Keith Ward *Religion and Creation* Oxford: Clarendon Press 1996 pp149-150, who argues that her use of metaphor makes her theology necessarily non-realist.

207 Terrance Reynolds 'Two McFague's: Meaning, Truth and Justification in Models of God' *Modern Theology* 11(56) 1995 pp289-313

208 p293

humble and open to review, yet they may still logically be made. Such are the claims that McFague makes. This distinction also implies that although a belief may always have been true (or untrue) it may at different times and in different contexts be warranted or not warranted and those who assessed it in another context may have been correct *in their context* in asserting or denying the belief accordingly. This supports McFague's desire to respect traditional models in their original setting but deny their appropriateness *to our age.*

Secondly Reynolds locates the cause of McFague's confusion on the question of reference (and thus much of the ensuing confusion among her critics) in a failure to differentiate between the *demonstrable correspondence* of a statement with its referent and the ability of the statement to refer to that referent at all. This is a key distinction also made by Soskice.[209] She argues that a statement may still be held to refer to an object even if the accompanying description in the referring sentence is entirely inaccurate. Her favoured example is that the statement 'Columbus proved that the world is round and discovered America' can still 'depict' a real, historical Columbus, even though we may hold that Columbus in fact did neither of these things.

McFague seems to fail to make this distinction and therefore has fallen into the trap of equating a claim that a statement refers with both the need to demonstrate correspondence with exterior reality neutrally observed, and also with a claim to exclusive or privileged access to truth. Instead, Soskice shows the importance of the fact that it is not words that refer, but speakers using words, and that, further these speakers belong to linguistic communities that have a tradition through which reference is maintained. (To return to her example, a speaker's ability to refer to Columbus is dependent upon her membership of a continuous linguistic community and tradition

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209 See Janet Martin Soskice *Metaphor and Religious Language* Oxford: Clarendon Press 1985 esp Ch 7 and 8

reaching back to an original designation of an historical figure as 'Columbus', rather than on any specific 'facts about Columbus' the speaker may wish to assert.)

The fact that speakers, and not merely words themselves, refer, has been picked up by a number of other scholars who aid McFague's cause by arguing from this fact to the ability of a metaphor to logically possess the potential to refer. Both Brümmer[210] and Chyssides[211] for example argue that a metaphor may refer if 'real existence' is one of the 'penumbra of meanings' that the speaker intends to map between domains. (Brümmer's example is that such a mapping is intended for 'Father' in the case of 'Father God' but not in the case of 'Father Christmas' – again note that here the difference presupposes the distinction between intending reference and demonstrating correspondence – the difference is one of speaker's intention before the fact and not a question of empirical investigation after the fact).

Though these writers all add support to McFague's claim to refer to God without idolatry (in other words, without claiming to possess a description which demonstrably corresponds with the inner being of God or that enjoys ontologically privileged access) this support comes at a certain price, for each of them directs us back to the question of how McFague's models relate to the God of the Christian tradition. Soskice's approach is dependent upon continuities of community and usage and she stresses the way in which metaphorical religious language builds upon the previous use of terms within the tradition, a process which creates networks of meaning and imbues metaphors with tradition-specific richness. Soskice's contribution would imply that there is much to be gained from a cross-fertilisation of meaning between models, and yet, generally speaking, McFague's models are developed and expressed in isolation.

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210 Vincent Brümmer 'Metaphor and the Reality of God' in Bartel T W (ed) *Comparative Theology, Essays for Keith Ward* London: SPCK 2003
211 George Chyssides 'Meaning, Metaphor and Meta-Theology' *Scottish Journal of Theology* 38(2) 1985 pp145-153

Meanwhile Brümmer and Chyssides both ask the question, how are we to determine which feature of the source domain can appropriately be mapped to the target domain?

These questions direct us to consider the target domain in McFague's models more closely, that is to consider what is being presupposed about God before the metaphor is applied. Now McFague seems, on the basis of her interactionist theory of metaphor, to treat the target domain as essentially empty or at least unresolved until the particular metaphor is formed. That is, she seems to intend to draw all her insights about God from the source domain (from 'mother' or 'lover' for example) and does not seek to integrate these insights either with each other or with the biblical tradition except in their broad ethical direction. Each model then is treated in relative isolation, as an isolated interaction between an individual source and an always largely empty target. Thus when God is considered as Mother, the interaction is between the category 'mother' and 'the mystery of God' rather than between mother and God-who-is-also-considered-as... (whatever else may already be held to be true of God).

It is likely that this approach has in part led to the appearance of her models as projectionist and also to her failure to explore ways in which different models may more fully relate to each other. Reynolds again provides insight into this issue, and does so in a way that binds together the questions of reference, ethical pragmatism and prior beliefs about God. Reynolds shows that McFague employs a 'web of belief' related theory of truth and justification, or a 'coherentism'. By this he means that:

> 'We never start from scratch but always begin already immersed in an epistemic context or tradition that orients us by means of assumptions, beliefs and precedents. We demonstrate our rationality by how we move out from this starting point in a dialectical and spiraling process of reasoning and

justification...'[212]

'...McFague, in essence, makes truth claims as a theological bricoleur, one who is justified in holding to certain well entrenched religious beliefs and building upon them.'[213]

'McFague adopts a ... form of theological realism, but without a string or 'bad' correspondence view of truth. Instead, she defends a weak or ... 'non-controversial sense' of correspondence, namely '...The perfectly intelligible relation of correspondence between theoretical statements and the facts as they are described in the vocabulary of a background theory'.[214]

Reynolds then shows that McFague presupposes a small number of 'facts' about God which determine the way in which her models are both formed and assessed, and also the way in which they are held to be true. The first of these is the belief that God is 'on the side of life and fulfilment'[215], a belief that she claims to be ontologically true even if it must remain unverifiable. This serves to tie together McFague's theological pragmatism and her desire to at least potentially refer to God as an extralinguistic reality, since if a belief about God can be shown to lead to life and fulfilment and this is also held to be the basic nature of God, then one is justified, within this web of beliefs, in holding that such a belief indeed refers to this God. On this understanding McFague is freed from charges of pure projectionism and is able to use her pragmatic criteria as criteria for truth.

Reynolds, though, also shows that McFague depends at least as heavily on the 'Imago Dei', that is a doctrine which links together the notions of creation and

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212 Barney Twiss 'On Truth and Justification' in Jeff Stout *Ethics after Babel* Boston: Beacon Press 1998 p44 cited in Reynolds *op. cit.* p302
213 Reynolds *op. cit.* p303
214 Jeff Stout *Ethics after Babel* p298 quoted by Reynolds *op. cit.* p306
215 *The Body of God* p191

personhood.[216]   This,

'enables McFague to move beyond ...mere instrumentalism ...and assert that

knowledge of persons leads us to knowledge of God.'[217]

Schaab, while discussing feminist methodology more generally, agrees, saying:

'Certainly, what the Christian feminist tradition can assert of a foundational nature

is inextricably connected to belief in God as creative Source of all

being...Christian feminist theologians must maintain the ontological link between

the Creator and creation if such theologies are to validly assert the foundational

nature of human experience as a critical locus of knowledge and expression of the

mystery of God and the God-world relationship.'[218]

Here the 'background theory' is that the God to whom McFague wishes to refer

is, by virtue of his/her self-expression in creation, able to be in some sense depicted in

terms of the creation, and especially in terms of human relationality. Thus a model that

is able to give valid expression to human experiences of creation and relationship may

be regarded as being true, within the context of this background theory.

Thus Reynolds has shown (though he does not put it in these terms) that in

McFague's models, the target domain ('God'), is not as bereft of previously existing

content as it may at first appear.

However, whilst Reynold's findings are helpful in clarifying and defending

McFague's work and the status of her models, and elevating her pragmatic criteria to be

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216 Perhaps we should say 'an interpretation of the Imago Dei' since not all would agree on the meaning ,
   and implications for method, of this doctrine. See for example Thomas Torrance 'The Christian
   Apprehension of God the Father' in Kimel (ed) *op. cit.* p120-143 'Hence [the imago Dei] does not
   mean that man ... through his own nature can somehow reflect God's nature; it means only that man is
   specifically destined by grace to live in faithful response to the movement and purpose of God's love
   toward him as his creaturely partner. The Creator/creature relationship in being and knowing between
   God and man cannot be reversed.' p125
217 Reynolds p303
218 Gloria Schaab 'Of Models and Metaphors: The Trinitarian Proposals of Sallie McFague and Elizabeth
   A. Johnson' *Theoforum (Ottawa) 33 (2)* 2002 pp213-234 p233

also part of the criteria for truthfulness, they do invite the question, 'why *these particular* background beliefs' and only these beliefs? Once attention has been drawn to the presence of certain particulars of the Christian tradition within McFague's 'background theory', it is legitimate to ask why others are not included also.

A partial answer to this would be that any particulars here included would need to be at least of neutral pragmatic ethical value for McFague's project, else the link between ethical pragmatism and relative truth would be lost. It seems unlikely though that this factor would rule out such a large part of the Christian tradition as McFague seems to do. This assessment would depend of course both on the pragmatic criteria used and on one's assessment of the past and current ethical performance of the tradition. These criteria will be examined shortly. Meanwhile note should be taken of another contribution from Reynolds who has compared the methodologies of McFague and Lindbeck.[219] Ultimately, he argues, the key differences between these writers are not in the area of methodology but on their differing assessments of the past and present ethical performance of the tradition. This would seem to support our view here that McFague's rejection of much of the tradition is pragmatic rather than methodological and that consequently it would be possible to employ McFague's method and allow for the construction of novel models while operating with a fuller version of the tradition.

The discussions here have shown that McFague's account of theological pragmatism is of vital importance to her work. Not only is it her preferred method of assessment because she wishes to meet certain contemporary ethical challenges, nor is it

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219 See both Terrence Reynolds 'Parting Company At Last: Lindbeck and McFague in Substantive Theological Dialogue' *Concordia Theological Quarterly* 63 Ap 1999 pp 97-118 and Terrence Reynolds 'Walking Apart, Together : Lindbeck and McFague on Theological Method' *Journal of Religion* 77 no 1 Ja 1997 pp 44-67

only the case that she sees ethical behaviour as the most important product of theology. As well as both of these, as we have just seen, the claims to truth and reference made by her models are fundamentally dependent upon a positive pragmatic assessment of them. Against the background theory she describes, a model can only be held to refer to God if it is pragmatically useful.

One upshot, however, of our attempt to better establish the claims of religious models to refer is that if they do in fact refer, then the need to have regard for how they relate to each other becomes more pressing. If models of God are held to be entirely about our own experience, about mothers, lovers, friends etc. rather than about God, they only need to be related together if we wish to discuss the relationship between mothers, lovers and friends for example. If however these models are held to refer to God, even if their accuracy as depictions cannot be independently adjudicated, they are still models that purport to refer to *the same subject*. Consequently, as simultaneously existing models of the same entity, they must have some form of relationship to each other. If further these models pass our pragmatic validation process and are held in some sense to describe the reality to which they refer, this need for a clarification of their interrelationship, and the possibility that such a task would provide additional insight, must increase. Further, if one was to follow Lindbeck's more positive assessment of the past performance and current potential of traditional theological models,[220] such that they would then be held to be referential models of God by the standards outlined here, then a relationship between these models and any new ones would clearly not only be warranted but would be highly desirable.

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220 See the summary of Lindbeck's position in Terrence Reynolds, 'Walking Apart, Together : Lindbeck and McFague on Theological Method.' *Journal of Religion* 77 no 1 Jan 1997, p54.

3.4 Assessing a metaphorical theology in theory.

This chapter has begun an examination of the criteria needed to assess theological propositions arising from an application of the principles of McFague's metaphorical theology and attention will be given to a more detailed study of these. It is evident that there are two potential sources of criteria in McFague's work against which models of God may be assessed to see if they accomplish her purposes. Firstly there are her theoretical statements on the issue of the assessment of models and then there is the actual process she appears to be using in practice when actually assessing models. These two are not necessarily the same and so each will be discussed, both on their own merits and in comparison to each other. Here we will be looking particularly at those theoretical statements concerning the assessment of models that McFague herself makes.

As we have seen above, McFague stresses that theological models cannot be assessed in a vacuum but can only be assessed relative to other models and as part of a web of beliefs, as the quote below illustrates. It is therefore true that it is not simply the models themselves that are being tested but the models in their web of associated images, models, concepts and theory that are being examined. In other words, since models are paradigm-dependent, the model can only be assessed within its paradigm, or else the whole paradigm needs to be assessed in relation to other potential paradigms. McFague quotes Ian Barbour making this point using a comparison with the sciences:

> '...scientific concepts and theories can be *tested only in networks*. Webs of interdependent constructs are evaluated as total systems. The fabric of interlocking religious beliefs must also be contextually tested; ideas of God, self, society and nature are not independent. An interpretative scheme is evaluated

indirectly by the convergence of many lines of enquiry.'[221]

Our investigations here are not concerned with the justification of paradigms, rather we are interested in the justification of models within and in relation to a paradigm – McFague's paradigm. Therefore we must look at how a paradigm affects the models within it. Recalling the discussions in Chapter 2, a paradigm for McFague is defined by its root metaphors, and the Christian paradigm is defined by the root-metaphor of Jesus as parable of God, most basically stated as

'a mode of personal relationship ... a tensive relationship distinguished by trust in God's impossible way of love in contrast to the loveless ways of the world.'[222]

Thus the paradigm within which a model is evaluated has two consequences for that process of evaluation. Firstly McFague intends the model to be coherent with the root-metaphor and secondly it must be an appropriate translation of the root-metaphor.

To treat these in turn, what I might call the *'criterion of coherence''* of model with root-metaphor is both a general and a specific one. (These '*criteria of...*' terms are my own but are in my view consistent with McFague's own observations on criteria for the assessment of models, which are not categorised). The criterion of coherence is specific in that root-metaphors specify the acceptable limits of the paradigm. Now this root metaphor does not control or specify the form and content of all models, but is a limiting factor upon the construction of theology which should be a *translation* of this root-metaphor.

An example that illustrates that the root-metaphor does not crudely control the choice of models can be seen in the way McFague handles impersonal models in

221 *Metaphorical Theology* p138 citing Ian Barbour M*yths, Models and Paradigms: A comparative study in science and religion* New York: Harper and Row 1974 p124 Emphasis original.
222 *Metaphorical Theology* p108

relation to a root-metaphor rooted in personhood and relationality. For although the root-metaphor of the Christian tradition is personal and relational in McFague's understanding, this is not to imply that *only* personal models can be justified by the criterion of coherence to the root metaphor. Rather an impersonal model is likely to be more peripheral to the overarching theological theory or system of which it is a part, while personal models are more likely to be central to the theory, contributing more significantly to the theory's comprehensiveness. However the impersonal model may still have value in relating aspects of contemporary human experience to these centrally held personal models (the model of God as Rock would be an example of an impersonal model commonly used in this way).

Indeed, in *Super, Natural Christians* McFague integrates impersonal models more fully into her theology by suggesting that the use of personal, relational language be extended to the inanimate world. This reduces the tension between personal and impersonal models since if we use subject-subject language in relation to, say, rocks, such images can be better seen as translations of the personal root-metaphor.[223]

The limit imposed upon models then by the criterion of coherence with the root-metaphor is therefore not fully prescriptive of model choice or determinative of the success of a model considered on its own, but the criterion is nevertheless a real constraint. It should be remembered that the basic images of a tradition, these being the person and teaching of Jesus in the Christian tradition, are not to be *replaced* by a root-metaphor. They are *unsubstitutable* in the tradition and cannot be removed. Consequently, one should surely argue, if a new model is to be considered a valid part of a particular metaphorical theology, such a new model needs to a) be located relative to the root-metaphor, b) be mindful of the basic images and c) embody the tension inherent in the tradition without fragmenting it.

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223 See especially p9 and 19.

The last of these requirements warrants further scrutiny however. The quality 'tension' just referred to is highly ambiguous in McFague's work. Its origins for her are in the 'is and is not of metaphor[224], the simultaneous affirmation and denial of a suggested comparison. However in McFague's definition of the Christian root-metaphor of Jesus as parable of God quoted above[225], this has become, not a *comparison*, but a stark *contrast* between an 'is of love' and an 'is of lovelessness' (rather than the relationship being characterised by truly 'metaphorical' tension, in which it would be a relationship that 'was and was not' love). It is therefore questionable whether this 'contrast' is the same as what is meant by the term 'metaphorical tension'. This lack of clarity is likely due to the loss in precision that occurs when a model is translated into a concept and the corresponding category is extended. Here the category 'metaphor' is being extended to include a contrast between opposites in the definition of metaphor, however doing so loses what is for McFague one of the key features of metaphor, its ability to hold similarity and dissimilarity together, a property quite different from contrasting a property with its negation. This demonstrates one difficulty a metaphorical approach may encounter in providing clear criteria for assessment by the application of rules, rather than the application of experience. If this 'tension' cannot be defined clearly, it cannot be used as a logical criterion. Then only subjective and intuitive judgements can be made on whether a model 'embodies tension'.

Instead, it can be argued, that in the general case, the requirement of coherence means that the links between images, models, concepts and theories and their implications for each other should be well thought through. McFague herself makes a much stronger claim saying:

'diametrically opposed or contrary models cannot be introduced into a theological

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224 *Metaphorical Theologyp110*
225 'a mode of personal relationship ... a tensive relationship distinguished by trust in God's impossible way of love in contrast to the loveless ways of the world.'

system.'[226]

However the situation may be more complicated than McFague allows. Taking the Bible as the classic text, as a key example of how theology is to proceed, as McFague advocates, it can be seen that contradictory models may be required to adequately express contradictions in believers' experiences of life and faith. For example, in scripture, models of God as lion, fire and avenging angel coexist with models of God as loving husband, shepherd and mother.

As we have just seen, there is a need for theology to embody tensions that are inherent both in religious and human experience and in the Christian root-metaphor. Consequently, and contra McFague at least in the statement quoted above, contradictory models may be necessary to provide an adequate translation of the root-metaphor. This is a further example of the difficulty a metaphorical theology has in providing formal criteria for the assessment of models. However, again, admitting this difficulty is not to allow an arbitrary selection of models since if a contradictory model is to be valid it is required to demonstrate how the particular contradiction makes the translation of the root-metaphor better rather than worse. Contradiction is not to be valued simply for its own sake.

Given that a model is therefore required to be a translation of the root-metaphor, what I would term a '*criterion of adequate translation*' is a second requirement that a paradigm places on a model. (Here 'translation' is being used in its linguistic rather than mathematical sense. It is translation as an 'art' rather than a 'science', a necessarily creative attempt to embody a meaning in a new form.)

Some of the most important questions McFague wishes to ask of a model arise from this criterion. A translation may only be judged appropriate in a given context and for a given purpose. A good translation is one that helps people in a specific context to

226 *Metaphorical Theology* p140

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understand their experience and live the 'abundant life' in the sense of a life lived in the knowledge of the inclusive love of God.

It should be remembered that, for McFague, theological models refer at least as much to ourselves as to God. Indeed in one passage she likens the process of model formation in theology to that of looking at a Rorschach Test,

'where one sees a pattern similar to something which is vaguely familiar and the mind jumps to fill in the unknown gaps in order to see it whole. The whole that one sees is not identical with anything with which we are familiar, but the similarity has enabled us to see a new thing.'[227]

The focus of her theology is on the nature and possibilities of human life as it is lived rather than on the nature of God considered for its own sake. Models of God are therefore as much models of ourselves, and in three ways. Firstly, models are derived from human experience and use its language, secondly they cause deeper reflection upon that experience and thirdly they are designed to both interpret and shape that experience. Consequently there is a significant role for experience to play in the assessment of the adequacy of a model's translation of the Christian root-metaphor.

This condition results in the following three additional formal criteria (here again a new label is being given to McFague's underlying ideas): which will be called here a *'criterion of relevance'*, a *'criterion of comprehensiveness'*, and *'a criterion of fruitfulness'* and it is in these three areas where there is an important role for experience.

The criterion of relevance means that a model should be related to the specific conditions of the context that it seeks to address and that it does so in terms which are intelligible in that context.

The criterion of comprehensiveness means that a model is required to aid the paradigm to which it belongs in interpreting and correlating as much of human

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227 *Metaphorical Theology* p36

experience as possible. Here the fact of 'anomalies' is significant and it is this which is of vital importance to McFague. Comprehensiveness requires that models address anomalies. An anomaly is any aspect of experience that is either absent from an interpretative scheme or is contradictory to it. For McFague, particularly important examples of anomalies (in relation to the dominant Christian paradigm) are the absence of the distinctive experiences of women and the 'contra-factor'[228] of the human nuclear capability to destroy life on earth (in contradiction to any model of God which sees only God as having ultimate power over the destiny of the earth).

A model is therefore given support if it is able to better relate the root-metaphor to the previously absent experience or the relevant contra-factor.

The criterion of fruitfulness means extending this ability to relate root-metaphor and anomalies to the more general case. A fruitful model is one that is capable of generating new insight over a period of time and across a range of experiences. A model is fruitful if it is able to be consistently useful in interpreting a range of diverse experiences which are either new or previously unconsidered or have proved problematic for previous models. It is most likely to be able to do this if it has an extensive and well defined structure in the sense discussed earlier with regard to good metaphors.

So far, we have seen that the following criteria may be used for the assessment of models:

A model may be considered an adequate part of a metaphorical theology if it is (in comparison to other models):

a) more coherent with the root-metaphor of its paradigm in that it is

i) well located relative to the root-metaphor,

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228 *Metaphorical Theology* p140 using a term borrowed from Jerry Gill in Ian Ramsey *To Speak Responsibly of God* London: George Allen & Unwin 1976 p131

ii) mindful of the basic images of the paradigm

iii) able to embody the tension inherent in the tradition without fragmentation

iv) well worked through in its connections to and implications for other models in the paradigm.

b) a better translation of the root-metaphor in that:

i) it is relevant to its context

ii) it aids the comprehensiveness of the paradigm

iii) it is better able to interpret anomalies

iv) it is fruitful for the continued interpretation of experience.

c) more helpful in promoting the fulfilment of all life.

The following passage, taken from *Models of God* illustrates our summary of McFague's points well:

'What prevents models of God, such as mother, lover, and friend, from being arbitrary? The most direct answer to that question is that they are not arbitrary, because, along with the father model, they are the deepest and most important expressions of love known to us, rather than because they are necessarily descriptive of the nature of God. But, pressing the ontological issue more sharply, are these loves descriptive of God as God is? ... it seems to me that to be a Christian is to be persuaded that there is a personal, gracious power who is on the side of life and its fulfillment, a power whom the paradigmatic figure Jesus of Nazareth expresses and illuminates; but when we try to say something more, we turn, necessarily, to the 'loves' we know ...That is to say, I do not know whether God (the inner being of God) can be described by the models of mother, lover, and friend; but the only kind of love I know anything about and that matters most to

me is the love of these basic relationships, so I have to use these loves to speak of divine love. The metaphors do not illustrate a concept of love (that is basically an allegorical direction); rather, they project a possibility: that God's love can be seen through the screen of these human loves. Metaphors 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): the most that one can say of any construct, then, is that it is illuminating, fruitful, can deal with anomalies, has relatively comprehensive explanatory ability, is relatively consistent, has humane consequences, etc. This is largely a functional, pragmatic view of truth, with heavy stress on what the implications of certain ways of seeing things (certain models) are for the quality of both human and non-human life (since the initial assumption or belief is that God is on the side of life and its fulfillment). This is obviously something of a circular argument, but I do not see any way out of it: I do not know who God is, but I find some models better than others for constructing an image of God commensurate with my trust in a God as on the side of life. God is and remains a mystery.' [229]

This passage, however, also illustrates the apparent confusion within McFague's work over the ontological claims made by her models; an issue that we examined earlier. There we showed that, contrary to McFague's own concerns in this passage, the 'circularity' of her argument is both acceptable and is what enables her to make ontological claims that are better grounded than she herself seems to appreciate, at least here. However in order to make these claims, the third criterion, the ability to promote the fulfilment of all life, becomes very important, for it is this criterion that supports the ontological claim of the model within McFague's web of beliefs.

The passage itself also indicates the importance of this pragmatic approach for

229 *Models of God* p192 n37

McFague. The various criteria just discussed only have relevance for McFague, and can only be used for the assessment and justification of McFague's models, in as much as meeting these criteria may to said to assist the model in promoting a vision of life and fulfilment for all and enabling action towards the realisation of this vision.

Now this is helpful in meeting the objection of Huiser who identifies a problem with such criteria saying

'The problem concerning these criteria in the case of religion, is that they are notoriously vague and difficult to apply'. [230],

In McFague's case, it is clear that the function that her models are, and are not, designed to achieve, and her particular ethical vision, at least provide a context in which the criteria may be applied since they provide a stated purpose and aim against which the models may be judged. We will examine her particular ethical vision itself in detail shortly. Still, it remains to be seen in the following chapters whether these criteria are adequate for her purposes and the question remains, how exactly does one assess the ethical ramifications of a particular model?

McFague's criteria for assessment also appear to partly address another issue – the question of the relationship between McFague's models and the Christian tradition. These criteria are also noteworthy for their originality. McFague's more general methodological remarks regarding comprehensiveness, fertility, scope etc. are common in theologies influenced by the science-religion conversation and especially in work following Barbour. However the addition of formal criteria to relate novel models to the Christian tradition is a welcome and more unusual step (many theologians either advocating the developing of new models in relative isolation from the tradition or

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230 By 'criteria' Huiser is referring to the general criteria of 'agreement with data, coherence with other beliefs, a wide scope and fertility' Pieter J Huiser *Models, Theories and Narratives:Conditions for the Justification of a Religious Realism* Amsterdam:Thesis Publishers 1998 p162

assuming a concentration on defending the rationality of traditional models).[231]

Whether these criteria for assessment with regard to the tradition, depending as they do on judgements concerning the translation of root-metaphors are sufficiently robust to locate new models within the tradition satisfactorily is another question. Two things arise from this attempt by McFague to provide such criteria though. Firstly that this is again an example of continuities with the tradition being conceptual and secondly the fact that such an assessment process in relation to the tradition is felt to be necessary underlines the importance that McFague does place upon speaking as a specifically and authentically *Christian* theologian.

Having identified some of the formal criteria that a model should meet in general, we now turn to look at the significance that the particular features of a given context have for the assessment of models. It is clear that any translation of a root-metaphor, and any judgement regarding ethical performance, can only be assessed in a given context and so the nature of the particular context addressed by McFague's work is of great importance.

3.5 Speaking to a context – the loving eye vs the arrogant eye.

In our preceding discussions in this chapter and chapters 1 and 2 we have identified a number of features which are to be desired if a model is to be considered valid and useful in metaphorical theology. Here these features will be recalled and their implications for McFague's practice of theology in her context will be drawn out. This

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231 See for example the list of standard assessment criteria provided by Anna Case-Winters in 'The Question of God in an Age of Science: Constructions of Reality and Ultimate Reality' *Zygon* 32 no.3 1997 pp351-375. This list is comprehensive with regard to criteria for general rationality, but criteria for assessing the status of a model in relation to the tradition are entirely absent.

context is primarily made up of North American, middle-class Christians living in the period 1980-2001 (a group she herself addresses explicitly, particularly in *Life Abundant,* which includes an appendix entitled 'A manifesto to North American Middle Class Christians).[232]

Contexts, of course, change with time, as do our understandings and interpretations of them. This is the thrust of much of McFague's argument and the most basic justification of her project. It is little surprise then that in an era of substantial cultural change, her reading of her context changes in emphasis over time, even in works written over the course of 10 years, This should be borne in mind as her models are assessed and when 'McFague's context' is referred to below. In her earlier works, including the writing of *Speaking in Parables* and *Metaphorical Theology* (1982) and associated articles, her context is most defined by the perceived exclusion of the female voice and experience from theology. *Models of God* (1988) carries this forward but is also driven by a concern with the nuclear threat to life on earth. *The Body of God* (1993) and *Super, Natural Christians* (1997) are written to address a context of environmental exploitation and threat more generally and *Life Abundant* (2001) is concerned with the range of human identity and diversity of human experience, especially where this differs from the 'hegemonic, idealised norm'[233] as well as all the preceding factors. This extension of concern from the personal to the universal is, McFague argues, a quite natural progression made by Christianity as a whole over time and by many theologians over their careers. It is also based on a consistent hermeneutic, namely a criticism of dualism and hierarchy and an interpretation of the world based on continuums of unity which are mindful of genuine difference.

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232 *Life Abundant* p205ff This article also appeared as 'A Manifesto to North American Middle-Class Christians,' *Encyclopedia of Religion and Nature*, Jeffrey Kaplan and Bron Taylor (eds.) London: Continuum International Publishing Group 2003.
233 By which she means the idealised man of Leonardo DaVinci, the US Declaration of Independence and contemporary advertising. See *Life Abundant* p47

McFague's models of God were introduced in her published work over the period 1982-1988, thus the extension of 'context' after 1988 to include other 'anomalies' not previously considered provides an opportunity for the testing of the 'fruitfulness' of these models. Meanwhile, the most basic criteria her models will need to meet, on her own claims, is that they should be on the side of *abundance* and *inclusivity* whilst avoiding *idolatry* and *irrelevance*.

Idolatry is perhaps the easiest avoided, given the assumptions about metaphor which underlie all her models. A charge of idolatry could only be truly levied if one model or set of models was allowed to dominate to the exclusion of all others. A model is also aided in meeting this criteria by being mindful of the 'tensive' properties of metaphor (see chapter 1.4). There should be sufficient distance between the model proposed for God and generally held ideas of God in her context for the model to generate a sufficient 'shock' of recognition and difference for the metaphorical tension to be established and also for new insight to be gained. As she says

'Does [a model] have both marks of a good metaphor, both the *shock* and the *recognition*? Do these metaphors both disorient and reorient? Do they evoke a response of hearing something new and something interesting?'[234]

The condition of 'relevance' is also related to some of the properties of metaphor. 'Familiarity' and 'structure' are both important here. A model needs to use imagery that is accessible to her context; that is imagery that most within her context have a good working knowledge of, and particularly those in that context who are excluded by other models. Further the extent and complexity of this knowledge needs to be relatively high if the model is to prove fruitful and aid comprehensiveness. This combination of structure and accessibility is vital if the model is to function with the same transformative possibilities as a parable, being able to necessitate, facilitate and reward

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234 *Models of God* p63

further reflection beyond the immediate recognition of hidden similarity.

This imagery should also bear emotive content as well as informational content. This aids the transformational power of the model and also assists in connecting it to the primary religious act of worship.

McFague argues that models should also be chosen bearing in mind that our understanding of both domains is altered by the creation of the metaphor. Thus the image or concept chosen as the basis of the model should bear the resultant 'divinisation' (as she calls it) without this being contradictory to the goal of the model.

This last criterion, she contends, affords an opportunity for inclusivity, since the content of the model may be such that what is 'divinised' by it is the identity or experience of a group commonly excluded from the sphere of religious reflection (or from another form of participation in society) in the given context. For example she contends that there would be a direct benefit in the way in which women are perceived if they are used to model God through metaphors such as 'God as Mother'.

However this understanding of metaphor is questionable and the preceding analysis has instead preferred an account which sees new metaphors as affecting cultural change much more slowly and indirectly. This is not, though, to rule out such change entirely; as Glucksberg and Keysar have shown, certain changes in understanding have, for example, occurred through metaphorical usage extending common linguistic categories such as the addition of 'computer' to the category 'machine' which has led to a significant change in our understanding of the category 'machine' as well as understandings of those things metaphorically understood as machines (e.g. the human brain).[235]

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235 Sam Glucksberg and Boaz Keysar 'How metaphors work' in Andrew Ortony (ed) *Metaphor and Thought* 2nd edition Cambridge: CUP 1993 pp401-424 p414 Glucksberg and Keysar argue that metaphors operate by category extension. That is that the target term is added to the category of objects denoted by the source term, thus changing the nature of that category to some degree. It is significant that the categorisation process occurs this way round. Consider the case of God the Mother. Here God is added to the category of 'Things that are Mothers'. It is not the case that

Therefore what is essentially at issue is the way in which a change in language can accompany and interact with a change in understanding in society (such as a change in the way women are viewed). McFague contends that this is a question of how things are *seen* and connects this to her understanding of metaphor as seeing as. Our reservations centre on our questioning of the ability of novel metaphorical God-talk to directly affect this renewed vision. This springs from our rejection of the interaction theory of metaphor in the light of later work in cognitive linguistics. It is not the intention here of course to suggest that the role of women in society or any other issue cannot be seen differently. Rather it is to argue that this renewed vision needs to be a partner project relating to the construction of models of God. It is we suggest a part of that construction process that needs to be deliberately and mindfully pursued, rather than being an automatic consequence of the process itself, with further efforts not required.

As McFague's work progresses, we do indeed find her pursuing just such a partner project, and she no longer appears to be simply assuming that her models of God will themselves create the renewed vision she seeks unassisted. This appears to be an unexpressed acknowledgement that the points we have made here are correct, since they explain a discernible shift in her work (that McFague does not herself explain or seem to acknowledge). The seeds of this change may perhaps be discerned in the following quotation from *Metaphorical Theology* in which McFague implies that patriarchy is not simply the product of the use of masculine imagery in God-talk and that a wider cultural context needs to be taken into account :

'It is…a mistake to focus on God the father as a limited model for talk about

Mothers are added to the category 'Things that are Gods'. This approach would account for the slower process of 'divinisation' of the sources of metaphors for God. On this understanding, such divinisation only occurs once the usage of the newly added term becomes such that it serves as an instantiating example of the category. (In McFague's schema it becomes an 'image') This may have arguably occurred with the term 'father', a category within which 'God' may provide the intention – the category's conceptual basis.

God; rather it is partriarchalism – the expanded, intransigent model radical feminists take to be the root-metaphor of Christianity – that is at issue. [236]

But the process really begins in earnest in *The Body of God,* where she moves away from presenting individual models of God and towards a more detailed analysis of the world and society and the interaction between prevailing understandings of these and her new models of God.

This later, additional focus on examining the way in which the world (as well as just God) is currently understood in her context finds its most eloquent expression in *Super, Natural Christians* in which McFague uses Marylin Frye's distinction between the 'loving eye' and the 'arrogant eye'.[237] These, she says, are basic modes of interpreting experience in accordance with foundational assumptions about what is viewed and who is viewing it.

'Arrogance' in this case means to see the observed as object and to measure its value in relation to its usefulness for the self. By contrast 'love' is 'the extremely difficult realization that something other than oneself is real.'[238] The Loving Eye assumes that value is intrinsic, based upon the nature of what is seen in and to itself rather than in its usefulness to the observer. To see lovingly is then to grant the seen the status of subject, to therefore see it as in some ways 'like' the observer and to grant it a complexity and richness beyond simply its function.

> 'A very different kind of vision from the so-called God's eye view is suggested by the phrase 'locking eyes.' Imagine shifting your vision from the picture of the whole earth to the eyes of another person—not to look at him or her, but into their eyes. Sight is not necessarily the eye of the mind; it can also be the eye of the

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236 *Metaphorical Theology* p 147-148
237 Marilyn Frye 'In and out of harm's way: Arrogance and Love' *The politics of reality: Essays in Feminist Theory* Trumansburg NY: Crossing Press, 1983 pp53-83
238 Iris Murdoch (unreferenced quotation) cited in McFague 'How should we love nature?' *Earthlight* Spring 1997. The copyright for this article is held by Fortress Press.

body—in fact, it rightly and properly is. When we lock eyes something happens: we become two subjects, not subject and object. Locking eyes is perhaps the ultimate subject-subject experience: it is what lovers do and what nursing mothers do with their babies. A version of it can happen with other animals. especially the eerie experience of locking eyes with a lowland gorilla or chimpanzee at a zoo. It is possible even with a tree or plant. The loving eye, paying attention to another (another person, animal, tree, plant) is not staring; it is, in Martin Buber's suggestive phrase, relating to the other more like a Thou than an It. There is nothing sentimental or weak-minded about this: it is simply a refusal to assume that subjectivity is my sole prerogative.'[239]

In this section, then, we have identified some of the primary features of McFague's context and we have argued that the properties of metaphors that she insists on, and as they were outlined earlier, need to be taken into account if a model of God, understood as a translation of a Christian root-metaphor, is to be adequate to its task within its context.

We conclude with a passage from *Models of God,* which sums up well McFague's position on the justification of models and also illustrates the importance of context in that process.

'... our constructions are intended to be better than the ones they refute or replace. This is, of course, a difficult issue, because if one admits that all are readings, with the new replacing the old, on what basis can some be better than others? They certainly cannot claim to be better absolutely, or from all perspectives, or for all time. At the most, they might be better relatively (to other constructions) from a particular perspective, and for a particular time. And this is the claim I would make: that a construction of the Christian faith in the context of a holistic vision

239 Sallie McFague *Super, Natural Christians* London: SCM Press 1997 p25

and the nuclear threat is from our particular perspective and for our particular time relatively better than constructions that ignore these issues. It is relatively better in part because of what Christian faith at base is about. The claim is that to understand the Christian faith in terms of the holistic vision and in response to the nuclear threat is in continuity with the basic Christian paradigm as well as being an appropriate construction of that faith for our time. I will attempt to make that case, but it cannot be proved. As with any construction, the most one can do is to 'live within' it, testing it for its disclosive power, its ability to address and cope with the most pressing issues of one's day, its comprehensiveness and coherence, its potential for dealing with anomalies, and so forth.'[240]

3.6 God the Father.

Earlier we suggested that if we are to establish the consistency of McFague's work, it needs to be determined whether McFague's assessment of models of God could potentially be different in her theory and in her practice, in other words whether she actually assesses models in the same way that her discussion of theological method suggests that one should. Further it needs to be investigated whether the criteria she uses to assess her own models are the same as those used to assess other models, such as the ones she identifies as belonging to the Christian tradition.

In the passage above, McFague says 'our constructions are intended to be better than the ones they refute or replace.' This implies a criticism of existing models and this in turn implies that she has conducted a practical assessment of those models. It is to this that we now turn. In this section we will look at a model that McFague regards as

[240]*Models of God* p26-27

central to the tradition, namely the model of 'God the Father', and McFague's criticism of it. We will see that McFague does indeed employ the criteria listed above in critiquing this model. We will also show, though, that to 'refute or replace' existing models does not completely characterise her approach to traditional models and so we will return to the important distinction McFague makes between 'reforming' and 'revolutionary' stances.

It is important to note from the beginning that McFague does not wish to dismiss the model of God as Father out of hand. In a few passages she praises the model for meeting many of the criteria we set out above, particularly its explanatory scope and systematising potential. It is clear that she does not find this model to be incoherent and the enduring nature of the model is testimony to its relative comprehensiveness. In fact it is not the model itself, as a model, that McFague finds problematic but rather two related aspects of its use.

McFague can be seen to show that the 'father' model is relatively comprehensive, that is:

'It suggests a comprehensive, ordering structure with impressive interpretive potential. As a rich model with many associated commonplaces as well as a host of supporting metaphors, an entire theology can be worked out from this model. Thus, if God is understood on the model of 'father', human beings are understood as 'children,' sin is rebellion against the 'father,' redemption is sacrifice by the 'elder son' on behalf of the 'brothers and sisters' for the guilt against the 'father' and so on.'[241]

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241 See *Metaphorical Theology* p23. See also Chapter 5 which is devoted to this question and is McFague's main treatment

Consequently, she argues, the model has become dominant within commonly held theories of Christian doctrine. This is not in itself a bad thing. This interpretive process is one that McFague advocates herself. However if this process becomes over-extended so that a model becomes *hegemonic*, i.e. it becomes dominant to the point where it excludes other models in principle, it has become, for McFague, an idol[242]. This has two consequences which McFague finds undesirable.

Firstly she argues that it may result in the deification of the source domain of the model ('father') within a community especially if that community holds the model to be the only valid way of talking of God[243]. (However note that we have already expressed caution about this finding by rejecting the interactionist theory of metaphor.)

Secondly, because 'Father' is a model and therefore partial, McFague argues that it follows that its use screens off other insights that would be gained from using other models.[244] Indeed when putting forward her own models, it is significant that McFague spends little time critiquing the models she seeks to replace or supplement in and of themselves. Rather she is concerned to compare the implications of each set of models for our understanding of some aspect of life or conduct. For example she is ultimately more interested in whether sin should be seen as rebellion (against the Father) or as a failure to affirm the existence, and seek the flourishing, of all (the Mother's children), than whether God is best modelled as 'Father' or 'Mother' in the abstract. This consequence of McFague's focus on lived experience and ethical praxis rather than metaphysical speculation or systematics again highlights the fact that for her the third of our major criteria above ('more helpful in promoting the fulfilment of all life') is the most important. This is not to say that McFague is purely a theological pragmatist. As we have seen, there are other criteria of rationality and coherence that she advances as

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242 See for example *Metaphorical Theology* pp 8, 21, 29 and especially 145
243 *Ibid.* p147
244 *Ibid.* p115

well as pragmatic concerns. However, all other things being equal, it is pragmatic criteria that are decisive in her account.

This problem of *all* models, that they are partial and therefore lack or even exclude other potential insights, is intensified both by the hegemony of 'Father' but also most crucially by the model's *gendered* nature. This is not only due to the fact that it images God after slightly less than half of the (human) population (a criticism that implies that the model can be found lacking in the categories of relevance, its ability to deal with anomalies and to produce continued fruitful insights), it is also a function of the history of the model within patriarchal systems and history.

Two points need to be made here. The first is to repeat the observation with which we began section 3.4, that models cannot be tested individually but only as part of networks. This is even more so in the case of a relatively comprehensive key model, especially one with as long a history of interpretation as God as Father. In reality it is this *network* of the models of 'God as Father' surrounded by various extensions, interpretations and applications and its patriarchal context and history that McFague is assessing, rather than the model itself in its original formulation. To repeat more fully the quotation already cited earlier:

> 'It is therefore a mistake to focus on God the father as a limited model for talk about God; rather it is patriarchalism – the expanded, intransigent model radical feminists take to be the root-metaphor of Christianity - ... This root-metaphor refers to 'the whole complex of sentiments, the patterns of cognition and behavior, and the assumptions about human nature and the nature of the cosmos that have grown out of a culture in which men have dominated women.' At the heart of patriarchalism as root-metaphor is a subject-object split in which man is envisioned over against God and vice versa.'[245]

245*Metaphorical Theology p*p147-8 quoting Sheila D Collins *A Different Heaven and Earth: A Feminist*

The second point is that McFague regards 'Father' as a model coined by Jesus[246], an important consideration given the Christocentric origins of her theology. Therefore McFague stops short of rejecting the model entirely. However her disagreement with the model is not in the fact of its existence or in its use as she sees Jesus using it (in her reading, Jesus used the model in ways that challenged the patriarchy, hierarchy and dualisms of his day[247]). Rather she is concerned, as we just saw, with the way in which the model has been used when adopted as the basis for a patriarchal theology and combined with patriarchal world views. The extent to which this has happened means that for McFague it is not simply the case that the model can be rehabilitated by returning to Jesus' destabilising, 'parabolic' use of the term, although she does argue that this rehabilitation can occur.

Thus we can see that McFague is neither advocating a 'recovery' approach to traditional models, trying to restore an 'original meaning' distorted over time, but nor is she arguing for the total rejection of such models either. Instead she feels that the solution is to underscore its status *as a model and one model only* among the 'many names' of God by using other complementary models[248].

Her models are intended to

'tak[e] the place, as it were, of the most ancient and hallowed names of the Trinitarian God – Father, Son and Holy Spirit. It was not a coincidence but a deliberate attempt to unseat those names as descriptions of God which will allow no supplements or alternatives.'[249]

A deliberate attempt, then, but nevertheless one in a limited sense. These names are unseated precisely (and only) as 'names' and 'descriptions' of God, not as potential

Perspective on Religion Valley Forge, Pa.:Judson Press 1974
246 *Ibid.* p170
247 *Ibid.* p151
248 *Ibid.* p21
249 *Models of God* p182

models of God in relationship to all that is. These terms may still be used (with the understanding that they are not 'divine names') so long as they are 'reoriented' within a new scheme which includes new models. In these way, McFague holds, traditional models can still be fruitful ones.[250]

This makes it clear that McFague, while putting forward radical and far-reaching novel ideas locates herself as a *'reformer'* in relation to the Christian tradition rather than a *'revolutionary'* who seeks to move beyond and replace it[251]. In fact she is explicit on this point, contrasting herself with other feminist colleagues such as Naomi Goldenberg, Carol Christ, and Mary Daly. McFague says

'Can an immanental, exclusively feminist perspective be absorbed into the Christian paradigm? It is doubtful, in my opinion, that it can be, nor is revolutionary feminist theology interested in making it commensurate with the tradition.'[252]

However,

'Reformers believe that the root-metaphor of Christianity is human liberation, not patriarchy, and that liberation for women can occur within the Christian paradigm.'[253]

and,

'As a feminist reformer, I believe that we must start with …the Gospel for all peoples.'[254]

The key distinction that she makes is one of paradigm and consequently root-

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250 McFague and Soskice both pick up on Ricoeur's article 'Fatherhood: From Phantasm to Symbol' and Soskice in particular shows how the image of Father is more fluid in scripture and tradition than may be commonly realised and hence that it is open to a constructive re-evaluation. Overall, because Soskice follows Ricoeur's emphasis on exegesis more closely than McFague, her understanding of the ambiguity of the biblical Fatherhood of God is more nuanced. See Janet Martin Soskice 'Can a Feminist call God Father?' in Kimel Jr (ed.) *op. cit.* pp81-94
251 For McFague's full discussion of this distinction, see *Metaphorical Theology*, Chapter 5, subsections entitled 'Revolutionary Feminist Theology: A New Paradigm and a New Model' p151ff and 'Reformist Feminist Theology: The Search for New Models' p164ff
252 *Metaphorical Theology* pp155-156
253 *Ibid.* p162
254 *Ibid.* p163

metaphor. Revolutionary approaches, as she defines them, are those that not only critique and find wanting particular key models but also reject the paradigm's underpinning root-metaphor. Reformers, such as McFague herself, she argues, may reject or seek to supplement certain key models but retain the underlying root-metaphor of Christianity. It is this prioritising of the root-metaphor over certain key models including 'God the Father' which makes McFague both radical and reforming, but not in her own assessment, revolutionary.

A number of scholars however would disagree with McFague's assessment of the importance of the Father model within Christianity. For many, the Trinity is foundational to the Christian narrative. Torrance makes an important distinction

'We cannot forget that the Trinitarian formula — Father, Son, and Holy Spirit — gives expression to God s personal self-revelation, one in which what he is toward us in the persons of the Father, the Son. and the Holy Spirit, he is inherently and eternally in himself, three persons in one divine being. Any other formula such as 'Creator. Redeemer, and Sustainer,' while a true expression as far as it goes of God's external acts toward us in creating, redeeming, and sustaining us, does not express what God eternally and personally is in himself— three persons who mutually contain and indwell one another — but only something of what he is toward us...the formula 'Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer' by itself does no more than give expression to a unitarian conception of God characterized by three different names, modes, or operations. Moreover, the impossibility of 'Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer' being a substitute for 'Father, Son, and Holy Spirit' is apparent from the fact that there can be no coinherent or perichoretic relation between Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer, for that would imply that God creates, redeems, and sustains himself! The effect of that would be to identify God's

functional relations toward the creaturely world with the intrinsic interrelations of his divine being, which would amount to a very gross form of anthropomorphism.' [255]

Now McFague would doubtless disagree that such talk of inner knowledge of the being of God was possible or appropriate. However we should note that the loss of the Trinity as a model of God significantly reduces the scope of the Christian tradition taken as a whole. We should therefore at least ask whether the rejection of the Trinity is required by her method. Now McFague argues that models are partial. What seems to be lacking in her account is a treatment of how models supplement one another and can be suitable for different tasks. The admission that God can be given many names and modelled in many ways *vis a vis* God's relationship to us and the world does not necessarily imply that God may not be modelled in a Trinitarian fashion in relation to the Christ-event for example. McFague argues that the Trinitarian formula should be unseated *as one that allows no alternatives.* But this does not imply that it must be rejected in all contexts or for all purposes. Many readings of McFague appear to miss this point, as indeed it would seem that McFague does herself when she insists she is *always and only* a monist.[256] Crucially, McFague's models of Mother, Lover and Friend may be designed to unseat Father, Son and Holy Spirit from a certain status and role but they should not be thought of as a replacement or translation of these names. Not only does McFague's view of the unsubstitutability of metaphors make such a crude replacement impossible, it is also clear that the 'tasks' of both formulae are different.

Once again, we have raised a question over McFague's relationship with the tradition and her assessment of its performance. This is of particular interest to our

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255 Torrance *op. cit*. p141

256 *Models of God* p92 Compare this to Soskice in Kimel *op. cit.* p92f who follows broadly Moltmann in differentiating between God's monotheistic Fatherhood in relation to patriarchal understandings of nation and family and God's Trinitarian Fatherhood of Jesus.

enquiry here and concern is heightened by her stated desire to be reforming within the tradition. This may call into question the coherence of her project. We must ask to what degree it is possible for her to retain this reforming role while rejecting so much of the content of the tradition she seeks to reform.

3.7 The Aims of Metaphorical Theology – Heuristic, Christian Metaphorical Theology.

It is only possible, of course, to assess McFague's models of God if we know for what purpose we are assessing them; what tasks they are being required to fulfil and in what context?

Most basically for McFague the task is the creation of models which assist the fulfilment of all life as a result of and response to experiences of the liberating love of God.

It is also clear that McFague's theology is intended for an audience shaped by the Christian tradition and participating in that tradition but that she also wishes to effect change within that tradition. While she is keen to make far-reaching changes to much of that tradition's formulation, doctrine and imagery, she wishes to do so whilst remaining inside it, unlike many of her feminist colleagues. Her basic goal, her fundamental theological task, is to construct Christian models of God that assist the Christian community in bringing about a vision of the fulfilment of all life. This means that however much pragmatic criteria of assessing models (i.e. assessing them for their ethical connotations) are brought to the fore, and however strong the desire to create new, imaginative and fruitful models, the requirement for these models to be demonstrably Christian models remains. This also in turn raises the crucial question:

what makes a metaphorical theology Christian? (as opposed to making a metaphorical theology ethically consistent with some readings of Christianity).   Therefore we should now bring together the various points discussed with regard to McFague's relationship with the Christian tradition to see to what extent this crucial question can be answered.

We have seen that McFague acknowledges that the unsubstitutionary nature of metaphors means that changing models means changing the meaning being expressed because no two models carry exactly the same meaning. It is therefore clear that McFague is not simply attempting an update of language – a translation of old meanings into new language that preserves all the features of the old, simply restating them in new terms. Instead we have found her to be explicit that she is attempting to express new meanings and address new concerns, while remaining in continuity with the Christian tradition.

She wishes to locate herself within the Christian tradition, reforming it, rather than overthrowing it by proposing new models that are so at variance with the 'root-metaphors' of that tradition that they would necessitate a paradigm change resulting in a new religion.

Her process of reformation involves the creation of new models to address the concerns of our time in the language of our time. These new models are to have a continuity with the Christian tradition which may be judged by a Christian community. We have identified this continuity as being at the conceptual level, the level of what she calls 'material norms' which, we have argued, should be seen as be concepts which are derived from a particular reading of Jesus which draws upon Liberation Theology.

However her reformation is not only constructive, it is not an attempt to simply place new models alongside existing ones as supplemental or complementary formulations. Her theology is also deconstructive. She is critical of existing models,

and especially those that use what she judges to be patriarchal images and understandings. She criticises their 'hegemony' in the tradition, by which she means their perceived special status as direct descriptions of God which she argues has meant that new models have been excluded from consideration.

She is also critical of the content of some of these traditional models, finding them irrelevant to 'our time' in the sense that they neither address what she views as the most pressing issues of her context – nuclear weapons and environmental threat – nor (in some cases) draw upon contemporary imagery.

We have seen that McFague also equivocates over the future status of traditional God-talk in the light of her project; the question arising is, are they to be replaced or merely supplemented? If we are to be able to make our own judgements on this question, to help resolve the uncertainty on McFague's relationship to the tradition but in her own work and in the responses of her critics, then it must be noted that a number of relationships between new and existing traditional models are logically possible.

We must initially ask whether the new models could simply sit alongside the old, extending the explanatory scope of Christianity as a whole, allowing it to address new subjects and issues. However we have already seen how models may conflict with each other in their implications and that if they do so in a way that indicates contradictory paradigms, then this is a tension that needs to be addressed for Christianity to remain a coherent web of beliefs.

If the tension between models needs to be resolved there are three ways of doing this:

Firstly the new models could be held accountable to the old, with new models only being accepted if they can be harmonised with traditional formulations.

Secondly, the relationship could be reverse, with the new models standing in

judgement upon the old.

However both of these would not find favour within McFague's stated methodology because the first is simply the hegemony of traditional models to which she objects so strongly, and the second would be to replace it with a new hegemony. Neither has a basis in her methodology. This is not to say that there is nothing to be gained by harmonising or contrasting models with each other. This may well be a productive exercise for theology. Rather it is to say that one model or set of models cannot be used to judge another if we are to be consistent with McFague's methodology and with the findings here, in neither of which is the model the appropriate device for making this judgement.

Thirdly then some form of external criterion must be used to judge both new and traditional models. For McFague, this criterion is provided by the material norms she draws from the tradition. But what at first seems to be a clear solution, turns out on further analysis to have a significant problem.

The material norms she identifies are not, as we have seen, for McFague a 'timeless essence of Christianity'. Rather these norms have been constructed and approved by her in response to the contemporary challenges she wishes to address. These material norms are those that are relevant to 'our time' in the sense that they are relevant to the particular and specific issues of our time that McFague wishes to address.

What McFague does not address is whether these specific issues of our time are the only issues of our time. If they are not, then the question arises as to whether or not these material norms, and the models based on them, are sufficient to address all the issues of our time.

We also need to ask whether the issues of our time have any continuity with the issues of past times. Whether for example existential themes of personal alienation, or questions of individual guilt and forgiveness, or the enduring existence of the individual beyond death have ceased to have any meaning for contemporary life?

If it is the case that human experience in our time shares many common features with human experience in times past, then this suggests that models from the past may have enduring relevance and may be able to address issues that models limited by a focus in their construction on addressing specific and limited contemporary issues cannot address. It may also be the case that models that previous Christian communities have adjudged to be useful in addressing some aspects of their experience, might, through their reinterpretation also be able to contribute to the tackling of new contemporary issues.

Now, it is clear that despite the ambitious and commendably wide range of issues McFague applies her models to (which we shall set out in the following two chapters) she is not attempting a complete systematic theology that addresses the entirety of the human condition. We would not expect her to undertake such an impossible endeavour of course. But it therefore follows logically that there are issues that she does not address which traditional models may address.

Further it is logically unlikely that a set of material norms derived to address specific contemporary issues could be sufficient to give rise to models that address all contemporary issues, including those issues which have substantial continuities with the concerns of past generations. This would imply that a broader set of material norms could, in theory, be derived in order to address a broader range of issues and that a place could be found for traditional models to make a continuing contribution.

In short, there is a danger that by trying to allow the gospel to 'speak to our time' McFague will unintentionally impose a limit upon it that will only allow it to speak to specific issues.

Therefore our discussion here suggests that it is necessary to examine how McFague's proposed new models relate to traditional models. This is not in order that traditional models may stand in judgement on them. It is in order to establish whether:
 a) the new models are being allowed to establish a hegemony of their own and replace traditional models in such a way as to limit Christian discourse to only the issues that McFague wishes to address
b) she is attempting any constructive relationship between new models and traditional ones that would preserve the ability of the tradition to address other concerns
c) her method leaves space for the reinterpretation of traditional models to make a positive contribution to the issues the new models are themselves addressing. (This would support her avowed methodological aim to be reforming rather than revolutionary.

If McFague's account of Christianity as a historical continuity carried by a community is preferred, similar, though less precisely defined questions apply, concerning exactly to what extent and how quickly a community can embrace substantial change to this tradition while still feeling itself to remain within that historical continuity. Further it could also be asked whether continuity at the level of concepts is sufficient to maintain the continuity without retaining in some form any of the community's traditionally held models.

Finally it should be remembered that the aims of metaphorical theology, while on one level radical, are also modest in what they are actually trying to claim about 'matters of fact'. McFague cautions:

'The alternative models ... are not a trinity in the old sense of hallowed names for God intended to discourage experimentation and ensure 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. And that is all that is being advanced inasmuch as metaphorical, heuristic theology says much but means little. It is mostly fiction, mainly fleshing out a few basic metaphors in as deep and comprehensive a fashion as possible to see what their implications might be. Perhaps the imaginative picture that has been painted provides a habitable house in which to live for a while, with doors open and windows ajar and with the promise that additions and renovations are desired and needed.'[257]

The concern here is essentially that this temporary construction of a 'habitable house' does not so clear the building site of resources and existing structures that it become difficult to build any different houses within it in the future.

3.8 Conclusions.

While subsequent research and the responses of McFague's critics have again suggested small modifications which might strengthen McFague's case and ability to achieve her aims, the analysis of her theoretical statements and theological methods in this chapter has further supported the judgement of the previous ones. It may be provisionally concluded at this stage that, even bearing in mind the challenges raised,

257 *Models of God* p xi

McFague's theoretical work is itself consistent, coherent and still able to make a relevant contemporary contribution. What remains to be seen in the following chapters is whether or not this judgement can be extended to McFague's models in practice and to the relationship between this practise and her theory. Therefore, over the course of this chapter, criteria have been derived for the assessment of models from within McFague's own work and these criteria will be used as the basis for evaluating her models over the next two chapters.

The following are initial criteria for a good image:

Familiarity

Structure

Accessibility

Emotive content

The following relate to the image's ability to become more formally a model within a Christian metaphorical theology:

(in comparison to other models):

a) more coherent with the root-metaphor of its paradigm in that it is

    i) well located relative to the root-metaphor,

    ii) mindful of the basic images of the paradigm

    iii) able to embody the tension inherent in the tradition

    iv) well worked through in its connections to and implications for other models
        in the paradigm.

b) a better translation of the root-metaphor in that:

    i) it is relevant to its context

    ii) it aids the comprehensiveness of the paradigm

iii) it is better able to interpret anomalies

iv) it is fruitful for the continued interpretation of experience.

c) more helpful in promoting the fulfilment of all life.

In all of this we have seen that successful models can be characterised as showing or assisting the use of the 'loving' rather than the 'arrogant' eye.

It has also been observed that McFague intends her models to be reforming and located within the Christian tradition and that the criteria relating to root-metaphors are intended to achieve this. However some doubts have been expressed about the ability of these criteria alone to indeed meet this condition fully. These doubts will now be more fully addressed in the following chapters.

Chapter 4 – Models of God in relationship

– Mother, Lover and Friend.

4.1 Introduction.

Having examined McFague's theoretical statements, it is now time to examine the outworking of this theory in practice. Are McFague's models of God themselves coherent and are they consistent with her theory and aims? Can they contribute, as she wishes, to reform of the Christian tradition today?

This chapter therefore looks at the models of God in relationship which McFague introduced in *Models of God* in 1987; the models of God as Mother, Lover and Friend. McFague presents her models in *Models of God* in a threefold movement, looking at first at the 'activity' of God under the model, then at the resultant account of 'love' suggested by the model and finally the 'ethic' that she argues results from these. The presentation which follows here broadly mirrors her own. Treating each of the three models of God as Mother, Lover and Friend in turn, the meaning of the model is outlined (going somewhat beyond 'activity' and including any qualifications McFague gives to them elsewhere in her work). This is followed by discussion of the accounts of love and ethic provided by the model. In these sections the concern is to present McFague's view. An assessment of her models then follows as they are evaluated in relation to the criteria derived in chapter 3 to assess how far McFague is remaining constant with her previous writing and declared aims. This is in turn followed by a review of critical responses to the model in the available literature. However there is an important and necessary limit set on these sections since they are concerned only with those responses that critique, as this chapter does, the ability of McFague's models to achieve her purposes and meet the criteria she sets out. They do not include for example parallel discussion of models of God as Mother, Lover or Friend in sources that are not in dialogue with McFague, for reasons set out in the Introduction.

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It is worth noting that most studies that critique McFague's models do so by means of criteria derived quite separately from McFague's own. Consequently, there are apparently very few attempts in the literature to engage with these models in McFague's own terms, either theoretically (as is done here) or empirically (as shall not be attempted here because of word constraints). By empirically is meant studies which attempt to assess in practice the ability of the models to meet their stated aims in the lives of worshippers or worshipping communities. As McFague says,

'A model of God is verified mainly by its consequences and this verification takes place within the community, the Church.'[258]

Studies of this type would be extremely useful in evaluating McFague but are noticeably, and perhaps surprisingly, rare given that *Models of God* has been widely read and engaged with for nearly twenty years, although a small number of studies of this type are examined below. This remains a potentially fruitful area of research for the future.

Finally, throughout it should be remembered that the partner and context of these models of God in relationship is another model in McFague, that of the world as God's body. That is, God is, in the first instance, mother, lover and friend to the 'world' (or universe) modelled metaphorically as God's own body, rather than mother, lover and friend of individual human beings or 'my mother, lover and friend' for example. The coherence and implications of this combination of models will be examined at the beginning of the next chapter where consideration is given to the model of the 'body of God'.

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258 Sallie McFague 'Models of God for an ecological, evolutionary era: God as Mother of the Universe' in Robert Russel et al (eds.) *Physics, Philosophy and Theology: A common quest for understanding* Rome: Liberia Editrice Vaticana 1988 p255

4.2 The meaning of God as Mother.

McFague's primary justification for using female imagery for God is the biblical concept of the 'image of God' in which human beings are created both male and female, while on the other hand there is what she perceives to be a relative lack of female imagery for God in the Christian scriptures and traditions. The use of female language by McFague, in partnership with, but also in contrast to, traditional male imagery therefore serves several functions. Firstly by imaging God in both male and female terms she wants to expose the metaphorical character of religious speaking since God is shown to be both like and unlike anything else we know. McFague argues:

> 'This crucial characteristic of metaphorical language about God is lost … when only one important personal relationship, that of father and child, is allowed to serve as a grid for speaking of the God-human relationship.'[259]

Secondly, although traditional language of God as Father is not intended to ascribe sexual characteristics to God, such language remains gendered and has sexual connotations. McFague sees the use of female imagery as offering both the realisation that Father language is not gender-neutral or non-sexual, and also the possibility of recovering a more positive attitude towards female sexuality than has historically been the case.

This said, McFague also feels that female imagery and especially imagery drawn from motherhood needs careful qualification. In particular she is keen to avoid inadvertently reinforcing existing hierarchical dualisms by deifying the stereotypically 'feminine'. Therefore:

> 'God should be imagined in female, not feminine, terms... the distinction between

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259 Sallie McFague 'God as Mother' in Judith Plaskow and Carol Christ (eds.) *Weaving the Visions: New Patterns in Feminist Spirituality* San Francisco: HarperCollins 1989 p139

'female' and 'feminine is important, for the first refers to gender while the second refers to qualities conventionally associated with women. The problem with introducing a feminine dimension of God is that it invariably ends with identifying as female those qualities that society has called feminine. Thus, the feminine side of God is taken to comprise the tender, nurturing, passive, healing aspects of divine activity, whereas those activities in which God creates, redeems, establishes peace, administers justice, and so on, are called masculine. Such a division, in extending to the godhead the stereotypes we create in human society, further crystallizes and sanctifies them.'[260]

Elsewhere she warns:

'We must not sentimentalise maternal imagery. We will not suppose that mothers are 'naturally' loving, comforting or self-sacrificing. Our society has a stake in making women think that they are biologically-programmed to be these things, when, in fact, a good case can be made that the so-called qualities or stereotypes of mothers are social constructions – women are not born, but become, mothers through education and imitation. Rather we will focus on the most basic things that females (as mothers) do among most, if not all the species and which human mothers do as well: give birth, feed and protect the young, want the young to flourish.'[261]

This distinction between 'female' and 'feminine' also avoids the stereotypical attribution of roles as well as characteristics, lest the same dualistic divisions be perpetuated with regard to roles and activities as well as characteristics and qualities. McFague also extends this distinction to the activity of giving birth itself, defending her use of the model 'mother' against the potential charge that it too stereotypes the female,

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260 *Ibid.* p140
261 Sallie McFague 'Mother God' *Concilium* 206 1989 p139

reducing her to motherhood only.

'Although mothering is a female activity, it is not feminine; that is to give birth to and to feed the young is simply what females do – some may do it in a so-called feminine fashion, and others may not.'[262]

In addition, McFague is concerned to stress that the choice of mother as her primary female image is not intended to suggest that women who are not mothers are any less women or any less fulfilled. Mothering, she argues, is an activity that in one sense all who seek the flourishing and fulfilment of others are involved in.[263] Also, since mothering is something that females *do* (as opposed to something that they of necessity *are*) she avoids the implication that mothering is the purpose of being female hence avoiding excluding women who are not mothers by the use of this model. She also recommends the use of other female imagery such as sister or midwife to avoid this potential problem.

Further, she is also clear that

'The intention is not to turn the tables and establish a new hierarchical dualism with a matriarchal model of God.'[264]

With this in mind there is a final and perhaps most serious qualification to be added. McFague says:

'We need to recognise how dangerous and oppressive maternal language can be, both to women and to all human beings in relation to God ... The model poses problems for all human beings in relation to God because if the parental model, mother or father, is used exclusively for God, it places us always in the role of children. At a time when we need desperately to be 'adults', to take responsibility

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262 *Weaving the Visions* p142
263 In *Models of God* (p 121) McFague gives a list of activities from the naturalist observing gorillas in the wild to rock-stars performing famine-relief concerts as examples of 'universal parenthood'.
264 'Mother God' p 139

for our world and its well-being, we cannot support a model that suggests that the 'great mother' or 'great father' will take care of our crises of poverty, discrimination, damage to the ecosystem, and so forth.'[265]

This is of particular concern for McFague since one of the central arguments of *Models of God,* one which funds her search for new models and causes much of her rejection of old ones, is the observation that our ability through nuclear or environmental destruction to eliminate life on earth suggests that ultimate power should not be conceived to be in the hands of God but in our own hands.

However, despite these reservations and qualifications, McFague feels that we not only should but must pursue the model of God as mother because,

'Parental love is the most powerful and intimate experience we have of giving love whose return is not calculated (though it is appreciated).'[266]

It is to the nature of this love that we now turn.

4.3 The love of God as Mother.

In *Models of God* it is clear that the nature of the root-metaphor of Christianity introduced somewhat abstractly in *Metaphorical Theology* as 'a certain relationship exhibiting a certain tension', is understood by McFague to mean the radical, inclusive, impartial and reorienting love of God. Each of the three models considered here attempts to explore the nature of this love by means of what McFague judges to be the deepest loves that we know. In the case of God as Mother, the aspect or type of love

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265 *Ibid.*
266 *Ibid.* p140

under consideration is *agape*. However McFague's presentation of this quality is somewhat different from traditional accounts. The nature of the *agape* love of God as Mother is linked strongly to the activity of God that 'Mother' seeks to model, that is God's creative activity.

Traditional, and McFague argues, patriarchal, models of God's creative activity can be represented by the 'imaginative pictures' of the artist/craftsman or of intellectual activity, willing or speaking the world into being.[267] The model of God as mother creates a picture of God creating out of herself, giving birth to her own body. The paradoxical nature of such a statement is explored in the following chapter. Here it should be noted that McFague's presentation of creation is quite deliberately at odds with the traditional models despite a brief attempt to relate it to the wisdom/sophia tradition.

This, coupled with the shift of the focus of *agape* from redemption to creation, results in a crucial shift in the interpretation of *agape* offered by McFague. She identifies this as follows,

> 'The usual understanding of agape sees it as totally unmotivated, disinterested love.'[268]

Against this McFague sets a passage from Paul Tillich:

> 'The mother-quality of giving birth, carrying, and embracing, and, at the same time, of calling back, resisting the independence of the created, and swallowing it.'[269]

By implication, this act of creating out of oneself and resisting the independence of that which is created in turn generates a degree of need, desire and vulnerability in

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267 See *Models of God* p 109
268 *Ibid.* p102
269 Paul Tillich *Systematic Theology* vol 3 Chicago: University of Chicago Press 1963 p294 cited in McFague *Models of God* p101

the creator in relation to the created. It is the love of a mother for her child. While the love of parents towards their various children may be regarded as impartial in that it ideally does not show favouritism and is not earned, based on aesthetic merit, strength, ability, success or any other criteria, it is certainly not disinterested. Being rooted in creation rather than redemption, this is love that affirms the essential goodness of being itself (as opposed to loving it despite its sinfulness and therefore redeeming it to imputed goodness)[270]. In short this love declares 'it is good that you exist'.[271]

It is also a love that 'calls back' the loved into deeper relationship, resisting independence and underscoring the interrelatedness of all its children (these being understood as all the component parts of God's body, which God has herself given birth to). Hence this love is not limited to human beings or even other creatures who could potentially be consciously responsive to it. This is love for all the created, without calculation of return. Yet it is also a love that desires, seeks and appreciates a return.

Another consequence of this equality of love for the whole creation/body is that it shifts the focus of attention from human beings and their history and society to a concern for the whole creation. Thus the model of God as mother produces an account of love that affirms the essential goodness and right to flourish of all things and takes an impassioned interest in the establishing of this flourishing. This is the basis for the ethic arising from this model to which we now turn.

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270 It is also clear that McFague means more by 'being' and 'existence' than simply the fact of being there. Her understanding of 'existing' is a fullness of being, of becoming abundant in the sense of being all that it is possible to be. We see this implied, for example, when McFague says 'Loving others 'as yourself' means – whatever else it may mean – willing for others the existence, the right to birth, nurture, and fulfillment, that one wills for oneself'. Sallie McFague 'the Ethic of God as Mother, Lover and Friend' in Ann Loades *Feminist Theology: A Reader* London: SPCK 1990 p256

271 *Models of God* p103

4.4 The ethic of God as Mother.

The first ethical application of the model comes from 'moving inside' it, using God so modelled as an image of idealised human behaviour. This results in a concept of 'universal parenthood' encompassing all activities and attitudes that lead to the flourishing of others. This McFague applies alike to individual, corporate and governmental actions and processes.

McFague's vision of society based upon the agapic mother-love of God is admittedly and unashamedly utopian.[272] However she does not intend to imply that such a utopia is achievable. Rather:

> 'The picture that one holds of utopia makes a difference in the way one conducts daily business If one thinks of it as individual election to an eternal otherworld, one will act differently than if one thinks of it as a just order for all in this world: both are utopian in the sense that fulfillment is always partial, but each serves as a goal and a goad, as an attraction and a critique.'[273]

This just ordering for all is the heart of the ethic of God as mother and develops out of the model's stress on interrelatedness and the 'interested' and universally inclusive nature of God's love. This love that desires the flourishing of all is frustrated by selfishness or exploitation. This connects the model of God as mother to the model of God as judge[274], but modifies the traditional presentation of the latter in the process. Thus McFague says:

> 'God as mother-judge condemns those who selfishly refuse to share. When

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272 Arguably this is as close as McFague comes to eschatology.
273 *Models of God* p118
274 This is an attempt to answer her own objection to parental imagery in *Metaphorical Theology* p177-8 where she is concerned that by focussing on the family as the setting for God's activity, parental language overemphasises personal and individual guidance, compassion and security at the expense of the political and ecological dimensions of the gospel.

judgement is connected to the mother-creator, it is different from when it is connected to the king-redeemer. In the picture of the king-redeemer, individuals are condemned who rebel against the power and the glory of the monarch, assigning to themselves the status that only the king deserves. The king judges the guilty and metes out punishment, or as the Christian story happily concludes, takes the punishment upon himself and thus absolves those condemned. In the picture of the mother-creator, however, the goal is neither the condemnation nor the rescue of the guilty but the just ordering of the cosmic household in a fashion beneficial to all. God as mother-creator is primarily involved not in the negative business of judging wayward individuals but in the positive business of creating with our help a just ecological economy for the well-being of all her creatures. God as mother-judge is the one who establishes justice, not the one who hands out sentences. She is concerned with establishing justice now, not with condemning in the future.'[275]

The transformation of the image of judge by the interested nature of divine *agape* is also clear in McFague's corresponding discussion of the nature of sin when she argues:

'God the mother judges those who thwart the nurture and fulfillment of her beloved creation. God as mother is angry because some of her created beings desire everything for themselves, not recognising the intrinsic worth of other beings. In this view, 'sin' is not 'against God', the pride and rebellion of an inferior against a superior, but 'against the body', the refusal to be part of an ecological whole whose continued existence and success depends upon the recognition of the interdependence and interrelatedness of all species.'[276]

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275 *Ibid.* p117-118
276 'Mother God' p142

The establishing of justice in the present involves a further two models which connect with the model of mother-judge. These are the models of gardener (which is used less in Models of God and related articles but becomes more important in later works with their heavier focus upon nature) and 'home-maker'.

The term 'home-maker' is not used explicitly by McFague, indeed she, unusually, does not use any anthropomorphic image at all for this activity and ethic of God, instead making reference to doing home economics in God's household. This may be an attempt to avoid feminist difficulties concerning the stereotyping of women as housewives but the model is certainly present and influential in her thinking. Thus she says:

> 'The mother-God as creator, then, is also involved in 'economics', the management
>
> of the household of the universe, to ensure the just distribution of goods to all.'[277]

However there is one important caveat with which we should round off and qualify this utopian picture. This is to introduce a level of realism and complexity which McFague notes but does not elaborate to any significant degree. This is the effect that competition for limited resources has upon attempts to establish justice in such a way. McFague applies this particularly to avoid interpretation of her ethic which is on the side of birth, life and fulfilment to the issue of abortion. This is most explicit in a significant footnote to one of her articles in which she says:

> 'This must not be interpreted as a pro-life or anti-abortion stance. If the various
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> species are to thrive, not every individual in every species can be fulfilled. In a
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> closed ecological system with limits on natural resources, difficult decisions must
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> be made to ensure the continuation, growth, and fulfilment of the many forms of
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> life (not just one form and not all of its individuals).'[278]

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277 *Ibid.* p142.
278 *Ibid.* p143 note 5.

4.5 Assessment of God as Mother.

McFague's views on this subject have naturally received a mixed response as they feed into a (still ongoing) debate within the churches and the academy[279]. Elizabeth Johnson has described McFague's exposition of 'Mother' as the finest presentation of this model[280]. As we shall see shortly, other scholars have built upon McFague's work and expounded its effectiveness in achieving the kinds of pastoral outcomes she seeks.

However a number of scholars have challenged McFague or rejected McFague's views on a number of points – generally points of methodology. Here we will leave aside arguments that 'mother' is not a scriptural term (or that it appears there only as a simile not a metaphor), or that Father is a proper name which precludes all others, and other arguments intended to preclude the use of any and all feminine imagery for God.[281] These arguments are well countered by Dell'Olio's article 'Why not God the Mother?' and the reader is referred there for a detailed defence[282]. Arguments relating to pan(en)theism are treated in the next chapter of this work. Here interest is in arguments that engage with McFague's particular account of the model or the way in which she has made use of her particular methodology. However before moving on it should be noted that Dell'Olio's arguments demonstrate only that Mother (and other female metaphors) can *co-exist* with Father; they do not warrant the replacement of one with the other. Indeed this threat of replacement (and along with that the loss of large sections of the

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279 For an example of the continued relevance of the debate see *The Daily Mail* 3rd October 2006 Headline "Outcry as clergy say calling God 'He' or 'Lord' encourages wife-beating" available online at http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-408190/Outcry-clergy-say-calling-God-He-Lord-encourages-wife-beating.html as accessed 14 September 2012
280 Quoted in S Shrein *Quilting and Braiding*
281 For a presentation of these arguments see for example Kimel (ed) *Speaking the Christian God* and Gary Heirion 'American Protestants Confront God the Mother' in *Lutheran Forum* vol 30 no 1 1996 pp36-38
282 A.J. Dell'Ollio 'Why not God the Mother?' *Faith and Philosophy* 15 (Apr) 1998 pp193-209

Christian tradition and systematic theologies associated with or deriving from the Father model) seems to be what lies behind a large number of the objections to McFague's and similar proposals. McFague's reading of traditional models is questioned by many of her respondents. For example. Ring, reviewing *Models of God*, says

> 'To write, however, as if the monarchical model were solely responsible for forming the individualistic, dualistic, exclusivist imagination characteristic of so many Christians is to overstate the case. Consequently, McFague depreciates her own work both by caricaturing the monarchical model and by inflating it to such proportions that the minor but persistent themes of the tradition are unacknowledged. This is disappointing to those aware of the richness of the tradition and no service to those who are unaware...Readers can hope that in future writings, McFague will devote more space to developing her own theology and less in confronting a past theological perspective. The latter ... detracts both from the excellence of her work and the wider acceptance that her work might otherwise gain.' [283]

I would concur with Ring, and see this more radical streak in McFague as a reason for the somewhat slow uptake of her ideas within mainstream theological communities. However in many passages McFague appears less antipathetic to traditional imagery, especially when describing Jesus' use of the term Father. In such passages she says she seeks a *new interpretative context* for the Father model rather than its replacement. Since it is possible to interpret traditional language and imagery in such a way as to be in keeping with McFague's models of Mother, Lover and Friend (see for example the interpretations of the monarchical model offered by Louw[284]) and

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283 Nancy C Ring 'Models of God (review) Journal *of the American Academy of Religion* 57 (3) 1989 pp656-661 pp660-661.

284 Daniel J Louw 'Diagnostic Criteria for an Assessment of God-Images in Pastoral Counselling' in Ralph Bisschops and James Francis (eds.) *Metaphor, Canon and Community:Jewish, Christian and Islamic Approaches* Bern: Peter Lang 1999 pp132-161 – Louw finds McFague's models very helpful

that doing so would also be consistent with McFague's overarching approach of using multiple models, it seems that McFague's more moderate streak is the one more in line with her methodology and aims overall.

Criticisms of McFague's expositions of her models, where such exist, tend to focus on what the model does not say rather than what it does say. For example Cobb says,

'Although McFague believes that there is a personal power in the Universe that is on the side of life and its fulfillment, her primary emphasis throughout is on how what happens in the world affects God, not on how God acts in the world ... She does not go as far toward describing or imaging how the power that is on the side of life supports life and enables it to reach fulfillment. Other metaphors would help here.'[285]

The last sentence is crucial here. McFague is explicit that her models are partial and are not meant to each be capable of bearing the weight of a whole systematic theology, never mind solve all theological problems. As Cobb also notes, she is aware of the limitations of her models and this is allowed for within her method and her understating of theology as a communal, collaborative endeavour. Therefore omissions from her models of this sort are not a serious problem for them.

What are more serious are questions of the consistency of the models themselves. It has already been noted that the relationship between models is an area that requires further study and we will return to this again in the next chapter. Discrepancies between models are potentially problematic but not insurmountable. However Herion draws attention to an *internal* inconsistency present in the Mother

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when applied to various pastoral situations, often preferring them to monarchical ones. However he also commends a reworking of traditional themes of the 'Almighty' and 'All-knowing', interpretations that are driven by criteria consistent with the pastoral applications of McFague's models.

285 J B J Cobb 'Models of God (Review)' *Religious Studies Review* 16 1990 pp40-42 pp41-42

model itself:

> 'If God the Mother is 'relevant' then does she believe in abortion? If so, Christians will have to wrestle with the implications of what it means to be children of a divine parent such as this.'[286]

McFague does treat this issue[287] by asserting that to say God is on the side of life in general is not to say that God is on the side of every individual life. Indeed the divine Parent knows that for life as a whole to flourish, some part of it will very likely have to be sacrificed. Whilst there is both a logic and a painful truth in this ethical standpoint, there is still a chilling edge to an assertion such as this. It is possible that a creative (and brave!) theologian may actually be able to square this circle somewhat by exploring the links between such an apparently utilitarian and 'unmotherly' ethical stance towards her child on the part of God the Mother and the psychological processes and experiences involved in abortion.

All of this does at least direct our attention to the relationship between a model and its accompanying ethic. This is a methodological question that has been picked up on by at least two theologians in dialogue with McFague's work.

Zeigler (in Kimel ed 1992) criticises McFague for what he terms her 'role model theology'. This process he sees as one in which we

> 'begin with some human value or activity and define God by elevating that value or activity to divinity. Doing so is making God in our own image, concocting the God we want.'[288]

The objection raised by Ziegler here is that McFague derives her ethic from her

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286 Gary Herion 'American Protestants Confront God the Mother' *Lutheran Forum* vol 30 no 1 1996 pp36-38 p 37. This article is discussing 'God the Mother' in general rather than McFague's particular account, but his point is relevant to McFague's views.
287 'God the Mother' in *Motherhood: Experience, Institution, Theology. Concilium* 6 1986 p138-143
288 Zeigler 1993 p2

model largely by using the model of God as a role model for human behaviour. Thus God is constrained to act in a way that is appropriate for humans to emulate and human beings are expected to behave in a similar way to God. The danger with such an approach is that it is particularly open to charges of projectionism and of our creating God in our image or 'trying to be like God' after the example of Adam and Eve and the tree of knowledge; charges which McFague's account of her methodology is already vulnerable to.

To be fair to McFague she is aware of other ways of deriving ethics from the implications of models (for example in her concern that the model of God as Mother could imply a helpless dependence on Her on the part of Her children[289]). We should remember that McFague is committed to using her models to bring about human action rather than intending to present the action of God and this, rather than any methodological move is likely behind her use of God as a role model (a theme which is not without precedent in the tradition).

However a different way of deriving ethic from model is outlined by Lerner[290]. Lerner argues that biblical metaphors such as 'king' were not intended to be understood metaphorically, rather they were taken literally (see 1 Sam 12:12 which argues against there being a king in Israel on the grounds that God is already king). Now Lerner's use of 'literal' is potentially unhelpful in our context here since we have understood the term differently (see Chapter 2) and requires clarification. What he means by literal and metaphorical is clear however when he goes on to argue that, just as the use of 'rose' as a metaphor for beauty commits us to the belief that roses are beautiful so a metaphorical understanding of God the king commits us to the belief that human kingship has

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289 This confirms our observations in earlier chapters that the process of interpreting metaphors is not an automatic, intuitive one but one that requires careful crafting and direction from their author.
290 Berel Dov Lerner 'Oppressive metaphor and the Liberating Literal Sense' in Ralph Bisschops and James Francis (eds.) *Metaphor, Canon and Community:Jewish, Christian and Islamic Approaches.* pp233-241 Lerner is engaging in this article particularly with the work of Mary Daly but his arguments are equally relevant to McFague's work.

positive qualities that we may also ascribe to God. In contrast the biblical text above is intending to make quite the opposite point – that in the light of God's kingship, it is 'intolerably presumptuous ... for any human being to assume that role'.[291] Therefore this biblical text is not to be understood as a metaphor. Rather, God is being held to possess only those basic 'legal prerogatives' required to exercise kingship and nothing more about his particular qualities (qualities that we might associate with particular human kings) is being asserted.

It is not necessary to follow Lerner's usage and call such an understanding a 'literal' one in the sense used in previous analysis here. On McFague's terms, such a usage remains metaphorical. Yet he still makes a number of valuable points. Firstly he offers an interpretation of a traditional metaphor that has the potential to avoid the problems of patriarchy and oppression that concern McFague regarding the image of King.   Secondly, a further valuable contribution is that he presents a different way of working from model to ethic, one that may be productive in reinterpreting traditional metaphors to allow them to co-exist more coherently with new metaphors.

Lerner's understanding begins from the model of God (in this case 'as King') and takes its direct implications seriously.   The model then is used to interpret experience and describe the ethical ordering of the world, rather than experience being used to interpret the model. Therefore it is God who defines the nature of kingship or fatherhood and God's example is the standard by which human modelling of these divine characteristics is judged.

Now Lerner's case fails to convince completely in that the origins of the categories in which God is described are derived from human experience and of human occupancy of these roles. Further human attempts to emulate the ethical character of God and/or model their occupancy of roles on God's behaviour have a long standing

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291 Lerner p 236

place within the Judeo-Christian tradition. It does not follow for example that since God loves, and my love of a person is only ever a poor imitation of that love, that I should not love because it is God's role alone to love truly. Rather the model of God as love can be understood simultaneously in Lerner's 'literal' sense (that God's love is the determining description of what the Christian means when (s)he talks of love) and also in McFague's 'role model' sense (that our understanding of the meaning of 'God is love', and our recognition of defining narrative example of this love, derives from our deepest human experience of love and that the Christian should strive to conform their loving to become like the love of God).

In short, while Lerner and Zeigler do not show McFague's method to be illegitimate they do suggest that an outworking of a model is flawed if it is simply designed to provide a role model for human ethical behaviour without incorporating the discontinuity between God and humanity by allowing God to behave differently from people (or rather by requiring human activity to be the asymmetrical consequence of the action of God). McFague may have set the balance too far towards the role model approach in her presentations and consequently lost some of the important metaphorical tension she identifies as being at the heart of that tradition – the 'is and is not' similarity in difference between God and the world.

The image of 'mother', from which the model develops, adequately meets the requirements of a good image. The resulting model is familiar and accessible to most people since most (but by no means all) have experiences of either being a mother, having received maternal love or witnessing it in others. Motherhood is a basic image in that it is close to being a universally familiar phenomenon (at least from the perspective that everyone has had (biologically) a mother) and translates fairly well across divides of culture, background and class. It also has significant structure and

connects as McFague observes to other basic images of life such as food, blood and nurture.

There is, however, slightly more doubt about the familiarity of the image because of the counter-cultural nature of the manner in which it is applied by McFague. She is concerned as we saw that the use of the female metaphor should not lead to the divinisation of the stereotypically feminine.[292] Consequently much of the work done by her presentation of God as Mother is in fact done not by the image (whose most 'natural' connotations in a still patriarchal society are not those that the model wishes to promote) but by new, added, independent elements, namely the concepts of *agape* and justice. McFague's discussions of these concepts are powerful and of benefit to theology in and of themselves but it is questionable whether they actually depend upon the image of mother or whether they could just as well stand alone.[293]

It may be that McFague is expecting rather too much when she hopes to use a source domain (mother) itself heavily affected by patriarchal assumptions to cast corrective light on a target domain (God) also similarly affected, and expects this combination to be able to lessen the effect of these assumptions on both domains. Certainly the degree of qualification and conceptual intervention that is required moves her model some distance from the sort of intuitive process of 'suddenly recognised insight' that she desires.[294]

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292 There is also the counter-intuitive issue of God being the mother of her own body to contend with. We will pick this up again in the next chapter.

293 In one sense, though, this observation on the important role of concepts in making images explicable and relevant, or mediating between images and models, supports McFague's methodological statements on this issue that we looked at in chapter 2. However it also supports David Tracy's concern that images are not themselves precise, structured or comprehensive enough to treat theological matters adequately given the complex nature of these concerns. See Tracey *Religion and Intellectual Life 5* Spring 1988

294 However the following anecdote, told by Margo G Houts in 'Is God also our Mother?' *Perspectives* June/July 1997 pp8-12 p8 shows how the use of such metaphors in a still patriarchal context can require such constructive work if they are to function in the way intended: 'The bumper sticker read, 'Trust in God, She will provide.' It was plastered on a weathered, red Volkswagen Bug, idling at a traffic stop in Santa Barbara, California, in 1975. I have never forgotten the initial jolt that bumper sticker gave me, nor the sinking, visceral feeling that God had somehow just been insulted, compromised, diminished. It was the first time I had encountered gender inclusive language for God, a

Traditional Christian understandings of God have often faced this problem by using composite models such as servant-king in order to both transform human understandings of human roles and practice and also lessen the risk of undesirable connotations of models being projected onto the divine. The question for McFague in light of this is whether her examples of this process, the composites mother-judge, mother-gardener and mother-home-maker, are adequate to the same task.

Certainly, mother-judge, is able to do this (and it is likely no coincidence that it is McFague's preferred composite in much of her writing on the ethic of Mother God). Here the potential contradiction between the two images lessens the problems that 'judge' would otherwise cause for feminists (problems associated with the dispassionate nature of the judicial image and the after-the-fact and individualistic nature of judicial justice perhaps, not to mention the disproportionately male composition of most judiciaries around the world). Likewise it also lessens the dangers of reading mother as a feminine term since it combines the female mother with arguably one of the most traditionally masculine and patriarchal professions.

These composite images also help to lessen the seriousness of the objection McFague is herself aware of, namely that maternal imagery implies that we are children and therefore, to more or less of an extent, helpless. (This may be another reason why McFague takes a role model approach, to avoid such language of dependency and helplessness, although in the ecological case in particular, some language that revealed the vulnerability of creation, its 'helplessness' in the face of human activity, could in fact be a positive).

One difficulty of maternal imagery is that although it is capable of modelling the ontological dependence of all creation on God (after the fashion of mother and nursing child) and also of modelling a mature, responsive relationship of human beings to their

God I had always known as he.'

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source (after the image of mother and adult offspring) it struggles to model both together.

Taken together as a composite system of models and concepts the mother-judge-gardener-agape-justice model certainly fares well in the criteria of usefulness in promoting the fulfilment of all life since it seeks to specifically place this concern at the centre of theological discussion of the nature of God, justice and love. It also fares well in McFague's other primary aims of being a good translation of the root-metaphor of radical, inclusive, transforming love since it articulates these well. Of the four criteria we outlined for this condition (is it relevant to its context, does it aid the comprehensiveness of the paradigm, is it better able to interpret anomalies, is it fruitful for the continued interpretation of experience) the model of God as mother scores highly, with the two qualifications in mind that a) it is not always or even mainly the model of mother itself that is meeting these criteria but models and concepts associated with it and b) the natural role for humanity under this model is as dependent child which arguably lessens the model's relevance to an 'ecological, nuclear age'.

The model does not fare quite so well when considered in relation to its coherence with its own root metaphor on two counts. On the question of its location relative to this metaphor it is certainly adequate since, in combination with the 'motherly' concept of *agape* it is a very close translation of the root. With its emphasis on establishing justice for all and the motherly desire to 'call back' her offspring it is also transformative and embodies the tension of the relationship expressed in the root-metaphor. However the weaknesses come in its relationships with the basic images of the tradition and other models within the tradition.

The model of God as Mother does offer the possibility of creative engagement with the wider concerns of the Christian theological tradition and community by

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providing a context for the reinterpretation of traditional models of the parenthood of God, judgement, justice and sin. However the main weakness of McFague's presentation, in the view of the present author and by the criteria set out at the end of Chapter 3.8, is that its engagement with the tradition is almost exclusively critical. It must be asked therefore whether a more constructive reading of the tradition is possible and whether such a reading might support McFague's aims.

One example of such an approach would be to further unpack the 'motherly' assertion that 'it is good that you exist'. While it may well be the case that the role of creation has often been downplayed in much historic theology in return for a concentration on the fall, redemption and eschatology, this basic assertion that 'it is good' is found in the very text (Genesis 1) that McFague criticises for its male understanding of creation. This makes the point that it is not only a model that sees creation as the child (or even self-born body) of God that can give value to that creation. Nor is it the case that traditional accounts of this creation regard the world in an unhelpful way in a nuclear, environmental context. Indeed the model of gardener also derives from this same passage. In other words the traditional passage deconstructed by McFague actually supports very well a key assertion of metaphorical theology: that the world 'is good'.

These examples also demonstrate the relative lack of engagement with the basic images of the tradition in McFague's presentation. Although her search for fresh imagery is of course necessary for her aim to reform the tradition, it seems that there is a considerable opportunity for exploring the connections between these images and biblical and traditional images, narratives and themes that has been missed. More to the point, the images of mother, gardener and judge, in company with the majority of images McFague uses are in fact all to be found in many places within the Bible but

McFague does not seek to connect her understanding of them with these narratives, an omission that seems a little strange given her remarks on the function of the Bible as classic text.

If there are some concerns about the coherence of McFague's presentation of God as Mother with its root-metaphor, there are more substantial concerns to be raised over certain aspects of the coherence of this presentation more generally. These are focussed upon its methodological consistency, its status as specifically Christian theology (partly in the light of the above criticisms), and upon the precise nature of the ethic that is being advocated.

Firstly then, there is the observation that McFague seeks to present models that bring God and the world into close relationship and is critical of presentations that emphasise radical separation. However the very basis of metaphorical theology is the assertion of the radical other-ness of God. It is not at all clear that McFague's project as a whole and this model in particular can deal entirely adequately with the, admittedly extremely complex, question of relating the immanence and transcendence of God.

Secondly, it is also not clear that McFague's presentation of God as Mother is to be most convincingly regarded as a model of *God* rather than a model of ideal human activity. This is partly because of the lack of an analysis in terms of either the biblical narrative of salvation-history or an account from McFague of any contemporary religious experience of what God is actually being held to *do* to establish justice or 'be involved in home economics' (thus leaving McFague open to charges of projectionism). The failure of the model to be a model of *God* is also partly due to her failure to observe the symmetry of the model in the move to ethical interpretation. The natural place of human beings in the model is the place of the child, a place McFague finds undesirable. However she argues, with little justification, that we should 'move inside' the model and

thus take on the role of 'universal parenthood'.[295] But while much Christian teaching does indeed involve the attempt to image ourselves after the God in whose image we are made, a strength of models such as the king-subject model is that these include the role of humanity within the model's structure without one having to take the role of God and act, it seems, *as God* to the world.

This 'acting as God' is also a problem for the ethic that is introduced by McFague in general terms but not worked out in its implications. McFague's pro-life quotation, with which we finished section 4.4, is an example of the sort of highly 'difficult decision' that is indeed necessary in a world of limited resources. McFague, while advancing the view that non-human life is to be valued for its own sake in such decisions, offers little help in determining how or by whom such decisions should be made and the remarks that she does make are potentially concerning since they would seem to run the danger of Stalin-esque interpretation. This is partly because, as critics have observed[296], it is difficult to determine in practice the consequences of an attempt to love *all things* to fulfilment. What, for example, might this mean for a response to a disease such as Ebola or AIDS? Hard decisions to be made according to some form of scale of values. Not all of creation can be loved in the sense that the existence and flourishing of some parts of it cannot be sensibly affirmed, not least by those, often the poorest and most vulnerable members of the human race, for whom the existence of these entities is a cause of immense suffering.

McFague is right to point out that we have tremendous power over nature, but rather than seeing this power as something to be renounced, it could be argued that it is more realistic and potentially productive to offer a Christian critique of the way that this power is used. Every action we take has an environmental consequence for example

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295 *Models of God* p150
296 A particularly thorough presentation of this argument is provided by Carroll, B J 'Models of God or Models of us?: On the Theology of Sallie McFague' *Encounter* 52 (Spring) 1991 pp183-196

and it is better that this is done mindfully and consciously than it is to pretend that we have given up this power, when in fact it is unlikely that we can ever do so, or even should do so. It is perhaps a shame that McFague does not expand her image of gardening, because here is a biblical description both of God's activity and ours which implies that not only hard work, but hard choices are to be made. The process of weeding is fundamentally about making decisions about what lives and what dies. Having the grave responsibility of this power pointed out at the level of the world as a whole is likely to make us profoundly uncomfortable but this is not necessarily a bad thing, lest this model too run the risk of seeming to promote a eugenics or dictatorial approach.

But in the light of these things it has been asked if McFague's view of nature is too utopian rather than being in touch with the nature of the neighbourhood as she would claim. Noting this problem, James Fowler regards the lack of eschatology in McFague as a serious omission[297]. Following Fowler it can be argued that eschatology, while not necessarily downplaying the role of divine and human agency in creating a more just society in the here and now, is, when applied to the universe as a whole, the result of *not* wishing to affirm all that is in its being. Eschatology results from the tension between the desire to affirm creation and the suffering that is observed and experienced within it.[298] While McFague does not intend this one model to meet all theological ends, this absence of critique of the 'nature of nature' and resulting lack of eschatology is a serious omission. Is all nature really lovable? Is love always the ethically correct response?

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297 James W Fowler *Faith development and pastoral care* Philadelphia: Fortress Press 1986.

298 Teilhard de Chardin was well aware of the need for eschatology and it is surprising that McFague, deeply influenced by him, does not pick up on it.   In an interesting and enlightening passage (*Metaphorical Theology* p136) McFague compares eschatology and science fiction, but seems to miss the point that science fiction combines the active human component (science) with the rejection of the nature of things (fiction). It could be said that the loss of eschatology is a danger when liberation theology is done (in an albeit well-meaning manner) by those in a position of relative affluence and influence.

In this section we have seen that McFague's model of God as Mother, when considered with its associated and supporting models and concepts, meets most of her criteria for a good model well. However several objections of varying seriousness have been raised, most of these relating to the lack of integration between the model and the Christian tradition and scriptures but also with regard to the effectiveness of the model more generally, especially in its ethical applicability. This suggests some degree of weakness in McFague's criteria themselves and hence her method. This is not to be deemed fatal, simply an area of weakness that may bear more scrutiny and perhaps be open to strengthening through further work. Therefore these observations will remain a line of investigation throughout what follows.

These things being said however, it is still the case that McFague's presentation of the model of God as Mother results in many insights that are of value to theology especially in relation to more inclusive, contextually relevant and powerful understandings of justice and *agape* in relation to God. It therefore is ultimately successful as a resource for reforming the Christian tradition as she wishes it to be.

4.6 The meaning and love of God as Lover.

The model of God as lover may be regarded as essentially a remythologising of the second person of the Trinity. Thus it is the most Christocentric of McFague's models. This model brings together the concepts of *eros*, sin, healing and salvation, but modifying traditional presentations of these concepts just as might be expected. Again much of the work is in fact being done by these reinterpreted concepts. This is evident

from the fact that McFague rarely returns to this image itself in her later work and yet the understandings of sin, incarnation and salvation found in its presentation remain central to her thinking.

Despite the Christocentric nature of this model it remains located within McFague's radical monotheism as a model of the One God in relationship to the whole creation understood as God's body. This distinguishes McFague's use of lover from other uses in the Christian tradition and scriptures. McFague's reading of the use of intimate and erotic language in these sources is ambivalent, even as she finds the tradition to be ambivalent itself on the issue. Initially she says:

'Christians do not speak of God as lover, or at any rate, only a fringe group of medieval mystics do'.[299]

But shortly after she says:

'Is it any surprise then that the Christian tradition in its attempt to sum up the goal of human existence has done so in lover's language? From Augustine through Thomas and to the Westminster' Confession, the 'end of man' was to 'know' and 'enjoy' God forever.'[300]

In essence, her reading of the tradition seems to be summed up when she says:

'...the Judeo-Christian tradition, if wary of the lover model and preferring to keep it well within the safe boundaries of marriage, has nonetheless not been able to eliminate it entirely.'[301]

This is because of the centrality of the lover relationship in human life and experience as,

'...the most intimate of all human relationships, as the one that to the majority of

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299 *Models of God* p125
300 *Ibid.* p128
301 *Ibid.* p124

people is the most central and precious, the one giving the most joy (as well as the most pain)...Could a relationship be of such crucial importance in our existence and be irrelevant in our relationship with God?'[302]

Basic to the image and model of God as Lover are desire and need. The desire of lover to beloved is in some respects similar to those of motherhood since they both desire the fulfilment of the being of their object. However the difference between the *agape* and *eros* is that *eros* finds intrinsic value within the beloved, desires to be united with this discovered value and consequently experiences need in relation to the beloved. Whereas the Mother gives without expectation of response, the Lover needs a response for her own fulfilment.

This suggests a vision of God importantly different from traditional, dispassionate and static ones and owning rather more to contemporary process thought and other forms of panentheism.

'Certainly a radically transcendent, triumphalist view of God, of God as either the unmoved mover or the absolute monarch, cannot conceive of God as needing anything, let alone an intimate relationship with her creatures. But our model of God as mother-creator and as lover to the beloved world puts need in a very different light. As many have pointed out, neither the covenantal God of the Hebrew Scriptures who pleaded with Israel to be his faithful partner nor the compassionate God of Jesus of Nazareth who healed the sick and cast out demons is an unmoved mover or an absolute monarch entirely outside the circle of need. Need, of course, implies change and growth, and though some societies, like that of ancient Greece, find change and growth inferior to immutability and motionlessness, our society does not. Change, growth, and development are all positive attributes for contemporary human beings; they are also characteristics of

302 *Ibid.* p126

an evolutionary view of the universe. Hence on the principle that we image God according to what we find most desirable in ourselves and what we find constitutive of our world there is reason to include change as a divine attribute.'[303]

This need for personal relationship, however, is not to be seen as making the model individualistic. Properly understood, the object of the erotic love of God, 'the beloved', is not human beings individually and one by one but the whole creation, again understood as God's Body. The desire is for the unification of the whole creation with God and in God. Since we are the only (known) species capable of actively and consciously working to this end, this implies that we have a particular duty of response. For McFague this response is not about creating individual loving relationships to a God beyond the world but rather the response :

'is directed toward God's body, the world'

'The response that God as lover needs is from us not as individuals but as parts of the beloved world; God as lover is interested not in rescuing certain individuals from the world but in saving, making whole, the entire beloved cosmos that has become estranged and fragmented, sickened by unhealthy practices, and threatened by death and extinction. God as lover finds all species of flora and fauna valuable and attractive, she finds the entire, intricate evolutionary complex infinitely precious and wondrous; God as lover finds himself needing the help of those very ones among the beloved - of us human beings - who have been largely responsible for much of the estrangement that has occurred. We are needed lest the lover lose her beloved; we are needed so that the lover may be reunited with his beloved. The model of God as lover, then, implies that God needs us to help save the world!'[304].

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303 *Ibid.* p134
304 *Ibid.* p135

This passage identifies the activity of God, from the perspective of this model, as saving. However, as has begun to be explored, the meaning of salvation is modified by the theme of a love which needs unification with the valued object of its desire. Thus salvation and its accompanying ethic becomes 'healing'.

4.7 The ethic of God as Lover.

If the activity of God the Lover is saving, understood principally as healing, healing implies diagnosis as its first step and so McFague presents an account of sin and suffering understood in the light of this model.

Firstly, McFague stresses that though sin is to be taken seriously, it does not, in terms of the intrinsic value of things, *ruin* creation. In other words, sin does not mean that the world becomes a place that is so marred that salvation must become the escape from the world of some elected individuals. The whole creation, as God's beloved, remains loved and valued, and this for what it is, rather than in spite of what it is.

Evil is seen principally from two perspectives. Firstly it is held to be a consequence of the complexity in a limited creation where the success of one being or species often comes at the price of another. This is the 'tragic aspect' of our 'organic solidarity'.[305] Secondly it is seen as a result of human freedom. In particular, in a nuclear context, it is seen as the decision to use a natural feature of creation (nuclear fission or fusion) for destructive purposes. This McFague sees as the ultimate example of the desire to 'be like God', having power over the existence of life itself.

This human aspect of evil is sin, but under the model of God as lover sin is differently understood from its traditional presentation under the king-subject model. That is, sin is not imaged as rebellion against a transcendent power or authority but as

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305 *Ibid. p*p137-138

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the refusal of right (i.e. loving) relationship. It is

'The turning away ... from interdependence, from all other beings, including the matrix of being from whom all life comes.'[306]

Thus sin is modelled as a wounding of the interdependent creation and salvation is modelled as healing. This healing has three aspects, two active and one, the 'last resort', is passive.

The passive response is identification (by God and consequently by us) with suffering, a sharing in the pain of the wounded. The active responses are defence, or prevention of further wounding and the active healing, or restoring of harmony, within broken or distorted relationships. These relationships are not limited to those between people but include all interdependent relationships within creation.[307]

Since, on this understanding, our sins are not individual acts committed against an external authority, it is not sufficient for salvation to be achieved by one individual winning forgiveness for all.

Since,

'The sins we must deal with are not the sort that can be atoned for and forgotten; they are daily, present refusals, by all of us some of the time and some of us all of the time, to acknowledge the radical relationality and interdependence of all God's beloved with one another ... Likewise, the evil we must deal with, epitomized in our systemic structures of oppression due to race, class, and gender, as well as the deterioration of the ecosphere and the monstrous escalation of nuclear weaponry, will not disappear through God's having 'conquered' it in battle.' [308]

Therefore,

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306 *Ibid.* p139
307 *Ibid.* p137
308 *Ibid.* p145

'Salvation is not a once-for-all objective service that someone else does for us. Rather, it is the ongoing healing of the divided body of our world which we, with God, work at together.'[309]

Salvation is therefore not only a work of God (although McFague attributes especially the revelation that all is loved and valued for itself to a work of God as a conclusion that we could not have reached on our own). Salvation is work towards healing in which the whole creation participates, especially that part of creation that can actively and consciously respond to God as Lover.

McFague links this understanding of the nature of salvation to her understanding of Jesus, traditionally the Saviour. Soteriology has traditionally shaped Christology and so McFague's reinterpretation of the nature, means and participants in the process of salvation can be expected to affect her understanding of the nature of Jesus Christ. Although her Christology will be discussed in much more detail in the next chapter, since she is most explicit on the issue while expounding the Body of God model, her remarks while proposing the Lover model are also significant.

McFague makes it clear that while Jesus is to be regarded as a paradigmatic revelation of the love of God, the very idea that a life can be revelatory itself opens up the possibility of other lives and other traditions being similarly revealing. The fact that an ontologically unique or distinct, vicarious saviour is neither necessary or desirable to her argument as she presents it, allows McFague to propose a universal incarnation in which God is seen as entering into both suffering and healing and indeed the whole of creation, and this over-against a particular incarnation of God in the person of Jesus of Nazareth.

4.8 Assessment of God as Lover.

309 *Ibid.* p143

Many of the remarks made in relation to God as Mother apply also to God as Lover. Again we can see that the image has many of the characteristics which warrant its experimental use. The only caveat here is that experiences and associations relating to the image of 'lover' are more varied and not necessarily as unambiguously positive as McFague may like. For example, for many people the term 'lover' will have relatively weak links with steadfast faithfulness or permanence of relationship in comparison with, for example, more traditional images of husband and wife. This said, the model certainly offers the right sort of 'metaphorical tension' – a combination of familiarity and difference as well as inclusiveness to suit McFague's project. However it could be argued that, in a slightly different sense, the model is impersonal because God is held to be lover of the *world* and not of *individuals* within it. This is of course because McFague wishes to stress God's love for creation and wishes to avoid individualism. It should be noted though that McFague's later work, and especially *Life Abundant*, moved to a position which is much more accepting of individual relationships with God without losing the universal and ethical imperatives of this relationship.

For example in that work McFague quotes Miroslav Volf with approval:

'For me theology springs from a *divine passion*: that is the open wound of God in one's own life and in the tormented men, women and children of this world....But for me theology also springs from God's *love for life*, the love for life which we experience in the presence of the life-giving Spirit, and which enables us to move beyond our resignation, and begin to love life here and now. These are also Christ's two experiences of God, and because of that they are the foundation of Christian Theology too: God's delight and God's pain.' [310]

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[310] Miroslav Volf 'Theology, Meaning and Power' in Volf et al (eds.) *The Future of Theology: Essays in Honor of Jürgen Moltmann* Grand Rapids, Mich: Eerdmans 1996 p 112 quoted in McFague *Life Abundant* p51. Original emphasis.

McFague is quick to reinforce the universal aspect of this experiential insight, of course, and continues:

'...experience is the place where Christian faith is manifested...a central and commanding insight into God's love...[but] this insight is not limited to the individual's well-being – it is an insight concerning the relationship between God and the world, one of such significance that one's orientation and behaviour must change.'[311]

There is of course no necessary contradiction between God's love for the individual and also love for the creation of which the individual is a part.

Again the effects of composite images can be seen, this time Lover-Healer. The model is consistent in relating these to each other, as well as relating this composite with the Mother-Judge composite already examined. Indeed it is a particular strength of this model that it supplements the previous models well, especially in providing an account of love in which a response is called forth and valued without losing the idea of grace.

The model is to be praised for precisely these reasons since it enables not only fruitful new insights for systematic theology, but also possible re-conceptions of the theology of *eros*, sexuality and loving partnerships. In addition, the focus on salvation as concern for the unity of the here and now is certainly more likely to lead to ethical concern for the environment than a theology that sees matter as disposable in the light of a spiritual soteriology based on escape from the physical world.

Once again however, the greater part of the creative work is being done by the influence of the image on the conceptual level, this time in offering a constructive account of *eros* that does not reduce it to self-love or the utilisation of another. As argued earlier, this type of 'exegesis' of terminology is a particular strength of McFague's work, but it does call into question whether in fact metaphorical theology

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311 *Life Abundant* p52

can work primarily on the level of the model as McFague argues. Indeed it is questionable just how far the image of 'lover' is, in fact, being used *as a model*. Few concrete features of the relationship between lovers are being mapped onto the God-world relationship in McFague's presentation. Rather the image is being used to inform conceptual understandings of *eros*, value and salvation and these are in turn being used to create an understanding of God and the world.

Again in similarity to our analysis of God as Mother, it has to be said that the Christian warrants of this model are, on this presentation, weak. Again the constraint that a model be 'mindful of the basic images of the paradigm' and 'well located relative to its root-metaphor' prove too weak on their own to secure the status of the model as Christian. However this is not so much a criticism of the model itself but of the way in which McFague applies it. Opinions will differ as to the value and status of the doctrines that McFague seeks to overturn or replace; that is not the concern here. However it does seem unlikely that her model offers sufficient explanatory scope and power on its own to entirely replace all the meaning of the traditional doctrines of the incarnation, salvation, eschatology and Christology. Again the power of Christianity to speak to a broad, and therefore more inclusive, range of concerns is being limited.

But it is not the case that the model needs to be presented in a way so hostile to orthodox Christian teaching. In fact in many cases, a more charitable (and, arguably, faithful) interpretation of the scriptures and traditions would integrate well with and be enriched by McFague's model.

One example of this is the conception of sin and salvation. Prioritising right relationships over individual acts of rebellion is not inconsistent with a view of the cross that includes (though is not limited to) a salvific action on the part of God *vis a vis* not only the individual but the whole creation in its relationship to God. Biblical and

traditional warrants for such a position would not be hard to find (e.g. Romans 8:22 (NRSV)- 'We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labour pains until now; and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies'). Such a view would ground a 'turning-back' to interdependence with all being and a restored relationship with the 'matrix from which all life comes'.

Likewise, if we focus on McFague's reading of Jesus as Christ we see that an interpretation of his life as revelatory as other lives can be does not preclude an incarnational Christology and nor does a high Christology necessarily imply that human agency has no role in bringing the Kingdom to fulfilment in the here and now.

On each of these fronts it seems that McFague's constructive theology is more directly a consequence of her models (and is also of greater theological value) than her destructive critique of the tradition which, since it does not appear to be based upon the logical or necessary consequences of the models themselves, must be based on other, external concerns and aims.

Two further problems that again rear their heads are the ethical difficulties of attempting to love the whole creation and the lack of eschatological focus. The latter is a minor problem for this model and probably stems from a desire to avoid too utopian a presentation of what is possible in the world. However it is an interesting feature of McFague's account of salvation as healing that it is consistently presented as a 'restoring' of a world that has been 'broken' or 'wounded', and it cannot be that McFague is intending to imply that there was a time or state when the creation was not wounded to which she seeks a return. Consequently this is a strange anachronism within her theology. Why image a past 'golden age' rather than a future goal?

The imagery of healing also works against her goal of encouraging love for the

whole creation and highlights the difficulties of removing the anthropocentric values of ethics. As well as wounding, healing can also imply disease, but disease is, from the point of view of the infecting organism, a success, a flourishing, a fulfilment of potential that *can only come* at the expense of the host. Healing in such a case is the prioritising of one form of life over many others.

The similarities in findings when considering the models of Mother and Lover are beginning to be indicative of certain methodological flaws in McFague's work, despite her offering many insights that are themselves fruitful and of benefit to theology and human understanding more widely. It will now be asked if the same pattern continues with McFague's third model, the model of God as Friend.

4.9 The meaning and love of God as Friend.

McFague first expounded a model of God as Friend in *Metaphorical Theology*. However here focus will be on her more developed and thorough presentation in *Models of God*. The former explored very similar themes, with the main differences being that *Models of God* is much more focussed on interpreting the model so as to maximise its ethical impact and is much more critical of the Christian tradition. In contrast, the argument in *Metaphorical Theology* is more concerned to root the model within scripture and tradition and in addressing questions of faith and religious practice such as what the nature of the authority of a friend may be, and the implications of the model for worship.

McFague says that 'Friends are unnecessary'.[312] That is, friendship is not

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312 *Models of God* p157

required for basic survival, though it is likely that it is necessary for happiness and human fulfilment. Consequently, friendship involves a degree of free association and response different from the relationship between mother and child or between lovers.

> 'The basis of friendship is freedom, and that is part of its power: all other relationships are ringed with duty or utility or desire.'[313]

The nature and role of friendship is not clear from the term's common usage or from studies on the subject. McFague gives the examples of 'It's nothing serious: they are just friends' and 'She had many acquaintances but few friends' to show the ambiguities in our understanding of the importance of friendship.

> 'Being a friend means many different things to different people in different times and places.'[314]

For McFague, *philia,* the love between friends, means forming a bond of trust that arises not so much from mutual delight in each other but rather from sharing a common vision.

> 'Friendship here, unlike friendship between God and certain mystics, is not between two facing each other but between two facing the common vision which is the basis of the friendship. The importance of common vision in divine-human friendship cannot be overstated, for it frees friendship from the self-absorbed individualism of its classical roots.'[315]

This reorientation of the image of friends is crucial to McFague's presentation of *philia.* Because of this shift, the model of God as Friend not only means God's presence, fellowship and support but also an adult sharing of a mutual vision. A friendly relationship with the divine is thus taken to model the less dependent aspects of

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313 *Ibid.* p162
314 *Ibid.* p161
315 *Ibid.* p163

the relationship between the world (and especially ourselves as that part of the world which is capable of sharing a vision) than were the natural implications of the other two models. The model of the Friend therefore complements the other models and corrects an overemphasis on our dependence upon God for the transformation of the world. This is vital for McFague's project which aims to warrant and inspire human action on behalf of the world in the face of nuclear and environmental threats.

McFague is explicit that the model of God the Friend is intended to at least partly replace the model of God the Holy Spirit[316]. This traditional model McFague regards as too dualistic, amorphous, ephemeral and bland to be relevant to the modern age[317]. Perhaps paradoxically, McFague prefers the term Friend to Spirit because she holds it to be less anthropomorphic. This appears to be mainly because friend is an embodied rather than disembodied, non-material image.

Rather than the ephemeral Spirit who calls individuals into relationship with God, McFague offers the image of God the Friend who calls all to join with her vision of the world and thus become 'friends of the Friend of World'.[318]

4.10 The ethic of God as Friend.

The ethical imperatives resulting from the friend model begin with solidarity, the standing alongside others in their need, suffering and struggle. This is, in effect, an inviting of others to join the circle of friendship in which God is a partner. As McFague says:

'... commitment to a common vision is not limited to two.'[319]

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316 *Models of God* p181
317 *Ibid.* p170
318 *Ibid.* p172
319 *Ibid.* p163

This common vision is not, though, to be mistaken for like-mindedness. The communities of friends that McFague is envisaging are not simply communities of similarity but are intended to include those who are in many ways different, yet still share the common commitment to the transformational vision of the Kingdom. This presentation is explicitly aimed at combating xenophobia and including difference and flows particularly from the image of the 'host at table', which McFague connects to the image of friend in the following way.

From her discussion of friendship she derives a picture of the activity of sustaining which, in this usage, is primarily the sustaining that comes from fellowship. However McFague also notes that companionship means, literally, 'together at bread.'[320] This she connects to Jesus' table fellowship with the outcast and the sinner and to customs of hospitality to the stranger especially in ancient cultures. This culture was one of interdependence since today's guest could be tomorrow's host and one of inclusiveness since hospitality was offered to the stranger

> 'Friendship is, then, potentially the most inclusive of our loves ... its other can be anyone.'[321]

Thus the God who sustains, and the community of friends who share in this sustaining work, are the God and community who welcome all, and especially the marginalised, to share in a meal of fellowship and joy. Further, since to provide food (and, by extension, other basic necessities) to another is to bless their existence and wish their fulfilment, the model of Friend is united with the models of Mother and Lover in their commitment to the affirmation of the existence of all and to the care of all.

Finally, to stand side by side with God as friend leads to prayer.

> 'We ask God, as one would a friend, to be present in the joy of our shared meals

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320 *Ibid.* p158
321 *Ibid.* p164

and in the sufferings of the strangers; to give us courage and stamina for the work we do together; to forgive us for lack of fidelity to the common vision and lack of trust in divine trustfulness. Finally, we ask God the friend to support, forgive, and comfort us as we struggle together to save our beleaguered planet ... Just as betrayal is the sin of friendship in which one hands over the friend to the enemy, so intercessory prayer is the rite of friendship in which one hands over the friend to God.'[322]

4.11 Assessment of God as Friend.

Whereas the model of God as Lover has drawn virtually no responses from the academic community, and the model of God as Mother has drawn a wide range of positive and negative responses, a small number of scholars have engaged with the model of God as Friend, and they have largely been positive[323]. In particular Kathryn Guthrie assesses the usefulness of the friend model in pastoral work with those suffering with addictions of various kinds[324]. Guthrie follows John Bradshaw's analysis of the roots of addiction, identifying 'toxic shame' as this root.

'Toxic shame ... is a feeling in one's core that one is not OK, that there is something fundamentally wrong with one's person. One is not acceptable, certainly not lovable, but essentially flawed. This is the conviction at the core of one's identity.'[325]

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322 *Ibid.*179-80
323 See for example the assessment of N J Ramsey 'Feminist Perspectives on Pastoral Care' in *Pastoral Psychology* 40 (2) 1992 pp245-252 Ramsey asserts, though without backing up her assertion, that this model has proved useful in a number of pastoral situations including with female survivors of incest. (p252)
324 Kathryn Guthrie 'Models of God: Empowerment, Intimacy, Hope' in *The Journal of Pastoral Care* vol 47 no. 1 1993 pp 26-34
325 Guthrie p27

To assist their recovery, Guthrie argues, sufferers need models of God which meet the following criteria:

1) that the model reflect a belief that God is compassionate, loving and gracious;

2) that the model reflect a belief that God is intimately involved in the struggle of human recovery and discovery of who one is, and affirms human vulnerability;

3) that the model reflect a belief that God is a 'power with, ' rather than a 'power over';

4) that the model reflect a belief that God offers the possibility of real change and hope for a future different from the past and that human choices shape that difference.[326]

Whilst calling for more study on the relationship between models of God and addiction and recovery in relation to social and church communities and also to prayer and spiritual reflection, Guthrie finds McFague's model useful, judging it to,

'clearly offer compassion for a person in recovery. Such a God/friend can offer empowerment toward hope for a future radically different from the past. It also offers a sense of intimacy not found in traditional process theology.'[327]

Meanwhile, McWilliams discusses the model from an evangelical standpoint[328]. Although, as might be expected, he calls into question McFague's stance on the status of the biblical text, it is interesting that he does not see this objection as enough to rule out McFague's method and models. In fact his presentation of her case is largely a sympathetic one. He argues,

'Evangelicals who encounter McFague's proposals should be willing to

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326 Guthrie p28
327 Guthrie p33
328 Warren McWilliams 'God the Friend: A Test Case in Metaphorical Theology' *Perspectives in Religious Studies* 16 1989 pp109-120

acknowledge that our basic models for God are not based exclusively on proof-texts or counting references in a concordance... The numerous scriptural references to God as father and the relative paucity of references to God as mother would not in itself settle the question of the most appropriate model for God.'[329]

McWilliams offers three areas though in which he considers the model to be weak. The first is that although McFague allows for friends to be unequal in status, it is 'not always clear how God transcends his friends'. McWilliams feels that McFague's proposals would get a wider reception from evangelicals if they were better able to balance immanence and transcendence.

Secondly he criticises the lack of exegetical support she provides for her model. However he feels that such support could be given and cites Terence Fretheim's *The Suffering of God* as an example of where such exegesis, reaching a similar position to McFague, has been done.

Thirdly, while McWilliams notes that McFague is addressing herself to the economic Trinity rather than the eternal Trinity he is uncomfortable with such a distinction saying 'Evangelicals would ordinarily hold to a clear connection between the eternal and economic trinities.'[330]

However he goes on to say that 'What you see is what God really is; God's revelation as triune reflects his inner nature'[331] so it is clear that there are extensive methodological differences between his position and McFague's. It is still the case though that here is a further example of the need for McFague's models to be related constructively to traditional ones if they are to gain wider acceptance, especially when a particular model shows a certain likeness to a traditional model or in some sense is a translation or transformation of one. That McWilliams provides examples of how this

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329 McWilliams p118
330 p119
331 p119

work might be done and the benefits of it further strengthens this argument.

By far the most thorough discussion of this model is provided by Lambert.[332] Lambert is writing primarily for members of the Evangelical Covenant Church, one of a number of current and historical Christian movements to call themselves Friends of God. Before discussing McFague's presentation of the model, Lambert charts the historic use of the image in theology and hymnody and this is helpful in better establishing the traditional warrants of the model. Lambert concludes this historical survey by lamenting the fact that 'the intimate and assuring relational possibilities of 'friend' language have remained unarticulated in a comprehensive doctrine of God.'[333]

Lambert then goes on to offer a theology of mission based upon McFague's model of Friend. This model is remarkable because although including a powerful discussion of the ability of friendship to overcome the existential alienation of the individual, Lambert also is one of the few scholars to take up the universalism and creation-directed nature of McFague's models (the majority of treatments tend to overlook or pay only lip-service to this universal context – God as Mother, Lover and Friend *of the World*). Lambert is probably more successful than McFague in holding together the personal and the universal aspects and provides an answer to Ring's objection to McFague that she 'strip[s] the personal of its relational component'.[334]

Lambert's work is a valuable supplement to McFague's on a number of counts, for example her understanding of truth under this model being one of

'authenticity in relationship ...[which] can never be mistaken for one or more propositions, and revelation can neither be identified with nor confined to a

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332 Jean C Lambert 'Befriending in God's Name: A preface to a missionary theology of God as Friend' *Covenant Quarterly* 46 1988 pp37-68
333 p43
334 Ring p660. Ring goes on to say 'Why cannot there be a personal, as distinct from individualistic, relationship between God and the person? There exists a whole literature that insists that one's personal relationship with God is truncated if it does not evolve into a life inclusive of all.'

book'[335]

Lambert goes on to apply the friend model constructively to thirteen major traditional theological categories, including the persons of the Trinity, sin, worship and hope. This is an instructive example of how McFague's metaphors may be made to work transformationally with the tradition rather than against it.

Considering McFague's presentation of God as Friend we again see the same features as in our above discussions. A number of points are of particular interest.

In the first place, once more we meet the use of composite models to complement and correct each other. In this case it is the friend-host composite. The same process, though in a less worked-through form, is at work in the relationships between the models of Mother, Lover and Friend themselves.

Again the greater part of novel and valuable work is being done at the conceptual level and this is particularly illustrated by this model. The actual application of the model is much more in keeping with McFague's proposed method of exploring the translation of 'associated commonplaces' from one domain to the other. However this is only possible once considerable conceptual work has been done on the concept of friendship. This springs from the model's main weakness, the fact that, as McFague admits, it is not clear what the associated commonplaces of friendship are.

Finally the same problems of relating to the tradition are seen again. These are highlighted by the difference in presentation between *Metaphorical Theology* and *Models of God*. It must be asked, especially in the light of the foregoing, why isn't McFague's pneumatology based around a Spirit-friend composite? Why does she not use her model of friend to reform an existing element of the tradition by supplementing and qualifying it as she does for her own models? Just as McFague connects her models to traditional concepts such as *philia*, and in doing so transforms understanding

335 Lambert p55

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of the concept, so the same process could be applied to traditional doctrines, models and images. McFague expends considerable effort in 'redeeming' *eros* and *philia* in particular from their potentially individualistic and exclusive interpretations. It is strange that the same is not done for the doctrine of the Spirit. Once again the gains made by the model of God as friend may not compensate for the resultant narrowing of the range of questions that can be addressed by this theology. This narrowing is caused by the loss of traditional models, and the friend model would not necessarily be incompatible with these models.

4.12 Conclusions.

So in the course of this chapter we have seen these three of McFague's proposed new models for God in relationship perform well in the main according to the criteria derived from her theoretical work. They are indeed coherent on their own terms and consistent with her aims. They remain a relevant theological resource for the reform of the Christian tradition and endure the scrutiny of her respondents. But at the same time, the qualifications to this view provided in previous chapters have been borne out once more and attention has been directed back to her method and theory. Where it was seen in previous chapters that challenges to some areas of her method may invite some modification, the exploration of these particular models here has further supported this assertion.

The discussions in this chapter, including the attempts to evaluate the success of these models in practice, suggest several areas where this strengthening may be beneficial to further enhance the ability of new models to meet McFague's aims. These

areas are, firstly, that it is a methodological mistake to compare models as being 'better' than another *for a time* and that rather we should think of models as being better *for one aspect of a task* in a given context. This is because no one model can address all of the complexities of the abundant life in an ecological, nuclear (and hence, extremely complicated) age. Secondly, that conceptual work is more important than McFague allows and further that the formation of concepts is more readily a collaborative process in which multiple models and insights may be brought to bear than is the formation of images or even composite models. Thirdly, our observations here have shed a critical light on McFague's criteria for what it means to say that a model is 'Christian'.

These conclusions can be derived thus:

It is difficult to assess whether a model will produce ethically better results in an 'age' given the complexities of the world. It is more realistic to say that certain images make better models in a given context for conceptualising *certain tasks*.

We have seen that the replacement of one model by another is a process of gain *and loss,* as McFague herself stresses. However we have also seen that many differ from McFague in their assessment of the *value* of what is lost. We have commented here especially on the near-total loss of eschatology and with it the loss of metaphorical theology's ability to critique the fundamental ordering of the world as opposed to its contingent arrangement at any particular time. For example, while McFague's account is able to offer hope in the face of the suffering caused by ecological damage and economic exploitation, it cannot offer a coherent response to the basic constraints caused by the fact that world has a greater capacity to produce life than it has to sustain it and that certain forms of life necessarily depend for their existence upon the destruction or suffering of others.

Also, the losses in terms of powerful models that have long been part of the

Christian tradition, such as the loss of any ontological understanding of the incarnation, are also very significant and it is doubtful that the resulting loss of explanatory power and fit with Christian experience is entirely compensated for by the insights resulting from the models that replace them.

Given this, it would seem that attention should be given to the *task* of particular models, that is, which aspects of experience they relate to and what ethical results they are trying to achieve. This focus would allow for the requirements of particular contexts but would not require a model to accomplish all tasks in a given context. For example, particular models with eschatological implications or particular models of sin and salvation, would be useful for helping a critique of those aspects of creation that are outside potential human control, while other models, such as McFague's, may be more appropriate to the task of motivating human action on those things which *are* within our control. The point is that *both* are necessary for Christian theology to be more comprehensive. McFague's presentations of her models (whatever her methodological statements in other places) are in terms of an 'either or' approach to using models, rather than 'both and'.

McFague's own presentation illustrates how small and seemingly exclusive clusters of models may in fact be related together. However, the use of multiple models raises again the difficult question of how models relate to each other and how such a project would retain its cohesion, but this chapter has also directed attention again to the role of the 'concept' and its ability to unite models in tension. It is possible that an answer may lie here.

We have seen at each stage of the assessments above that the particular value of McFague's models is the way in which they help to reform and refine concepts, such as *agape,* justice and healing. These concepts are also informed by traditional models and

images. Concepts, then, are the meeting place between new models and existing ones and it is at this level that metaphorical theology makes its most valuable contribution to Christian theology. At the conceptual level, the need for conceptual coherence requires the constructive engagement of models with each other. At this level the new models are engaging with the traditional ones indirectly, in a way that does not assume that one model must prevail over and against another but that both can interact to form an enriched and more comprehensive concept with greater explanatory power.   Thus it is at the level of the concept that theology can most easily become the type of collegial, collaborative enterprise McFague wishes it to be. The conceptual level is also that at which McFague's project becomes reforming rather than revolutionary since it is here that she is working creatively with material that can be identified as Christian.

The findings of this chapter have begun to call into question McFague's criteria for models to be considered Christian. Indeed it must be asked whether in fact a model, in and of itself, can be considered Christian at all. What if, instead of looking for coherence with a root metaphor as sufficient condition for the Christian status, we were to take McFague's other attempt at answering this question and focus on the Christian community as a diverse, fluid, sociologically defined entity? If this was combined with a new focus on *task* ,this may produce a different understanding.

Seen in this way, to say that a model is Christian would be to say for example, that the model is used by a Christian community in a way that is consonant with their characteristic practices.

However, a desire for the fulfilment of all (for example) would be consistent with the goals of most Christian communities but this desire alone is not sufficient to define these communities uniquely as Christian. Instead, Christian communities, could perhaps be uniquely defined by their creative and constructive engagement with

particular narratives provided necessarily (though it does not have to be held, sufficiently) by scripture and inherited and evolving reflections upon it. Understood in this way the question would not be whether or not a particular model is itself 'Christian' but how and why that model might be taken up and used by a Christian community and, as part of that, how it might relate to the communities inherited and evolving narrative reflections.

These arguments will be explored further in the next chapter as consideration is given to McFague's most extended exposition of a model, the model of the World as God's Body, with the above comments in mind. Particular focus will be on two of the book's major themes, Christology and Eschatology, since these are two areas in which this chapter has been particularly critical of McFague.

Chapter 5 – The World as God's Body.

5.1 Introduction.

In the previous chapter a number of questions and issues were raised concerning the application of McFague's methodology to concrete models of God in relationship. Attention was drawn to the role and importance of concepts in her models as was done previously when her theory was examined. Again the value of McFague's work was suggested to be largely at the conceptual level. This differs from McFague's own view in that, in the light of her respondents, these concepts were found to be integral to the process of exploring a model and metaphor, rather than being a secondary level of reflection upon them. That is, most of the meaning McFague draws from the model was to be found in an exploration of its associated concepts and not in the less abstract structure of the model itself.

In the previous chapter it was questioned whether McFague's models are indeed acting as 'metaphorical models' as she has defined them, in the sense that they do not generally involve the mapping of 'associated commonplaces' from one domain to the other. A question was also raised concerning the adequacy of McFague's criterion for the acceptance of models as Christian. That criterion was the strength of their relationship to a particular root-metaphor. Finally concerns were raised over the loss of traditional doctrines (and especially their explanatory power and scope) resulting from her presentation of her models and the resulting impact this may have on her ability to be reforming within the tradition. This was especially the case in the areas of Christology and Eschatology, and this was argued on the grounds that such loss is not logically required by her models and that such loss may result in a decrease in the overall explanatory scope and inclusiveness of the tradition.

This chapter examines McFague's presentation of the model of the world as

God's Body, as presented in her book *The Body of God* and associated articles, with these questions in mind.[336]   It then looks at McFague's most recently published work for any changes to her positions in these key areas in the most recent phase of her work, to see whether she has modified her theology in the light of her respondents on these questions.

5.2 Criteria for the World as God's Body.

Concerns were raised about the criteria McFague used in *Models of God* to evaluate her models, especially in relation to evaluating the Christian status of models. It is therefore significant to note that in *The Body of God*, McFague expanded her presentation of these criteria. While McFague does not intend the following list to be exhaustive it is significant that she says:

> 'A sampling of some of these reasons [for accepting a model] includes our own embodied, cultural experience; the testimony of significant communities to which we belong; the view of reality current in our time and the usefulness of a perspective, model, or construct for humane living.'[337]

Here the 'testimony of the significant community' she is interested in is the Judeo-Christian theological tradition, including the Scriptures. This is because it is the tradition that has shaped not only McFague's own understanding but also the cultural understanding of the Western world in which she writes. She also believes that this tradition,

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336 It should be noted that McFague is far from the only writer to have presented a model of the world as in some sense God's body, however a detailed comparison with the extensive and varied literature around this area would fall outside our focus here. Instead, attention will be drawn only to the particularly distinctive features of McFague's account in this regard.

337 Sallie McFague, *The Body of God* London: SCM Press 1993 p85

'With radical revision ... can be [a] prophetic means of liberating the oppressed.'[338]

This 'radical revision' is of course important to McFague and she regards this as the key difference between her own approach and that of 'narrative theology', citing Lindbeck as a representative figure of this school.[339] This distinction is substantiated by Reynolds who has compared the theologies of McFague and Lindbeck in detail and concluded that the principal differences between them are not so much methodological as in their evaluations of the past and potential future performances of the tradition.[340] We have already seen that McFague's reading of the tradition and its ability to promote environmental sustainability is less than positive, but also that this reading is open to challenge.

A further notable feature of *The Body of God* is that McFague began to move away from a focus on 'root-metaphor' as the unifying factor of Christian doctrine and towards an understanding of Christian identity rooted within a particular context and community; that is towards a more sociological rather than theoretical understanding of the status of a model as Christian. Indeed, in it, she describes any attempt to locate the 'essence' of a tradition as 'futile'.[341] Given the difficulties already observed in separating McFague's 'root-metaphor of the Christian paradigm' from such a 'timeless essence', it is likely that this desire to avoid defining a Christian essence is her reason for moving away from a focus on root-metaphor.

Instead McFague takes some central Christian themes, especially the doctrines of the incarnation and the resurrection of the body and develops her model in the light of a reinterpretation of these, as we shall see. However this is not a move on her part towards finding continuity with Christianity at the level of particular *models*. Her

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338*Ibid.* p87
339See *The Body of God* p240 n60
340Terrence Reynolds 'Parting Company At Last: Lindbeck and McFague in Substantive Theological Dialogue' *Concordia Theological Quarterly* 63 Ap 1999 pp 97-118.
341 *The Body of God* p240 n 61

understanding of these doctrines and her engagement with them is, as we shall see, still highly conceptual.

This move, away from a root metaphor functioning to all intents and purposes as an 'essence' and towards a broader interpretation of the tradition, results in a heightened concern with biblical texts and traditional theological writers and themes when compared with previous works.[342] *The Body of God* is also in some respects more 'orthodox', especially on the subject of pneumatology than previous works as we shall see. However, this change of criteria also results in less clarity on the issue of what is and is not Christian for McFague. For example, little guidance is given as to what constitutes a valid interpretation of the Christian tradition and what does not. As will be seen when looking at Christology below, while Christianity provides a direction of ethical concern for her model of Jesus, again the result is a narrower Christianity, one less able to address concerns that are not McFague's immediate ones. This change in criteria may been seen as a move in the right direction, because it offers the potential for a broader engagement and richer dialogue between McFague's models and the tradition they aim to reform, however it does not fully rectify the situation because it does not fully locate her work relative to this tradition. It thereby threatens this aspect of the coherence of her project.

Her remaining criteria, those of fit with experience and of pragmatic concern for ethical living, remain very much as before, but the criterion for fit with 'the view of reality current in our time' finds fresh expression in this period of her work in a significant way. This criterion has in mind what McFague calls 'post-modern science', especially evolutionary biology and big-bang cosmology. These provide important motifs and also set important limits within her theology.

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342 A trend continued further in her later presentation of these ideas in 'The World as God's Body' *Concillium* 2002/2 pp50-56

Firstly, McFague presents an understanding of the 'common creation story' of contemporary cosmology interpreted so as to stress both the emergence of genuine novelty (and thus a focus on radical particularity and diversity of 'bodies' within the universe) and the common origin of all things in a particular 'event' (such as the 'big bang') within which everything that is was once united (thus reopening the way to a recovered sacramentality on the basis of the original unity of all things).

Secondly she presents a reading of evolutionary theory that stresses the mutual interdependence of all things living and non-living, after an organic rather than mechanistic model, but an account that also reserves causal explanation to 'local causes' and defies any attempt to identify any purposeful agency or guided planning behind this process. She is insistent that any discernment of direction or purpose into the evolutionary process can only be done after the fact, 'metaphorically', that is as a 'reading into' the story that cannot be warranted by the scientific data or theories themselves. Her reading of this account stresses the importance of life in and for itself, but does not imply that life or any particular species is the goal of evolution. It also, she believes, prioritises life and embodiment over will, mind, control or purpose.

> 'The 'wonderful life' that has evolved, in all its unbelievable diversity and complex interdependencies, is what is important ... not that its diversity and interconnectedness were willed by some principle or divine power other than the play of chance and law.'[343]

The range of topics covered in McFague's work, from evolutionary biology, to contemporary cosmology, through epistemology, economics, biblical criticism and systematic theology is truly vast and itself illustrates the complexity that lies behind the search for a recontextualised theology. It is a particular strength of McFague's work that she is careful to build on well established foundations and avoid placing too much

[343] *The Body of God* pp45-6

weight on particular details or controversial or marginal positions in the fields she covers while side-stepping the very many important and contentious questions that these throw up where these questions are peripheral and would detract from her central thesis. It is not the *particular accounts* (for example of evolutionary process or economic theory) on which McFague draws that provide the novelty and value of her work but the *fact that she draws from them at all.* Consequently the details of these 'extra-theological' sources or debates in these areas need not be considered here. Instead, discussions will be confined to the theological use that McFague makes of her sources, particularly in light of the four concerns above.

5.3 The meaning of World as God's Body.

Here, and in the following two sections, the main themes of McFague's presentation are briefly outlined, with the focus being on allowing McFague's ideas to speak for themselves and make the points and emphases that she wishes to make. An assessment of these ideas follows in section 5.6.

In the face of ecological and nuclear threats, McFague argues, the particular contribution of Christianity is that it is the religion of incarnation and thus of the body. Therefore 'body' should be elevated to the same ranks of revered metaphors as 'father' and 'king'. However, rather than the spiritualisation associated with much of the traditional use of body, such as with reference to the spiritual food of the Eucharist, McFague wishes to use the metaphor of God's embodiment to direct attention to the physical bodies, living and even non-living that make up our universe.

'It forces us too think about human bodies that are hungry, thirsty, overworked unhoused, sick, mutilated, imprisoned, raped, murdered. A focus on the body

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prohibits us from spiritualizing human pain, from centering on existential anxiety, from substituting otherworldly salvation for this-worldly oppression. Whatever else salvation can and ought to mean, it does involve, says the body model, first and foremost, the well-being of the body. A theology that works within the context of the body model claims that bodies matter, that they are indeed the main attraction.'[344]

This focus McFague regards as revolutionary and prophetic in our culture.
'A society that allows thousands of homeless people to roam the streets with no protection for their bodies; that spends, on the average, more for the last week of a dying elderly person's hospital care than for the medical needs of the first ten years of a child's life; that refuses in international congresses to join other nations in protecting biodiversity and limiting chemicals that contribute to global warming: this society hates the body, human bodies, and all other animal and plant bodies that make up the body of our planet.'[345]

This act of looking *at* the body is itself done *from* a body. We as observers are actually embodied participants in what we observe. This means that bodies matter in the *process* of observation as well as being what is observed, (in other words bodies are both the object *and subject* in the observation process). McFague also wishes to stress strongly the embodied nature, and thus the radical particularity, of what is observed; that is the act of observation is an act of granting autonomous status and value to other (body) as and for what it is. It is in Iris *Murdoch's phrase* 'the realisation that something other than oneself is real.' This 'attention epistemology' is a loving act, the 'loving eye' that we discussed in chapter 3.

'An attention epistemology is central to embodied knowing and doing, for it takes

344 *Ibid.* p18
345 *Ibid.* p24

with utmost seriousness the differences that separate all beings: the individual, unique site from which each is in itself and for itself. Embodiment means paying attention to differences, and we can learn this lesson best perhaps when we gauge our response to a being very unlike ourselves, not only to another human being (who may be different in skin color or sex or economic status), but to a being who is indifferent to us and whose existence we cannot absorb into our own—such as a kestrel (or turtle or tree). If we were to give such a being our attention, we would most probably act differently than we presently do toward it.'[346]

A focus on bodies and consequently on the physical needs of bodies results in a focus on the concepts of space and place. McFague uses the concept of space to expand on the concepts of diversity and unity she derived from the common creation story, and to add an ethical imperative.

'First, space is a levelling, democratic notion that places us on a par with all other life-forms. ... The category of space reminds us not only that each and every life-form needs space for its own physical needs, but also that we all exist together in one space, our finite planet or, in terms of our model, within the nurturing matrix of God's body. We are all enclosed together in the womblike space of our circular planet, the indispensable space from which we derive our nourishment ... Each and every life-form needs its own particular space and habitat in which to grow and flourish ... Yet all these differences and special needs must be satisfied within one overarching space, the body of our planet.'[347]

When considered in relation to one particular species, and especially the human species, space becomes place. This idea of place has two fold meaning. Firstly 'our proper place' in relation to others and the environment becomes the focus of justice and

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346 *The Body of God* p50
347 *Ibid.* pp100-101

righteousness and a failure to keep to our place becomes the definition of sin under this model. Secondly, 'our place' becomes 'our home', the concept of place then not only carries a negative meaning, that is a limit on human ambition and activity, but also a positive meaning, that is a sense of identification with and belonging to the space that we occupy. These two are linked because the attitude one has to a space to which one belongs can be expected to be quite different from the attitude one might have to the space one simply occupies.

But consider more specifically the model of the world as not only *a* body but *God's* body. There are two aspects of this that require particular elucidation.

Firstly, the stress placed upon unity and diversity also has an impact upon the type of body used to model the body of God. McFague introduces her discussions on the body of God with a stress on the diversity of bodies that make up the world and several moves that combine to reorientate theology away from an anthropocentric perspective and towards one that sees our bodies as one with many bodies, including, but very much not limited to, diverse human bodies. These other bodies are to be considered valuable in and for themselves. Thus the body of God is not to be regarded as a human body, or indeed any specific body. In fact it is quite unlike any body since it is a diverse 'body of bodies'. In a passage that recalls her discussions of metaphor itself she writes:

'The organic model that emerges ... is not the orderly, limited, clearly defined classic one based on the human (male) body, with its unity of the one ideal life-form ... Rather, it is wild, strange, and unconventional (from the perspective of the classic model), for in place of one, ideal body, it includes all the bodies that were, are, and shall be here on this planet and throughout the universe—from the slimy bodies of primitive worms to supernovas and black holes, from the elegant bodies

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of tigers and seals to coral reefs, viruses, and birch trees. And since this body includes everything that is, what characterizes it above all else is diversity, not sameness.' [348]

In making this move McFague trades some of the clarity that might be gained by modelling the world after a particular concrete body, in favour of a more abstract concept of 'body', in order to avoid what she sees as the pitfalls of elevating any one body, and particularly the 'perfect', male, human body to the status of archetypal body. She does not wish a particular body to be allowed to stand as representative of all bodies because this would not be inclusive. It is precisely the nature of bodies as unique and individual that necessitates for her an abstract category of 'body' with which to represent them because no one body is sufficiently like all other bodies to stand as the typical case.

However, in a later (2002) presentation, McFague greatly strengthens the coherence of this model by adding the observation, not of course novel, that bodies, including our own, are themselves diverse as well as united, and that this balance is crucial. This returns the image of the body to a more intuitive, if still unspecific one. She says:

'In an organism or body, the whole flourishes *only* when all the different parts function well; in fact, the 'whole' is nothing but each and every individual part doing its particular thing successfully. Nothing is more unified than a well functioning body but, also, nothing relies more on complex, diverse individuality.'[349]

Of more significance is the relationship that McFague sees this model providing

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348 *Ibid.* p47
349 ' The World as God's Body' p52. The words 'nothing but' should be taken as rhetorical emphasis and not a reductionist view of bodies which would be quite against McFague's general position.

between God's transcendence and immanence. In the model of the World as God's body, God is not seen as being equivalent to the world only (which would be pantheism – a complete collapse of transcendence). As the world is modelled as the Body of God, God is not in turn being modelled as simply a body. Rather God is being modelled as embodied spirit. This is in contrast to many presentations of divine action that have explored a model of God relating to the world as the *mind* relates to the body.

This model, much debated particularly at the time McFague wrote *Body of God*, has been shown to have considerable difficulties, many of which concentrate around the fact that the relationships between mind and body, and indeed the nature of mind itself, are far from clear and settled questions.[350] (Polkinghorne[351] argues for example that the structure of the universe is 'nothing like' the structure of the brain and Peterson that the mind/body understanding of God and the world would necessarily imply that God is an emergent property of the world.[352])

McFague's presentation avoids these objections by focusing on spirit rather than mind. This focus is also part of McFague's feminist project since 'mind' prioritises will, intention and control while spirit speaks of empowering and enlivening. For example, when applied to evolution, the model of God as spirit, as opposed to mind,

'does not claim that the divine mind is the cause of what evolutionary theory tells us can only have local causes; rather it suggests that we think of these local causes as enlivened and empowered by the breath of God.'[353]

McFague's hope in presenting the God-world relationship in this way is that 'since, as we recall, our tendency is not only to model God in our image but to model ourselves on the models with which we imagine God, the metaphor of

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350 For a good summary of this debate see Gregory Peterson 'Minds and Bodies: Human and Divine' *Zygon* vol. 32, no. 2 (June 1997) pp189-206

351 John Polkinghorne *The Faith of a Physicist: Reflections of a Bottom-up Thinker* Minneapolis: Fortress Press 1996

352' Whither Panentheism' *Zygon,* vol. 36, no. 3 (September 2001) pp395-406

353 *The Body of God* p145

breath rather than mind might help us to support, rather than control, life in all its forms. Thus, in a spirit theology, we might see ourselves as united with all other living creatures through the breath that moves through all parts of the body, rather than as the demilords who order and control nature.'[354]

God, then, is both spirit (transcendent) and the body of the world (immanent). This is a deft move on McFague's part, but it raises the concern (for McFague) of dualism. Spirit is a category that she rejected in Models of God as we saw in the previous chapter. In *The Body of God* a doctrine of spirit, including the Holy Spirit, is recovered. However McFague is well aware of the dualistic overtones of this language and seeks to present an understanding of spirit that is grounded in material reality. On this understanding,

> 'Spirit is a wide-ranging, multidimensional term with many meanings built upon its physical base as the breath of life. We speak of a person's spirit, their vigor, courage, or strength; of team spirit, the collective energy of people at play; of the spirit of '76 or the spirit of Tienanmen Square, the vitality, grit, and resolution of a people banding together in a common cause to oppose oppression; of a spirited horse or the spirit of a sacred grove — animals, trees mountains can also have spirit. All of these connotations are possible because of the primary meaning of spirit as the breath of life.'[355]

For McFague, this understanding of spirit not only avoids dualism by rooting spirit in the material, but also, for the same reason, provides an account of transcendence that is accessed through the immanent and everyday. This is an immanent transcendence.

Finally it is important to understand that both spirit and body are metaphors, it is

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354 *Ibid.*
355 *The Body of God* p143

not that God *is* spirit and that the world is metaphorically his/her body, but that both terms are equally metaphorical.

5.4 Christology and the Body.

Simply presenting the world as God's body does not itself imply any particular ethic. Neither does evolutionary biology. Thus McFague turns to the 'Christic Paradigm', a reading of the Christian narrative and especially the gospel narratives of Jesus, to provide both a scope and a shape to the body model. However she does so in a way that has considerable consequences for traditional Christology.

'McFague is explicit that her focus on incarnation, God's embodiment, is intended to meet two priorities. The first is to,

> 'relativise the incarnation in relation to Jesus of Nazareth and the second is to maximize it in relation to the cosmos. In other words, the proposal is to consider Jesus as paradigmatic of what we find everywhere: everything that is is the sacrament of God (the universe as God's body).'[356]

The first priority, relativising the incarnation in relation to Christ, is intended to address what she calls the 'scandal of uniqueness', the idea that,

> 'claims that God is embodied in one place and one place only: in the man Jesus of Nazareth. He and he alone is 'the image of the invisible God' (Col. 1:15). The source, power, and goal of the universe is known through and only through a first-century Mediterranean carpenter. The creator and redeemer of the fifteen-billion-year history of the universe with its hundred billion galaxies (and their billions of stars and planets) is available only in a thirty-year span of one human being's life

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356 *The Body of God* p162

on planet earth.'[357]

However she does add,

'Here and there we find [God's] presence erupting in special ways. Jesus is one such place for Christians.'[358]

Her second priority, to maximise the Incarnation in relation to the cosmos, is very much shaped by the traditional character of the incarnation in Christ. That is, the universal incarnation is given its shape and scope, its structure and detail, by the qualities exhibited by Jesus, (or more accurately, McFague's reading of Jesus). This reading of Jesus is not substantially different from that which informs all her works and that has been considered previously, so this ground will not be covered again here. Suffice it to say that the scope of the body is universal and yet its distinctive characteristic is that it is especially and explicitly inclusive of the poor and needy, and its shape is a bias towards the outcast and the oppressed based on the key themes of Jesus' ministry: destabilising parables, table fellowship and healing.[359]

What is important is that McFague takes the universality and inclusiveness she finds in Jesus and extends it to be inclusive of nature, of all bodies, as well as human ones. In this scheme, nature is seen as the 'new poor'. However this statement requires two important qualifications. Firstly the status of nature as poor does not mean that 'the poor' as traditionally understood are replaced, only that they are joined by nature, or that part of nature that is oppressed, as the ethical focus of Christianity. Secondly:

'Nature as the new poor does not mean that we should sentimentalize nature or slip into such absurdities as speaking of 'oppressed mosquitoes or rocks'. Rather,

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357 *Ibid.* 159
358 *Ibid.* p162
359 For a fuller exploration of how the body McFague proposes can be better shaped to include a fuller range of human bodies, and especially those with a disability, see Deborah Creamer 'Including all bodies in the Body of God' *Journal of Religion, Disability and Health* Vol 9 Issue 4 January 2006 pp 55-69

nature as the new poor means that *we have made nature poor.* It is a comment not about the workings of natural selection but about human sin. It is a cold hard look at what one part of nature, we human beings, have done to the rest of it … Nature is not necessarily and as such poor; it is so only because of *one* species, our own.'[360]

Despite saying that this is not a comment on natural selection, McFague does see this bias to the poor as not only a 'scandal' by conventional human standards but also by evolutionary ones. Now evolution, she says, can be cultural and social as well as biological and in this sense we may choose to side with outcasts and see this as a continuous part of our evolution.[361] However this inclusivity goes beyond the utilitarian base that could be justified by this evolutionary view; a view that would see us exhibiting solidarity only with those weaker bodies that we *needed* to survive and flourish. Ultimately she says,

'At this point, I believe we have no choice but to admit that the radical inclusiveness that is at the heart of Christian faith, especially inclusion of the oppressed, is not compatible with evolution, even cultural evolution. For as we have seen, its view of sinful human nature deepens the notion of the ecological sinner: the bloated self refusing to share. Hence, even the best of cultural evolution, from a Christian perspective, is lacking, for we 'naturally' construct our worlds to benefit ourselves, including only those who are useful to us.'[362]

McFague also sees Christianity as offering another distinctive contribution to the suffering of creation. This is the image of the Cosmic Christ – the risen Jesus, which is the Body of God interpreted Christologically. This not only means that the 'character' of

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360 *Models of God. p*p165-6
361 *The Body of God* p148, *Super, Natural Christians* p17
362 *Ibid.* p173

the world as God's body is an identification with the pain of the oppressed, suffering and outcast, but it also begins to unite transcendent and immanent ideas of salvation.

'The metaphor of the Cosmic Christ suggests that the cosmos is moving *toward* salvation and that this salvation is taking place *in* creation.'[363]

The addition of the resurrection and the Cosmic Christ to the common creation story evidently raises the question of eschatology and so this subject must now be considered.

5.5 Eschatology and the Body.

McFague's eschatology in *The Body of God* begins in the light of the common creation story with the observation that,

'we have been decentered as the point and goal of creation and recentered as God's partners in helping creation to grow and prosper in our tiny part of God's body.'[364]

This is a move that is welcomed by James Moore who points out that McFague's reading of cosmology as decentering is fundamentally different from that of many cosmologists including Tipler and even Paul Davies who see teleology rather than organic equality as lying behind nature. Moore finds their readings to be patriarchal.[365]

However other writers, while not necessarily wishing to make humanity the goal and purpose of the universe, find a flaw in the extreme nature of the idea of universal equality when applied directly to ethics. For example Grizzle and Barrett say,

'Our particular concern is that in their rush to do away with 'hierarchical' thinking and 'dualisms' of all kinds, eco-feminists seem to champion an almost blanket

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363 *Ibid.* p180
364 *Ibid.* p197
365 James Moore 'Cosmology and the Reemergence of Patriarchy' *Zygon* 30 no. 4 Dec 1995 pp613-634

notion that all components of creation are equal.'[366]

They also say,

'Clearly, God pronounces that creation is 'good' repeatedly in Genesis 1. And we in no way intend to trivialize these passages. However, they should not be taken to mean that everything about creation is to be valued and protected and simply declared 'good' in an unqualified way. For instance, should we strive to protect the AIDS or Ebola viruses so they do not go extinct? Are all species really equal and 'good'?'[367]

If further evidence of these ethical difficulties is needed, practical examples of the difficulties of balancing the competing needs of different organisms, even when a theological commitment to environmental equality rather than human-centeredness is present, the reader is referred to Cooper's 1995 case studies.[368]

However ethics are at the heart of McFague's eschatology as with the rest of her theology. We see this in an important passage, in which she defines eschatology as she understands it.

'Eschatology can mean many things. Often in the Christian tradition it has been concerned with death and the afterlife, with 'last things' such as judgment, hell and heaven, the second coming. But it can also mean the breaking in of new possibilities, of hope for a new creation. It can mean living from a vision for a different present based upon a new future. The future serves as both a goad and a goal, a goad with which to criticize the reigning paradigm and a goal to encourage

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366 Raymond E Grizzle and Christopher B Barrett 'The One Body of Christian Environmentalism' *Zygon* 33 no.2 June 1998 p241. They also provide here a summary of other attempts to theologically motivate environmentalism by using more traditional theological motifs and categories. It is significant that such projects are possible since this calls into question the radical rejection, rather than reinterpretation of such traditional elements in McFague's work.
367 *Ibid.* p240
368 Nigel S Cooper 'Wildlife Conservation in Churchyards: a case study in ethical judgements.' *Biodiversity and Conservation* 4 1995 pp916-928

us to bring into being a new one. We do not have a Utopia, an ideal community to which we can point where the new vision is being realized, where things are the way they ought to be; but we can have an 'Atopia,' an imagined world both prophetic and alluring from which we can judge what is wrong with the paradigm that has created the present crisis on our planet.'[369]

It is clear then, that when considering eschatology, McFague presses her focus on ethics for the here and now particularly strongly. This results in a strong ethical vision towards which human beings are able, and expected, to work, with the qualifier that we are partners with the creator and saviour of the world rather than bearing the entire burden ourselves. However as significant as what McFague does say in these passages is what she does not say. It is clear that she seeks a vision of the future which is not in any way causally discontinuous with the present. That is, her eschatology does not include any divine actions that fall outside the processes recognised by science or are unable to be affected by human beings. Other eschatologies, dependent upon the intervention of God in an act of New Creation in some way discontinuous with the present creation, could be seen to lessen the imperative for urgent human action. It is likely that McFague avoids them for precisely this reason. However this move does limit the scope of what her eschatology can critique. Specifically, only those things which can potentially be changed by human effort and cooperation can be critiqued by her account of eschatology. The ability of more traditional eschatologies to critique the very nature of the underlying structures of creation, structures that we are powerless to change, is lost from her presentation. McFague's models may then be arguably less well equipped to give voice to those human experiences of powerlessness and alienation, or cry for justice, in the face of situations that *cannot be changed* by human will or effort – such as in the face of death. McFague herself may well argue, we might imagine, that

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369 *Ibid.* pp198-9

this is a price worth paying, given the urgent need she feels to effect change in the areas in which human action can make a difference.

McFague's theology does touch on the underlying structures of nature in places, for example when she contrasts the Christian bias to the poor and outcast with the workings of natural selection, but in the general case, an ability to critique the inner workings of nature is exchanged for an ability to expound a direction for a contemporary ethical vision. This is a prime example of a problem already identified in her work, namely a narrowing of the ability of the Christian tradition to address the full range of human experience and concern. Traditional models, and the concerns that they address, are *replaced* (not supplemented) by models which have only been constructed to treat particular ethical issues and address particular, limited contexts. Because this results in a Christianity that is narrower and therefore excludes certain concerns, it can be questioned whether this is fully consistent with her stated desire to provide a more inclusive Christian tradition. It verges upon a hegemony of new models over and against the old.

There is a connected problem which McFague is aware of and this is that the ethical vision she advocates may not be achievable in reality. She imagines that someone might ask,

'The decay of our planet is probably inevitable, so we might as well just accept it. What real chance do we have of turning things around?'[370]

Clearly McFague cannot place too much weight or emphasis upon the action of God in turning things around. She does say,

'We are not the creators or saviors of creation, only the partners of the creator and savior. God, in the Christian paradigm, is on the side of the oppressed to liberate, heal and include them. That is God's main activity - and ours – in relation to

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370 *The Body of God* p207

creation. God, our embodied God, also suffers with all suffering bodies. And beyond even suffering we live with the hope against hope that defeat and death are not the last word, but that even the least body in the universe, the most insignificant, most vulnerable, most outcast one will participate in the resurrection of the body.'[371]

However she also says,

'One has to get up in the morning and look in the mirror. It may come to nothing more than that. But one does have to get up in the morning and keep going. How to do that? Throughout the centuries Christians have typically done so by being deeply rooted, personally and daily rooted, in God.'[372]

Thus McFague connects God and spirituality to her eschatology without making the latter entirely or primarily an action of God in which we are not involved.

Now, considered over cosmic time-scales and in relation to contemporary cosmology, the death of the planet, and probably the universe as a whole, appears inevitable. Whether this has any practical impact upon life as it is lived now is open to debate but the closest McFague comes to addressing this problem constructively is to say that as the world comes from God, it also grows towards God. However such far-future speculation is a long way from McFague's desire to focus on the here and now and the present features and challenges of our environment.

Connecting together the strands of McFague's Christology and Eschatology, she seems in much of her presentation to treat Christ as simply paradigmatic of God's universal incarnation, and therefore has been criticised for 'Christifying creation'.[373]

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371 *Ibid.* pp201-2
372 *Ibid.* p208
373 David A Scott in Kinmel (ed.) *op. cit.* pp237-256 p253

However there is an ambiguity in her Christology that perhaps arises from her awareness of the ambiguities of suffering inherent in the evolutionary process. In one passage she describes the resurrection as 'freeing' Christ from his body 'to be present in and to all bodies'.[374] This would seem to suggest a role for the cosmic Christ beyond that of illustrative paradigm, but this role is not expounded in any detail. It also hints at an element of discontinuity in the God-world relationship brought about through the resurrection, in line with more traditional theology, but, perhaps because McFague is keen to locate redemption entirely within the present world and human action, again this discontinuity remains to be unpacked.

McWilliams has provided an extensive analysis of these features of McFague's work, aided by a comparison with Moltmann's use of 'Cosmic Christ' Christology.[375]

He notes that Moltmann argues,

'If we were to confine the meaning of the resurrection within narrower boundaries ... whether existentially in the faith of the individual or historically in the hope of humanity, Christology would remain bogged down in the unreconciled nature of this world ... It is only a cosmic Christology which completes and perfects the existential and historical Christology.'[376]

McWilliams follows Moltmann not only in seeing a more traditional eschatology as necessary in the face of the ambiguities of evolution,[377] but as both a guard against despair and as a motivation. It is the answer to McFague's search for a reason to 'get out of bed in the morning'. Far from resulting in a disinterested or negligent attitude

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374 *Body of God* p179

375 Warren McWilliams 'Christic Paradigm and Cosmic Christ: Ecological Christology in the Theologies of Sallie McFague and Jürgen Moltmann' *Perspectives in Religious Studies (Journal of the NABPR)* 25 1998 pp341-355

376 Jürgen Moltmann *The Coming God: Christian Eschatology* Minn: Fortress Press 1996 p261 cited in McWilliams p347

377 'A *Christus evolutor* without a *Christus redemptor* is nothing other than a cruel *Christus selector*, a historical world-judge without compassion for the weak, and a breeder of life uninterested in the victims.' Moltmann, *The Way of Jesus Christ: Christology in Messianic Dimensions* trans. M Kohl Minn: Fortress Press 1990 p296 quoted in McWilliams p352

towards creation, an understanding of Christology that relates Cosmic Christ to both creation and redemption as well as to the life and teaching of Jesus of Nazareth may help fill in the gaps left by McFague's ambiguities in this area.

This would support McWilliams' contention that 'Mature evangelical theology has not so much been anti-nature or anti-ecology as neglectful of the theological resources in its heritage for a green theology.'[378]

It is arguable though, that while McFague's work is helpful in providing *new* resources for such a theology, she too has overlooked some of the resources present in her heritage.

5.6 Assessment of the 'God's Body' model.

McFague's account is valuable in a number of regards. Particularly praiseworthy is her attempt to take seriously the statements of contemporary science without committing a theology entirely to any one particular presentation of this. Secondly the ethical imperatives produced by such a theology are surely to be welcomed and the focus on bodies and the material is an important and timely contribution to a tradition that has a chequered history in these areas. Thirdly, McFague is very likely correct in asserting that the modelling of the world after organic rather than mechanistic metaphors is both appropriate and fruitful.

The objections and questions raised here, then, focus on two key issues. Firstly, accepting a model of the world as *a* body, we should ask whether McFague's ethic is dependent upon the world being specifically *God's* body. Secondly, we should consider further the question of the Christian status of the model.

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378 McWilliams p354

In relation to the observations in previous discussions concerning the role of concepts vs models, again it can be seen that the strengths of McFague's presentation are at the conceptual level. On this occasion, this is very much linked to her desire to avoid modelling the world after any specific body; and this out of concern that neither the particularity and diversity of bodies in the world be lost from view, or that one body become idealised and deified over and above others. This means that the 'body' referred to in the model 'the world as God's body' is an abstract concept of body, separated from its imagistic base and separated from the physical properties of particular bodies. It is not a case of mapping 'associated commonplaces' as using a model would be in McFague's understanding, since this abstract body has very few defined features to map. Again it is an exploration of the concepts associated with being 'embodied' and 'embodying'.

In the light of this we can see that, in relation to ongoing questions concerning the way models are applied, *The Body of God* is largely an exploration of the theme of embodiment and the kinds and needs of bodies, rather than the explication of a correspondence model of the world and its relationship to God. This is particularly evident in McFague's article 'The Earth is a Body: Seeking a new paradigm'[379] in which the earth is modelled as 'a body' rather than explicitly 'God's body' and yet much of what McFague seeks to achieve is possible on the basis of this more general category.

Indeed the main point of direct correspondence McFague envisages through the model is the relationship between spirit and body, standing as a metaphor for the immanence and transcendence of God. However despite the advantages of this approach that were seen above, this aspect is perhaps the least coherent and consistent part of McFague's presentation. It is undermined especially by the very contemporary scientific and non-dualistic approach that McFague draws upon. However widely she

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379 'The Earth is a Body: Seeking a New Paradigm' *Voices Across Boundaries* 2004 Fall pp11-13

draws upon images for the idea of spirit, from physical breath to psychological states of inspiration or courage, each example is, in human experience and understanding, an example in which the spirit is dependent upon the body.[380] Further, although McFague does not address this point herself, the common creation story can arguably most naturally be read to suggest that spirit evolved out of matter. This may be understood to imply that spirit is a higher level emergent property of matter.[381] This would not be a problem for McFague's anthropology or indeed her theology at any other point. However it does not correspond well to, in fact it is in direct opposition to, her theology of God as the source of all being. In her particular model of the world as God's body, the spirit is not the *source* of the body. Instead, on this presentation, it appears that the opposite is true. The combination of 'the world as God's body' and 'God as spirit' suggests that God becomes transcendent out of the world at some point after it began. This radical process theology is not, however, the standpoint McFague is trying to support.[382]

McFague, in common with other panentheists also faces problems over the questions of evil and suffering. B J Carroll argues that McFague's metaphorical identification of God and the world must imply a degree of resemblance between God and the world, quoting McFague to this effect.[383] Carroll goes on to quote extensively from Annie Dillard. Dillard employs an attention epistemology very much like McFague's in order to discern the properties of the god reflected in nature. But Carroll

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380 A point made briefly in Southgate et al (eds.) *God Humanity and the Cosmos*: *A Textbook in Science and Religion* Edinburgh: T&T Clark 1999 p216

381 This is the view taken, for example, by Warren Brown and Nancy Murphy in their articles, respectively 'Cognitive Contributions to Soul' and 'Nonreductive Physicalism: Philosophical Issues' in W Brown, N Murphy and H Malony (eds.) *What happened to the Soul* Minneapolis, MN: Ausberg Fortress 1998

382 McFague is doubtless aware of this difficulty to some degree since she remarks that God is 'embodied, but not necessarily or totally' (*The Body of God* p150) but this move simply muddies the waters since it is not clear what it means to be embodied less than totally or what contribution this makes to the model under consideration.

383 B J Carroll 'Models of God or Models of Us' *Encounter* 52 (Spring) 1991 pp183-196 citing (p185) McFague *Models of God* p135 '[the world] will be like God ... all phenomena in reality have the potential for reflecting the deity.'

sees Dillard as doing so while paying particular attention to the evil and suffering innate within nature. Carroll ends by concluding that, 'In nature the emphasis is on what is rather than what ought to be,'[384] and argues that the same must therefore be true of God.

Carroll acknowledges that McFague could argue that God *endures* such evil, rather than *causes* it. But, I would argue, while a distinction between personal experience and body can be appropriate for human beings (we experience our bodies acting beyond our control or in ways which do us harm or cause us pain) translating this distinction to God may well have undesired theological consequences. It may imply that God is at the mercy of his/her 'body' in a similar sense to the way we find ourselves at the mercy of ours. We may be left with the feeling that such a close identification between the world and God is undesirable theologically, especially if there are other ways of imaging the empathy between God and the suffering of the world. For example, traditional models such as that of the incarnation of God in Jesus might provide a starting point for reflection about God that is able to find God identifying with, and participating in, human experiences of embodiment. This may enable a conceptual theological exploration of the themes of embodiment, and yet still allow a separation between God and world to take into account the problem of evil.

Moving on to another key concern of our project, the judgement concerning 'what is and ought to be' in nature is very significant because it draws attention back to the role of eschatology and its importance in assisting with the theological task of both affirming the value of, and yet at the same time critiquing, the 'way the world is'.

If the idea that the world is *a body* is useful (as it has been argued here to be), but the idea that the body in question is *God's* body contradicts the priority of God over the creation and the otherness of the creation from God, the question becomes whether much is lost from McFague's theology if the world is held to be simply a body in some

384 *Ibid.* p194

other relationship with God.

Many commentators[385] find an identification, albeit metaphorical, between God and the world to be contrary to the Judeo-Christian tradition which is often at pains (particularly in the Old Testament) to separate God from creation in contrast with pantheistic religions. However the precise God-world relationship envisaged by Old Testament writers is difficult to pin down simply, and McFague is not suggesting a simple or literal identification between the two. The objection here is different. It centres on McFague's consistency between her own views on the priority of God as source of being and her view of the ontological dependence of the world on God.

Firstly then it should be asked, what role does the identification of the body of the world as specifically God's body play in McFague's theology? Secondly, would another identification of this body in relation to God be more consistent.

Despite the apparent centrality of the designation 'God's body', an analysis of the works themselves shows that, other than imaging God's immanence, this designation only plays three roles. One is to universalise the action of God (this will be returned to again in the following section). The second is to place the category of 'body' among the ranks of privileged metaphors that can refer to God. The third is to underscore the value of the world by equating it with that which has ultimate value.

While the use of the metaphor 'Body of God' for the world does help in meeting these three aims it is not the case that they can only be met by the use of this particular metaphor. An alternative metaphor which demonstrates this will be considered shortly, but first the last of the three requires closer examination. As just stated, McFague models the world as God's body to emphasise the value, the sacredness of the earth, as a move to ground an ethic of nature which is not based on the usefulness or benefits of

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385 E.g. See Ryan Klassen 'Metaphorical Theology: An Evangelical Appropriation' *Quodlibet Journal* Volume 7 Number 2 April - June 2005

nature towards humanity but on the intrinsic value of the things themselves. Indeed one suspects that this ethical imperative is her chief reason for using this model in the first place. However it is therefore strange that at one level the use of this model undermines this aim entirely. Ultimately what is being held to be valuable in this model is God and creation is only held to be valuable inasmuch as it is considered to be *part* of God. But McFague's contention is that the world and the multitude of diverse bodies it comprises are *themselves* valuable, in and for themselves. The model of the world as God's body could be seen to work *against* the ascribing of independent value to the world by implying that for something to be valuable it must be in some sense be God. Ironically, so long as it is not held to be the case that 'what is not God is not valuable' accounts which *do not* identify God and the world (even metaphorically) offer the better chance of valuing the world in and for itself rather than subsuming the value of the world into the value of God. McFague seeks a Christianity that truly expresses the value of the Other. However surely this value can flow *from* God without what it flows *to* having to be held to *be* God. Wouldn't this be in fact a more accurate mapping of the model of God as Mother? That which a mother brings into being is not herself, though it is of herself and related intrinsically to her. Her child has value in part because of this relationship but also because of its own intrinsic value as an 'other' to her. It is valued because it is other, not because (or not only because) it 'of her'.

Therefore the 'body' may be elevated to a sacred position, or be a subject of theological reflection and value, without embodying God within the world itself. This may be done for example by reconsidering traditional metaphors such as 'This is my body' or 'The Body of Christ'. Further, in a response to McFague, Pui-Lan Kwok observes how McFague has partially deployed traditional Christian categories such as incarnation but has not followed this through, for example in her use of the Bible.[386]

386 Kwok Pui-Lan 'Response to Sallie McFague' in Hessel and Ruether (eds) *Christianity and Ecology*

Kwok demonstrates how the Judeo-Christian scriptures can be read in a way much more sympathetic to McFague's cause. In particular he cites the 'cosmic' aspects of Paul's theology and the importance of 'the land' for understanding the Bible. Alternatively, other metaphors for God as embodied may be used. Therefore the principal functions of the Body of God model may be met in other ways or by other models.

One such way is provided by James Hart. Hart's suggestion is especially interesting because it was written as a response to McFague's *Models of God*. His work is based on a phenomenological approach and seeks to provide an illuminating 'interpretive paraphrase' of the internal logic of McFague's approach. Thus he is attempting to express McFague's meaning through his own representation of her models and it is significant that he makes the following changes. Attempting to re-encapsulate McFague's understanding of the God-world relationship, he writes,

> 'Here the speculative analogical correlation is: God is to the natural world as a woman is to her pregnant body and the perspective of creaturely sensibility is to nature *qua* God's body as the third-party perspective is to the body of the pregnant woman.
>
> 'First, the one whom I perceive to bear a baby in the womb is present to me as one whose life houses and produces another. For the third observing party the mother is present (appresented) and the child she is bearing is made present not through the third party's empathic perception of the infant Other but through the perception (apperception) of the mothers bodily sensations and empathic perception (appresentation) ... That is, here the mother may say, I have a presentation of something through the contact of which I am contacted, in the touching of whom I am touched; and yet my touching (contiguity) is not only a

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Cambridge Ma: Harvard University Press 2000 pp47-50

perceiving of what is there but is creative of what is there.'[387]

In somewhat less technical language, the essence of Hart's proposal is to view God as a *pregnant* mother, with the world *in utero* but also with the human observer as an observing (external) third party. Setting aside for a moment the obtuseness of this apparently 'exterior view from within the womb', God is in this model present to the world as a mother is present to the child in the womb (and vice versa) and human (or other perceiving) agents have the perspective of an external observer discerning the life that is 'housed and produced within' the mother.

While Hart's presentation is potentially open to criticism for separating humanity from the rest of nature and for somewhat counter-intuitively seeming to suggest that our perception is firstly of God and secondarily of nature, it remains a subtly reworked variant on the image of the world developing *in utero* with respect to God, retaining the possibility of human agents working with the Mother to bring creation to full birth.

Now, McFague indicates awareness of models of this type, citing both Grace Jantzen and Arthur Peacocke[388] but does not explore them herself. This is because she interprets the image of the world as God's child to refer to a child already born and such an image as Jantzen's and Peacocke's, she might argue, would not combine transcendence and immanence sufficiently for her. However in her presentation she also equates the child with the Mother by saying that God gives birth to God's body, giving rise to the problems with preserving transcendence, or at least Otherness, already noted earlier.

It would seem altogether more satisfactory to remain simply with an *in utero* model without Hart's change of perspective between 'creaturely sensibility' and the relationship between creation and God. Thus the creaturely perspective would also be

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387 James Hart 'Models of God:Evangel-logic' *Religion and Intellectual Life* p29-44 p34,35
388 See *The Body of God* p255 n.27

an internal perspective – that is an apprehension both of the rest of the self (child) to and by itself and an apperception of the context (mother) which is present to it as both house and means of production, as a creative touching.

The aim here though is not to explore various *in utero* models in detail or compare them with each other but simply to draw attention to the ways in which such models might also meet McFague's aims whilst avoiding some of the problems already mentioned.

Firstly, these models grant a degree of autonomous identity and value to the world without making this absolute. This helps with problems of theodicy while retaining the sacramentality of the world. (God's child is expected to be like but not identical to God, empathy and co-suffering are allowed for without the problems associated with an identification of agents, especially in relation to sin).[389] It also avoids the confusions concerning whether the world is ontologically dependent on God or vice versa.

Secondly, these models underscore the vulnerability of the creation in a way that seeing it as God's body does not. Finally, though perhaps most tenuously, these models offer a possible context for a more robust eschatology with the image of the child growing towards its birth into a new mode of existence.

Thus there are alternative models which can meet McFague's aims, perhaps better than her own model. This important finding is significant for consideration of the Christian status of her theology because it separates to some extent on the one hand her ethical vision and concern with bodies and the material from, on the other, this specific model of the world as God's body. This is relevant because the application of this

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389 See Peterson 2001 p400 'When I sin, God does not sin as well. Yet it would seem that the locative metaphor would say otherwise . Whatever the part does, the whole would do as well. If the world is enveloped in God, the world and its occupants stand to lose their true distinctiveness.'

model results in the same kinds of losses to the tradition observed previously.

Despite the fact that *Body of God* is a more 'orthodox' presentation than the works that immediately preceded it, the narrowing of focus of the tradition that it implies are still significant. In part, as we saw above, these restrictions are in the area of eschatology. The vision that she offers in this area is essentially an ethical vision only and not one that offers any specific grounds for hope, despite assertions that God participates in the realisation of this vision and that the world is growing 'towards God'. But perhaps the most significant departure from traditional Christian theology is the reduction of the Incarnation to a special case of a general incarnation.

We should remember that McFague grounds her own methodology in the 'metaphorical tension' she finds embodied in the person and work of Jesus and holds him to be *unsubstitutable* for Christianity not simply illustrative of a universal phenomenon. In contrast here, her presentation of a universal embodiment of God threatens to reduce the concept of incarnation to near meaninglessness through over-generalisation, in effect erasing its claim to be unsubstitutable. Incarnation traditionally has a precise meaning – to indwell human flesh. To expand the category of incarnation to include all entities within the universe is to lose most of the specificity and hence the meaning of the term. Hence it threatens the status of the root-metaphor of Christianity which she defined by drawing the *particular* relationship between God and world of which Jesus stands as a metaphor. Since this account of Jesus defines the Christian paradigm to a significant extent in McFague's view our concern is whether it is possible for McFague to remain within the Christian tradition in her own terms while maintaining these positions. Perhaps this is another reason for her move away from a relationship with a root-metaphor as sufficient criterion for models to be regarded as Christian.

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Further, the tradition has not only had the image of incarnation with which to talk about God's immanence and presence. It has also had the indwelling of the Spirit within individuals as well as incarnate in Christ, with these not being identical, although having some analogies and links with each other. Again the model of the Church as the Body of Christ, and in some traditions the Eucharist as an embodiment of Christ, are other forms of non-incarnational embodiment to be found in traditional theologies. There are further images of the presence of God throughout creation which are again of a different type. Incarnation cannot be reduced to presence. Indeed there is much more to a theology of God's immanence than simply presence and absence.

Therefore to limit the Incarnation to Jesus is not necessarily to deny any form of embodied presence at other times and places or any revelatory presence in other people. However to universalise the incarnation is to lose the particularity of Jesus, when preserving particularity in the face of over-generalisation is one of the things McFague herself is advocating.

Now it is true that McFague does not intend this (or any of her models) to be the only model. She says

'The model of the world as God's body is meant as a corrective to the tradition, not as a substitute for it.'[390]

And

'...the point is certainly not to claim our new vision has all the answers and to pit it against other positions.'[391]

However the methodology she employs, and particularly her sweeping reinterpretations or disposals of traditional models and approaches, does not seem entirely consistent with these statements. This may well be because, as we have seen,

390 'The World as God's Body' p56
391 *The Body of God* pp204-5

McFague, especially in this phase of her work, does not apply any definite criterion or method to insure against these losses. Thus it appears that the question of the internal consistency of McFague's work on these matters centres around the question of how a theology can be heuristic and experimental, adapting to new contexts and including unheard or marginalised voices while still remaining within the Christian tradition. This is a difficult question, which touches on a great many contested issues outside McFague's own work, so it is hardly surprising that her work shows a degree of weakness here. However we shall see later in this chapter that her works, and especially the most recent, do in fact offer the possibility of beginning to reconcile some of these difficulties. It will be shown that there are other currents in her theology, especially in its earliest and latest phases which, being incorporated into her methodology more fully, may answer many of the concerns raised here.

5.7 The coherence of God's Body with Mother, Lover and Friend.

Briefly, before concluding the discussion of the Body of God model, consideration must be given to the way in which this model relates to those in the previous chapter, in the light of the findings above.

McFague uses the world as God's Body as the 'context' for her models of God as Mother, Lover and Friend. In practice this means that God's Body is the partner or recipient in each of these models. Thus God is the Mother of God's Body, the Lover of God's Body and the Friend of God's body.

McFague is aware both of the paradoxical nature of the first of these composite models and the dangers of divine narcissism inherent in the second two, but she makes this move anyway for the following reasons. Firstly she is concerned to move away

from individualism and the exclusivity and privatisation of relationships with God that can result from the application of the Mother, Lover and Friend models primarily or solely to the individual. Secondly, (and she is not explicit about this), such a move is required by that part of her ethic which prioritises the well being of the whole over the well being of specific individuals.[392] Thirdly she wishes to apply the models to creation itself and hence underscore its value.

However again we can see that these points would be as well made if God was simply Mother, Lover and Friend of the world considered in and of itself rather than the world considered as God's Body. This would avoid the objections McFague is aware of and also avoid the risk of, ironically, losing the world from the model at all, with the image become God as the Lover of God and so on.

5.8. McFague's most recent thought.

Thus far the discussions in preceding chapters have followed McFague's published work in a roughly chronological fashion, since for much of her career she herself moved from method to application in a reasonably straightforward way from *Speaking in Parables* to *The Body of God*. We have seen that McFague's lifetime of work, while generally having progressed coherently as a single project, shows a degree of change in understanding and emphasis over time. Therefore examination is needed of her most recent works, *Life Abundant* and *A New Climate for Theology* to determine to what extent these demonstrate any change in position on the areas of concern and to

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392 We see this in her treatment of abortion where she says, 'the current battle over the right to abortion in the United States, when seen in light of our new paradigm, becomes an issue not of the sacredness of every human embryo, as it is in the individualistic, anthropocentric point of view, but of two other broader and deeper bodily concerns: the right of each child born to be wanted and to have the essentials for a healthy, satisfying life as well as the right of women to control their own bodies. The new paradigm widens the perspective on abortion from a narrow, absolutist one of human embryonic rights to the well-being of those born in addition to the well-being of those who must care for those born.' *The Body of God* p204

see whether in them McFague has herself suggested any moves towards answering the objections considered to this point. Particular focus is needed on the question of the relationship between McFague's theology and the broader Christian tradition.

Whereas McFague's earlier works place theological method under the microscope, one of her later works, *Life Abundant (2002)*, takes more of a 'wide-angle' approach. Being perhaps her least technical work to that date, this book is also by far the most personal and gives the best overall view of McFague's developing personal motivations and theological beliefs, not only as a theologian but as a Christian. In it she charts her personal journey, within which life, work and faith intertwine and she also acknowledges the communal nature of this journey. It seems then that in her later work, McFague has decided against a view of Christianity as defined by a root-metaphor and instead presumes the idea of historical and communal processes of verification and reflection upon inherited narratives and concepts building on a biblical base. This process will shortly be seen to be taken still further in her most recent work, *A New Climate for Theology*.

One advantage of this moving away from a normative root-metaphor and towards community focused definitions of Christianity is that it allows more easily for a number of contextual and yet authentic Christianities to arise in and for different contexts (and we would add, for different tasks).

McFague defines theology as:

'reflection upon experiences of God's liberating love from various contexts and within the Christian community[393].'

But she also notes the plurality of this community, saying,

'we stand *in this place* as all Christians of all ages have stood in their own places. The question, 'what is Christianity?' attracts a wide variety of replies. A Jehovah's

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393 *Life Abundant* p 52

Witness, a Quaker, a Southern Baptist, a Latin American Roman Catholic liberationist, and an African-American womanist would all answer the question in very different ways.'[394]

This plurality she finds mirrored in the Bible where the gospels of four communities, rather than one, are preserved.

Meanwhile her adoption of a Christianity held together by participation in communities with a biblical foundation but also an ongoing hermeneutical tradition is evident when she says,

'Because revelation – insights into God' love – occurs in our ordinary experience, it is ongoing. Revelation did not stop with the Bible; the experiences of the first Christians of God's love manifest in Jesus of Nazareth are a critical norm for subsequent Christians, but revelation is not a deposit of biblical truths.'[395]

Later, she confronts the issue head on, asking:

'What makes a revelation of God's love *Christian?*

'...There is no one answer, but all answers share some identifiable characteristics that come from Scripture, the tradition and contemporary resources. This answer contains some basic assumptions. First, fundamentalism is not an option since all theology is contextual and metaphorical. No human interpretation, including the ones in the Bible, is absolute. Second, radical relativism – anything goes – is not an option either, since there are some basic understandings from Scripture and the tradition about God and the world that characterize Christian interpretations.'[396]

She goes on to develop her view of the Bible using the metaphor 'constitution' such that

'it is the document without which one cannot understand Christianity...This is not

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394 *Ibid.* p40
395 *Ibid.* p53
396 *Ibid.* p57

to say that Scripture tells us everything we need to know about Christianity, just as the constitution of the United States is only one document among many that we need to be acquainted with if we are to have a full understanding of the nation's form of democracy. The New Testament as constitution means that it is a necessary document, but not the only one. As founding literature, it is essential but not absolute.'[397]

She then moves on to discuss the criterion of fidelity to the Christian tradition, understood as a paradigm. However, as will be clear from the following quote, she no longer sees a paradigm as being linked to an unchangeable root-metaphor.

'Christians also have 'the tradition'. This tradition includes all the texts, in many genres, orthodox and otherwise, that make up the loosely defined phenomenon known as 'Christianity'. It is, in Thomas Kuhn's term, a paradigm, a set of assumptions and practises that distinguish it from other world religions and gives it a distinctive nature. I am not speaking of 'the essence of Christianity,' some foundational kernel or core that all must adhere to – in fact, just the opposite! I am asking whether there are some historical continuities, some features that have arisen over the centuries and within different contexts, that distinguish the religion. This is an empirical, not a foundational question.

'...What we call Christianity is composed of many theologies...which are loosely connected by some common threads. These characteristics have been embodied in different root-metaphors...They are not universals, but simply some more-or-less identifiable historical continuities that keep appearing in Christian theologies.'[398]

These continuities she goes on to identify as a) belief in a God who is creator, redeemer and continuing spirit, who is love and who, while spoken of in impersonal terms at times, is usually anthropomorphic, b) a view of the world that assumes that

397 *Ibid.* p59
398 *Ibid.* pp60-61

worldly life is good, c) an understanding of human life as essentially relational in character and, most importantly, d) engagement with Jesus Christ as the 'Christic lens' through which God, the world and humanity are viewed, a lens whose distinguishing characteristic is his dual-dimensional love, for God and for others.

The final criterion that she advances for a Christian theology is a restatement of the criterion of relevance:

'A working theology, a theology that matters, must reconstruct its basic understanding of God and the world from and towards *our world.*

'...It is not enough...to merely translate scriptural or traditional understandings of God and the world into contemporary terms...They must be reworked, reconstructed, in the light of the novel situations of one's own time.'[399]

This understanding would begin to answer many of the objections raised in the present study, but with one important caveat. It is possible that, for all the importance of our current context and particularly the threats brought by climate change, McFague overestimates the novel aspects of the current situation. While much has indeed changed, much of what it means to be human, and much of common human experience remains. The particular novel features of our world that she identifies are not the only issues of concern for modern people and some of the remaining concerns have an historical continuity with the past. Consequently there may be more of a role for traditional formulations to play than McFague allows since these are models and concepts that have endured within Christian communities in relationship with these continuous aspects of human experience over time.

In addition to this change of stance, what is also immediately interesting about *Life Abundant* is that McFague appears to have revised her view on what can be accomplished by the use of specific models and images. The following comment in the

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399 *Ibid.* pp64,66

preface is suggestive of this:

> 'I have written each of my books in an effort to make up for deficiencies in the last one. Life Abundant is no exception. After completing Super, Natural Christians, subtitled How We Should Love Nature, I realized love was not enough. 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 ordinary, taken-for-granted high-consumer lifestyle. I realized that the matter of loving nature was a deep, complex, tricky question involving greed, indifference, and denial.

> 'So I have set about trying to rectify the inadequacies of my last book with yet another (inadequate) book. The thesis of this one is that American middle-class Christians need to live differently in order to love nature, and to live differently, we need to think differently...'[400]

The key point here is that it is clear that McFague has concluded that the link between a model of God and resultant ethical action is not straight forward. Holding a particular view does not automatically entail following a particular course of action in a simple, deterministic way. As *Life Abundant* makes clear, there are many things that we need to think differently about in order to live differently. 'Loving nature' is not sufficient in itself. *Life Abundant* therefore engages with a network of different models used for a number of diverse tasks in order to understand and re-imagine our relationship with the world. As well as models for God, then, this work includes detailed discussions on models of economics and anthropology for example. This is consistent with the arguments already advanced concerning the need for models to be formulated for different tasks and to be related to each other. It also seems to be a tacit recognition that a model of God is not itself a model of everything else in a straight-

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400 *Ibid.* p xi

forward way.

McFague's latest book is *A New Climate for Theology: God, the World and Global Warming.* The recent nature of this publication prevents a discussion of this work being fully integrated throughout the preceding chapters. However, since *A New Climate* appears to be largely a representation of McFague's body of work for a non-academic audience, tailored particularly to the issue of climate change, it does not appear that anything contained within it substantially alters the discussions or conclusions here. It does however illustrate two things.

Firstly it demonstrates that McFague is comfortable representing most of her central arguments even after up to 35 years of critique from the academic community, supporting our general verdict here that her theology is coherent, valid and makes a valuable contribution to contemporary theology. Secondly, the process of constructive rather than destructive engagement with the Christian tradition can be seen to have advanced still further in the direction already discussed. *A New Climate* largely lacks formal discussion of theological method and instead serves as an example of McFague's methods in action. The feature that distinguishes it, at least quantitatively if not qualitatively, from the works that precede it is McFague's much greater efforts to engage creatively with both biblical texts and narratives and sources within the post-biblical tradition. Three examples will suffice:

When discussing the 'ecological model of the church' McFague regards this as 'returning to the oldest and deepest Christian theology'.[401]

She reflects upon the theology of St Paul, quoting 2 Corinthians 4:6 and saying,

'Our creeds tell us that Jesus was of one substance with God, and that is good news, but just as important, we learn that *God is like Jesus* – the mysterious, awesome God of the universe can be *known* in Jesus...In Paul's understanding God does it all:

401 *A New Climate for Theology* p33

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God creates us, God comes to us in Jesus, and God enlightens us so we recognise God in Jesus.'[402]

Finally, in discussing the hope that Christians may have in the face of environmental problems she reflects upon verses from Isaiah 65 (NRSV) 'For I am about to create new heavens and a new earth...Before they call I will answer, while they are yet speaking I will hear. The wolf and the lamb shall feed together, the lion shall eat straw like the ox...They shall not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain, says the Lord.' She says

'...we read in the Isaiah passage that in the midst of painting this wonderful picture of life beyond our wildest dreams, God says, 'Before they call I will answer, while they are yet speaking I will hear.' *'While they are yet speaking'* - we only have to ask for God to answer! But we must ask with our whole being; a better world must come from our deepest desire. And this means, of course, we must *work at it*; we must give our whole selves to it.'[403]

In these passages McFague should not be understood to be returning to a supernatural picture of God or to have changed her mind on the nature of religious language. Rather she has directed her attention back to the primary context of religious language as a part of worship, the position from which *Metaphorical Theology* began and uses these texts from the position of a second naiveté, recovering the usefulness of the language while remaining aware of the limitations the language faces. It is however interesting that she has taken this more constructive approach to engaging with the tradition in her most recent work without compromising or diluting her novel insights and models, her views on the status and workings of religious language or her ability to critique that tradition. It is a step towards proving that such a constructive approach is

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402 *Ibid.* p39
403 *Ibid.* p144

possible within her methodology and that this is the more effective way of meeting her own stated aims.

5.9 Conclusions.

This chapter supports the findings of earlier chapters. Considered as a whole, the model of the world as God's body is coherent and consistent with McFague's method. It offers original insights and addresses contemporary concerns. It engages critically and creatively with the Christian tradition and offers a reinterpretation of it consistent with McFague's intentions and aims.

However some of the questions raised in previous chapters have again been seen to be relevant. In this model again much of the work being done is at the conceptual level e.g. it is carried out in terms of the concepts of 'space', 'place' and 'spirit'. Even 'body' has become distant from intuitive images of bodies and has become much more abstract, more conceptual. Once more the actual model, *if a model is strictly understood in terms of mapping associated commonplaces*, does very little work in that particular way. Therefore again there is little use of the model *as a model* in the sense outlined in the earlier chapters. This is not to say that the model does not produce results of value to theology, simply that it does not do so in exactly the way McFague proposes that it should. There is indeed much that is of value in what McFague has constructed. She achieves the large part of what she is seeking to achieve, that is, her exposition of the model is consistent with her aims, motivations and ethical focus and invites reform and re-engagement with traditional themes. Yet much of this is achieved independently of a strict application of the model of the world as God's Body.

The other consistent criticism of McFague has been directed towards the

relationship, or sometimes lack thereof, between her models and traditional Christian doctrines and themes. In this chapter we have seen that she has herself moved away from the root-metaphor criterion for establishing a model as 'Christian' and towards an understanding of tradition as a process of community interpretation. We have also seen that her later work strengthened her commitment to this position. This move is a welcome one in the light of many of her respondents criticisms and those in our project here. However she does not offer a defined method for guiding or describing this process and so this question awaits future research.

As a consequence perhaps of this change, McFague has worked with more traditional theological themes such as incarnation and resurrection in presenting this model compared to those studied in Chapter 4. Consequently there is less narrowing of the tradition in this presentation. However the degree to which she restructures Christology and Eschatology in particular may still somewhat restrict her ability to act as a reformer within the tradition by weakening the relationship between her theology and traditional ones.

Detailed consideration has now been given both to McFague's method and to the models that she produces and interprets as a practical outworking of that method. A high level of coherence between the two has been identified and tested. But questions have been raised concerning some details of both method and models. In the following, final chapter it is asked whether there is a link between the questions asked about her method and problems explored in the application of that method in her models and her interpretation of them. Are the two connected by any common themes or causes?

However, despite these questions, it has become clear that McFague offers much that is of significant value. She makes a considerable, original contribution to

theology. Her models have been found in very large part to be consistent in themselves and coherent with her method and aims. Her method itself can therefore be seen to have endured the scrutiny of her respondents and remained a relevant contemporary theological resource. Additional research into answering the challenges raised here may strengthen this claim still further and we have seen that her own more recent work offers potential starting points and directions for that research.

Chapter 6 – Conclusion.

6.1 -Introduction.

The preceding chapters have assessed the coherence and consistency of McFague's theology in order to assess its ongoing ability to contribute to the reform of the Christian tradition. In order to explore this, the various stages of her work have been considered in the light of her respondents and in the light of selected, subsequent research.

This enquiry began by examining the motivations and goals of her work and its basic categories of thought before exploring the more detailed methodological assertions and assumptions that she makes. This prepared the ground for an assessment of her models, viewed as a practical outworking of her theoretical statements. Discussions of her method led to a number of conclusions. The high level of symmetry in form and content and the high degree of conceptual unity in her work has been demonstrated. Investigation and analysis has supported the claim that, in the main, her assertions on the nature and practice of theology are defensible in the light of her respondents and in the light of subsequent research. However a number of small modifications have been suggested, particularly to her interactionist understanding of metaphors and to the relative importance of the conceptual level in creating new meaning. It appears that models, strictly understood, cannot provide this new meaning alone. It has also been advanced here that the claim of McFague's models to refer to an ontological reality may be strengthened by a distinction between the validation and the warranting of models of God. To this end, our explorations of the issue have supported the idea that religious language could still potentially be warranted as referential even if it could not always be empirically validated. This is, God-talk can be rationally held to refer to an ontological reality even while its correspondence to the nature of this reality

cannot be objectively proved.

Our enquiry and McFague's own work both engage with 'the Christian tradition'. However it has emerged, that this relationship is a cause for concern if she is to be seen as reforming fully within the Christian tradition rather than creating a separate belief system. Indeed a fuller integration of her models with traditional ones would strengthen her work's already impressive contribution to the debate within this tradition at the same time as building on her desire to see herself as ultimately a realist, contra some accusations from her respondents.

These minor concerns were borne out in the consideration of her suggested models. These models were judged to perform very well in relation to her aims and suggested method, but with the caveat that much of the value here was again at the conceptual level – it was the concepts derived *from* models that were creating new meaning, rather than the models themselves. This small modification however does not threaten the overall coherence and value of her project, rather it offers the possibility of furthering her case by a natural extension of her work.

To repeat, the criterion that McFague's theology be well located relative to Christian tradition is not one that has been imported from outside her theology. Rather it has been held throughout to be vital to establishing the coherence and consistency of a theology that she intends to be explicitly Christian throughout her work. Metaphorical Theology as a practice is intended to be reforming *within* Christianity, and this as an integral part of the coherent unity her project aims for, and in the large part succeeds in attaining.

In the preceding chapters, changes in McFague's thought over time have been charted and she has been seen to build upon her previous work in a linear and consistent fashion and it is this which gives her work much of its coherence and consistency and

consequently enables it to have an enduring significance for theology today. However it is once again on the particular issue of relating to the tradition, and so being a theology that can be maximally described as Christian, that McFague's views have been least consistent and have changed most over time.

This concluding chapter, then, will begin by summarising the points that have been raised over the course of the past five chapters. Despite the judgement emerging that in the main McFague's work has endured beyond her respondents critique, what follows here will particularly draw out those points at which McFague's work could, in the light of her respondents, benefit from further strengthening to achieve its aims even more fully. At the same time, where the preceding chapters have suggested the direction from which this strengthening may come, this is highlighted. Finally these observations are brought together to see if any common causes might be seen to underlie these weaker points and whether any solutions towards their remedy might be suggested.

6.2 Challenges for McFague in the light of her respondents.

Although McFague's work has endured the response of her critics and can still today be judged to make a very valuable contribution to the reformation of the Christian tradition, nevertheless, some challenges remain. In what follows these are summarised. But since these challenges are not judged to be terminal threats to her project, and sources of potential strengthening have also been identified in the light of academic responses and subsequent research, these sources are also summarised at the same time.

The most intense critique of McFague in the literature and in preceding chapters has focused on her relationship with the tradition. The first chapter considered

McFague's most basic aims – a move towards inclusion and abundant life and away from idolatry and irrelevance. Thus her project is motivated by a desire for accessibility and ethically useful outcomes and these concerns over-ride others (such as a full systematic integration of models with each other for example). A key part in this strategy is her decision, looked at more closely in chapter 3, to focus on the Christian tradition and community, despite having at times a negative assessment of its historic and current value. This decision is summed up in her statement that she is seeking to reform the tradition and not instigate a revolution to bring about a post-Christian religion or entirely new reading of Jesus. This is no doubt in the main because the Christian tradition is the one to which she herself belongs and which she values highly, despite the aforementioned critique she levels at it. It is also possible that participation in this pre-existing community gives her a ready-made, and, in her culture, dominant, community to address and so engagement with it would be appropriate given her aims and pragmatic approach. Seen in this light, her desire to avoid 'idolatry' might primarily be a move to create a space within this tradition for her own models. However the decision to locate herself here brings with it a number of constraints as McFague is well aware. Had McFague been content simply to construct models of ultimate concern and ethical behaviour, as it were, in a vacuum, or as an independent, self-contained belief system, many of the objections emerging would not apply.

As things stand though, McFague's thought faces a number of challenges, as many of her respondents have consistently suggested and as they have been explored here. These challenges have focussed not only on debating the status of her models as Christian but also on difficulties deciding what 'Christian' is. In her earlier work (especially *Metaphorical Theology*), McFague reduces Christianity to a root-metaphor and sees all expressions or translations of this root metaphor as therefore being

Christian (see Chapter 3.4). But several problems with this position have emerged. Firstly, it does not differentiate between that which is itself Christian and that with which Christians would agree but which is not itself specific to that faith. Secondly, this position on its own does not manage to capture the paradoxes and complexities inherent within that tradition.

Further, recalling the discussions of Chapter 1.4, the properties of metaphor, properties that McFague herself endorses and builds into her theology, themselves imply that any translation or expression of a root-metaphor into another metaphor is going to result in a change of meaning to some degree. It is not immediately clear however by what criteria the nature of such change is to be guided and controlled. McFague begins to answer this by means of a particular reading of Jesus (which was considered in chapters 1 and 3). This she uses to give a direction and ethical cohesion throughout her work. Yet we have seen in chapter 5.8 that McFague does, in later works, introduce a different understanding of the continuity of Christianity. This sees the continuity as that of a *community,* exhibiting similarity as well as change over time. However, these different ideas, continuity through root-metaphor and continuity through community, are not brought together in her work in a firmly defined way. Before moving on from this tension, it is worth recalling the discussion in Chapter 4.12. This suggested that narratives play an important role within faith communities. It is possible that narrative may provide a meeting place for these two definitions of Christianity, one focusing on the narrative of Jesus and the other on faith community. Both connect to McFague's long-standing interest in faith-based biography, and this issue will be returned to below.[404]

McFague's relationship with the Christian tradition has also been criticised in preceding chapters, and widely in the literature, for the breadth of its attacks on that

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404 See particularly her first published work, *Literature and the Christian Life.*

religion's major doctrinal elements. Whilst on a number of issues McFague's critique is incisive and many will be sympathetic to it, the question has arisen whether a removal of major doctrinal elements from the tradition is warranted, necessary or desirable if her task is to be the reformation of Christianity rather than the replacement of it. Indeed we have seen how in other passages McFague seems anyway to take a more conciliatory tone. These passages suggest that her models are complementary to the tradition rather than substitutionary for it. The preceding chapters here have suggested that this more reforming stance in relation to the tradition is more congruent with her overall aims.

A process of following the critical literature revealed that McFague's more revolutionary approach, one that tended to predominate particularly in the earlier phases of her work, seems to have been counter-productive. This element of her work has likely reduced the acceptance of her valuable models with her intended audience. This is to be regretted, since her aim is to reform the Christian tradition with practical and ethical consequences, but discussions of her models, which are well able to contribute to this aim, have been sidetracked into areas of systematic and doctrinal thought which were not her main areas of concern. This view is supported by our findings in Chapters 4 and 5 where it was evident that much of the response to her work of that period in the literature focuses on either a defence of traditional models against her stronger statements, or as part of this, a critique of her theoretical statements. Constructive engagements with, or buildings upon, the actual content of her models is relatively lacking in the literature by comparison.

This question of the relationship between McFague's models and traditional ones also seems to be the one on which the theoretical cohesion of McFague's project might be most open to strengthening. In Chapter 1 we also looked at McFague's understanding of language about God in terms of non-idolatry and explored the

relationship between this and metaphor. There we saw that it was helpful to understand speech about God as being non-literal in the sense of being semantically non-autonomous. That is, that all statements about God are statements in terms of other entities or domains of meaning and that no autonomous (and therefore determining) account of God can be given. Chapters 1.4 and 1.7 argued that this does not imply that all talk of God starts from a blank canvass; that each model or metaphor for God exists as a separate and isolated entity and projects its features onto a domain that is otherwise empty of meaning. Analysis of this issue suggested that the absence of a semantically autonomous account of the term 'God' does not imply that the domain 'God' has no content for the hearer and is simply there to be filled from scratch by each new metaphor as it is formed.

This issue arose again in Chapter 3.3 where it was explored in more detail. This analysis followed Reynolds in questioning whether, for McFague, 'God', as a target domain in metaphor formation, really was empty of prior content. It was suggested that in fact a certain number of background assumptions should, apparently contra McFague, be assumed to be present in the target domain both for metaphorical mapping to occur in a rational way and also to warrant the metaphor within a web of pre-existing belief.

These observations can be combined with those in Chapter 2.2, following Bisschops, concerning target domain experience. It was argued that religious experience is held to be experience *of God,* however much that experience may be mediated through images derived from source related experience (experience of kings, rocks etc).

Therefore the case has been made here that it is in fact McFague's choice to participate in a pre-existing theological tradition that most argues against her seeming assumption that 'God' is to be treated as a semantically empty domain in the process of

metaphor formation. As she is clearly aware, the community which she addresses already has ideas about God and therefore the term 'God' already holds meaning. Indeed it is some of this very meaning that she wishes to reform. The significance of this pre-existing meaning in the light of the challenges McFague faces in integrating her thought fully with the tradition will be explored further below.

In Chapter 1.4 it was argued that more recent research into the nature of metaphor, particularly in the field of cognitive linguistics, has changed the broadly accepted view of metaphor since McFague wrote on the subject. Although most of her core views on metaphor endure well, this is not the case in one particular area, since the notion of the directionality (irreversibility) of metaphor[405] has been questioned, in the ensuing debate. If the interaction theory of the function of metaphor has been called into question in subsequent research, this suggests that McFague's theology, which places weight upon this view, may benefit from a degree of modification to assist it to remain a relevant resource for the reformation of the Christian tradition and to be judged all the more fully coherent in the light of her respondents.

Chapter 2 also introduced and analysed McFague's basic categories of image, model, concept and theory. Over the course of our enquiry as a whole, the evidence emerging has pointed to the conceptual level having a greater importance and active role in McFague's work than she seems to have fully explored herself. McFague seems in her method and its application to limit herself to operating at the more limited and fragmentary level of image and model. However, and especially over time, she has in fact appeared to have moved to explore the conceptual and theoretical aspects both of her models and of Christian theology more generally, but without naming this move. It is possible that if one was to explore this move more mindfully (that is, with concepts treated as concepts and not as if they were models or images) that this might begin to

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405 Chapter 1.4 g)

remedy these small weaknesses. Chapter 2.4 suggested, for example, that it is at this conceptual level that she finds a degree of unity with the tradition, rather than finding a more conventional unity at the level of common images or models. We also saw that Kaufmann has suggested more focus on the conceptual level to provide additional complexity to her theological formulations.

In summary then, the criticisms emerging in the light of her respondents have focused firstly on the interaction theory of metaphor deployed by McFague (quite reasonably at the time of this aspect of her work, but since called into question). Secondly attention has been drawn to her slight underestimation of the importance of the conceptual level in constructing theologies and deriving ethics from them. Thirdly it appears on occasion that her models stand isolated and disconnected from (or even in opposition to) both each other and the tradition from which they are intended to spring. While tension is part of the ethos of Metaphorical theology itself, it might better meet its stated aims with some modification in these weaker, but far from terminal, areas.

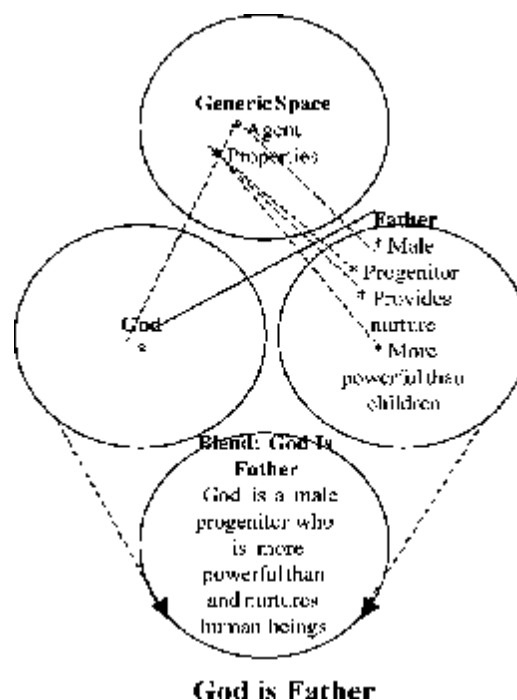**6.3 Bringing the threads together.**

This project has identified a number of points within McFague's work, in the light of her respondents, where further work might be fruitful. It has also explored, at the end of the last chapter, how her most recent work suggests that she is herself aware of these issues and has responded to some of them accordingly. It now needs to be asked whether these issues are in any way inter-related.

It is of course unlikely that several complex methodological areas like these can be related directly and in a reductionist way (i.e. with each being a direct and necessary consequence of another). This said, there does seem to be a common theme of

oversimplification – and in particular of considering elements in isolation from their broader context at a number of different levels in McFague's thought. Since such simplification is, as McFague herself observes, an inherent property of models and of metaphors as she understands them, then this simplification is perhaps to be expected on the basis of her method, but it would also be consistent with that method to explore the issues further using the nature of metaphor as a starting point.

Recalling our discussions in Chapters 1 and 2, McFague follows Max Black in her understanding of metaphor, giving an interaction account of its workings. However, subsequent research had called this into question. McFague's model of metaphor considers only the existence of two semantic domains, source and target, with information flowing relatively freely in both directions. Thus a metaphor is seen as a 'binding together in meaning' of two terms (along with the associated commonplaces of the source term). Crucially it is assumed in McFague's account that the process of the transfer of meaning itself is relatively trivial and intuitive and no allowance is made for the governing of this transfer by, for example, literary context or speakers intention.

God is Father

By comparison the approach preferred by DesCamp and Sweetser,[406] and illustrated in this diagram of the metaphor 'God the Father', contends that metaphor formation is a multi-stage process. In this example, as the first stage, certain qualities are abstracted from the

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406 Mary Therese DesCamp and Eve E. Sweetser 'Metaphors for God: Why and How Do Our Choices Matter for Humans? The Application of Contemporary Cognitive Linguistics Research to the Debate on God and Metaphor' *Pastoral Psychology,* Vol. 53 No. 3 January 2005 pp203-238

'Father' domain into a 'generic space' before forming a 'conceptual blend' with the 'God' domain. But, it may be asked, what factors influence these stages?

Having rejected the contention that, in the case of taking 'God' as the target domain, this domain is semantically empty, a further conclusion can now be drawn. Since the target domain can influence what is mapped from the source domain, it follows that what will be mapped by two different users of the same metaphor may not be the same if they have different understandings of the target domain. That is, even if two speakers have the same understanding of what is meant by 'Father', the products of the metaphor 'God the Father' will not be same for both if they hold different 'core beliefs' about God initially.

Similarly, it must be questioned whether all speakers should be expected to map source domains in identical ways independently of literary context. For example does the metaphor of 'Father' map the same properties onto the domain in the image 'Father of the Prodigal Son' as it does in the phrase 'Father of Jesus Christ'? If (as seems likely) the answer is no, to what extent are the properties of the target domain alone responsible for these different mappings and to what degrees are factors external to this (such as an history of interpretation and the literary context or personal experiences e.g. of 'fathers') coming into play?

It appears desirable to nuance and texture metaphors with the concrete and particular, allowing the same metaphor to map differently in different contexts rather than to simply map generic associated commonplaces in a vacuum. In contrast to this, McFague has been accused of
"tend[ing] to settle for images and phrases without serious attention to their textual embedment.'[407]

It is also likely that it is this dislocation of biblical and traditional models from

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[407]Walter Bruggemann 'The Collapse of History (Review)*' Journal of Religion* 76 (2) 1996 pp349-352

their historic and literary contexts that has at least in part led to her reading of these traditional models being widely divergent from those of many expounders of the text. However McFague is clearly aware of this issue. In the case of Jesus' use of 'Father' (see Chapter 3) she engages explicitly with these literary and historical contexts and does in fact allow for the possibility of a positive and constructive use of this traditional model of God. Therefore the suggestion here is simply that work remains to be done to allow the surrounding interpretative context to shape the models more consistently. This would support the case for these models to be most naturally seen as reforming within the tradition.

Given McFague's background in academic English and literature,[408] her concern for the context of theology itself and her feminist stress on the significance of the particular in the face of the general, it is perhaps surprising to suggest that she may overly generalise in aspects of her approach, especially to the biblical text. However it must be remembered that it is precisely this process of generalisation that she has built into her method in the light of her understanding of metaphor and this should make the observation less surprising – it is a consistent part of a method which is aware of its own partial and generalising nature and one that is humbly advanced, addressing as it does a very large range of issues and covering many academic disciplines.

This is not of course an insurmountable problem for her method. As she herself says, models need to be kept close to their imagistic roots. By imagistic is meant the broader, methodological sense which was introduced in Chapter 2.2 – that category of concrete and particular instances that supply the examples on which a model generalises, (rather than imagistic in the sense of picturable). Therefore for a metaphor to remain connected to images in this sense is to deploy it within particular linguistic expressions and for particular and limited purposes, that is, as already argued in

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408 See her *Literature and the Christian Life* for example.

chapters 4.12 and 5.8, it should be deployed for particular and defined tasks. To repeat, the meaning of a model such as 'God as Mother' is best drawn out when the model is deployed in particular sentences with a particular purpose, not when the model is considered as a linguistic fragment, isolated from any context within a text or a situation in life.   The context provides the meaning of a statement as well as the words themselves. In passing it is worth noting that perhaps the most natural context for this process to take place is within a narrative. Perhaps narrative expressions would return the particularity to models by allowing them to draw definition from each other and their context. This is not to argue against the deployment of models for theoretical and conceptual tasks such as McFague's, rather to argue that both approaches may be necessary together to fully explore a model's meaning and relate it to other models.

We have seen how McFague's views on metaphor are integrated with the rest of her theology.   A considerable degree of cross-fertilisation has taken place, carrying her understanding and the language of metaphor into her understanding and language about, for example, Christology. It is reasonable to ask the question, is this tendency to isolate the terms in her model of metaphor from their literary and interpretive context also partially behind her tendency to isolate terms from their contexts in other areas?

Two stages in DesCamp and Sweetser's model suggest that the answered may be affirmative. Firstly, allowing for the target domain to contain information not derived from the source domain allows for the tradition in which the new metaphor is to be placed to have a role in governing its content. (The very minimal abstractions of the Christian tradition that McFague does in fact use in this way have, as has been suggested here, not been fully sufficient to locate her models securely within that tradition.) It may be admitted that it is useful to allow the source domain to specify the content of the metaphor almost exclusively when a new model is created. This would

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allow the new model to be given a maximally original and creative form. However it would still seem to be the case that a more sophisticated and nuanced process of conceptual blending with the pre-existing beliefs that comprise the interpretative context would be required if that metaphor were to be integrated into the systematic theologies of a particular tradition, to become reforming within it. For example the metaphor of God as sacrificial victim is often held to be given its particular power and location within Christian soteriology only by its conditioning by other beliefs about the incarnation and resurrection of Jesus and beliefs about sacrifice that are current in the context of the interpreter.[409].

Secondly, attention has been drawn to the role of concepts in metaphor formation. We have seen that, somewhat contra McFague, it is largely conceptual information that is transferred between domains as a metaphor is formed. Even when this metaphor is expressed in imagistic terms, its meaning has been seen to be derived from concepts, particularly in the form of abstracted qualities. Hence, it is also at the level of concept, as well as image and model, that seemingly diverse entities may be compared and may cast light upon each other. However this may provide a viable explanation for the dominance of the conceptual level within McFague's theology, particularly where she explores the meaning of her new models of God. We see this in McFague's use of composite models as discussed in Chapters 4 and 5. In these instances, models such as mother-homemaker or mother-judge are deployed together. It is the partial overlap and tension that exists between the pairs of *concepts* (rather than images) that enables them to act as composites. It is possible therefore, that if McFague's work were to be extended to include an analysis of the full importance of concepts in the actual process of the formation of metaphors (including imagistic

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409 See Ian Bradley *The Power of Sacrifice* London: DLT 1995 for an overview of the various relationships between understandings of sacrifice and other theological themes through Judeo-Christian history.

metaphors) that this may lead to a greater understanding of the function of the conceptual level in other places in her work.

The details of how this process might be done fall outside our present focus and await future research. However, as already suggested, embedding the models and metaphors in a narrative might be one fruitful way of beginning to draw them together, exploring their creative tensions and allowing them to interact with traditional motifs and narratives. This is perhaps to redirect attention back to one of the primary sources of McFague's theology, the parables, with the reminder that these are not simply metaphors but metaphors in a narrative form and located in a narrative context (the gospels).[410]

In short it appears that in those instances where McFague's project may be weaker, these weaknesses may be a factor of the inherent risk of the process of metaphorical modelling itself. That is, it falls foul of an occasional tendency to over-simplify a complex set of inter-relationships. To use McFague's own image, metaphors 'screen out' important insights or factors that, had they been brought into play, would have yielded different outcomes. This is, therefore, a risk that McFague herself acknowledges.

6.4 Summary.

The key elements of Sallie McFague's works remain coherent and relevant in the light of her respondents and in the face of her respondents and subsequent research. The foregoing discussions have drawn attention to a considerable degree of symmetry and cohesion between the form and theory of her work. A high degree of consistency

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410 For a contemporary example of how theology might proceed in this way, the reader is referred to the work of Trevor Dennis and especially *Speaking of God* which includes an non-technical introduction to the method of God-talk through narrative.

has been observed between the method she advocates and that which she actually uses in forming and assessing her models and that, by the standards she sets for them, they may be said to perform well.   As for the models themselves, an examination of each of these has shown them to be well developed and fruitful heuristic aids to an exploration of the nature of God, the nature of the world and the deepest emotions and relationships of humans within that world. It has also been seen that in the large majority of cases, McFague's work may be defended in the light of subsequent research and on occasion her arguments may be strengthened by it.

However, on a small, but consistently re-occurring, number of points, there has been cause to question McFague's work, either following more recent developments in the field, or in response to her critics or simply on the basis of explorations of her own internal consistency.

Considering her work as a whole then, it can be concluded that McFague still makes a significant, coherent and consistent contribution even to contemporary Christian theology following many years of debate on her work in the academic community.   This contribution is particularly valuable both in suggesting and expounding new metaphors and models and also by providing a theoretical framework in which further models may be created and assessed. There are however two further tasks which await future researchers into her valuable work to further strengthen its ability to meet its aim of being reforming of the Christian tradition.

One is the exploration of the possibility of expanding the imagistic base of these models by deploying them within new narratives and interpretative contexts and applying them to new tasks (and a reworking of traditional ones) and thus returning them to what McFague describes as their 'primary context' - the language of worship, a process which McFague has herself begun in her most recent book.

The second task, in partnership with the first, is the integration of models new and old, including their integration into the existing tradition, particularly at the conceptual level.

McFague's reforming work on Christian language about God, perhaps itself reformed with the small modifications as suggested here, stands as a valuable and significant contribution to be used in future theological endeavours. But, correctly understood, it is to be regarded as a resource to be used with the broader sweep of Christian theology rather than forming a complete and separate theology in itself. (This, after all, is her original stated intention in *Metaphorical Theology.)* In addition, the clear values and imperatives for theology consistently offered by her body of work offer an important voice in the conversation concerning how and for what purpose Christian theology should apply itself to understanding and re-imagining our world if it is to be relevant to the needs of our age.

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Note: Many of McFague's articles are earlier drafts of work that later appeared in her books, or are edited versions of book chapters. Therefore citations are drawn in the main from her books as these are generally the most complete statements of her positions.

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