

Sallie McFague, *A New Climate for Theology: God, the World, and Global Warming*. Fortress Press: Minneapolis, 2008, 198 pp. ISBN-13: 978-0-8006-6271-4;

Reviewed by Reginal M. Harrell

Sallie McFague (b: 25 May 1933) is a Distinguished Theologian in Residence at Vancouver School of Theology, Vancouver, BC, Canada. She received her BA (1955) in English Literature from Smith College, a BD (1959), MA (1960), and PhD (1964) from Yale Divinity School, and a Litt. D. from Smith College in 1977. Most of her academic career was spent in various roles at Vanderbilt University where she retired as the E. Rhodes and Leona B. Carpenter Professor of Theology. Her theological worldview was shaped in part by Barth's writings (from the context of hearing God's word) and from H. Richard Niebuhr (one of her teachers) who inculcating her progressive sense of her beliefs. Based on the influence of these two individuals in particular, her career focus has been on the biblical interpretation of Jesus' parables as metaphors; especially from the context of metaphorical theology. She is well-published with multiple books and many articles linking the precepts of literature and theology; especially from her progressive feminist's perspective. Beginning with her 1987 book *Models of God: Theology for an Ecological, Nuclear Age*, she took her liberal perspective to a new ecofeminist direction, which is even more prominently demonstrated in the pages of the current book being reviewed.

Dr. McFague's purpose of the book, as stated in her introduction, is to build upon the 2007 Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC; 1, 10-15) and produce a theological discussion as to the role of Christian theology in standing against the consequences of global warming as the IPCC document reported. This review is not to address the pros and cons associated with the IPCC 2007 report or to debate whether the evidence for global warming and whether anthropogenically effected climate change exists. The purpose is to respond to the approach that Dr. McFague outlines as a "theology of climate change."

The book itself is divided into an Introduction, four parts with nine chapters, and an Epilogue. The four parts cover areas addressing the science of climate change (Part 1), determining where God and the world are within the context of climate change (Part 2), how we (in a Western, urbanized society) should serve God within the context of climate change (Part 3), and how we emotionally and faithfully respond to the issues of climate change (Part 4). The Epilogue is brief (2 pages) and personally reflective.

Throughout the entire book she builds on her approach to metaphorical theology (best seen in pages 107-119) that culminates in the final part of the book (Part 4 with Chapters 8 and 9) by answering a series of questions such as *is a different world*

*possible; who are we; where do we fit; who is God; and, what is our task* by providing answers that are indicative of her worldview. The book's chapters are evenly weighted, for the most part, regarding length with those in the first and last part of the book being the shortest. Part 1 addresses the science and theology of global warming and, not surprisingly, is the shortest as she is not a scientist, and it is here where she frames for the rest of the book with her theological introduction that is best described as . The last part (Part 4) is a reflective section with prose about relating self to the world, others, and God. Part 3 is the longest section wherein she builds on her feminist's thesis of incarnational theology (132-134), which will be addressed below.

To provide an objective assessment of this book one must look at the tome from differing perspectives. To an ecofeminist, deep ecologist, or follower of Lovelock's Gaia Hypothesis (cf. Chapter 1 – 11-15), this book provides thoughtful insight to their prevailing worldview that we are morally bankrupt from an ecological perspective, and we are destroying the world and condemning people to death (18). Inherent in this worldview, and clearly espoused throughout the book, is an overt approach to ecotheology from an incarnational theology perspective. By incarnational theology I do not mean God's son as the second part of the Trinity leaving His heavenly throne to become God incarnate—fully God and fully man, which is the traditional evangelical understanding, but one where she considers self (individual humans) kenosis as a cathexis for the love, protection, and salvation of the world. This is the type of Universalist, communitarian philosophy (29, 32) also prevails throughout the book, and is another key to McFague's worldview.

Also inherent to this worldview is her prevailing panentheistic and metaphorical language that God exists in and beyond every part of nature (as opposed to pantheism, which places God and the universe as one) (34; 63-76; 132-139). Here the physical earth (and whole universe for that matter) is the flesh and body of God (Chapter 4). God's transcendence then is proclaimed as love (102-104) wherein ultimately eternal salvation comes through creation care. Throughout all she drives the philosophy away from time and history to space and place in the "here and now" the salvific context of earthly stewardship as the means to the end (65, 136).

Switching to my own worldview and with all due respect to Dr. McFague's philosophy and her talented writing I found very little value contained within the pages of the book beyond a better appreciation of the progressive perspectives of metaphorical and incarnational theology as viewed from a progressive perspective. I saw hints of an attempt to revive the social gospel that was so popular at the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup>-20<sup>th</sup> century to include not only the poor and oppressed but to include nature in this mix. As an ecologist in a tier-one research institution I found her understanding of ecology

superficial at best wherein she allows her worldview to bias her polemic points. To her credit she has a reasonable appreciation of the interconnectedness of all of nature yet that is about as far as it goes. Other than the introductory chapter in Part 1 there is little actual discussion of global warming in the context of her thesis other than to use it occasionally as a “buzzword” to remind the reader that she is still thinking about the “climate.” Missing in the discussion was the cruel side of nature such as competition, predator-prey interactions, and natural diseases that can be of epidemic (or biblical) proportions. You cannot have a thoughtful discussion of ecology and nature without considering these facets of the mix.

As a Southern Baptist conservative evangelical pastor my worldview is almost directly the polar opposite of Dr. McFague. What would be a personally interesting exercise would be to have a thoughtful discussion about the clear and strong differences in our worldviews. While I disagree with her interpretation of the providence of God from a metaphorical perspective I did actually appreciate the depth of thought she has placed into the value of metaphor and how it can be used in multiple contexts.

Because of my background and worldview I found this book one of the most tedious and worrisome books I have read in a long-time. The tedium was because my training and personal faith was personally affronted on almost every page. I had to force myself to objectively seek what Dr. McFague was trying to convey with as much passion for her beliefs as I did against her beliefs.

Yet, to me her, and her colleague’s viewpoints on incarnational theology is misleading and a distortion. The problem is not with incarnation as a doctrine because it is central to my Christian faith. The problem is taking the glorious truth of God’s son leaving His throne in heaven to come to earth to be the means for my salvation and distorting it into a means of works-based salvation by caring for others, our communities, our sense of place and our earth. In essence the inference is that we earn our salvation by being caretakers for God’s kingdom. Yes, we are commanded by God himself to be his stewards but it is for his praise and glory, not ours. Incarnational theology and metaphorical theology is about what God has done for us through his transcendent love, not what we can do for others (although we are clearly commanded to love one another as ourselves. Jesus was indeed our model for how to live with other cultures including how to appreciate the gift of nature itself, but it was not until the last few pages that Dr. McFague even mentioned the resurrection.

I do not think Dr. McFague accomplished her task as outlined in her introduction. To those faithful, like-minded panentheistic believers of her theology maybe so, but to those of us who proclaim that there is only one transcendent, omnipotent God who is much

more that the “body of the world” we are not convinced her teaching is sound. There are many pages throughout the book where I could address specific and strong differences between my faith and Dr. McFague’s worldview, however, I will conclude with the following closing comment: If you are faithful to God’s holy word as the true and inspired teachings that we are a sinful people in need of a savior who not only will provide *the* means for our eternal salvation, do not purchase this book.

Reginal M. Harrell, PhD, MBA, MDiv Ethics  
Professor of Fisheries and Wildlife Sciences  
University of Maryland  
College Park, MD  
Pastor of Discipleship and Pastoral Care  
Easton First Baptist Church  
Easton, MD