Whispers of Conversation between Thomas Merton and Sallie McFague on God, Self, and the World: Considering Engaged Spirituality Today

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WHISPERS OF CONVERSATION BETWEEN THOMAS MERTON AND SALLIE MCFAGUE ON GOD, SELF, AND THE WORLD: CONSIDERING ENGAGED SPIRITUALITY TODAY

A Dissertation

Submitted to the McAnulty Graduate School of Liberal Arts

Duquesne University

In partial fulfillment of the requirements for
the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

By

Emily D. Manning

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Emily D. Manning

2013
WHISPERS OF CONVERSATION BETWEEN THOMAS MERTON AND SALLIE 
MCFAGUE ON GOD, SELF, AND THE WORLD: CONSIDERING ENGAGED 
SPIRITUALITY TODAY

By

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ABSTRACT

WHISPERS OF CONVERSATION BETWEEN THOMAS MERTON AND SALLIE MCFAGUE ON GOD, SELF, AND THE WORLD:
CONSIDERING ENGAGED SPIRITUALITY TODAY

By
Emily D. Manning
May 2013

Dissertation supervised by Dr. Gerald Boodoo

This dissertation focuses upon the question, “how are we called to live?”, relying on the thought and dialogue of Thomas Merton, a 20th Century Catholic monk, and Sallie McFague, a 21st Century Protestant theologian. This question is approached by examining Merton and McFague’s understandings of God, self, and the world as these aspects relate to the question and issue of Christian living. In exploring these areas this project brings together aspects of Christian spirituality, theology, and ethics to grasp the intimate relationship between faith and action, which is the essence of authentic Christian discipleship. Ultimately, the merging of faith and action seen in Merton and McFague’s lives and work suggest that they both possess and advocate for “engaged spirituality,” or spiritually rooted social action, as the central expression of Christian faith called for
today. Their examples, brought together, convey truth and inspire all of us to live more authentically and to more fully contribute to the making of a better world.
DEDICATION

This work is dedicated to those around me who are ultimately responsible for its fruition. To my parents, Donald Strunk and Roxanne Wilson, who have encouraged me to follow my dreams and who have believed in me throughout my life, making this moment possible. To my very first and favorite theology professor and mentor, Mike Duffy, who introduced and instilled in me a great love for Merton as a young undergraduate, and who has been there to ease my anxiety and answer questions each step of the way throughout my educational journey. And finally, to my husband, Brince, who has, despite all challenges and obstacles, patiently stood by my side and loved me without fail…
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I am deeply indebted to the Theology Department at Duquesne University for making this project possible. Many thanks for both the financial support and the encouragement of the faculty, particularly George Worgul, for whom I worked as a Teaching Assistant the majority of my time in the program. Taking me under his wings, Dr. Worgul challenged me to widen my box and consider Christian faith in new ways than when I entered the program. I am indebted to him for all that he has done for me during my time at Duquesne.

A special thank you also goes out to my dissertation director, Gerald Boodoo, for his desire to work with me and continual support throughout this project, and to my committee members, Marie Baird and George Worgul, for the assistance and feedback they have provided, which has enriched me and my work. Thank you!
INTRODUCTION

How are we called to live? The question is spiritual in nature, but holds theological assumptions and ethical implications, which can be explored through a series of questions that are themselves built into the primary question. These questions include: Who is God? Who am I? What does God want from me? Is my life my own? What is my relationship with the world? Such questions, though they can be articulated in different ways, are fundamental to human nature in our search for meaning.

Because of the fundamental nature of the question(s) that this dissertation seeks to explore, it is not surprising that numerous books, articles, and dissertations already exist addressing the topic. (In this particular project, it is, essentially, Christian living, which we are concerned with—a topic relevant and of fundamental importance to all who profess belief in Christ Jesus as Lord.) And so while the questions are not new, they have never been explored in light of the findings and dialogue of Thomas Merton and Sallie McFague specifically.¹ Merton and McFague have never before been placed together as conversation partners on this subject.² Unlike other projects, then, this dissertation plans

¹ The number of dissertations on Merton and McFague as individually contributing to this topic is significant. A word search for “Thomas Merton” and “Sallie McFague” in the ProQuest database for Dissertations and Theses shows roughly 100 dissertations already completed on (or involving) each figure.

² In researching past projects, I discovered only one dissertation that incorporated both Merton and McFague. This dissertation was written by Blake Richard Heffner, entitled A Catechism for Kenotic Spirituality: The Book of Spiritual Poverty in Analysis and Reflection (Mysticism, Rheinland School, Meister Eckhart, Detachment, Christian
to contribute to the conversation surrounding the spiritual and ethical components of
Christian living and discipleship by relying on Merton and McFague specifically in order
to answer the question, “How are we called to live?”

Merton and McFague have been influential in paving specific ways of answering
the question. What happens when each figure’s findings are presented and examined in
light of the other? What we find is that, essentially, Merton and McFague both possess
and advocate for “engaged spirituality,” or spiritually rooted social action. This project’s
humble proposal is that, in every instance, faith should prompt and beget action. As
Christians, we are called to live as imitations of Christ and embodiments of love in and to
our world. That is what this work seeks to explore and demonstrate—how, together,
Merton and McFague shed light on concepts such as God, self, and the world, which
ultimately shape our responses as Christians to the question, “how are we called to live?”
so that we can live our lives with more authenticity, fulfillment, and love, contributing to
the making of a better world.

**Introducing Merton and McFague**

Why Thomas Merton and Sallie McFague? Perhaps readers are wondering who
these figures are, what is significant about them, and why are they being brought
together? Merton and McFague are both well known within their respective arenas; they
have large audiences, and both are well published (though Merton’s seventy plus books

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*Lif.* (Princeton Theological Seminary, 1986). Although Merton and McFague are both included in this dissertation, they were not brought into dialogue regarding their own ideas; rather, they were included in a forum of modern authors, used to individually explore the dissertation topic of kenotic spirituality.
significantly outnumber McFague’s seven books\(^3\). Yet what interests us most, here, is that Merton and McFague represent different times and contexts, which helps us examine the project’s leading question of how we are called to live from a wider, more inclusive, Christian perspective.

**Thomas Merton**

A significant number of biographies have been written about Merton’s life, as well as Merton’s own autobiography, *The Seven Storey Mountain*. His life story appeals to so many, I believe, because people relate to his experiences. Merton strikes people as this average, typical guy, who has walked a winding road full of challenges, like so many others, and he has shown others how to do so with humility and authenticity. Yet however “normal” Merton might seem, his life was not in the least bit traditional.

Merton had an uncharacteristic childhood. He was born in January 1915 in Prades, France to two artists. His mother was American and his father was from New Zealand. His parents’ lives were both cut short due to illness, and Merton was left orphaned by the age of sixteen. Merton’s early years were spent in America, but he spent 1925-1934 in Europe, attending school in England the majority of those years. These years abroad shaped Merton’s thinking in terms of the kind of education he received and his later interest in worldly social and political affairs.

Once back in the United States, Merton attended Columbia University, graduating in 1938. This same year, Merton joined and was baptized into the Roman Catholic Church. Merton had had glimpses of God and religion throughout his childhood, but as a

\(^3\) Both Merton and McFague have extensive number of articles, essays, reviews, etc. published in addition to published books.
child it was nothing more than an aesthetic appreciation of Church buildings and icons; deep Christian belief had not quite set in. Merton spent the next few years of his life deepening his faith, while teaching college level literature courses, having received his M.A. degree in English in 1939. In 1941, he made a retreat to the Abbey of Gethsemani, a Trappist monastery in Kentucky, and was deeply moved by the experience, which led him to return as a novitiate within the year.

Merton spent the remainder of his life as part of the Trappist community of monks, living a life of solitude and writing about the experience of contemplation. Merton’s years in the monastery were certainly not stagnant; he continued to mature in his faith and grow as a person. As will be noted for readers in the following chapters, his writing reflects this growth. Merton’s life came to a tragic end in 1968, when he was accidentally electrocuted by a fan while attending a conference with other religious monks in Asia. Merton’s body was laid to rest in the monastery’s cemetery, under his given monastic name, Fr. Louis Merton.

_Sallie McFague_

Far less has been written about Sallie McFague than Merton. While a number of reviews, articles, and a handful of books speak of McFague’s thought and writing, no biographies have yet been published—likely because she is still alive, but also because, with a few exceptions, she has chosen to keep the details of her life private, and has not used her life story as the basis for her writing in the same way as Merton.\(^4\)

\(^4\) This idea will be further developed in chapter two in reference to differences in Merton and McFague’s methodology.
What we do know about McFague’s life is that she was born in May 1933 in Quincy, Massachusetts. She holds a B.A. degree in English Literature from Smith College, which she earned in 1955, and a B.D. degree from Yale Divinity School, received in 1959. She went on to earn her M.A. at Yale the following year as well as her Ph.D. in 1964. McFague taught for thirty years as the Carpenter Professor of Theology at Vanderbilt Divinity School and now resides in Vancouver, British Columbia as the Distinguished Theologian in Residence at Vancouver School of Theology. Her main academic interests and publications are in religious language, feminism, and ecology.

Aside from her academic achievements, McFague provides only basic descriptions of herself in her own writing, such as commenting on her American, white, and middle-class status, or the fact that she is Protestant. Yet she still does not specify which particular Protestant denomination she means to refer to. McFague is said to have married Eugene TeSelle in 1959 and has two children.5 Her early works are published under her married name, TeSelle, or under McFague-TeSelle. All works written after 1977 are authored under her maiden name, McFague. McFague has never formally explained this change or commented on her marriage or family life. It is clear that she wishes to be viewed as an academic—a linguist, ethicist, and theologian.

Merton and McFague, while sharing some aspects of American heritage and having several years of their lives overlap, are two very different individuals with distinct life stories. With their popularity and different contexts, Merton and McFague, placed

together, speak to a wide array of people. As readers will discover, despite their different contexts and agendas, Merton and McFague produce complimentary responses to the question, “how are we called to live,” which has the power to unify their followers, as well as other Christian believers, seeking more authentic lives. Thus, not only are Merton and McFague individually important and significant figures, but when they are put together and assessed, they are extremely valuable in enabling readers to better answer the question, “how are we called to live?”

Merton and McFague would themselves support such dialogue/conversation. As McFague states in one of her works, she believes that all theology is limited and contextual, and should therefore be placed alongside other perspectives. She uses the metaphor of a patchwork quilt to capture her understanding of different contributions to theology, suggesting that her own ideas represent “one square in the quilt, one voice in the conversation, one angle of vision…” Thus McFague desired that her contributions be in conversation with other voices; only once all of these theologies and perspectives are brought together will there be a rich, diverse picture of reality (a full, patchwork quilt).

Merton would have certainly agreed with McFague. He was in constant correspondence with so many people all over the world, writing letters, discussing all aspects of life. Like McFague, Merton thought dialogue was extremely important and helpful, not only within one’s own tradition, but even outside of it (which was why he

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had traveled to Asia to attend a conference at the end of his life). This is evident in that Merton spent his later years incorporating Buddhist language and concepts into his Christian understanding of God and the self in an attempt to capture the reality of God and the self that are beyond language. Besides this, his journal entries reflect the deep impact various authors before him had on his thinking, such as the Christian mystic, St. John of the Cross, or the philosopher, Heidegger. Merton’s own thoughts and writing would not have developed the way they did without such individuals and Merton’s dialogue with them. Thus McFague and Merton would agree that only through dialogue and conversation are we able to respond to the question, “how are we called to live?” most fully. Together, they provide us with a larger, fuller picture of how we are called to live than either capture alone; they build a strong framework for thinking about God, identity, and the bridging of faith and action to live more authentically in the world.

**Project Overview**

*Part One*

The first two chapters will set the scene for this project. These chapters provide necessary background information on Merton and McFague in regards to their differing contexts, methodology and general worldviews. While not the direct focus of this project, part one is critical in grounding each author’s ideas and conception of God, self, and the world (which we will be exploring in the following chapters) within his/her appropriate context.

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8 Here, I use the word "dialogue" loosely. Merton did not have any actual conversations with these figures.
Chapter one begins with an examination of each figure’s framework of thought and agenda. As readers will discover, Merton and McFague’s agendas are heavily influenced by the specifics of their contexts. Thus we note the differences between Merton and McFague when it comes to the time in which they lived and wrote, philosophies they embraced, their personal influences in and to their work, understandings of theology, and approaches to faith, church, and scripture.

Chapter two will continue to set the scene for our project by addressing the methodology that each figure implements in their writing. Readers will here discover the correlation between methodology and context, and the ways that Merton and McFague’s methods are similar and/or dissimilar. In addition to methodology, chapter two will also include a study of Merton and McFague’s conceptions of reality, which will prove critically important for us to grasp their understandings of God, self, and world in the following chapters and ability to see how they each might respond to our leading question, “how are we called to live?”

Part Two

Recall the central question which this dissertation seeks to explore: “how are we called to live?” The question states that we are called to live a certain way, implying that our lives are not completely our own, but are a response to a source outside or beyond ourselves. The question also implies that our lives, and how we live in the world, matters. Thus, for both Merton and McFague, their answer to how we are called to live is rooted in their understandings and assumptions about God, self, and world.
Chapter three begins by examining Merton and McFague’s understandings of God. Who is God? How do we experience or know God? In what sense is God accessible to us? What does God want from us? Does God “call” us? All of these are questions addressed in this chapter, and they are all critical in the formulation of an answer to the question of how we are called to live.

Examining Merton and McFague’s understandings of God in chapter three, in many ways, leads us into the topic of the self in chapter four. The character and nature of God and God’s interest in and relationship with us and the world hint at who we are. Chapter four seeks to pinpoint both Merton and McFague’s conceptions of self. Who am I? Who are we? What is the point of our existence? How and where do we fit in the world? What is expected of us? Merton and McFague both have their own unique ways of answering these questions that ultimately shape their answers to the question of how we are called to live.

Chapter five is in many ways a continuation of the dimensions of human life that were raised in chapter four, on the self. In this chapter, we continue to respond to the question of how we are called to live by examining aspects of the self as they relate to the world. Thus in this chapter we will consider Merton and McFague’s perceptions of the world, and how they view our relationship to and with it. The self cannot be identified or defined without consideration for the world, so we will examine our relationships to and with one another and to and with nature, or non-human forms of life.
Part Three

Chapter six serves as the conclusion to this dissertation, revisiting the question, “How are we called to live?” The previous chapters have hinted at the ethical implications in and to our lives, as evidenced in our identity and relationships with God and the world. In this chapter, we look at what these ethical implications are explicitly. How are we called to live? Both Merton and McFague’s conclusions will be presented, and here we will finally look at the point of intersection—the whispers of conversation—between Merton and McFague. What are the points of convergence and divergence between them, and what do we make of them? We will consider what significance their findings have in and to our own lives, and in helping us discern how we are called to live, today. Ultimately, we will see that Merton and McFague serve as examples of “engaged spirituality,” which is concerned with spiritually based social action. As such, they encourage us to possess and embody an engaged spirituality today. In this way, Merton and McFague, held together, shed light on the question, “How are we called to live?” in a new way, leaving readers with a new appreciation for and understanding of the question, so that we are better prepared to live authentic and meaningful lives in today’s world.

Preliminary Caveats

All projects possess limits and boundaries in regards to their exploration of a central argument or question. This dissertation is no exception. This project asks the question, “How am I called to live?” from the perspective of Christian faith, assuming a principally Christian audience and readership. Those who find themselves outside of the boundaries of Christianity, particularly those belonging to other faith traditions, will
likely also find this question significant in and to their lives. Thus, while written for Christians, others are welcome to join in our exploration of this question and quest for engaged spirituality.

Beyond the limit in scope to the confines of Christianity, we are further narrowing our examination of the question of how we are called to live to only two Christian viewpoints. Merton and McFague’s perspectives are hardly all encompassing. For instance, they are not global; they are both Americans. As such, some may argue that they do not, and cannot, serve as conclusive evidence for this project’s ultimate conclusion—that together, Merton and McFague shed light on how all Christians are called to live and to embody love in his/her own form of engaged spirituality. But while they are, in fact, only two American voices, they do represent vastly different circles within Christianity, and therefore, I do believe, they offer a rather inclusive look at the question of how we are called to live.

Still, having limited the scope of this project to two Christian figures, more limits must be set. Neither Merton nor McFague will be given comprehensive treatment or assessment regarding their life, work, and contributions in this project. Because of the broad scope of writing by and about Merton and McFague, this dissertation will primarily use their published books. Of Merton’s seventy plus books, only the most relevant works will be referenced; not all books will be used or needed for this project. With considerably less publications than Merton, all of McFague’s books will be used in this project except for her earliest work, Literature and the Christian Life, which is no longer in print and easily available to us.
We only seek to consider Merton and McFague’s perspectives with respect to this project’s leading question of how we are called to live. Thus their ideas are presented only as they are relevant to this question, while leaving other ideas aside to be explored on another occasion. There are many times in the following chapters that readers may note points of convergence and divergence between Merton and McFague in their ideas on God, self, and world that are thought provoking and worthy of exploration, but we cannot make all of these connections here. That would simply exceed the time and pages available for this endeavor. Rather than address all points of contact, we will attempt to trace their lines of thought and only examine the points of convergence and divergence that are relevant and impact our understanding of how we are called to live, explored in chapter six.
PART ONE

A basic sketch was provided in the introduction of Merton and McFague’s life stories in order that readers might gain familiarity with these two figures and comprehend the basic differences between them in terms of the time in which they wrote and their life experiences and interests. Here, we are again interested in looking at the differences between Merton and McFague’s contexts, this time in regards to their agendas, times in which they wrote, philosophies, influences, understandings of theology, approaches to faith, the Church, tradition, and Scripture, as well as their methodology, and conceptions of reality. We are particularly concerned in the first two chapters with “setting the scene” and pinning down these differences in context and the way that such differences shape and determine their thought and writing. It is important to do this because neither writes in a vacuum. It would be unfair and uncritical to assess and compare Merton and McFague’s conclusions on how we are called to live without any regard for their differing agendas, methods, outlooks, etc. Exploring these differences will provide us with a deeper appreciation for their contributions and will help us understand why they make the claims they do.
CHAPTER ONE: SETTING THE SCENE

CONSIDERING CONTEXT

What is context? Context has to do with the circumstances or conditions that surround an event (in this case the ideas/contributions of Merton and McFague). These conditions function as a setting or background, providing meaning for/surrounding an idea. No idea eludes context, and an idea/statement’s meaning and significance can be changed or lost if taken out of its context. This means that all theological, ethical, and spiritual ideas and contributions that Merton and McFague make are contextual, meaning that they arise out of particular sets of conditions that include distinctions in time, location, class, gender, etc. Context then essentially has to do with personal human experience.

Theology has not always been considered as contextual; classical theology gave no recognition to context, thinking of itself as objective and universal in its truth claims about God and matters of faith, relying solely on the theological sources of scripture and tradition. Yet in recent years a shift has occurred and now theology accepts context, or experience, as a third theological source. As Bevans, author of *Models of Contextual Theology*, states,

The reason we add experience/context to the traditional theological sources [of scripture and tradition] is the revolution in thinking and understanding the world.

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that is characterized as the “turn to the subjective at the beginning of modern times.” While classical theology understood theology as something objective, contextual theology understands theology as something unabashedly subjective. By subjective, however, I do not mean relative or private or anything like that but the fact that the human person or human society, culturally and historically bound as it is, is the source of reality, not a supposed value- and culture-free objectivity “already out there now real.”

Both Merton and McFague would agree with Bevans’ statement that we are not value or culture-free. For Merton, this was something that he learned with time, since the dating of his writing puts him right in the midst of the transition between modes of thinking about context as an additional source in/to theology. Merton’s goal was objectivity. In the Author's Note of his work, *New Seeds of Contemplation*, he states that his ideas are no different than any other monk's and thus the book could have been written by anyone (xiv-xv). He was trying to articulate the mystical experience of contemplation that is (in theory) shared or common to all in the monastic community. Yet Merton included a footnote in reference to his initial statement, indicating that many monks disagreed that his ideas were representative or common to all. With time and through conversation with others, Merton learned an important lesson: his writing is not and cannot be objective. He learned that his thoughts and writing are dependent not only on scripture and tradition, but on his personal experiences (context) as well.

McFague’s support of context as a theological source is consistently present in her writing. In *Metaphorical Theology*, she stresses that we must use an “interpretive context” to critically assess religious language. She states, “It is the context that

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10 Bevans, 4.

11 This shift is expanded upon in the following sections on Modernity and Postmodernity.
recognizes that we who attempt to speak about God are social, cultural, and historical beings with particular perspectives influenced by a wide range of factors.”  

This means really examining the differences between Merton and McFague in terms of their personal experiences if we are going to take seriously their ideas and any similarities we find in their thinking. We must acknowledge that Merton’s ideas flow from his experiences as a white, American, Trappist monk interested in the relationship between contemplation and action, writing in the 1950’s and 60’s. And that McFague writes still today as a white, middle class, American, Protestant woman, interested in religious language and ecological theology. Neither Merton nor McFague’s ideas are objective, universal statements about reality. Their understandings of scripture, tradition, and present day experiences are contextual. (And as Bevans suggests, scripture and tradition were/are themselves contextual, formulated by people with varying experiences). Both Merton and McFague understand their ideas to be limited and shaped/influenced by their contexts, which is why both are so adamant that dialogue and crossover work must occur with others. As McFague has described, one’s ideas are merely one patch/square of a quilt.

Merton and McFague both take experience seriously; their contexts are the framework from which we must examine their ideas. We must be cautious in our comparisons not to overlook their contexts or to take either of their ideas out of context, for this risks a change or loss in the meaning of each of their ideas. In order to prevent

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13 Experience will be explored further as it pertains to Merton and McFague's methodologies, in chapter two.
this from occurring, let us begin with an exploration of Merton and McFague’s contexts, and the ways in which they share similarities and/or vary, resulting in differences in their ideas on God, self, and the world, which will be highlighted in Part Two.

**Different Agendas**

Merton and McFague’s writing shares a common starting point; both had an initial interest in English and literature, having received degrees in/related to these fields. While this transpired into an interest in writing for both, it did so in different ways. Merton took a keen interest in the romantics, particularly William Blake, whom he wrote on for his Master’s thesis. What attracted Merton to the romantics was the spiritual, mystical nature of reality (with its truth, goodness, and beauty), which the romantics captured through their use of imagination and intuition. Merton’s interest in these underlying aspects of reality led him to always search for the “more” in life, or the deeper layers of meaning and truth, which ultimately led to his conversion to Christianity and his later joining of the monastic, Trappist community.

Merton thought that in becoming a monk he was ultimately giving up his writing in pursuit of deeper truth (the direct experience of God), but to his surprise, his desire and need to write followed him into the monastery. Merton was initially frightened of this desire, believing it was only the mask of his secular, worldly self. In his autobiography, *The Seven Storey Mountain*, he writes, “There was this shadow, this double, this writer who had followed me into the cloister.... He is a business man. He is full of ideas. He breathes notions and new schemes. He generates books in the silence that ought to be

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sweet with the infinitely productive darkness of contemplation.” Merton admitted the temptation to write to his superiors, hoping to clear his conscience, and was surprised by their instructions to keep writing.

Merton wrote on an array of subjects; his mind easily wandered across topic lines as he wrote. Yet at the heart of each piece of Merton’s writing, no matter the topic, was the theme of contemplation, or the mystical experience of union with God. “Whether he was explicitly writing on prayer, monastic life, liturgy, the psalms, or on civil rights, peace and war, nuclear disarmament or ancient cultures, he was expressing the fullness of the nature of contemplation.” Contemplation was more than a mere literary concern for Merton; it was at the root of Merton’s being. He understood contemplation to be a way of life and a way of viewing and relating to God, self, and the world.

What began for Merton as an interest in mystical experience, writing on the poetry of William Blake, transpired into a surplus number of books, letters, journal entries, and articles centered on the mystical experience of contemplation. The

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16 The theme of contemplation will continue to be explored throughout this project as it pertains God, self, and the world, and the question of how we are called to live.


18 It is possible to trace back Merton's interest in mystical experience further to specific instances of which he speaks in his autobiography of his childhood. He describes various occasions of being overcome or struck by an emotion or sensation experienced in/by a church, icon, conversation, etc. These experiences from his childhood were short-lived, but perhaps foundational in/to his later interest. For purposes of this dissertation, I am claiming that Merton's literary interest in mystical experience began with his research and writing on William Blake.
development of both Merton’s life and writing, while at times a tumultuous journey, show a man that did not stray far from his path. His interest in spirituality and mystical experience pervaded his thought and writing and depicts his steadfast determination to be true to himself and his identity throughout his life.

Yet it was not just that Merton treated the same subject throughout his work that shows him as being true to himself; Merton was intrigued by the topic of identity itself, understanding identity to be an important part of contemplation. As he understood it, the mystical, direct experience of God is at the same time the discovery of one’s true self, which has its reality in God. Thus, while Merton wrote on an array of subjects, his most central ideas gravitated towards the experience of contemplation and the discovery of one’s true self.

The focus of Merton’s writing was spiritual in nature. Everything he wrote, he wrote from and within the experience of contemplation, involving the discovery of the true self. McFague went a very different direction than Merton in regard to her literary interest and ambition. From McFague’s earliest works it is clear that her focus throughout her career has been on religious/theological language, later narrowing in on the issue of ecology. This is clear from her book titles alone: Literature and the Christian Life (1966), Speaking in Parables: A Study in Metaphor and Theology (1975), Metaphorical Theology: Models of God in Religious Language (1982), Models of God: Theology for an Ecological, Nuclear Age (1987), The Body of God: An Ecological Theology (1993), Super, Natural Christians: How we should love nature (1997), Life Abundant: Rethinking Theology and Economy for a Planet in Peril (2001), and her latest book, A New Climate for Theology: God, the World, and Global Warming (2008).
McFague’s interest in religious language, particularly the use of metaphor, and ecology has remained a constant in her writing. Yet her examination of religious language has not been static; her ideas have evolved with each new publication. In her early works, McFague took interest in poetry, novels, and autobiographies, claiming that “these genres manifest the ways metaphor operates in language, belief, and life.”¹⁹ She then moved from these genres to her next “thought experiment”: What would the relations between religious and theological language look like if seen in the light of the way metaphors become models, in light of the relativity and openness of metaphorical thinking, and in light of the intrinsic iconoclastic and transformative character of metaphorical thought?”.²⁰ Metaphors and models have remained a central aspect of McFague’s writing, which she has applied to the issue of ecology, such as thinking about the world as God’s body. McFague is adamant that changing the language that we use to talk about God and God’s relationship to/with the world will change the way we live and treat the earth. Put simply, religious language has ecological significance. McFague’s latest works, while still demonstrating the correlation that exists between theology and ecology, have moved away from a focus on religious language and more towards “hands on” approaches to loving nature and to responding to issues such as the economy and climate change. As she sees it, we all can contribute to the making of a better world in some capacity, and for McFague, as a theologian this means reexamining our understanding of God and self to articulate the God-world relationship in a way that is healthier for all of creation. Thus McFague, while interested in English language and


²⁰ McFague, Metaphorical Theology, ix.
literature like Merton, took this interest in the direction of linguistics, using it as a tool to merge theology with ethical, ecological concerns.

**Digging Deeper**

As readers can see, Merton and McFague clearly have different agendas for their writing, which has to do with a difference in context. They are different people, having grown up in different places, surrounded by and influenced by different people, living in different times, dealing with different issues of the times, and so on. Naturally then, their writing reflects these differences. Let us examine some of these differences in more depth.

**Different Times**

While several years of Merton and McFague’s life spans overlapped, the years in which they wrote the majority of their works did not overlap. The bulk of Merton’s writing was done between 1948 and 1968, at which point he passed away. McFague’s first book was published in 1966, but it wasn’t until her next book publication in 1975 that her writing started to gain popularity. Since then McFague has released a steady stream of books, her latest of which was released in 2008, and her contributions in ecological theology have impacted many.

In many ways, the agendas in Merton and McFague’s writings are reflections of the times in which they wrote. Merton discovered that his study and experience of

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21 There exists an extensive posthumous publication list as well, but these works would have also been written in/around this time frame.
contemplation led him to its relationship with social action.22 The precise forms of social action that Merton examined in the 1960’s clearly reflect the trends of the time. He wrote on racism and aspects of the Civil Rights Movement, war and peace, particularly the threat of nuclear war/warfare, and nonviolence, both as a strategy of engagement and as a way of life. Racism, war, and violence were prevalent concerns in the 1960’s and people were struggling with change and to create change. Merton was aware of such tensions and wrote on such issues in an effort to contribute to resolution for people during this time period.

The content of McFague’s writing also corresponds to the time in which her works have been published. Her interest in ecology as a theological and ethical issue was part of a growing trend. Ecology, or “the study of relations and interactions between organisms and their environment”, had been studied for centuries by some of the world’s greatest philosophers, such as Aristotle, while the term itself dates back only to the 1870’s, when coined by E. H. Haeckel.23 Yet it was not until the mid-20th Century that ecology began to be taken seriously, as an interdisciplinary study. In the 1960’s, environmental concerns rose among Americans with the threats of nuclear war/warfare obliterating planetary life. Such threats brought new awareness and an increase in study and writing on matters of ecology. In 1962 Rachel Carson published her famous work, Silent Spring, which looked at the effects of pesticides and pollution on the environment, particularly their effect on birds. Carson’s work was revolutionary; others followed suit.

22 This idea will be more thoroughly explored and developed in chapter six.

in writing on and advocating for ecological and environmental concerns. Government funded environmental protection programs and Earth day followed as well, being instated in 1970.

Also monumental in the 1960’s was historian Lynn White Jr.’s lecture for the American Academy of Arts and Sciences in 1966, which was titled and later published as “The Historical Roots of our Ecological Crisis” in the journal Science. White’s thesis was that Christianity is to blame for the ecological crisis seen in the 20th Century, based on a reading of Genesis 1’s account that humankind has “dominion” over the earth and Scripture and Christianity’s anthropocentric focus as a whole. Naturally, White’s comments spurred heated debates over any correlations that might be made between religion and ecology.

McFague found herself writing in the midst of this ecological climate. She was undoubtedly aware of such conversations and debates and influenced by them, but her interest in ecological matters had to do with more than just its popularity; it also arose out of her interest in religious language as a feminist. McFague studied and accessed religious language from the perspective of an American, middle-class woman. She saw as her task the job of introducing new metaphors and models into Christianity, due to the fact that many traditional metaphors/models are no longer helpful or functional. As she explains, the main problems with religious language are idolatry, when certain metaphors and models are overemphasized to the detriment of others and as a result become treated as literal truths, and irrelevance, in which case metaphors or models no longer fit our

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24 Merton too read Carson's book and was deeply moved by it, writing her a letter of appreciation. Carson's book deepened Merton's resolve to try and correct the spiritual sickness that he saw pervading the world and to help people see the unity that exists between God, humankind, and the world.
current society and worldview. As a feminist, McFague was critiquing certain metaphors/models support of patriarchy. She worked to correct the problems of idolatry and irrelevance by suggesting alternative metaphors, such as God as Mother, Lover, or Friend that may make God more accessible to women and other marginalized groups of people.

Yet McFague did not stop there. Her examination of religious language from a feminist perspective led her to consider the effects of religious language on the rest of creation. She states, “I have come to see patriarchal as well as imperialistic, triumphalist metaphors for God in an increasingly grim light: this language is not only idolatrous and irrelevant—besides being oppressive to many who do not identify with it—but it may also work against the continuation of life on our planet.”

Having made the connection between religion and ecology, McFague found herself a part of the ongoing conversation, initiated by Lynn White, Jr., on the role of Christianity in either bettering or worsening the natural world. More specifically, McFague found herself located within a community of feminist theologians making this connection, who wore the label “eco-feminists.”

This is another way that McFague’s thinking and writing reflect the trends of her time.

Readers can see how both Merton and McFague were impacted by the times in which they lived. Merton’s writing on social concerns such as racism, war, and violence reflect concerns of Americans in the 1960’s while McFague’s writing on ecology, from a feminist perspective, reflects developments in the late 1960’s into the 1970’s and beyond.

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26 The movements of feminism and eco-feminism will be examined in more depth in the section, "Different Influences."
Yet it is too simple to say that Merton and McFague’s writings were *only* reflections of or reactions to historical and social events of their times; such historical and social events emerge as the result of underlying philosophies of the times. Thus a deeper divergence in Merton and McFague’s thinking and writing is the different frameworks of thought that fit their respective times.

**Different Philosophies**

Different times bring different philosophies. Any given period of history or time consists of attitudes and philosophies that shape the particular culture and society. Thus it is not just the time of Merton and McFague’s writing that differs, but also the philosophy or framework of thought that each employs, based on the approximate times in which they wrote. The philosophy of any given time functions as a lens through which one interprets the world around them. So much about what Merton and McFague have to say about God, self, and the world is shaped by the philosophies that go with the time in which each wrote. By pinpointing what these philosophies are and how they differ, readers will find themselves more capable and better skilled in grasping Merton and McFague’s contributions in the following chapters.

Merton, with a lifespan from 1915 to 1968, was a man that belonged primarily to the Modern Era. McFague, while also born and educated in the Modern world, exhibits in her thought and writing in the 1970’s and beyond the philosophy of an evolving, Postmodern world. Neither Merton nor McFague represent the philosophies of their times in full; both were selective in what principles they accepted, used, or rejected, likely because both were exposed to aspects of the transition from Modernity to
Postmodernity and were impacted by it as well as other alternative, fringe philosophies circulating during their times.\textsuperscript{27}

Modernity and Postmodernity, as time periods, both possess rich interdisciplinary histories, infiltrating philosophy, science, theology, art, architecture, and so on. These movements within different disciplines that are created and shaped are referred to as Modern and Postmodernisms, otherwise described as “intellectual moods” that correspond to each era.\textsuperscript{28} A full treatment of the histories of Modernity and Postmodernity exceeds the scope of this project; for our purposes a general overview of these periods and their basic principles, particularly those most significant in/to philosophy and theology since these disciplines are most significant to/on Merton and McFague and their work, will be our focus here.

\textit{Modernity}

The Modern period has fuzzy beginnings; scholars have not found agreement on the precise dating of its start. It is widely accepted, however, that Modernity was shaped by the Renaissance and the Reformation.\textsuperscript{29} Both the Renaissance and Reformation preceded the Modern Era, belonging still to Medieval times, but certain elements of the

\textsuperscript{27} Merton's life preceded society's acceptance of Postmodernity by only a few short years. Postmodernity infiltrated society in the 1970's, though it existed prior to this date, the 1960's being influential, transitional years to its development. In this way, while Merton did not experience postmodern thought at its peak, he did have some exposure to aspects of Postmodernity during his lifetime.


Modern age took shape during these times. The primary contributions of these two historical events include their new concepts of identity, autonomy, and technology. Grenz states that renaissance thinkers “elevated humankind to the center of reality” and “proposed the principles that anchored the scientific method.” The Reformation marked the creation of the printing press, capitalism, and elevated individual conscience, a direct result of Luther’s teachings. Both the Renaissance and Reformation sparked a shift in worldview and in how people understood God, self, and the world that was foundational to the Modern Age.

While the Renaissance and Reformation were important influences, modern thought is most closely tied with the Enlightenment. Buzz words depicting Modernity such as autonomy, reason, objectivity, universal truth, and progress were key concepts from the Enlightenment. Livingston states, “More than anything else the Enlightenment marks a revolt against authoritarianism and the emergence of individual reason and conscience as the primary arbiters of truth and action.” The idea was that autonomy, or self-governance, allows one the freedom to seek, examine, and test truth claims and progress (scientific, technological, and cultural) through his/her own use of reason and will, rather than blind acceptance from authority.

This concept, a central principle of Modernity, was grounded in Descartes’ dictum, cogito ergo sum, “I think, therefore I am.” The human person was considered to

30 Grenz, A Primer on Postmodernism, 58.
32 Livingston, vol. 1, 6.
be “an autonomous rational subject.”  

Reason became the “final arbiter of truth” for the Modern period, over and above all other sources of knowledge. Based on humanity’s ability to reason, modern thinkers argued that truth is objective, accessible/assessable and knowable by all. Grenz states that the principle of reason “presumed a human ability to gain cognition of the foundational order of the whole universe.” The universe (God, self, and the world) was understood to possess laws of nature that create order and structure, which could be understood through reason. Thus knowledge and truth were thought to be both objective and universal. As Tracy suggests, “if the world is objectively knowable, true knowledge will be the same for all people everywhere.”

Kant reiterated this point, essentially universalizing the thinking individual (Descartes’ contribution) in his philosophical writing. As Grenz describes, what followed Kant’s conclusion was “the presumption that in all essential matters every person everywhere was the same. When Kant’s self reflected on itself, it came to know not only itself but all selves, as well as the structure of any and every possible self.” Thus not only were outside aspects of reality such as God and the world objective and universal, and accessible through reason, but so was human nature.

Essentially these concepts of objectivity and universality of knowledge and truth central to Modern thought fit the philosophy of metaphysics, which is concerned with the

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33 Grenz, 3.

34 Grenz, 62.

35 Grenz, 69.


37 Grenz, 79.
fundamental nature of reality. Modernity is closely tied with metaphysics; metaphysics preceded Modernity, but it peaked during the Modern period, with its emphasis on “foundations and causes.”

Horner states, “Metaphysics as it emerges in modernity relates to the priority of epistemology, that is to dependence on the thinking subject and its capacity to found knowledge of what is.”

Tied to this understanding of knowing is the Cartesian dualism between subject and object. Reality is “out there,” an object that can be grasped by the individual subject through his/her use of reason.

In addition to the tenets of Modernity mentioned so far—autonomy, reason, objectivity, and universal truth—comes another belief: the inherent goodness of objective and universal knowledge and truth, which ultimately leads to progress. “Progress” was an umbrella term that included many disciplines, but it was most closely associated with advancements in science and technology and “the application of scientific method to politics and to social problems.” Therefore progress really had to do with culture and the moving forward of society as a whole. Modern thinkers saw no limit to the progress that could be made, continually striving for perfection and looking forward. Thus included in the modern idea of progress were concepts of unlimited freedom, optimism, and utopian vision for humanity’s future.

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39 Horner, 20.

40 Livingston, vol. 1, 9.
Postmodernity

However fuzzy Modernity’s dates and content may have been for scholars, the Postmodern is even more unclear. Postmodernity is elusive on three fronts: its initial dating, its relationship with Modernity, and precisely what it encompasses. Postmodernity infiltrated various disciplines such as the arts, philosophy, theology, etc. just as its predecessor had done. The term postmodern was first used in the 1930’s in reference to evolving styles in architecture and art. Yet it was not until the 1970’s that Postmodernity was in full swing, becoming a cultural phenomenon, even still today.41

Postmodernity’s name is ambiguous about its relationship with Modernity. On a most basic level, it refers to the period after Modernity, but is it a continuation of the general principles of Modernity or does it represent a radical departure from Modern thought? Scholars agree with Livingston that “the term is…burdened by a lack of precision,”42 but they also tend to agree that Postmodernity is best defined as a critical reaction to/against the precepts of Modernity, therefore representing a disruption of Modern thought. As Toulmin explains, the Postmodern is a “world that has not yet discovered how to define itself in terms of what it is, but only in terms of what it has just-now ceased to be.”43 Lack of a better term is due in part to a lack of unity within the movement(s) itself. Postmodernism really refers to Postmodernisms—a variety of movements and thinkers in different disciplines that find basic unity in critiquing

41 Grenz, 2.


Modernity. “Broadly speaking the term *postmodern* implies the rejection of certain central features of the modern project, such as its question for certain, objective, and universal knowledge, along with its dualism and its assumption of the inherent goodness of knowledge. It is this critical agenda, rather than any proposed constructive paradigm to replace the modern vision, that unites postmodern thinkers.”\(^{44}\) This is not to say that Postmodernity does not include constructive projects—it certainly does—it is simply in its deconstructive agenda that unity is found.

As a critique of Modernity, Postmodernity involves questioning the central, basic principles of Modern thought which we previously discussed—the idea and existence of an autonomous, rational self and objective, universal knowledge and truth, involving metaphysics. This leads to questioning of the modern idea of progress (both already made and anticipated) and its inherent goodness as well. Postmodernity replaced these aspects with their own, new precepts, such as a focus on the other/otherness rather than on the subject, a rejection of metaphysics and any such thing as objectivity, universality, and accessibility to absolute truth, and a growing appreciation for context and pluralism. Citing Graham Ward, Horner states that the two most basic tasks of Postmodernity are “the overcoming of metaphysics as conceived in modernity as the correlation of Being and reasoning (the thinking through and therefore intelligibility of all that is)” and “the thinking of difference,” as opposed to the modern idea of sameness (for example, Kant’s idea of the universality of human reasoning, and therefore human nature).\(^{45}\)


\(^{45}\) Horner, 15.
Why did this critique come about? What caused this shift to occur? The details of this transition from Modernity to Postmodernity exceed and are not of direct importance to this project, but it will be helpful to have a basic understanding of the background and development of postmodern thought, since both Merton and McFague’s thinking and writing were affected by it. There were a variety of factors that led to the end of Enlightenment ideals that fit the Modern Age, but perhaps the most influential challengers of Modern thought were the Romantics of the nineteenth century, Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900), and Martin Heidegger (1884-1976). These three, while not necessarily representing a full break with modern metaphysics, paved the way for Postmodernity.

The Romantic Movement challenged the subject-object Cartesian dualism, on which Descartes and Kant’s philosophies hinged. Criticisms raised by the Romantics regarding the subject had to do with Descartes’ foundational claim, “I think, therefore I am.” Descartes had defined the self as a thinking substance. Grenz states, “The ‘I’ whose existence he cannot doubt is the conscious self, the subject of mental acts. But by focusing on the thinking self, Descartes relegates the body to a sphere outside of and apart from the thinking subject.”46 Romantics felt that this mind-body split was not representative of humanity’s experiences of a complete self, mind and body united.

Nietzsche and Heidegger both followed in the footsteps of the Romantics, pointing out further fictions and illusions in the principles of Modernity. Nietzsche was responsible for pointing out the problems with metaphysics, particularly “the arbitrary nature of the attribution of grounds; the abyss underlying the presumption of one’s being

46 Grenz, 85.
able to occupy an absolute standpoint; and the issue of relative truth, as a result.”

Nietzsche explains that our concepts or frameworks for thinking about reality are in actuality fictitious constructions; they are not real. All truth claims and knowledge are sets of illusions that we have simply chosen to live by. With this claim comes the realization that the modern concept of progress, with its inherent goodness and utopian future vision, is illusory as well. The only thing that is real and true for Nietzsche is “the certainty of one’s own will to decide.”

Nietzsche’s ideas posed a serious threat to the metaphysical claims of Modernity. He was essentially pulling out the rug from under which modern thought stood.

Heidegger pushed the critique of Modernity further still. Heidegger saw deficiencies in modern metaphysics, particularly as it relates to issues of ontology and epistemology. The problem for Heidegger with modern metaphysics was that it treated being with an “apparently objective, theoretical understanding; the potency but isolation of the subject, and the hardening of things and relationships into what can be manipulated and controlled.”

Heidegger felt strongly that we do not experience being this way; rather, we are embedded in the world and in relationships “that is without beginning or foundation.” Reality is not something “out there” that we can objectively grasp, but is already experienced and interpreted. Thus, like the Romantics, Heidegger does not think of the human person in terms of a thinking self, as Descartes had suggested, but rather as

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47 Horner, 35.
48 Horner, 35.
49 Horner, 36.
50 Horner, 36.
being-in-the-world. For Heidegger, this meant that the starting place for philosophy is a “being there” rather than a thinking being, which he saw as a more holistic understanding of reality.

As we can see, once challenged, many of the precepts of Modernity began to collapse, such as the very concept of absolute truth and its accessibility, realism, objectivism, the autonomous, rational subject/self, etc. The real challenge raised is that of interpretation; from what vantage point we see and understand the world around us and attempt to articulate and define what we see. Postmodern thinkers argue that no standpoint is neutral or innocent; we are born into a world that has already been interpreted, through those that precede us and through the language and words that we choose to use to articulate what we see. Postmodernity is therefore concerned with context. Thus the modern idea of the “subject”—the thinking self—as removed from the world and able to observe it objectively, with reason, does not hold up. As Heidegger suggested, we are relational beings rather than removed, isolated individuals.

Having deconstructed this modern precept, postmodern thinkers chose rather to replace it with an emphasis on the other/otherness. This means understanding who we are based on the relationships that we have and are a part of rather than as autonomous individuals. It also means acknowledging and embracing the differences between us rather than attempting to categorize all human beings as the same.

If we are relational beings and do not live isolated lives removed from others, this means that we do not see the world from a distance; we are embedded in it. Again, the

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51 Grenz, 86.

52 Grenz, 105.
subject-object dualism breaks down, so that reality is not something “out there,” accessible and ready to objectively grasp. Postmodern thinkers posit that all knowledge is mediated, interpreted, and experienced. It is contextual, based on where we live, who we are surrounded by, and what language we speak. As Best and Kellner state, “Epistemologically, postmodernists refuse the modern belief that we have unmediated access to reality. All postmodernists reject the metaphor of the mind as a mirror of nature, the object as a neutral datum, and the subject as an aloof observer of the world.”

Postmodernity calls into question both our ability to know reality as well as its very existence as something objectively “out there.”

The alternative for postmodern thinkers is that reality and truth are things we create or construct ourselves through language. As Best and Kellner suggest, the “mind is constitutive, not reflective of reality.” Grenz describes the transition from Modern to Postmodern thought as a shift “from an objectivist to a constructivist outlook,” in which the modern assumption that the world is objectively real and that the mind mirrors reality no longer hold up. As postmodern thinkers explain, “we do not simply encounter a world that is ‘out there’ but rather that we construct the world using concepts we bring to it.”

The problem that postmodernists had with modern, objectivist, realism is the assumption that our language corresponds to the world we seek to know. Linguists have found this to be a “faulty assumption,” stressing that “languages are human social conventions that

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54 Best and Kellner, 287.
55 Grenz, 40.
56 Grenz, 41.
map the world in a variety of ways, depending on the context in which we are speaking." With different contexts come different languages, which shape our different understandings of the world. Therefore, Postmodernity holds that a single, unified, universal worldview is simply not possible.

Postmodernity’s claim that reality is constructed leaves open the question of how we ought to understand knowledge and truth. Foundational to a postmodern understanding of knowledge and truth are two basic assumptions: “(1) postmoderns view all explanations of reality as constructions that are useful but not objectively true, and (2) postmoderns deny that we have the ability to step outside our constructions of reality.”

Nietzsche suggested that knowledge is simply what we create within the context of a constructed reality. This means that “truth ‘exists’ only within specific language contexts.” In actuality, truth is an illusion that we choose to live in/by; it exists only as part of the creation in/of our constructed worlds. Modern thinkers would be quite troubled by Nietzsche’s suggestion, particularly with respect to the lack of progress that could be made or ability to move forward as a society, since there are no foundations on which to proceed. Yet Nietzsche did not see it this way; Nietzsche saw an opportunity for people to be creative with their constructions, calling all of us “to become the artists of our own existence, inventing a world suited to our being.”

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57 Grenz, 42.
58 Grenz, 43.
59 Grenz, 90.
60 Grenz, 95.
Heidegger’s thoughts on knowledge and truth were perhaps not as extreme as Nietzsche’s description of truth as an illusion, but they did also fit the postmodern challenge to modern conceptions. As we have mentioned regarding Heidegger, his problem with modern thought was the treatment of the subject as removed from the world. He preferred to talk about humanity as being-in-the-world, as relational beings. Thus for Heidegger, “Truth is not absolute and autonomous…; it is relational.”\textsuperscript{61} As Grenz explains, the very idea of knowledge and truth claims about reality “out there” simply does not make any sense. Life is contextual and experiential. “We can speak about truth only insofar as we are ‘in’ it, not searching for it outside of experience.”\textsuperscript{62}

Relationships with an emphasis on the other, context, experience, pluralism, linguistics, and interpretation—such are the central concepts of Postmodernity. The autonomous, rational subject of the Modern Age, thought to be removed from the world/reality which he/she sought to explore and know, has been called into question, along with modern assumptions of the existence and accessibility of objective, universal, and absolute knowledge and truth, with its inherent goodness and promising, progressing future. Postmodernity, while an un-united front, has managed to deconstruct the precepts of Modernity and present alternative ways of thinking about God, self, and the world. As readers will see, both Merton and McFague were deeply impacted by these philosophies and the transition between them from modern to postmodern thought.

\textsuperscript{61} Grenz, 106.

\textsuperscript{62} Grenz, 106.
The Impact of Modernity and Postmodernity on Merton and McFague

Having outlined the history and development of Modernity and Postmodernity, readers will be able to pinpoint the precise ways that Merton and McFague embrace or reject these philosophies, such as in their methodology and conceptions of reality, God, self, and the world. Yet let me here comment on the ways both were affected by the transition between Modernity to Postmodernity, albeit in their own ways.

As explained earlier, Merton lived primarily during the Modern Age. Merton relied on many of Modernity’s tenets in his own work, such as an emphasis on the subject/individual and the acceptance and accessibility of universal knowledge and truth. Yet Merton did not accept all of the principles of modern thought; he held his own criticisms of Modernity as well, such as their stress on reason as the sole way to knowledge and truth.

Postmodernity was beginning to take shape towards the end of Merton’s life, but it was not widely accepted by society until after his death. Merton, an avid reader, learner, and countercultural thinker, would have certainly been aware of the emergence of the new philosophy of postmodern thought. As we will discuss more in the next section, he was familiar with (and particularly fond of) the Romantics and Heidegger, two parties already mentioned as having been influential in the invention of Postmodernity. Because of these influences, Merton developed an appreciation for relationships and criticized the Cartesian dualism that pervaded modern thinking. Thus Merton’s work reflects aspects of both Modern and Postmodern philosophy.

McFague’s writing dates more specifically to the time of Postmodernity. Yet her life up until the time of her publications was lived within a society that accepted modern
principles. Thus it is not surprising that we see a blend of modern and postmodern strands of thought in her work. McFague’s aim and agenda is postmodern in her acceptance of metaphor as a way to construct reality, or in her use of imagination for religious language due to a lack of accessibility to God/Reality. Yet, she still seems to posit the existence of Reality, to which our language refers, which is a modern understanding of the workings of language. Also, she seems aware that many in society still hold to Cartesian dualisms, thinking of the world as an object or machine to be controlled. McFague is clear that she wants to get away from these modes of thinking, but she acknowledges that they still pervade society today, and so she acknowledges them and incorporates them into her work. These inconsistencies in McFague in regard to which philosophical system she relies on, whether modern or postmodern, are worth noting here, before pursuing McFague’s understanding of God, self, and world in the next section, as readers might discover further points of contradiction in her ideas.

**Different Influences**

Tied to the times, Modernity and Postmodernity were strong influences on Merton and McFague. However, these philosophies were not the only influences seen in their thought and writing. Merton and McFague found themselves influenced by and in many ways indebted to a variety of different figures and movements that reflect their different settings and surroundings. Some of these influences are consistent with philosophical trends of the time, while others serve as counter voices, significant in helping persuade Merton and McFague from fully embracing either philosophical system.
Merton

Merton, the son of artists and an English major himself, had a real appreciation for aesthetics. Throughout his life Merton felt himself drawn to artistic expressions of truth, goodness, and beauty. He believed that art could capture hidden meanings about life and reality, apparent in his own telling of his childhood experiences of God through church architecture and icons.

Merton’s interest in aesthetics and literature led him to the Romantic poets. He was partial to the first generation Romantics, such as William Blake, though he agreed with the general precepts of the Romantic Movement as a whole. Most basically, the Romantics believed in an underlying ontological and spiritual reality that could be perceived through intuition and imagination. They felt that “reason and empiricism contributed to only a partial understanding and knowledge about reality, particularly about ultimate reality.” As we discussed, the Romantics challenged Modernity’s support of Cartesian dualisms and claims about the power and authority of reason to grasp truth. The Romantics therefore represent an alternative influence on Merton besides Modernity.

The Romantics’ understanding of ultimate reality as a union of spirit and matter requiring more than reason appealed to Merton. He liked that they saw the material and immaterial world as ontologically united or as one, and that they employed intuition and imagination, allowing us to think of the world in alternative ways to conventional

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thought. As Merton understood it, Romanticism found a way to unite the natural and supernatural.\(^{66}\) Thus what really appealed to Merton about Romanticism was its way of bridging the artist and mystic, two aspects of Merton’s own identity.

Merton recognized that William Blake, along with other Romantic thinkers and writers, was influenced by Platonism and Neo-Platonism and their understanding of reality.\(^{67}\) Many mystics were influenced by Platonic thinking as well. All of these influences led Merton to conclude that God is present in us and in the world and that we are also in and a part of God. As we will discuss later on, in Merton’s conclusions, he was careful to avoid pantheism, to which some Romantics, such as Wordsworth, fell trapped. Merton was struck by the balance of unity and individualism that most first generation Romantics were able to achieve. As Labrie explains, these Romantic poets “preserved the identity of the self and the separateness of the individual,” which appealed to Merton.\(^{68}\) Merton agreed with the Romantics that there exists a unity in the world that does not require the surrendering of a particular person or thing’s own sense of self/being.

In addition to the influence of the first generation Romantic poets on Merton were the early Christian mystics, such as St. John of the Cross and Meister Eckhart. Merton’s interest in mysticism began long before he entered the monastery, but continued even stronger thereafter. As far as mystics went, Merton was again drawn to those working within Neo-Platonism. Labrie explains, “Mystical experience, according to Plotinus,


brought one closer to the absolute envisaged by Plato, a more impersonal and ontological state of being than the relatively anthropomorphic Christian deity of the Judeo-Christian tradition.” Like the Romantics, Christian mystics challenged conventional thought.

Because of the impact of both Romanticism and Mysticism on Merton and their affinity for Neo-Platonism, it is not surprising that Merton describes himself as having “always been a Platonist.” Merton agreed with the Romantics and Mystics’ platonic conception of God as absolute or ultimate reality, which one comes to know through experience, intuition, and imagination. Merton’s own articulation of contemplation echoes this line of thinking.

The influence of early Christian mystics on Merton did not stop there; as readers will see, Merton borrows heavily from St. John of the Cross in his work in his usage of the conception of darkness to describe one’s experiences in his/her spiritual journey. St. John of the Cross was part of an apophatic tradition, or negative approach to God, as opposed to positive, cataphatic approaches by other Christian mystics and theologians. In this way, St. John of the Cross served as a counter voice to the claims of the power of reason put forth by Modernity. Merton was also influenced by Christian mystic belief in the goodness and beauty of creation, including both humanity and nature. This is yet another similarity between Romanticism and Mysticism in their influence on Merton.

The impact of Romanticism and Mysticism on Merton are obvious; yet their influence was held in a state of tension with another influence on Merton: the Roman Catholic Church. As a monk, Merton’s thinking was influenced by his superiors and


leaders within the Church. The tension between these influences involves the fact that for both the Romantics and Mystics, solitude was of great importance in discerning reality because of the individual nature of perception. Both the Romantics and Mystics saw experience, intuition, and imagination as an individual endeavor. In that way, in the midst of challenging Modern thinking about the role of reason, they still upheld Modernity’s focus on the subject/individual. This focus on the power of the individual ran counter to teachings of the Catholic Church to which Merton belonged.

Merton had joined the Church in 1938 and joined the monastery in 1942; the philosophy of the Church at that time was Pre-Vatican II, focusing on hierarchy, order, and authority. Merton spent the majority of his years as a Catholic under Vatican I. He struggled with learning to balance his own interest in the individual’s search for ultimate reality with the community and unity that the Church provided, likely because of these varying influences.

Merton had his fair share of challenges with the Church in regard to its stagnant structure and hierarchy, and he vocalized his concerns and desire for church renewal. Merton states, “Instead of considering the Church primarily and principally as a hierarchical society and a strictly organized institution, [the Constitution] affirms that the Church is the community of the faithful, the Mystical Body of Christ, the People of God.” Merton’s concerns were heard and responded to by the Second Vatican Council (Vatican II), which began in 1962. Merton only witnessed renewal in the Church in the last few years of his life. In many ways, Merton spent his years ahead of the Church in his thinking about ecumenism and interreligious dialogue, but the Church, and the

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monastery more specifically, undoubtedly influenced Merton’s thinking throughout his years as a Catholic, monk, and author.

Another significant influence on Merton in his thought and writing was philosophy, particularly that of Heidegger and the movement of Existentialism. Merton focused heavily on experience and existential awareness as the root of contemplation. It was about being, rather than knowing. As Labrie states, “Knowing was a part of being.”72 What appealed to Merton specifically about Heidegger was his notion that one can experience being without the meaning of being having yet been articulated or fully understood.73

This emphasis on being over knowing ran counter to the intellectualism of Neo-Platonism and Modernity, which tended to focus on the mind as the means of grasping reality. With the help of Heidegger and Christian existentialists, Merton, while still accepting some Platonist elements, was able to make being and consciousness the priority, so that more than anything, contemplation is about the direct experience of God, or ultimate reality. Based on this influence of Heidegger and the movement of existentialism, it is no surprise then that in his own writing Merton rejected Descartes’ dictum, “I think therefore I am.” Merton accepted Descartes’ emphasis on the human person, but rejected his conclusion that being is reliant on thought or reason. Merton states, “For the contemplative there is no cogito (‘I think’) and no ergo (‘therefore’) but only SUM, I AM.”74 With the help of Heidegger and other existentialists, Merton is able

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to articulate the primacy of being and consciousness that he felt was so important to contemplation.

It is no surprise then that Merton described himself as a “Christian existentialist.” “What appealed to him about existentialism was its avoidance of abstraction, its modeling of thought to concrete existential realities, and its focus on the present as the matrix of life and experience.” Merton understood existentialism to be a bridge between the individual and the conceptual world; just as the Romantics had found a way to overcome the subject-object division, so had the existentialists, which really resonated with Merton.

Consistent with influences such as the Romantics, mystics, Heidegger, and existentialists came another influence: Zen Buddhism. Zen Buddhism was an influence that came later in Merton’s life, but its prevalence in Merton’s writing cannot be denied. Merton believed that Zen captured the experience of union with God in contemplation. He explained that Zen is “not a religion, not a philosophy, not a system of thought, not a doctrine.” Rather, it has to do with enlightenment; it is “the ontological awareness of pure being beyond subject and object, an immediate grasp of being in its ‘suchness’ and ‘thusness.’” Merton was attracted to Eastern religions’ treatment of the self and the alternative descriptions they provided to the Cartesian subject-object split in Modern


76 Labrie, Thomas Merton and the Inclusive Imagination, 50.


78 Merton, Mystics and Zen Masters, 14.
thought. While still accepting Modernity’s focus on the individual subject, Merton’s other influences brought radical alternatives to viewing the relationship between the subject, God, and the world.

Merton’s background in art and literature combined with his monastic vocation and love for philosophy and intellectual inquiry created an array of influences on his thinking to create the unique writing for which he became known. The Romantics and early Christian mystics, with their Neo-Platonist lines of thought, along with Existentialism, Zen Buddhism, and the Roman Catholic Church were among the top influences on Merton’s thinking. As readers should have gathered, some of these influences complimented each other while others were held in tension and created contradictions or paradoxes in Merton’s thinking. These tensions represent the growth or maturation of Merton’s thought as well as the transitioning times in which he lived and was responding to, so therefore are not all that surprising. Let us now examine some of the influences on Sallie McFague, in her thought and writing.

*McFague*

McFague’s surroundings (and therefore, his influences) were clearly more eclectic than McFague’s; Merton spent his childhood traveling Europe and his adult life in a monastic setting. He dabbled in art, poetry, philosophy, spirituality/mysticism, and theology. His influences were primarily historical and countercultural. McFague, on the other hand, lived in the world of academia, working extensively within her field of theology and surrounding herself with fellow scholars and theologians. Her academic surroundings yielded more academic, theology-based influences than Merton, which
include Gordon Kaufman, Paul Ricoeur, David Tracy, Ian Barbour, and movements within theology such as Liberation and Feminist Theology. All of McFague’s influences fit the time in which she was writing and therefore reflect the theological thinking of a transitioning, postmodern age.

McFague’s interest in religious language and in what she refers to as “heuristic theology,” a form of theology that experiments with metaphors and models, was shaped by certain discussions in theology that were underway in the 1970’s and 80’s. Specifically, McFague looked to Kaufman, Ricoeur, Tracy, and Barbour as examples for their conceptions of religious language and understandings of the task of theology. Of these figures, McFague most often cites Kaufman as the source of inspiration for her work. On multiple occasions in her writing she refers to his Presidential address to the American Academy of Religion in 1982, in which Kaufman called on theologians to consider the current task of theology in light of events taking place in the world at that time, namely the threat of nuclear destruction. McFague writes, “The times are such that, like it or not, we have thrust upon us, Kaufman insists, the responsibility to turn our research programs toward the deconstruction and reconstruction of the central symbols of the Judaeo-Christian tradition—the symbols of God, Christ, and Torah—so that they will help divert rather than court disaster.”

McFague took Kaufman words to heart and responded to his plea, making her own project about deconstruction and reconstruction, which she describes as a “remythologizing of the relationship between God and the

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79 McFague, Models of God, xi.

McFague found creative freedom in Kaufman’s words to find alternative metaphors and models within Christianity that are more appropriate for our age. McFague also echoes Kaufman’s concerns about the possibility of extinction due to nuclear power held by humans. This led McFague into her writing on ecology. Kaufman’s influence on McFague is undeniable; she clearly focuses her thought and writing on creating new alternatives for conceptualizing and articulating the God-world relationship, while remaining within Christian tradition.

Ricoeur and Tracy were also influential on McFague in her task of deconstruction and reconstruction. Ricoeur was known for his work on symbol and myth, and later on interpretation and narrative. McFague took a keen interest in Ricoeur’s contributions on metaphor, since this was the primary aspect of religious language towards which her work gravitated. Ricoeur’s basic thesis on metaphor is that “the metaphorical function of language is the creation of new meanings in human discourse.” Ricoeur believes metaphor is at the heart of meaning-making in language, due to the tension between the literal and metaphorical meaning of the word, phrase, or statement that creates a shock, resulting in the creation of new meaning. Ricoeur relies on the illustration of Jesus’ parables to drive home his point; the tension between the literal and metaphorical meaning of Jesus’ parables brings a shock that creates new meaning. In the case of Jesus’ parables, new meaning involves new vision of the God-world relationship.

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81 McFague, Models of God, xi.
McFague relies on both Ricoeur’s notion of metaphor and Jesus’ parables in her own writing. She cites him in her explanation of the power of metaphor, with its tension between the “is” and “is not” and its shock value. Live metaphors continue to hold this power while dead metaphors have lost the tension between the “is” and “is not,” resulting in literalism. McFague also accepts Ricoeur’s description of metaphor as redescribing reality, thus assuming metaphor’s power to transform one view of reality to another. Just as Ricoeur suggested, this is evident in Jesus’ parables, which McFague also relies on as a way of demonstrating how such a shift in worldview is possible.

Tracy, a successor of Ricoeur, is concerned with method, theory, and hermeneutics. McFague relies on Tracy’s theological contributions in two ways: the status of Scripture and the nature of contemporary theology. Tracy’s thinking about Scripture hinges on the work of Ricoeur, with his understanding of metaphor and the way it redescribes reality. Tracy describes Scripture as a “religious classic.” He states, “Like all classics, religious classics will involve a claim to meaning and truth as one event of disclosure-concealment of the reality of live existence. Unlike the classics of art, morality, science, and politics, explicitly religious classic expressions will involve a claim to truth as the event of a disclosure-concealment of the whole of reality by the power of the whole—as, in some sense, a radical and finally gracious mystery.” Tracy believes that classics are open to interpretation, thus Scripture cannot be pinned down to one interpretation and one meaning. This notion appealed to McFague; she agreed with


Tracy, stressing that there is no innocent, unbiased position. Therefore we must read Scripture with the awareness that what we have in the text has already been interpreted by its authors, and that therefore, even in Scripture, metaphor holds a central role in the process of meaning-making and redescribing reality.

In light of the open interpretative framework that a religious classic such as Scripture could take, it is no surprise that Tracy also stressed pluralism and diversity as central (postmodern) tenets of his thought. In addition to his claim that each religious classic was open to multiple meanings, he posited that multiple religious classics exist, as a result of a range of religious traditions. It is no surprise then that Tracy calls for dialogue and conversation as critical components of theology in its contemporary setting, a pluralistic world. Tracy is aware of the diverse range of interpretations that theologians hold as a result of context, and he thinks recognition of this limitation and a variety of voices are needed in theology today as a result. McFague full heartedly agrees with Tracy. She describes her own project as limited in scope, and hopes that her contributions are part of a conversation in theology, which as we have seen, she metaphorically describes her contribution as one patch or square of the quilt.

Barbour was another influence on McFague, allowing her to go beyond metaphor to include models. As McFague explains, models are metaphors with staying power, which can be used to create a larger framework of thought for how one understands the God-world relationship. Barbour, interested in the relationship between science and religion, examined theoretical models in science, which he described as originating “in a combination of analogy to the familiar and creative imagination in creating the new. They are open-ended, extensible, and suggestive of new hypotheses…such models are
taken seriously but not literally. They are neither pictures of reality nor useful fictions; they are partial and inadequate ways of imagining what is not observable.” McFague felt that Barbour’s description also fit models in theology, though she admits slight differences exist between models in science and theology in regard to their goals, importance, and number. In addition to her use of models, McFague also refers to Barbour on occasion for his contributions on the relationship between science and religion, as relevant to issues of ecology. In these ways, Barbour deeply influenced McFague’s thought and writing as well.

Another influence on McFague that pervades her writing is the movement in theology called liberation theology. First and foremost, what appeals to McFague about liberation theology (better understood as liberation theologies) is their unveiling of the fact that what has paraded around as an objective, universal theological voice is really that of the Western, male, whose voice dominates and muffles all other voices. Consistent with postmodern thought, liberation theology insists on the importance of context, that there does not exist one absolute, objective, universal experience, but only various fragmented experiences of different people, based on different social contexts. Thus theology must come out of these specific, different communities. The second aspect of liberation theology that appeals to McFague is the idea that theology is not just about theory, but is heavily based in/on experience, and is therefore practical and concerned with social justice here and now. Liberation theology insists that action comes first, followed by reflection. Brought together, this is referred to as “praxis.” The influence of liberation theology on McFague’s thinking is evident throughout her writing.

She attempts to apply the ideas of liberation theology to ecological concerns, so that ecological theology itself becomes seen as a form of liberation theology.

The last of the major influences on McFague’s thought and writing is the movement of feminist theology, which is also a form of liberation theology. Feminist theology emerged in the 1960’s and 70’s as part of the second wave of feminism. Critique’s include the oppression of women and other marginalized groups, the harmful effects of patriarchy, which causes dualisms that place women in inferior categories than men, and that women’s voices are not being heard.

With the rise of feminism came the creation of a new brand of feminism interested in the relationship between women and nature, known as eco-feminism. For these women, the destruction of nature is tied to patriarchy, which has infiltrated Christianity and society as a whole, and needs to be corrected. These central tenets of eco-feminism resonate with McFague. Thus, while indebted to Kaufman, Ricoeur, Tracy, and Barbour for their help in shaping her ideas about religious language and the task of theology, McFague has found ways to incorporate their ideas with her own

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89 A variety of strands of feminism exist, which articulate the problem(s) and solution(s) differently. McFague acknowledges two basic groupings in feminist theology: revolutionary feminists and reformist feminists. Revolutionary feminists believe women's experiences are the main resource for feminist theology, whereas reformist feminists still look to Christian tradition. McFague fits in the reformist feminist grouping.

90 Eco-feminists are divided on the exact correlation that exists between women and nature, as well as the relationship between Christianity and patriarchy and what role Christianity can play in providing solutions or alternatives to patriarchy. It is no surprise then that there are several different feminist camps. McFague believes that there are sources within Christianity's own tradition to combat patriarchy and so remains within the Christian tradition.
feminist perspective, such as the deconstruction of metaphors and models that are
damaging to women and nature and construction of new metaphors and models that are
more helpful and better serve us today, such as thinking about the world as the body of
God.

As an influence on McFague’s thought, feminism is a foundational part of her
writing. At times in her writing she explains the harmful effects of patriarchy or the ways
certain metaphors or models may be limiting to women and other minority groups—these
are clear examples of her feminist position—but the real focus of McFague’s writing is
on the power of new metaphors and models to transform our thinking and our world.
Thus, while McFague belongs to a certain grouping of eco-feminist authors, she does not
write on the women-nature relationship as explicitly as others that belong to this category
(for example, Rosemary Radford Ruether).

**Different Understandings of Theology**

The differences between Merton and McFague continue in regard to their
understandings of theology and Christianity, which like other aspects of context that we
have discussed, manifests itself in their writing. Both Merton and McFague’s approaches
to theology conform to Anselm’s 12th Century definition of theology as faith seeking
understanding, yet not surprisingly, in their own ways. Merton was not a theologian in
any traditional sense of being an academic scholar; he did not write anything systematic
about Christian faith. Yet Merton was and is still considered a theologian. As
Cunningham suggests, “He was a theologian in the ancient patristic sense of the word:
one who could speak existentially about the experience of God."\textsuperscript{91} It is in this sense that Merton understood theology and its task. He describes theology (\textit{theologia}) as contemplation of God, based on the teaching of the Greek fathers.\textsuperscript{92} Rather than thinking about the theologian as one that studies God and is able to articulate precepts \textit{about} Christian faith, the theologian in the Greek fathers’ eyes was one that directly experiences God him/herself and is then able to share that experience with others. It is within the context of this mystical, spiritual experience of God that Merton can be referred to as a theologian.

Based on Merton’s understanding of theology, he saw the task of theology to be the experience of God and the articulation of it. It is within the context of this more experiential and personal conception of theology that Merton’s thought and writing must be viewed as a contribution to the field and he can be seen as a theologian. His writing was often autobiographical, if not directly so, then an indirect reflection of his own personal experiences, which included both tribulation and joy. Put simply, Merton’s writing was an attempt to communicate all aspects of the experience of contemplation, or pure union with God. It is no surprise, then, that his writing feels intimate and intensely personal, and is written as though to a small audience, such as a group of Merton’s closest friends. These aspects of Merton’s writing, while rather nontraditional in regards to theology, are what set him apart and continue to draw people to him.


McFague is a theologian in the more traditional sense of the word—a scholar in the field of theology, contributing through both teaching and writing on the subject of God. She goes further than Merton in attempting to move from religious experience to systematic theology. Not surprisingly then, readers find in McFague’s work considerably more comments on theology as a discipline than found in/ by Merton. Reflecting her postmodern philosophy, for McFague, theology is contextual, ecumenical, and pluralistic. No theology is complete. As McFague understands it, the purpose of theology is “to be a servant of the hearing of God’s word in a particular time and place.”

She continues, “Theology is, then, always hermeneutical, always concerned with how the gospel can be ‘translated’ or understood—grasped—by people.” This means that theology must work to deconstruct and reconstruct images and language for articulating God and the relationship that God has with the world in ways that fit current worldviews and contexts, which requires that many people participate in this undertaking. McFague states, “Theology is interpreting who God is and what God does. Theology is talk about God from various points of view and experiences. A working definition of Christian theology, as I understand it, goes like this: theology is reflection on experiences of God’s liberating love from various contexts and within the Christian community.”

For McFague, theology’s task of helping the gospel be heard in every time and place is one that is primarily focused on language. As she explains, “Judaism and

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93 McFague, Speaking in Parables, 7.
94 McFague, Speaking in Parables, 7.
95 Sallie McFague, Life Abundant: Rethinking Theology and Economy for a Planet in Peril (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001), 40.
Christianity are “logos” religions.” Theology’s job, then, is linguistic; it must assess and interpret the meaning and relation of words. As she notes, theologians have done this in various ways throughout history. McFague’s personal belief is that theology functions at its best when focusing on and embracing metaphor. In this regard, McFague supports a “minimalist Christian theology,” which is content with metaphor and “avoids metaphysical claims.” Metaphors of varying degree are structured so that a hierarchy is formed in which a model is created, which is essentially a dominant metaphor. From models, concepts and theories are developed that make up theology.

Much like Merton, McFague understands theology to be experiential, but in a different way than Merton. Merton thought of theology as involving the direct experience of God; McFague insists that direct access to/experience of God is not possible, but instead theology is dealing with mediated experiences of God. As she explains, “We cannot ‘speak of God,’ but only of God from this or that perspective, this or that worldview.” To this extent, McFague stresses that theology is concerned with “modeling relationships rather than defining natures.” Still, McFague views theology as experiential from the standpoint that it is embodied. Our thoughts about God are

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96 McFague, Speaking in Parables, 27.


98 McFague, Metaphorical Theology, 25.

99 Merton and McFague’s varying views on the nature of reality will be explored in more depth in a later section.

100 McFague, Life Abundant, 127.

101 McFague, Metaphorical Theology, 129.
inseparable from our contexts—race, class, gender, and everything else.\textsuperscript{102} Theology is embodied from the perspective that life and thought go together. Therefore, McFague insists that theology serves the purpose of aiding in Christian living. She states, “Thinking theologically is not an end in itself; it is for the purpose of right action, for discipleship….The goal of theology, as I see it, is to be \emph{functional}, that is, to actually work in someone’s life. It is meant to be an aid to right living…”\textsuperscript{103} Ultimately, this form of experiential, embodied theology means that theology is always tied to ethics and spirituality, leading McFague to conclude that theology is the task of every Christian.\textsuperscript{104}

\textbf{Different Approaches to Christian Faith, Church, and Scripture}

Merton and McFague’s ideas about God, self, and the world are impacted not only by what they understand the purpose and task of theology to be, but also their basic understandings of the meaning of faith, Christianity, and the role and authority of the Bible.

\textit{Merton}

Like all other aspects of Merton’s writing, his comments on Christian faith come through a contemplative lens. He states in \textit{New Seeds of Contemplation} that faith “is not an emotion, not a feeling….It is not a conviction that one is somehow saved…. It is not

\textsuperscript{102} McFague, \textit{The Body of God}, 67.

\textsuperscript{103} McFague, \textit{Life Abundant}, 15.

\textsuperscript{104} McFague, \textit{Life Abundant}, 25.
something entirely interior and subjective, with no reference to any external motive.”¹⁰⁵

Rather, faith is an assent to God, “a grasp, a contact, a communion of wills…. the opening of an inward eye, the eye of the heart, to be filled with the presence of Divine light.”¹⁰⁶ Put simply, faith is the direct experience of God. This is what Christianity is all about for Merton: experiencing God directly through Christ, and being transformed by the experience so that it pervades all aspects of your life.

Merton’s contemplative notion of faith shaped his understanding of Christianity. Merton focused heavily on the “already” rather than the “not yet” dimension of Christian living and teaching, concerning himself with the possibility of contemplative union with God here and now. Given this focus, it is not surprising that Merton understood salvation as a gift, through faith, of transformation in the present. For Merton, salvation was not exclusively associated with the end of life and eternity; it had to do with conversion and transformation in the present, and ultimately with the discovery of one’s true self. “The salvation I speak of is not merely a subjective, psychological thing—a self-realization in the order of nature. It is an objective and mystical reality—the finding of ourselves in Christ, in the Spirit, or, if you prefer, in the supernatural order.”¹⁰⁷ Based on this understanding of Christian faith and salvation, scholar Robert Inchausti notes that Merton

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saw Christianity as a “humanistic faith whose chief task was ‘to enable man to achieve his destiny, to find himself, to be himself: to be the person he was made to become.’”  

Merton felt that this experiential nature of faith and salvation extended beyond just Christianity; he had a deep respect and admiration for religions of the East and their commitment to interior reflection and authenticity in terms of the self and search for truth. Yet religions in and of themselves were not necessarily positive for Merton. As Shannon, Bochen, and O’Connell suggest, for Merton, “When religion is recognized and practiced as an orientation toward the sacred that leads to inner transformation and to an attitude and acts of compassion, it is seen as crucially important for authentic human existence. When it is adherence to a formalized system of cult and dogma that domesticates the divine and is directed toward a comfortable acceptance of a current social or economic system, it must be challenged.” Merton was adamant that faith and salvation—no matter the religion, but particularly within his own Christian tradition—be about the direct experience of God rather than about piety and devout acts, or dogma and doctrine. He points to the saints in Christianity as the purest examples of self discovery, as well as biblical prophets and leaders such as Paul, who warned of the risks of outward piety and ritual without internal transformation of the heart. For Merton, Christianity is at its best when it holds to this prophetic call: its people must not think of the Church solely as a refuge or safe haven; rather, Christian faith and salvation require the believer to actively seek truth, with not just words, but one’s whole being and life.

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108 Robert Inchausti, *Thomas Merton’s American Prophecy* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1998), 63. This framework of thought for considering faith and salvation in the present will be more fully developed in chapter six.

To the extent that the Church and Christianity as an organized religion have failed to uphold its most basic precepts of faith and salvation, as Merton understands them, it must be critically assessed and corrected. Merton states, “If in practice the function of organized religion turns out to be nothing more than to justify and to canonize the routines of mass society; if organized religion abdicates its mission to disturb man in the depths of his conscience, and seeks instead simply to ‘make converts’ that will smilingly adjust to the status quo, then it deserves the most serious and uncompromising criticism.”

As a Roman Catholic, Merton accepted the structure and hierarchy of authority and teaching within the Church. Yet he did not accept it blindly. He had no fears in regard to questioning or reinterpreting Church teaching and tradition when he felt that it was failing to convey the Gospel, particularly when it came to social concerns such as war and peace. Admiring Dorothy Day’s advocacy for peace, he writes to her in a letter: “But what is a Church after all but a community in which truth is shared, not a monopoly that dispenses it from the top down.” In this regard Merton’s relationship with the Church consisted of a mixture of love and extreme frustration; he felt that as an institutionalized religion, Christianity in many ways was hindering rather than helping its mission. Yet he saw within Christianity the potential for believers to experience deep spiritual awakening and to directly encounter God. To this effect Merton remained committed to his faith and to his Christian community.

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110 Merton, Mystics and Zen Masters, 273.

As Merton began to question aspects of Church authority and the conception of passive submission of Church teaching, his ideas began to evolve concerning the meaning of tradition. He moved away from the more conservative notion of tradition as “a strict adherence to dogmatic formulas handed down from the past”\(^\text{112}\) to thinking about tradition as being alive, fresh, and creative in every age. He realized that tradition is “rooted in the wisdom of the distant past, and yet is living and young, with something peculiarly new and original to say to the people of our own time.”\(^\text{113}\) Merton finally understood the difference between tradition and convention: convention is the passive acceptance of past teaching without real application or thought about its meaning and significance; convention is unoriginal, routine, and essentially stale. As Merton explains, tradition “is living and active,” and “really teaches us to live and shows us how to take full responsibility for our own lives…. Tradition, which is always old, is at the same time ever new because it is always repriming—born again in each new generation, to be lived and applied in a new and particular way.”\(^\text{114}\) Merton’s matured understanding of tradition is one that acknowledges the effects that context and culture play on tradition, the Church, and ultimately Christianity as a whole. While still honoring the Church’s structure, teachings, and traditions, he found a way for Christianity to maintain relevance and responsibility to each and every age.

Merton’s approach to Scripture was much like his approach to faith, the Church, and tradition: experiential and contemplative. He read the Bible not as an academic


\(^{114}\) Merton, *No Man Is an Island*, 150-151.
source, but as revelation. As a Trappist monk, Merton practiced *lectio divina*, the meditative practice of praying and reading Scripture. The special task of Trappist monks, “in the inspired text he will drink theology from its very source, and what is more important, he will learn to enter into direct contact with God by contemplation of His revealed truths…. Passing through the veil of Scripture he entered into the holy of holies, mystical marriage with the Divine Word, uncreated Truth.”\(^{115}\) Thus, first and foremost for Merton, Scripture is one’s way of accessing God. It is more than a source of information about God; it is a source of transformation that allows for the direct encounter of God in God's self.

In seeking out understanding of God in and through Scripture, Merton had no issue with using all available tools and resources to grasp the meaning of biblical authors’ statements. Various forms of biblical criticism are welcomed if they lead to deeper understanding of God’s revelation. Yet Merton cautions others not to let biblical scholarship ruin or deaden our “sensitivity to the existential reality of Biblical experience.”\(^{116}\) Still, it is important to try and seek out the meaning that each author intends, says Merton, which in many cases includes taking into consideration their use of myth. Merton states, “We must…respect the wide variety of literary forms and historical backgrounds, which give special characters to the separate books, and yet remember that


the Bible as a whole can and should be seen as imparting a unified, or unifiable, theological message.”\textsuperscript{117}

In our critical reading of Scripture, which takes seriously differences in context of various authors and books regarding genre and history, Merton reminds us that the message of the Bible is still ultimately one of unity, reconciliation, love, and Truth, made possible by the transforming and liberating power of the Word of God.\textsuperscript{118} As such, Scripture pervades human life and experience; it is not “an entirely unworldly book, a message from eternity, a contemptuous dismissal of the world in a promulgation issued from ‘out there’ beyond the confines of time and space. The Bible is not a denial of the world, a rejection of man, a negation of time and history and a condemnation of all that has been done by man in his world and in history. Nor is the Bible something that is meant to be superimposed upon the world, man and history from the outside…”\textsuperscript{119} Rather, as Merton explains, Scripture is “worldly” in how it “sees God at the very center of man’s life, his work, his relations with his fellow man…”\textsuperscript{120} While not immediately concerned with accounting for metaphysics or science, Scripture is focused on the real world; themes such as unity, reconciliation, love, and Truth indicate that the Bible intends to teach us not only about God, but also about ourselves and about the meaning of life in the world today.

\textsuperscript{117} Merton, \textit{Opening the Bible}, 70-71.  
\textsuperscript{118} Merton, \textit{Opening the Bible}, 18.  
\textsuperscript{119} Merton, \textit{Opening the Bible}, 12-13.  
\textsuperscript{120} Merton, \textit{Opening the Bible}, 65.
McFague describes Christianity as a “logos” religion, requiring our interpretation and deconstruction and reconstruction of Christianity’s basic metaphors and models. As McFague explains, these metaphors and models pervade Christian faith, Church, tradition, and Scripture, forming a structured hierarchy from which central concepts, or systematic statements, of Christianity are formed. Most foundational to this grid is a dominant model, or root-metaphor, which 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.”

In Christianity, the dominant model or root-metaphor “is that of a personal God relating to responsible and responsive beings,” or more specifically, it is “a mode of personal relationship, exemplified in the parables and with its chief exemplar Jesus himself.”

All religions have root-metaphors, or basic sets of assumptions, from which they create a framework of belief. If and when the root-metaphor is changed, it ceases to be the same religion. Specifically for Christians, Jesus exemplifies the particular relationship that exists between God and the world. As McFague explains, Jesus “not only tells us about it and demonstrates it in his own life, but he also is believed by his followers to be the way to it. He is its exemplar; hence, he is the root-metaphor of Christianity without which Christianity would not be the religion it is.” While foundational, it is important to remember that the root-metaphor is still metaphor; as

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previously stated, McFague insists that there is no direct access to God, Truth, or Reality. We are limited to language, specifically metaphor, which has both an “is” and an “is not” dimension of truth to it.

Because of lack of access to truth, directly, our claims are relative and limited to our particular time and place. Thus, what we can say about Christian faith is limited. On more than one occasion in her writing, McFague states her own position on Christian faith: “Christian faith is…most basically a claim that the universe is neither indifferent nor malevolent but that there is a power (and a personal power at that) which is on the side of life and its fulfillment.” 125 Specifically, Christians look to Jesus as the exemplar of this claim. McFague insists that Christians must interpret and apply what is found in the story of Jesus in new ways with each generation, critically assessing what fulfillment is and looks like for different times and places. This means we must take context seriously, and as McFague encourages, we must rely on new imaginative metaphors and models to help us interpret Christian faith in each age.

In every context, McFague believes that the contents of Christian faith are formed by experience and revelation. 126 Using a three step process, she explains, “First, experience is the place where Christian faith is manifested; it is the channel, but not the substance.” As McFague understands it, the focus is on God’s liberating love, but it is necessary to experience God’s love in order to be drawn to this object. In this way

125 McFague, Models of God, x.

126 Claiming experience and revelation as part of Christian faith raises questions concerning the nature and accessibility of Reality, especially in light of McFague's proposal that there is no direct access to Reality. As she sees it, we can have insight into God without possessing information about God. Her position will be examined more fully in our exploration of Merton and McFague’s conceptions of truth and reality in chapter two.
experience functions as a carrier or means to the end. “Second, the content of Christian faith comes into our experience as a revelation, a central and commanding insight into God’s love.” McFague explains that revelation is the content of faith, brought in and through experience. It is not restricted to supernatural, “religious” experience; revelation of God’s love comes in all forms of experience. Nor is revelation limited to the Bible; while certainly evident in the Bible, it continues today. “Third, this insight is not limited to the individual’s well-being—it is an insight concerning the relationship of God and the world, one of such significance that one’s orientation and behavior must change.”\textsuperscript{127} The experience of revelation of God’s love is transformative, setting Christians apart towards lives of solidarity with God and the rest of the world.

The formation of Christian faith’s dependence on experience cannot be overstated. It is no surprise, then, that Scripture and tradition, Christianity’s two constants, are also interwoven with and reliant on experience. As McFague explains, the separation of these three Christian sources (Scripture, tradition, and experience) is “artificial” and “deceptive.”\textsuperscript{128} Both Scripture and tradition fall under the umbrella of experience; “our texts, including Scripture and the classics of the theological tradition, are ‘sedimentations’ of interpreted experience.”\textsuperscript{129} What we have in Scripture and tradition are certain individuals and groups’ experiences of the God-world relationship interpreted through the story of Jesus from particular times and places in history.

Scripture and tradition are already interpreted; New Testament writers spoke of Jesus

\textsuperscript{127} McFague, \textit{Life Abundant}, 52.
\textsuperscript{128} McFague, \textit{Models of God}, 42.
\textsuperscript{129} McFague, \textit{Models of God}, 42.
using metaphors, models, and concepts that fit their time and location: the first century Mediterranean world. In just the same way, theologians that constitute tradition have followed suit throughout the centuries from biblical times up to today.

The persistence of the experience of revelation throughout time indicates the ways that Christianity is both historical and contemporary, always seeking to find a balance between these poles. While concerned with the person of Jesus in history and the witness that we have of this in Scripture, Christianity is also concerned with the present relevance of Jesus today.\(^\text{130}\) McFague insists that new, imaginative metaphors and models are needed for our time, which continue to share the message of the Gospel in new contexts. This requires openness in our approach to Scripture and tradition. As McFague explains, Scripture is “a principal source, norm, criterion for subsequent Christian expressions of God’s liberating love,”\(^\text{131}\) but only insofar as it is a “case study, classic, or prototype,” rather than an authoritative text, dictating absolute truths.\(^\text{132}\) She stresses that the stories in the Bible are models, not dictums. She states,

> What we have in the New Testament are confessions of faith by people, who, on the basis of their experience of the way their lives were changed by Jesus’ Gospel and by Jesus, gave authority to him and to the writings about him. The New Testament writings are foundational; they are classics; they are a beginning. But if we take seriously the parables of Jesus and Jesus as a parable of God as our starting point and model, then we cannot say that the Bible is absolute or authoritative in any sense except the way that a “classic” text is authoritative: it continues to speak to us.

McFague views Scripture, and particularly the story of Jesus, as the beginning of Christianity, rather than its totality. Acknowledging that the biblical authors used


\(^{131}\) McFague, *Life Abundant*, 58.

metaphor and models of their time to describe the God-world relationship sheds light on ways that we can continue to do so in order to keep Christianity relevant today.

McFague’s attitude towards Scripture carries over into her treatment of tradition. She defines tradition as “all the texts, in many genres, orthodox and otherwise, that make up the loosely defined phenomenon known as ‘Christianity.’ It is…a paradigm, a set of assumptions and practices that distinguishes it from other world religions and gives it a distinctive nature.”

Just like Scripture, McFague sees tradition as open to new interpretations and imaginative possibilities in regards to metaphors and models that better articulate the God-world relationship for our time. This is at the very heart of McFague’s own enterprise: deconstructing and reconstructing doctrine based on new, alternative metaphors and models that better fit our time. Her own contribution is the model of the world as God’s body, which radically shifts our vision of God, and Christian precepts such as sin and salvation, which will be explored at more length in the following chapters.

McFague’s thoughts on Christianity as an organized religion correspond directly to her open interpretation of Scripture and tradition, and alternatively proposed model of the world as God’s body. McFague criticizes Christianity for giving specific metaphors within its tradition priority, which results in them being literalized and becoming idolatrous. As she explains, this limits our thinking about God to specific images and we lose a sense of the mystery that surrounds God. What also happens, then, is that these metaphors become used and extended beyond their respective contexts, which results in

133 McFague, Life Abundant, 60.
them losing their meaning and relevance in conveying what was originally a fresh interpretation of God and God’s relationship to and with the world.  

McFague points out specific ways that idolatry and irrelevance have become problems in Christianity, such as in their focus on models such as Father or King that support the idea that God is over and above the earth, removed from it, and that God’s relationship extends only to humankind, to the detriment of the rest of the earth. Relying on science as a resource to Christian faith and theology, McFague stresses that this picture of the God-world relationship no longer fits our age and that we must take the current picture of reality seriously if we want to have a functional faith in today’s world. With her alternative model of the world as God’s body, McFague wants to speak about the ways that God is present in and among the world and relates not only to human beings, but to all of creation. She also wants to reconsider the relationship between humankind and the earth. It is through this lens that McFague redefines Christian concepts such as resurrection, salvation, and sin, ultimately reformulating Christian doctrine in light of a new model that allows for such concepts to be understood in the present rather than limited to the past or future. For McFague, it is about God being present in the world, demonstrating his liberating and inclusive love for all.

McFague, taking seriously the idea of limited or relative truth as a result of context, acknowledges that as an organized religion Christianity is but one way of articulating the God-world relationship, through the lens of Jesus. She accepts other religious tradition’s metaphors and models as well. Yet McFague believes that Christians have much to offer and contribute to the deconstruction and reconstruction project. As

\[\text{134} \text{ McFague, } \text{Metaphorical Theology, 2.}\]
she explains, the Church “is a sign of the new creation;” churches must work to help bring about the new reality of God’s liberating and inclusive love.\textsuperscript{135} This means that Christians must forget the concept of the supernatural in lieu of being super, natural. For McFague this means acknowledging the earth as our home and treating it as such. It also means widening our focus from personal piety to social justice and working for the inclusion and betterment of forms of creation that do not have their own voice. As McFague explains, “One of the classic marks of the church—its catholicity or universality—calls for the inclusion of the world.”\textsuperscript{136} McFague refers to all those that see this task through as saints; they have ultimately managed to unite Christian language, belief, and action based on the example of Jesus in order to help restore the dignity and integrity of all of creation. And this is what the Church ought to look like, for McFague.

\textbf{Conclusion}

This chapter has provided a behind-the-scenes look at Merton and McFague’s thought and writing, pointing out the differences between them in regard to the agenda in/of their writing, the times in which they write, and influences in/on their thinking, both philosophical and theological. All of these aspects of context shape who each thinker is, and what he/she aims to do. We also explored Merton and McFague’s different understandings of theology and its task, as well as faith, the Church, and Scripture. The importance of context when considering Merton and McFague’s claims (or anyone’s claims, for that matter) cannot be overstated. As we have said, neither of their ideas were

\textsuperscript{135} McFague, \textit{Body of God}, 206.

\textsuperscript{136} McFague, \textit{A New Climate for Theology}, 33.
formed in a vacuum; we must lay out the foundational differences that shaped their thinking in order to make fair assessments of their contributions and any crossover between their ideas that we will find in the following chapters. It is my belief that despite these contextual differences in agenda, time, and influence, Merton and McFague can ultimately be held together and are united in their prophetic calls for spiritually rooted social action, or engaged spirituality, a claim that I will seek to demonstrate later in this project.
CHAPTER TWO: SETTING THE SCENE

CONSIDERING METHODOLOGY AND CONCEPTIONS OF REALITY

In many ways a continuation of chapter one, this chapter seeks to further explore contextual matters surrounding Merton and McFague. In this chapter, we will explore their methodologies and conceptions of reality. Taking a look at each thinker’s method will prove helpful in understanding and interpreting his/her writing so that we have a better grasp of their style and format. Merton and McFague’s conceptions of reality are directly tied to their philosophies and influences. As readers will see, their conceptions of reality will be of critical importance to our later pursuit of their understandings of God, self, and the world.

**Methodology**

Methodology refers to the methods, principles, or tools used in the process of a specific field that help a thinker come to certain conclusions. Put simply, “Whenever we ask ourselves how we arrived at the answer, then we are raising the method question. Method is done best by reflecting over how we actually arrived at an answer.”\(^{137}\) Both Merton and McFague use specific tools as a means of coming to their final positions that reflect their own contexts.

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As we have discussed, Merton was a poet, contemplative, and monk rather than a systematic theologian. His methods reflect this; his writing bears fragmentation and allusiveness. “He rarely develops in a systematic way the kernels of insight that appear in abundance in his journals or elsewhere. More typically, he choreographs insights to illuminate a central theme, or circles from one insight through others and back again.”

The imagery of choreographing and circles sheds light on Merton’s methodology: he uses the metaphor of “dance” in his own work as a means of speaking of the experiential and participative quality of contemplation, as well as its non-linear structure and being. Playing off of Merton’s own metaphor, one does not learn to dance by observation, but rather by practice, or experience. Experience is therefore central to Merton’s methodology.

Merton’s use of experience as the starting block for his thoughts on God, self, and the world, not surprisingly, corresponds to his influences and context. As we have discussed, based on his time, Merton was heavily influenced by modern philosophy’s ideas on objectivity, universal truth, and metaphysics. Based on this influence, Merton believed that Reality and Truth were accessible and attainable. His notion of experience, then, was of direct experience.

Yet while Merton’s understanding of experience as directly accessing Reality and Truth reflected the teaching of modern philosophy, his use of experience as a

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139 This idea comes from New Seeds of Contemplation, in the last chapter entitled, "The General Dance."
foundational tool and method to theology was most certainly not marked by Modernity. “Theology in the mid-twentieth century tended to be largely deductive in its methodology. The starting point of the theology manuals of the time was the doctrinal thesis that was accepted as true and then proved from Scripture, tradition, and reason.” Merton was familiar with theological methods of his time, but he was unsatisfied with them; he did not feel that heavy, theological jargon could really capture the essence of contemplation. He states, “I have…tried to put down my ideas in my own words, avoiding all technical terminology. I have attempted to convey something…not in the language of speculation but in terms of personal experience…. technical language, though it is universal and certain and accepted by theologians, does not reach the average man and does not convey what is most personal and most vital in religious experience.” As Merton explained, contemplation ultimately has to do with the direct experience, awareness, and intuition of God, which is not captured in theological terminology and dogma. Thus, it only made sense for Merton to rely on his own personal experiences as a way of conveying what happens in contemplation.

Merton’s writing consists of a blend of personal experience and what he believes to be more general, Western experiences, seen in the range of his writings from personal autobiography, letters, and journal entries to more general treatises on contemplation. The line between these two forms of experience in his writing is blurry; he often speaks of experience as universal, but the passion behind his claims indicates that the nature of


the material was also personal for/to him. Thus his assumptions on what things constitute
general experience are rooted in his own personal experience, which he believes extends
beyond himself. This assumption is one that, as we have said, reflects Modernity and its
claims of objectivity, universality, and Absolutes. At points in Merton’s writing, he
claims that his thoughts on contemplation are not original, and that his contributions
could have been made by any of his brothers in the monastery.142 He thinks that his
personal experiences are universal, general experiences, and relies on this assumption
throughout his writing as part of his method. But is this true? Merton seems to believe
so throughout his life and work, though he was aware that others thought his experiences
were not universal and so were unique and original.143 Regardless of whether Merton’s
experiences were in fact universal or only relatively so, his reliance on experience in
conveying ideas about God, self, and world is undeniable, and is ultimately what makes
his writing so accessible to others.

Adding to the layers of complexity is the idea of paradox that Merton sees
pervading experience, and therefore pervading his writing as well. Merton used paradox
as part of his method to convey truths about the experience of contemplation. More
specifically, “he uses paradox to dissolve seeming opposites into deeper, more unifying
insights.144 Understanding contemplative experience as the direct access of/to God, or
pure union of God and self, Merton was unable to convey the experience fully in words,


143 As was noted last chapter, Merton provides a footnote in a later edition of *New
Seeds of Contemplation* indicating the discrepancy between his beliefs and those of others
around him on this matter.

144 Del Prete, 121.
because it is beyond words. As a result, contemplation is surrounded by paradoxical language in an attempt to articulate what the experience is. There is an “is” and an “is not” dimension to everything Merton can and does say about contemplation, which is tied to the cataphatic and apophatic traditions of Christian mysticism, which Merton loves and borrows from. Merton explains, “Contemplative experience is something very real, but elusive and hard to define. It takes place in the depths of the subject’s own spiritual being, and yet it is an ‘experience’ of the transcendent, personal presence of God. This experience has to be carefully qualified, because its paradoxical character makes it an experiential awareness of what cannot be experienced on earth. It is a knowledge of Him Who is beyond all knowledge. Hence, it knows Him as unknown. It knows ‘by unknowing.’”

Due to the paradoxical nature of contemplative experience, Merton relies on creativity and imagination for ways of articulating and overcoming the barrier of language to access Reality. Merton relies on two specific metaphors rooted in tradition to try to capture the paradoxical character of the experience: a desert and a dark night. The metaphor of a desert comes from Scripture’s teaching of Jesus’ account in the desert, in which he experienced loneliness, temptation, and hunger. Merton uses this metaphor to describe our experience of God, in which we too experience a sense of emptiness, thirst, and helplessness. Similarly, darkness, or the dark night, an image borrowed specifically from St. John of the Cross, expresses the vulnerability and blindness of contemplative experience.

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145 As mentioned last chapter, Merton is particularly fond of the apophatic tradition, which is essentially a negative theology that focuses on the ways God transcends all images, words, and concepts.

experience. In paradoxical terms, Merton explains that in contemplation, one experiences a vision of God in darkness; one “sees ‘without seeing’ and knows ‘without knowing.”’\textsuperscript{147} The direct experience of God transcends all images, words, and concepts that we know of this world.

In addition to using creativity and imagination in Merton’s attempt to articulate the experience of contemplation, both served an ontological function for Merton. Indebted to the Romantics, Merton “was interested in the imagination as a means of attaining truth or reality either through imaginative discernment or through the creative joining of things together to restore their original unity, thus regaining a sense of the depth and authority of their being.”\textsuperscript{148} Labrie continues, “Merton’s eye was on the inclusiveness of the imagination, its ability to bring back together into a primordial unity that which through a weakness of vision or will had at some point become fragmented.”\textsuperscript{149} Just in the same way that Merton relied on paradox to resolve seeming differences into unity, here he uses imagination and creativity as part of his method to explain the experience of union with God, which concurrently means union with the rest of creation. As Merton explains, our powers of creativity and imagination are rooted in God. He states, “Our power to create is a power to consent in creation, or to work in common with the creative will that transcends both our freedom and our world.”\textsuperscript{150} Only

\textsuperscript{147} Merton, \textit{New Seeds of Contemplation}, 1.

\textsuperscript{148} Labrie, \textit{Thomas Merton and the Inclusive Imagination}, 151-152.

\textsuperscript{149} Labrie, \textit{Thomas Merton and the Inclusive Imagination}, 154.

by submitting to God and accepting God’s power can creativity and imagination serve to uncover the unity of all things; attempts by our own strength are futile.

Ultimately, Merton’s methodology is marked by a change in consciousness which leads one to a heightened level of awareness and experience itself. Repeatedly in his writing Merton uses words such as “active,” “aware,” “alive,” “awakening,” “realization,” etc. to convey the sense of change that happens in/to a person. However, Merton refers to this transformation as a realization or change in consciousness, he is clear that it is an ontological experience, transcending thought alone. “Thinking tends to divide: it implies a subject thinking and an object that is thought about. Awareness, on the other hand, reduces the distance between me and what I am aware of…. It brings together and unites. In fact, in a deep experience of attentive awareness the subject-object dichotomy disappears. I am not aware of something. I am simply aware.” It is clear why experience, along with paradox, creativity, imagination, and a change in consciousness, is necessary in/to Merton’s methodology; contemplation can only truly be grasped through first hand exposure. As Merton explains, “The contemplation of which I speak here is not philosophical. It is not the static awareness of metaphysical essences apprehended as spiritual objects, unchanging and eternal. It is not the contemplation of abstract ideas. It is the religious apprehension of God…. It is awakening, enlightenment and the amazing intuitive grasp by which love gains certitude of God’s creative and

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151 Merton's selection of words to express the experience indicate the influence of Zen Buddhism on his thought.

dynamic intervention in our daily life." Merton’s method is far from being rationalistic or deductive; it is experiential, intuitive, and contemplative.

**McFague**

Like Merton, McFague relies heavily on experience in her methodology, yet not surprisingly she does so in a different way than Merton. Whereas Merton made use of his personal experiences, McFague offers very little of her personal life in her writing. In addition, Merton assumed that his personal experiences were at the same time universal, human experiences at large, reflecting the influence of Modern philosophy on his thought and method. As we have seen, McFague rejected Modern philosophy’s conceptions of absolutes and universals. Rather, appropriate for her time, her thought and writing demonstrate tenets of Postmodernity. McFague’s use of experience in her method is one that focuses on context, reducing universals and absolutes to relative truths that are embedded and contextual. Consistent with this postmodern emphasis on context, and again contrary to Merton’s methodology, she insists that experience is not objective and does not provide direct access to Reality. She states, “Subjects do not make statements; rather, interpretations emerge from various contexts with subjects as the channels of these interpretations.” McFague looks to liberation theologies for support that all experience is mediated and contextual. As was mentioned last chapter, she notes the way liberation theologies have uncovered the way one context—the white, Western male—has been

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given priority and treated as if absolute, reminding us that this is just one context among many.

McFague’s method involves contextual experience, specifically looking at one context which she believes has typically been overlooked: “human beings as a species among many others living in a home we all share.” McFague approaches this ecological context aware of and from the standpoint of her own contextual biases, namely her identity as a white, middle-class, Western, Christian woman living in a postmodern world. To this extent, McFague makes use of her personal experiences, which reflect a contextual experience. Thus McFague does suggest that experience is shared insofar as others belong to the same context; and it is primarily her fellow Americans whom McFague seeks to address in her writing.

Based on this shared context, McFague assumes a common understanding of the world between her and her readers, which she at other times refers to as a worldview or a sensibility. She explains that the worldview still most widely accepted is rooted in Enlightenment and Modern thought, which are outdated philosophies and do not capture the thinking of our age. She states, “We are not naming ourselves, one another, and our earth in ways commensurate with our own times but are using names from a bygone time.” McFague urges her readers to discover the sensibility of our time that fits Postmodernity. For example, rather than thinking of the world as a machine, an image or model associated with the Enlightenment and Age of Reason, today it makes more sense

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to think of the world as organic, which demonstrates the interdependence and relationships between all beings.

For McFague, this new sensibility is dependent on a range of disciplines that inform our thinking about God, self, and the world. McFague looks seriously to contemporary science to understand the current picture of reality. As she explains it, science is a resource to theology. She states,

What is of interest to theology is the picture of reality from postmodern science, painted in broad strokes. Theological reconstruction is not interested in fringe issues relating science and religion or in supporting cosmetic changes in theology to avoid clashes with science, such as interpreting Genesis as a myth rather than history or giving psychoanalytic interpretations of miracles. It is the broad features of the postmodern scientific view of reality that are exciting and fruitful for reformulating the essentials, not the minutiae, of the faith. Moreover, the relation between science and theology that I am suggesting is not so much a dialogue as an “eavesdropping”: theologians should listen to what the scientists are telling us about reality, and use it as an important resource for reformulating doctrines concerning God and the world.¹⁵⁷

Put simply, “theologians cannot interpret the God/world relationship in credible, holistic, persuasive ways unless they take the scientific picture of the world seriously.”¹⁵⁸

McFague sees no way around science for theology, and therefore includes postmodern science in her methodology. It plays a critical role in shaping our worldview, or current sensibility, and therefore, contributes to McFague and her readers’ contextual experience. While relying on the findings of science to help shape our current picture of reality, McFague is clear that science is always partial, biased, and incomplete. McFague explains that science is not absolute or objective the way it has often been treated;


scientists are embedded in contexts too—science is subjective and forever changing and evolving. McFague believes we must pay attention to such changes and new discoveries and use them to adjust our picture of reality when necessary.

Contemporary experience for McFague is always contextual and is always already interpreted. As we’ve noted previously, consistent with postmodern thought, McFague does not believe there exists direct access to reality. Thus all experiences, no matter how concrete, are interpreted or shaped by the context in which we find ourselves, which has been the case throughout history and time. Since no experiences are direct, McFague believes that our current, contemporary experiences take priority over experiences of/from the past. Contexts are always changing, which means that our understanding of the world/Reality is always changing. Therefore we cannot rely on past frameworks of thought, because they are outdated and do not fit our current context. This is the push behind McFague’s desire to uncover the new sensibility of our time, based on postmodern science.

McFague describes what is needed as a “change in consciousness,” a concept that she uses regularly throughout her writing in reference to the new sensibility needed for our time. As she explains, a change in consciousness has to do with thinking differently so that, ultimately, we act and behave differently. Thus she states, “A new imaginative picture of the relationship between God and the world must precede action.”

Central to McFague’s methodology here is the power of imagination, by

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159 Both Merton and McFague rely on the concept of a “change of consciousness,” in ways consistent with their differing philosophies. For Merton, a “change in consciousness” has to do with the direct access and experience of Reality; for McFague, it is used within the confines of contextual and mediated experience.

160 McFague, Models of God, xiv.
which one embraces change and imagines new possibilities. Ultimately, for McFague, this imaginative project is one that is entrenched in the task of deconstruction and reconstruction of the images in Christianity, which are foundational to our conceptions of the God-world relationship.

As previously noted, McFague’s interest in the imaginative task of deconstruction and reconstruction of Christianity is due to the influence of Gordon Kaufman, who first suggested the importance of such a project. Upon hearing Kaufman’s words, McFague leapt at the opportunity, stating, “The deconstruction and reconstruction of models by which we understand the relationship between God and the world is, in my opinion, one of the most serious tasks facing contemporary theology.”

Consistent with McFague’s view of the importance of contemporary experience (since experience is always contextual and therefore evolving), deconstruction and reconstruction mean finding images in Christianity that fit the sensibility of our time, not simply relying on images of times and contexts of the past.

McFague explains that theologians have continued to construct new concepts with little attention paid to the underlying metaphors and models from which such concepts arise. She seeks to correct this by taking a thorough look at the traditional metaphors and models in Christianity and imagining new alternatives and possibilities. The task of deconstruction and reconstruction, then, ultimately deal with religious language, for McFague, particularly the use of metaphor. This imaginative task is as she describes “a remythologizing of the relationship between God and the world.”

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creatively playing with metaphor in an attempt to better articulate the God-world relationship in ways that makes sense for our time.

McFague’s imaginative project works with a few basic presuppositions in place: first, that we live in the midst of a postmodern world or sensibility, which at its most basic level means an “appreciation of the thoroughgoing, radical interdependence of life at all levels in every imaginable way,”163 second, that “the universe is neither indifferent nor malevolent but that there is a power (and a personal power at that) which is on the side of life and its fulfillment,” and third, that “we have some clues for fleshing out this claim in the life, death, and appearances of Jesus of Nazareth.”164 As one critic, Carroll, describes, “These… notions… form the general grid of McFague’s thinking as a whole. It is into this framework that she places her method of doing theology, a method centering on the definition and function of metaphor.”165

McFague’s understanding and use of metaphor is central to her methodology; the imaginative task of deconstruction and reconstruction are only possible insofar as we recognize that our religious language has both an “is” and an “is not” dimension of truth to it. In McFague’s postmodern view, it does not directly access Reality. She states, “The essence of metaphorical theology…is precisely the refusal to identify human constructions with divine reality.”166 Consistent with her claim that all experience is contextual, our language provides limited or relative access to reality, in a mediated way.

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163 McFague, Models of God, x.

164 McFague, Models of God, x.


166 McFague, Models of God, 22.
Anything that we say about God is mediated and already interpreted due to our contexts and the language associated with our contexts. Thus we cannot speak of/about God directly. Metaphor, with both the “is” and “is not” dimension, is our only access point; as McFague insists, “there is no way around the metaphor.”\footnote{McFague, Speaking in Parables, 4.}

While the goal of deconstruction and reconstruction of religious language is to find new images that fit our time and sensibility, McFague believes that Christians do have a guide to follow, based on the example of Jesus. Therefore, this imaginative project has boundaries; it is not a complete free for all. McFague looks to Jesus as the example for the way new metaphors and models ought to function today. In this regard, we find a method of correlation in McFague’s work between Scripture/tradition and the contemporary situation in which we find ourselves.\footnote{In her article, "Cosmology and Christianity," McFague footnotes the evolution in/of her methodology. While still relying on the method of correlation, she notes that it is not the sole form of her method. She acknowledges many different influences on her method, which have resulted in the various aspects of her methodology documented in this section.} She states,

The significance of the story of Jesus is its present relevance, not its description of the past, although—and here is the difficult part—the story of the past gives a clue, at least a clue, to its present relevance. The point is that one cannot, in this tradition, distill some eternal truths from the “story of Jesus” and then cast the story aside; on the contrary, the events of and surrounding the life, death, and appearances of Jesus of Nazareth are claimed at the very least to be paradigmatic, that is, exemplars, models, parables of the God-world relationship, for today.\footnote{McFague, Models of God, 41.}

McFague’s belief in the destabilizing power and unconventional character of metaphor today is rooted in the same destabilizing power and unconventional character of metaphor found in Scripture, and more specifically, based on Jesus. McFague does not believe that
Jesus is the *sole* source for theology today, but as she states, there are “clues or hints”\(^{170}\) in his story that are significant still today. Thus McFague insists that the story of Jesus is paradigmatic of God’s relationship to/with the world, still today.

In the story of Jesus McFague finds evidence that the Christian paradigm is destabilizing, inclusive, and nonhierarchical in its vision, all of which fit the postmodern sensibility of our time. Specifically, these Christian characteristics are found in Jesus’ parables, table fellowship with outcasts, and his death on the cross. Following in the footsteps of liberation theologies, McFague explains, “The parables illuminate the destabilizing aspect of the good news of Christianity; the table fellowship its inclusive character; and the death on the cross its nonhierarchical emphasis.”\(^{171}\) Unlike liberation theologies, McFague believes that these clues in the story of Jesus indicate the inclusion of all creation in the God-world relationship, rather than focusing on humankind.

McFague is well aware that these examples from the story of Jesus are not always used in destabilizing, inclusive, and nonhierarchical ways, but she believes there is room for such interpretation. Therefore, she implements these aspects into her methodology as a way of conveying God’s presence and relationship in/to our postmodern world.

To summarize, McFague relies on a variety of methods in her writing, such as postmodern science and philosophy, and a change in consciousness brought on by the imagination, in which deconstruction and reconstruction of religious language are made possible, focusing specifically on metaphors and models in and consistent with the Christian tradition. While these methods appear wide-ranging, they are all ultimately


brought together in contemporary, contextual experience. As McFague insists, the only way to truly test and to speak of/to the truth of the postmodern sensibility learned through science and philosophy, as well as metaphors, models, and any new construction, is by experience; we must live it out. Speaking of constructions, she states, “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.”\textsuperscript{172} McFague’s method is heuristic, through and through—daring to experiment, test, and to think outside of the box—all done through the contextual experience of living it out.

\textit{Conceptions of Reality}

References to Merton and McFague’s different understandings of reality and truth have been made multiple times already in this project, in connection to their differing philosophies, understandings of the tasks of theology, and methodologies. Here we will examine what reality and truth are for each figure, as well as the questions of our access and control of them, and the precise relationship they have with language. As we will see in later chapters, Merton and McFague’s conceptions of reality and truth pervade their thoughts on God, self, and the world, as well as the question of how we are called to live. It is therefore important that we grasp their basic conceptions here, as they will be built upon and developed in the following chapters.

\textsuperscript{172} McFague, \textit{Models of God}, 27.
Although Merton’s writing is not systematic, he does give us some insight found in scattered statements throughout his writing that, when pieced together, offers a picture of his view of reality. In many ways, Merton’s ideas reflect the thinking of Modernity, such as the nature of truth and reality as absolute, universal, and their ability to be grasped. Yet not everything Merton stated or indicated about truth and reality were in sync with tenets of Modern thought. For example, Merton’s adamant rejection of the Cartesian dichotomy of subject and object and the concept of objectivity.

Merton believed wholeheartedly that reality exists and can be known. Yet he stressed that it is not as simple as seeing reality as what is “out there,” as the world we see and live in every day. Reality is not found at the surface level; we must dig deeper to discover the truth about reality. As Merton explains, this is a result of sin, which has caused illusions of alienation, division, and dualisms to arise. He states, “The fall from Paradise was a fall from unity…. Man fell from the unity of contemplative vision into the multiplicity, complication, and distraction of an active, worldly existence…. In such a condition, man’s mind is enslaved by an inexorable concern with all that is exterior, transient, illusory, and trivial.”

As Merton explains, as a result of Adam and Eve’s sin, we are all born into a false, or illusory way of thinking about the God, self, and the world, and therefore, reality. The sense of alienation, division, and dualism that we experience are simply not real; they are nothing but illusions that keep us from knowing truth and reality.

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173 Merton, *The Inner Experience*, 35. Merton’s gender exclusive language of “man” and “mankind” reflect the Modern time in which he wrote; his statements can be read today as inclusive to all humankind.
The result of such illusion has been a false sense of consciousness, which Merton believes has been further promoted by Modernity’s emphasis on the thinking subject.

Merton’s problem with this is both the equation of the self with the mind and the situating of the self as central in/to reality, which it perceives apart from itself. Merton explains,

Modern man, in so far as he is still Cartesian (he is of course going far beyond Descartes in many respects), is a subject for whom his own self-awareness as a thinking, observing, measuring and estimating “self” is absolutely primary. It is for him the one indubitable “reality,” and all truth starts here. The more he is able to develop his consciousness as a subject over against objects, the more he can understand things in their relations to him and one another, the more he can manipulate these objects for his own interests, but also, at the same time, the more he tends to isolate himself in his own subjective prison, to become a detached observer cut off from everything else in a kind of impenetrable alienated and transparent bubble which contains all reality in the form of purely subjective experience. Modern consciousness then tends to create this solipsistic bubble of awareness—an ego-self imprisoned in its own consciousness, isolated and out of touch with other such selves in so far as they are all “things” rather than persons.  

Merton makes clear that such thinking is severely flawed. The modern conception of the self, as based off of Descartes’ cogito, along with the Cartesian division of subject and object have led to a skewed picture of reality that places the thinking subject in an alienated, isolated central position, acting as if the world revolves around me alone (and then we all proceed to act this way).

Contrary to this position is Merton’s wholehearted belief that God is truly the one at the center of reality, not us. For Merton, God is Absolute Reality, and as he suggests, “outside of Him there is nothing.” Thus the unity of which Merton speaks, which constitutes reality, is founded in God. Philosophically speaking, Merton understands such unity to be ontological in nature. In contrast to Cartesian thought, he suggests,

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175 Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain*, 186.
Another, metaphysical, consciousness is still available to modern man. It is starts not from the thinking and self-aware subject but from Being, ontologically seen to be beyond and prior to the subject-object division. Underlying the subjective experience of the individual self there is an immediate experience of Being. This is totally different from an experience of self-consciousness. It is completely nonobjective. It has in it none of the split and alienation that occurs when the subject becomes aware of itself as a quasi-object. The consciousness of Being... is an immediate experience that goes beyond reflexive awareness. It is not “consciousness of” but pure consciousness, in which the subject as such “disappears.”

With the help and influence of Heidegger, Merton saw this ontological conception of reality as uniting all beings existentially in Being. Thus he perceives reality to be a single, unified, ultimate reality in God.

While the fall of humankind to sin has distorted this vision, Merton insists that such unity still exists and is possible to reach and experience through Christ Jesus. Merton explains, “In the beginning, Adam was ‘one man.’ The Fall had divided him into ‘a multitude.’ Christ had restored man to unity in Himself. The Mystical Christ was the ‘New Adam’ and in Him all men could return to unity, to innocence, to purity, and become ‘one man.’” Salvation in Christ Jesus makes it possible in the here and now to break free to the illusions that blind us and hold us back, and to see the sense of inclusivity and oneness that characterize all beings in reality.

In this regard Merton’s understanding of reality is one that focuses on the present. He understood progress and movement towards truth and reality to be measured not just in terms of the linear progression of moving forward in the future, but rather by moving inward, outward, and upward all in this present moment. Christ made it possible to unite with God and the rest of the world now. As Merton explains, the experience is one that is

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“not freedom from time, but freedom in time. It is the freedom to go out and meet God in the inscrutable mystery of His will here and now, in this precise moment.”178 Unity is possible now, and is not just part of Christians’ eschatological vision of the future.

Merton understood this unity to pervade all aspects of life; dualisms such as the natural/supernatural, body/soul, and matter/spirit all collapse in on themselves. Thus he made comments such as, “The soul and body are not divided against one another” and “nature itself has, in man, become transformed and supernaturalized so that in everyone in whom Christ lives and acts, by the Holy Spirit, there is no longer any further division between nature and supernature.”179 While Merton thought of such unity as holistic, he was careful to preserve each person’s sense of self, avoiding any accusations of monism, the belief that only one being exists, or pantheism, in which the individual, world, and God all become identified with and collapsed in on one another. Rather, Merton posits a panentheist position that all beings are united in God, but not identical to God or to one another. It is about the sharing in the experience of Being.

As Merton clearly articulates, such ontological and spiritual reality is accessible to us in and through Jesus. More specifically, contemplation is the path towards true vision, which allows us to see past the illusions of alienation and division and grasp the underlying unity that pervades. This is because contemplation is, as Merton quotes Paul,


179 Merton, The Inner Experience, 40. Merton’s writings reflect an evolving stance on the relationship between the natural and the supernatural; in his early writings (Seven Storey Mountain) he keeps these two realities separate. It took Merton time to learn that the world is not evil, bad, or a place needing escape, but that it participates in a larger reality. This quote from The Inner Experience reflects his matured vision of unity between the natural and supernatural.
the experience that “it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me.”\textsuperscript{180} Thus Christ is the means of bringing together the natural with the supernatural. Through Christ, the self is united with God. In the same way, Christ lives and works within every person, and so we find that we are united with all beings in God. Contemplation is the way towards seeing this holistic truth of reality. Merton states, “The contemplative life is primarily a life of \textit{unity}. A contemplative is one who has transcended divisions to reach a unity beyond division.”\textsuperscript{181}

What allows the contemplative to see beyond the division and see the truth about reality is their ability and practice of solitude and detachment from the world. As Merton explains, in order to see reality as it really is, the contemplative “must recollect himself, turn within, in order to find the inner center of spiritual activity which remains inaccessible as long as he is immersed in the exterior business of life.”\textsuperscript{182} It is important to get away from the busyness, distractions, and lack of authenticity of societal affairs. Silence, solitude, and prayer mark the contemplative’s ability to see the world through a different lens that does not see the superficial, surface layer of life, but instead pierces the deeper, spiritual reality underlying existence.

Yet Merton is cautious with his description of the contemplative life and vision: he insists that solitude is not the same as separation, isolation, or complete withdrawal from the world. Such an idea goes against the holistic picture that contemplation is all about. Rather, solitude is interior, or a matter of the heart. It has to do with creating

\textsuperscript{180} Galatians 2:20. Merton quotes this Scripture verse throughout his writing to capture the experience of contemplation.

\textsuperscript{181} Merton, \textit{The Inner Experience}, 147.

\textsuperscript{182} Merton, \textit{The Inner Experience}, 147.
space between you and the rest of creation so that you can experience clarity in what you are seeing and experiencing. As Merton explains, “Mere living in the midst of other men does not guarantee that we live in communion with them or even in communication with them…. Very often it is the solitary who has the most to say; not that he uses many words, but what he says is new, substantial, unique…. He has something real to give because he himself is real.”  

The contemplative, having united with God, through Christ, is able to see the world as God created the world. Having gotten past seeing their own ego as center of/to it all, he/she can see the original unity that has been restored in and through Jesus. The contemplative is able to experience reality as one. Merton states, “Since he is detached, since he has received the gift of a pure heart, he is not limited to narrow and provincial views. He is not easily involved in the superficial confusion which most men take for reality. And for that reason he can see more clearly and enter more directly into the pure actuality of human life. The thing that distinguishes him from other men, and gives him such a distinct advantage over them, is that he has a much more spiritual grasp of what is ‘real’ and what is ‘actual.’”  

In uniting with God, the contemplative sees, knows, and loves as God does.

The contemplative comes to grasp reality through solitude and detachment, but ultimately, the process and experience is one that is intuitive. Contemplation is the direct experience of God and reality. Merton describes it as “a vivid realization of the fact that life and being in us proceed from an invisible, transcendent and infinitely abundant

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Source. Contemplation is, above all, awareness of the reality of that Source.”

Merton’s language of “awareness,” “realization,” and “awe” capture the intuitive nature of contemplation, in which the contemplative knows God “without knowing” and sees God “without seeing.” Thus intuition is a deeper kind of knowing at a deeper level, the level of being; it is not deductive or analytical, but rather it knows in “complete oneness.”

Merton’s point is to express the existential character of contemplation, which balances and brings together consciousness and being. Our access to reality through contemplation is one that is direct, experiential, and existential. Contemplation provides “ontological transparency, as it were, with a full sense of its participatory value in the fullness of being.”

Consciousness, while involved, transcends itself; priority is given to being itself, in which consciousness participates. As Labrie explains, Merton was resistant to approaches of ontological reflection that “isolated the mind from an existential awareness of being…. In short, knowing was a part of being rather than being a part of knowing.” Labrie also notes that while Merton was indebted to Platonism/Neoplatonism for his structuring of reality and treatment of God as absolute and ultimate reality, he rejected the intellectualism of such philosophy and replaced it with a focus on being itself, known through intuition, experience, and “existential

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The way to God and reality is through a full body experience of being present, rather than through faculties of the mind.

Yet while intuition serves as the pathway to reality through contemplation, rather than the mind or intellect, it does so by resourcing the imagination, which allows us to see past the illusions in conventional thought and conceptions of reality and consider other possibilities. To this effect, Labrie describes the imagination as “an instrument of discernment,” able to grasp reality “through imaginative discernment or the creative joining of things together to restore their original unity, thus regaining a sense of the depth and authority of their being.” Imagination, steered by intuition, holds the power to unite the divisions and dualisms pervading society by providing an alternative vision. Its fresh lens for viewing the world uncovers the ontological unity underlying reality.

While the imagination serves intuitive consciousness in its access and experience of God and reality, the experience is still one that is not completely available to us. This is not surprising considering the fact that contemplation is not an experience of the intellect, but is rather intuitive. The direct experience of God and reality in contemplation is one that transcends the human level of experience, which can be understood and articulated. It makes sense, then, that our access to reality, and reality itself, transcend or are beyond concepts and words. Merton refers to apophaticism to explain this, which addresses the limits of experience, concepts, and language. These

190 Labrie, Thomas Merton and the Inclusive Imagination, 49.

191 Here, Merton means to refer to imagination as used by intuitive consciousness rather than active forms of consciousness associated with the mind and intellect.

192 Labrie, Thomas Merton and the Inclusive Imagination, 5.

193 Labrie, Thomas Merton and the Inclusive Imagination, 151-152.
things help us grasp things about God and reality, but do not provide direct access to God and reality. Merton explains, “God is not an object of limited and precise knowledge and consequently cannot be apprehended as ‘a thing’ to be studied…. Relinquishing every attempt to grasp God in limited human concepts, the contemplative’s act of submission and faith attains to his presence as the ground of every human experience and to his reality as the ground of being itself.”

Thus contemplative experience of God and reality are paradoxically beyond our comprehension. The contemplative “experiences the ineffable reality of what is beyond experience. It ‘knows’ the presence of God, not in clear vision but ‘as unknown.’”

Merton maintains that reality exists and can be experienced directly, but that it eludes all explanation. Any attempt we make to explain this mystery will be inadequate. It cannot be fully grasped or articulated. Thus God and reality transcend or exist behind or beyond language. Merton believes that our language is limited for a variety of reasons: it is metaphorical, it is not objective, and it is hindered by reason and the intellect, which cannot grasp God and reality.

Merton is clear in his writing that everything he says about contemplative experience is not itself contemplative experience. The real experience transcends or eludes all concepts and words; it escapes capture. Put simply, reality “is not wholly within our grasp;” “The more we attempt to attain knowledge of it, the less precisely we can pin it down.”

Thus there is a gap between what we can say about the experience

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194 Merton, Contemplation in a World of Action, 168.

195 Merton, Contemplation in a World of Action, 167.

196 Del Prete, 123.
and the experience itself. To this effect, Merton admits that language is metaphorical; he cannot capture or pin it down exactly, but only point to it. Thus he states, “All of this is of course pure metaphor. It is a way of saying that our being somehow communicates directly with the Being of God, Who is ‘in us.’” All images and language of darkness, desert, transparent glass, etc. that try to capture contemplation are metaphorical.

In addition to the metaphorical character of language, Merton strongly resists any idea of objectivity. As earlier explained, Merton does not believe in the Cartesian separation of subject and object. He understands this division to be an illusion, which in reality is replaced by ontological unity. Thus we are unable to objectively view reality as if removed from it; we are always in its midst. The Cartesian subject-object dichotomy treats reality as if it can be “broken, reduced, analyzed, defined, and manipulated in terms of its constituent parts.” Merton finds this thinking naïve; in reality, the self does not objectively stand over and against the rest of reality, which it seeks to know. Such objectivity is illusory. In reality, the division between the self and the rest of the world dissolves in ontological unity, or a sense of oneness. As Merton understands it, “In the investigation of this world, the observer discovers that she or he is part of the observed, that the effort to observe itself limits what is observable—the particles move in response to us. There is therefore no inherent separation between us and them.” Such is the holistic, unified nature of reality.

197 Merton, The Inner Experience, 11.

198 Del Prete, 122.

199 Del Prete, 123. As the author notes, Merton’s conclusion is made as a result of his study of quantum physics, which challenges classical/ Newtonian physics, and its claims for objectivity.
Merton is clear that God and reality transcend or stand behind concepts and words; language does not give us direct access to reality. However, this does not mean that language is completely ambiguous and therefore worthless. Merton believes that language corresponds to and participates in reality, and insofar as language stays connected to truth, it does have meaning.\(^{200}\) He states,

> Can language make sense if there is no God? In other words, what is the point of talking about truth and falsity if there is no God? Is not man, in that case, reduced to putting together a series of more or less arbitrary noises in the solitude of a mute world?\ldots If language has no meaning than nothing has any meaning. Language has enough meaning, at least, to reassure us that we are not floating in a pure void. In other words, communication becomes possible, and with it community, once it is admitted that our words are capable of being true or false\ldots. We are thus called to take care of our language, and use it clearly.\(^ {201}\)

While the contemplative experience of God and reality are ineffable, language points to and participates in this indescribable reality. It is metaphysically grounded in it. Thus our language is symbolic, meaning that it possesses the power to point to and make reality known, and to participate in the reality to which it points, without becoming completely identified with it.\(^ {202}\)

> Like metaphor, symbol has an “is” and “is not” relationship with and participation in reality. Reality can be momentarily, conceptually grasped, but then slips back out of reach. In this way language gives us insight into the experience, though it is fleeting. Merton explains, “One may isolate the reality in a symbol, but then one must remember

\(^{200}\) Merton was indebted to Brice Parain, and Albert Camus’ linguistic theories for his ideas on language.


that it is not the symbol, and that the symbol itself is incapable of communicating the full reality. So that one must be able to say, immediately after using the symbol, ‘But the reality is not that.’ What is the reality? The only answer is that it is Unknown, but that one knows it by unknowing.”

Thus we must both affirm and deny any and all conceptual involvement of language with reality. It corresponds and participates in reality from a distance.

While Merton believes that language has the potential for truth and meaning in its correspondence to and participation in reality, more often than not we fail to use language in this way. The choice is ours whether we employ language to communicate truth and express reality or use it to manipulate and distort reality. Far too frequently, language is used to foster illusions, concealing rather than revealing reality. As was previously explained, Merton names sin as responsible for our vision of fragmentation and division in the world. Our language reflects such vision, working in conjunction with our images and concepts, thus leading us down a further destructive path away from God and the sense of oneness that characterizes reality. Specifically, Merton points out the mistruths in advertising claims, slogans, and other forms of propaganda pervading society, which show us this sobering departure from truth. In response, Merton calls for the “purification and restitution of language so that the truth may become once again unambiguous and fully accessible to all men, especially when they need to know what to do.”

With honesty, integrity, and determination, we can make language reveal reality, and once again correspond to the truth in which it is grounded.

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203 Merton, The Inner Experience, 151.

204 Merton, The Literary Essays, 273.
Merton states in *The Ascent to Truth* that our statements are only true insofar as Truth exists. He believes that language is metaphysically grounded in Truth. What is “truth” for Merton? Merton defined God as Absolute Reality, and in the same way he describes God as Truth. He states, “The primal truth, the ground of all being and truth, is in God the Creator of all that is.” As the Truth, God is the source, or ground, of all truth. Yet there remains a distinction between Truth and truth. “Propositions or ‘truths’ about God, Merton insists, are conceptual expressions and are not to be confused with the Reality of the God who is Truth.”

Language corresponds to and participates in Truth, without being identical to it, in the same way that it does with Reality. As Merton explains, this is because truth and reality are bound together in God. In the same way that reality is ultimate and absolute, Merton describes truth as one and eternal. It does not change because God does not change. No matter how the world around us changes, truth, like reality, is absolute and universal.

Reality and truth depend on one another. They cannot exist apart from one another; there is no reality without truth and truth, by its very definition, has to be real. Thus Merton makes comments such as “truth, in things, is their reality” and that “we make ourselves real by telling the truth.”

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208 Merton, *Contemplation in a World of Action*, 87.


210 Merton, *No Man Is an Island*, 188.
to reality. Authentic living, which involves truthfulness, sincerity, fidelity, and love, will help us see past the illusions and see unified reality. In this way, Merton understood truth to be a matter of identity and the discovery of who one really is. He believed that “the true self knows its Source in the God who is Truth and in so doing recognizes its unity with others whom it meets ‘on a common ground of spiritual Truth’”211. This discovery of self and pursuit of truth and unity are the path of the contemplative. Contemplative experience provides, with its emphasis on intuitive consciousness, imagination, solitude, and detachment, access to both Truth and Reality.

As Merton understands it, it is the contemplative that is able to break through and penetrate truth and reality. Yet Merton explains that, this creates a misleading image, as if truth and reality only exist outside of us, which is not true. Merton understands Truth and Reality to exist both inside and outside of us. He explains,

The “reality” through which the contemplative “penetrates” in order to reach a contact with what is “ultimate” in it is actually his own being, his own life. The contemplative is not one who directs a magic spiritual intuition upon other objects, but one who, being perfectly unified in himself and recollected in the center of his own humility, enters into contact with reality by an immediacy that forgets the division between subject and object. In a certain sense, by losing himself and by forgetting himself as an object of reflection, he finds himself and all other reality together. This ‘finding’ is beyond concepts and beyond practical projects.212

As Merton understands it, this experience has to do with living in and living out the truth, and by living in and living out the truth, one comes to know God and reality.


212 Merton, The Inner Experience, 151-152.
In examining McFague’s position on reality, truth, and their accessibility, one finds that in some ways, her position echoes Merton while in other ways it is quite distinct from it. On a most basic level, McFague seems to agree with Merton that reality does in fact exist and is equated with God. She states that God is reality. McFague continues to explain that God is being itself. “God is not a being, even the highest being: God is reality… God is ‘being itself,’ or the ground of all that is real, is actual, exists.”

As being itself, McFague believes that God is the ground or source of our being and reality. Thus the reality of God and the reality of us and the world are deeply connected, or as McFague states, “ontologically related.” While our reality is not identical to the reality of God, it is formed from God and remains in God. Thus McFague makes the distinction between these two different realities, while still recognizing the participation of each in the other.

McFague bases her belief in the deep relationship between the reality of God and the reality of the world on the Christian belief in the Incarnation, which indicates that God is present in and through creation. God is embodied. Thus the reality of God is not separate from the reality of the world. McFague states, “There is not God and the world, but the world as it exists and only exists in God.”

The reality of God and the world are united, and ultimately are one. As McFague explains, “The world (all matter) is a manifestation of God, for God is reality. If the world were ‘outside’ God, then there

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213 McFague, A New Climate for Theology, 163.
214 McFague, Life Abundant, 18.
215 McFague, A New Climate for Theology, 163.
would be something greater than God, that is, ‘God and the world.’ A dictionary
definition of reality is ‘something that exists independently of all other things and from
which other things derive.’ Hence, ‘God’ is being-itself, or existence-itself, the source of
all other forms of existence.”

McFague is clear that she is not claiming pantheism; God and the world are not identical. Rather, she is claiming panentheism, meaning that
the world is indebted to God for its existence and is the place where God chooses to
reveal God’s self. God is embodied, but not reduced to things of the world.

The Incarnation brings the reality of God into the reality of the world. To
McFague, this means that God is worldly, not otherworldly, and our access to God is here
and now, in this world in which we live. McFague states,

I believe that we live and move and have our being in God, that we are not our own
but belong to God. I also believe that we are not on our own; we live in God’s
world. We come from God and return to God and in the meantime, we are to live
in the presence of God. God is, then, reality: God is the source, the sustainer, and
the goal of everything that is. This in no way undercuts the reality of the world; on
the contrary, the world is real and significant because God is incarnate—God is
enfleshed, God is worldly. I believe a Christian cannot speak of God without
speaking of God incarnate, for we do not know a distant, disembodied God but an
intimate, embodied one. Because of the incarnation, we can speak of the world as
God’s body and hence when we say that God is reality we mean that reality is both
with us and beyond us, both immanent and transcendent, both physical and
spiritual.

Thus the reality of God pervades the reality of the world, though not in a neutral way;

McFague insists that the incarnation not only tells us that God is present in the world, but
also that the reality of God is love and is therefore personal. As the source of the world’s
reality, God loves the world and wants to see all of creation flourish. In this way, God is
intimately aware and concerned with our well-being.

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216 McFague, *A New Climate for Theology*, 164.

Everything is ordered by God and in relation to God. Reality “makes sense,” not according to worldly standards (nor mine), but in terms of the love that created everything and wants it to flourish. Ecologically, theologically, and personally it makes sense: the world is characterized by radical relationality ordered by and to the Power in the universe, who is love. It is the reality in which all are to live together in community to glorify God and to share with each other. Such reality has order and harmony; the disorder and confusion come when we fail to acknowledge this order and try to reorder things around ourselves.  

McFague recognizes that reality is characterized by personal love and unity. Much like Merton, she notes that awareness of this reality takes correct vision, in which we see that all things circle around God. 

Essentially, McFague is making a faith claim about reality: that reality is “good” insofar as it is directed by God and God’s relational love, and only with right vision, the loving eye, can we recognize this. The example of Jesus shows Christians that “reality (God) is on the side of life and its fulfillment.” The direction and intention of reality are wrapped up in God’s personal and relational love.

While McFague supports the goodness of reality, she is cautious with her endorsement, providing two qualifications. First, she raises the question of how we are measuring goodness: we must ask, “good for whom?” We live in a complex world full of causes and effects, where specific acts benefit some at the detriment of others. This is what we see when we view the world from a scientific perspective. Yet McFague insists that the direction of reality is love and fulfillment. “This assertion about reality’s goodness is not absolute, but relative to the redeeming and redemptive love of God”  

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219 While they agree this is necessary, McFague and Merton have their own ideas about what this vision is and entails, exactly, and how one achieves it.

220 McFague, A New Climate for Theology, 165. Precisely how McFague uses Jesus as an example will be discussed in chapter three.

221 McFague, Life Abundant, 154.
intention is what faith, rock-bottom faith, is: trust that love and not indifference, neutrality, or malevolence is at the heart of things.”222 The second qualification that McFague gives is that the goodness of reality is dependent on us and our active involvement and participation in its flourishing. As McFague explains, “This is an acknowledgement that God is not the supernatural being who can control what happens, either at a natural or a personal level, but rather is the direction toward flourishing for all creatures.”223 God is Being itself, or the source of all that is. McFague believes this places responsibility on beings in the world to see God’s personal, relational, and loving presence in the world and move towards it in daily life. Because our being comes from God, our “well-being” and our “reason for being” are found in a relationship to/with God.224 Thus we must actively work here and now to know God and God’s love, and as a result, all will flourish.

McFague’s emphasis on the responsibility placed on beings in the world in daily life demonstrates her focus on reality in the present, rather than the past or future. As she explains, this is not a denial of past and future, but simply a choice to focus on the here and now, since God is present here and now. Along these lines, McFague interprets elements of Christian belief and tradition in the present, rather than limiting them to past or future events. For example, God’s personal and relational love means that he desires for all beings to flourish here and now, not just in the future, as part of another world.

222 McFague, A New Climate for Theology, 165.

223 McFague, Life Abundant, 154.

224 McFague, Life Abundant, 183.
This means that salvation has to do with “the well-being of all creation here and now.”225 McFague’s belief in the oneness of reality, as God being present in the world, means that Christian beliefs should not be interpreted as otherworldly—they are worldly and concrete, having to do with the present.

The focus on God’s presence here and now in the world leads McFague to emphasize space rather than time, a dimension of reality that she believes has often been overlooked. She states, “The eternal return of the earth’s physical cycle is contrasted with the historical movement toward the eschatological fulfillment of creation in the kingdom of God, a fulfillment beyond earthly joys. In space versus time, the old dichotomy of nature versus history is played out.”226 While not absolutely, she believes that history (time) has been over-emphasized to the detriment of nature (space). As McFague insists, space shows us how beings relate to/with one another in the world. The flourishing of all creation is dependent on space—that all beings have their own space and not infringe on another’s space. Space becomes a time issue when not used appropriately. McFague’s emphasis of space fits her ecological lens, through which she is articulating her thoughts on reality. God as present and embodied in the world means that both the present and space matter.

To summarize McFague’s understanding of reality as presented so far—she claims that God is reality and is the source or ground of our reality and the reality of the world. While not completely collapsing these realities in one another, she insists that there is a basic oneness to reality, which unites God and the world. Put simply, God is

225 McFague, A New Climate for Theology, 36.

226 McFague, The Body of God, 100.
present and known in and through the world. More specifically, God is present and known in and through God’s personal and relational love, which pervades and directs all beings in the world towards fulfillment. In this way, McFague interprets Christian belief and tradition in the present. God’s relationship with the world is happening here and now; “the world, the true world, is at one and the same time two-dimensional. We do not live in a secular world that must be discarded when we become ‘religious,’ nor do we live in a ‘religious’ world which has no truck with the secular... ‘God is with us’ in, through, under, and for our human, historical, temporal world.”

As one can see from McFague’s position on reality, she seems to support modern concepts of absolutes, universals, and certainty insofar as she posits what reality is. Yet McFague also claims to be a postmodern thinker, resistant to and skeptical of metaphysical claims, opting instead for “uncertainty, partiality, and openness in both the statements and in their source.” What are we to make of this seeming inconsistency? McFague finds herself caught between modern and postmodern frames of thought, both insisting upon and rejecting absolutes and universals at the same time. As a postmodern thinker, she believes that no person can make universal or absolute claims, based on the limitations of context. Yet at the same time, she acknowledges that theologians are attempting to speak of something that is absolute and universal. She explains, “Theologians make universal statements—that is, statements about God, world, and human beings—realizing that the statements are hypothetical, partial, risky, and limited. Theological statements are universal in scope but not in quality of judgment. Another

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227 McFague, Speaking in Parables, 6.

228 McFague, Life Abundant, 28.
way to express this proper stance of the theologian is to insist on ‘radical monotheism’: the only absolute, the only certainty, the only universal, is God.”\textsuperscript{229} Essentially, McFague sees the only certainty, universal, and absolute as God; no certainty exists in my self or my statements. Uncertainty arises the moment we attempt to comprehend and articulate the things of God.\textsuperscript{230} To this extent, our claims are partial, risky, and limited.

While McFague claims that the only absolute is God’s existence, in her description of reality she does additionally claim God to be relational, personal and loving, supportive of life and fulfillment. To this end McFague seems to indicate that it is possible to go beyond the basic claim of God’s existence and speak in some manner to the character of God. Critics have pointed out this inconsistency in McFague’s thought and writing.\textsuperscript{231} Bromell points out the way McFague insists on God’s relational nature to/with the world, not as a metaphorical relationality, but as a literal relationship to/with the world. Thus McFague is making an ontological and metaphysical claim beyond what she states is possible. As Bromell puts it, “McFague appears to go beyond this epistemic claim to affirm a metaphysical ‘fuzziness’ about reality itself.”\textsuperscript{232}

McFague acknowledges that her claim to God’s relational and personal love is one ultimately based in/on faith. As we saw in her description of reality, she insists such

\textsuperscript{229} McFague, \textit{Life Abundant}, 28.

\textsuperscript{230} McFague's allowance of one absolute and universal certainty (God’s existence) shows us that her position, while postmodern, is not extreme.

\textsuperscript{231} More attention and criticism surround McFague’s conception of reality than Merton's likely due to the fact that she more concretely attempts a systematic theology, whereas Merton never claims to do so.

a claim about God’s love and fulfillment “is what faith, rock-bottom faith, is: trust that love and not indifference, neutrality, or malevolence is at the heart of things.”

McFague’s faith informs her that God is relational. Thus, while McFague’s remarks on God beyond his existence sound like absolute certainties, they remain faith claims. As McFague insists, God’s existence is absolute and certain, but anything we attempt to say beyond that is uncertain. She states, “The point of uncertainty is what we say about God’s love, how we understand it, how we apply it. Theological statements, then, are risky, partial, uncertain assertions made by relative, historically bound creatures about universal matters—God, world, and human beings.”

As has been stated before, McFague believes that we lack direct access to reality. Anything we think or say about reality is marked by our own limitations. While God absolutely and universally exists, we cannot know God directly. Reality exists, but we do not possess full access to it. One reason for this is that we are embodied, embedded in particular contexts. She states, “We experience life in many different ways and from different perspectives: there is no universal human being.”

Our contexts shape how we understand and see God and the world, often in ways that we are not even aware of. McFague explains, “Worldviews are pictures of reality held at a very deep level. They are the basic assumptions of a culture we learn early in life and usually do not question, in part because we are often not aware of them…. We are seldom conscious of world

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models; they are simply ‘the way things are.’”\(^\text{236}\) In reality, these worldviews are constructions or pictures of reality that are not neutral or innocent. They are mediated and interpreted, deeply influenced by the contexts in which we live. In this way, we cannot make any universal claims about God because there is no one, universal picture of God and God’s relationship with the world. There is no direct access. Particular contexts prevent such objectivity and absolutism.

In addition to the limits put on us by context, we lack direct access to God and reality because of the limitations of language. McFague explains that we cannot take language at face value; “its transparency is gone.”\(^\text{237}\) The belief that language provides direct access to reality was a modern tenet of thought that has been done away with. McFague states, “The days of supposing we are free of finite limitations, of supposing that we have some direct access to ‘Truth,’ that there might be words that correspond to ‘what is,’ that ‘clear and distinct ideas’ can be many or very interesting—such a time is over (if it ever existed except in the most rationalistic circles)…. What we have and all that we have is the grid or screen provided by this metaphor or by that metaphor. The metaphor is the thing, or at least the only access that we highly relative and limited beings have to it.”\(^\text{238}\) Because of context, and the ties that language has to culture and worldviews, it does not offer literal, universal descriptions of reality. Nor does language any longer possess symbolic power, by which it used to be able to point to and participate in reality. McFague insists that such a sacramental view of language and the universe has

\(^{236}\) McFague, *Life Abundant*, 42.

\(^{237}\) McFague, *Speaking in Parables*, 27.

long been dismissed. Instead, we live today in a secular world. “Our time is characterized by disunity, by skepticism that anything is related to anything else, and by secularity.” As a result, McFague chooses to focus on metaphor as the way of communicating the God-world relationship for our time, which demonstrates both the “is” and the “is not” dimension of the relationship.

McFague’s resistance to metaphysical claims makes metaphor a useful candidate. As she describes, metaphor “lies somewhere between ‘nonsense’ and ‘truth,’” working on an “as-if” basis. In this way, metaphor can create pictures or constructions of reality without the threat of them being literalized. We use metaphor aware that any claims we make are limited and risky. This is liberating in that it provides us room to play with different metaphors and attempt new constructions of reality. Thus, metaphor is heuristic and imaginative, constantly testing out new ways of envisioning God and God’s relationship to/with the world.

McFague insists that the most our metaphorical language can do is attempt to speak to God’s relationship to/with the world, rather than making any claims about God directly. She states, “Models of God are not definitions of God but likely accounts of experiences of relating to God with the help of relationships we know and understand.” Thus to speak of God as “father” or “mother” is not to say that God is a father or mother, but to say that he has qualities like a father or mother and relates to us in these ways. In this way, metaphor tells us something about the relationship that God has with the world,


and allows for a diverse range of images. McFague insists that “we know God only in relationship, only in experiences of relating to God: we do not know God’s ‘nature.’”\(^{242}\) We know God only insofar as God makes God’s self known in the world—through relationship; we do not know God in God’s self. This is as much access as we have. God reveals God’s self in and through the world, but never directly; as McFague metaphorically puts it, God only reveals his backside. This means that our experiences of God are always mediated, through Jesus and through creation. Essentially, McFague radicalizes the incarnation, so that all beings “are reflections of God, all bodies are the backside of divine glory.”\(^{243}\) Thus, all language to speak of God’s relationship to/with the world is necessarily metaphorical. No language can be descriptive of God because we do not have access to God; “no one has ever seen God; no one can make empirical statements about who God is or what God is doing.”\(^{244}\)

Essentially, to accept that all of our statements and language is metaphorical in speaking about reality, McFague is insisting upon a certain amount of ambiguity in/to our metaphorical claims. This uncertainty requires a great deal of humility; our claims are rooted in faith and hope. Yet exactly what is the connection between language and reality? What access does and can language give us to reality, if any? McFague is clear that we do not have direct access; as she states, “The essence of metaphorical theology… is precisely the refusal to identify human constructions with divine reality.”\(^{245}\) This is


because no one “experiences reality ‘raw’…. Our access to reality is in every case
mediated and hence partial and relative.” Yet do McFague’s comments mean that
language in no way connects to reality, or does she leave room for an indirect or weak
level of correspondence between language and reality?

McFague struggles to pin down concrete answers to these questions. In her
insistence that metaphor treads between “truth” and “nonsense,” McFague walks a fine
line in regard to the meaning in and behind metaphor, trying to remain positioned in-
between fundamentalists and deconstructionists. As we have discussed, McFague rejects
fundamentalists’ claims that our words literally and directly speak to reality. This
position focuses solely on the “is” dimension of how language reveals reality, leaving no
room for imaginative constructive projects that provide alternative pictures of God and
God’s relationship to/with the world. Resistant to this line of thinking, McFague insists
that “all language about God is human construction and as such perforce ‘misses the
mark.’” At the other end of the spectrum are deconstructionists, who claim that
metaphor is all our language consists of—there exists nothing but metaphor. This view
focuses solely on the “is not” dimension, emphasizing the partiality, incompleteness, and
uncertainty in/to our knowledge and words. McFague views this position as doing
nothing other than playing word games. McFague agrees with the deconstructionists that
our language is metaphorical and that we are essentially playing with words, but she
insists that the “games” we play with language have a purpose and meaning; they are not

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246 McFague, Models of God, 26.

247 McFague, Models of God, 23.
morally neutral. Ultimately, McFague insists on keeping both the “is” and “is not” dimension of metaphorical language. Our language is able to express something about reality, while not being identified with it.

It is not difficult to see why critics raise concerns about the “metaphysical fuzziness” pervading McFague’s work. As Bromell states, “McFague still has not satisfactorily clarified the precise relations between the mystery of reality itself, metaphorical language, and abstract metaphysical thought.” Specifically, critics point out McFague’s inability to continually tread between “nonsense” and “truth,” and the inconsistencies in her position as a result. With metaphor possessing both “is” and “is not” components, McFague tends to focus heavily on one or the other, often to the detriment of its counterpart, at various points in her writing. Rather than keeping the “is” and “is not” dimensions properly balanced, McFague ends up with seeming alternative conclusions.

On the one hand, McFague insists that we cannot get behind our constructions; we cannot know if or how well they capture reality, indicating a disconnect or gap between language and reality that cannot be overcome or closed. The more McFague emphasizes the way our language is imaginative, constructed, and uncertain, the more she implies the impossibility of ontological claims about God and reality. Reynolds states, “McFague never denies the existence of an objective, trans-historical referent for her claims; in fact, she affirms it. She does, however, deny that we can refer directly to it, or make

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249 Bromell, 497.

‘referential truth claims’ about it…. The ontological and epistemological distance she establishes between her constructions and the divine referent in which she believes is such that she cannot make referential truth claims about it beyond its existence.”

Thus there are times when McFague focuses so heavily on the “is not” that she seems to forget its counterpart, the “is.” Doing so creates a picture of the relationship between language and reality that is basically one of isolation; language has no access to reality and its correlation to reality simply cannot be known.

The alternative picture to this that McFague provides is seen when she chooses to emphasize the “is” component of metaphor, rather than the “is not.” As was mentioned previously, McFague insists that our playing with words is more than just a game, which signifies that are constructions have meaning, and that not all constructions are of equal value. What McFague is suggesting is that some constructions are better than others; some pictures of reality are closer to the way things are than others. Thus, language does correspond (in some fashion) to reality. Aware of this inconsistency, Reynolds acknowledges, “She does wish to make referential claims to truth, shy claims, to be sure, but ontological claims nonetheless.”

Evidence of this fact is found in comments made by McFague along the lines of metaphorical theology being “mainly fiction, mainly elaboration.” As Reynolds suggests, “These web-of-belief related claims are tentative, open to reconsideration and re-structuring, fallible, and proposed in a spirit of humility,

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251 Reynolds, 295.
252 Reynolds, 295.
but they are thought to describe the divine, even if only indirectly and metaphorically.  McFague herself acknowledges her desire to speak to reality, and admits to making “shy ontological claims.” She admits that metaphorical language corresponds to reality, albeit indirectly and in a limited and mediated fashion. Our metaphorical constructions consist of both likeness and unlikeness to divine reality.

What are we to make of this seeming inconsistency in McFague’s treatment of language? It is my belief that the inconsistency that critics like Bromell and Reynolds point to in McFague’s work turns out to be more of a “both and” scenario. Our language is an imaginative, creative fiction, but it also has a deep connection to reality, behind or beyond language, and so conveys truth. Still, we find that we cannot get completely behind our claims to test their validity and truth. As McFague describes it, “Metaphors and models of God are understood to be ‘discovered’ as well as ‘created,’ to relate to God’s reality not in the sense of being literally in correspondence with it, but as versions of hypotheses of it that the community…accepts as relatively adequate.”

Our metaphorical constructions do reference reality; but rather than capturing reality as it is, metaphor imaginatively creates versions or pictures of reality that we use in particular contexts in the world. Thus McFague states, “Models do not refer directly to reality; they are not copies of it. Yet they do refer indirectly through their own interpretive glasses, and the reality to which they refer is concerned with relationship,

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254 Reynolds, 296.

255 McFague uses this language in her article, “The Theologian as Advocate.”

with ways of being in the world.”\footnote{257} The use of interpretive glasses indicates that metaphor is not only indirect, but it is also “redescriptive” of reality.\footnote{258} By this, McFague means to suggest that every metaphor and model that we construct paints a different picture of reality. Without literal or direct access to reality, each metaphor and model interprets reality in its own unique way.

Our metaphorical redescriptions are the closest we can come to describing reality. As McFague explains, since we lack unmediated and uninterpreted access to reality, “we are not dealing, on the one hand, with ‘reality as it is’ and, on the other hand, with views of it; but solely with the latter. We are dealing with old and new, accepted and unconventional, views of reality.”\footnote{259} McFague sees this as reason to promote a variety of metaphors and models; no one metaphor or model captures reality in itself. The more pictures or constructions that we have, the more perspectives we have for thinking about reality. Thus McFague views even the metaphors and models within Christianity as “but one attempt, from a particular, concrete location, to speak of the unspeakable—reality.”\footnote{260} All constructions are limited and partial; therefore, it makes sense that multiple images help us create a fuller picture than just one image, and help us get past the limitations of our own particular contexts.

While McFague supports the diverse range of metaphors and models imagined, she does believe that we gravitate towards certain constructions over others, making

\footnote{257} McFague, \textit{Metaphorical Theology}, 134-135.

\footnote{258} This idea appears throughout McFague's writings. She acknowledges Ricoeur as the source of the description.

\footnote{259} McFague, \textit{Metaphorical Theology}, 133-134.

\footnote{260} McFague, \textit{The Body of God}, 163.
certain images primary in/to our worldviews and pictures of reality. As she explains, “Since we only have interpretations, not descriptions, we must make a judgment as to which interpretation, which metaphor, is the one on which we should base our thoughts and our actions.”

McFague believes that the decision of which models and constructions become primary depends on context. That said, she believes that we must consciously work to promote the metaphors and models that best fit the picture of reality at/of any given time and place. Thus not only are our constructions diverse, but they can and should be changed out. McFague criticizes today’s Western world for relying on the language of times before ours, which creates a disconnect between our language, worldview, or picture of reality, and everyday experiences. Our metaphors and models shape our worldviews, and both must connect and resonate with our (contextual) daily lives. Thus for the sensibility of our time, today, McFague insists that we must shed the picture of the world as a machine and replace it with an organic model, since as McFague states, “it would appear that the appropriate language for our time, in the sense of being true to the paradigm of reality in which we actually live, would support ways of understanding the God-world and human-world relationships as open, caring, inclusive, interdependent, changing, mutual, and creative.”

Based on this, McFague suggests that the best organic metaphor/model for our time is the image of the world as God’s body, which promotes the love and fulfillment of all creation and provides us with a way to concretely imagine the God-world relationship, in which God is present in and through the world, here and now.

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McFague’s distinctions and judgments between different metaphors and constructions bring with it questions of value and truth in discerning which models best fit a particular time and place. On the one hand, McFague asks, “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.”

McFague suggests that our shy ontological claims are made on the grounds of both faith and life experience. She is able to make value judgments on which constructions are best, based on these grounds. She states, “The ‘truth’ of a construal of the God-world relationship is, it seems to me, a mixture of belief (Paul Ricoeur calls it a ‘wager’), pragmatic criteria, and what Philip Wheelwright terms a ‘shy ontological claim.’”

In her insistence that some constructions are better than others, McFague does seem to suggest that some metaphors and models more accurately depict reality than others. Yet she admits that she is unable to fully overcome the gap between our claims and reality itself. We have no way of judging the truth of our claims in regards to how or to what extent they connect to/with reality; we cannot get behind language. Thus our claims are made on the grounds of faith, and our claims are limited and risky as a result. While making shy ontological claims, McFague acknowledges that our only tangible

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263 McFague, Life Abundant, 29.

criteria for determining which constructions are best are practical and pragmatic criteria. McFague states,

How does one come to accept a model as true? We live within the model, testing our wager by its consequences…. This is largely (though not totally) a functional, pragmatic view of truth, with heavy stress on the implications of certain models for the quality of human and nonhuman life. A praxis orientation does not deny the possibility of a “shy ontological claim,” but it does acknowledge both the mystery of God and the importance of truth as practical wisdom. Thus, it acknowledges with the apophatic tradition that we really do not know the inner being of divine reality: the hints and clues we have of the way things are, whether we call them religious experiences, revelation, or whatever, are too fragile, too little (and often too negative) for heavy metaphysical claims.\(^{265}\)

McFague asserts that truth is about more than practicality, but she admits to taking a heavily pragmatic view of truth. In this view, truth is about constructing the best model that we can for imagining the God-world relationship, so that we can best see and understand God’s love and fulfillment. In this sense, truth has to do with the quality of relationships; it is not something static.\(^{266}\) Borrowing from liberation theologies, McFague describes what is needed as “praxis,” which blends practical experience with faith and reflective thought. She states, “Negatively, praxis is the awareness that human beings cannot rely on ahistorical, universal truths and positively, it is the realization that human life is fundamentally practical. Hence, in this view, knowledge is not the correspondence of some understanding of reality with ‘reality-as-it-is,’ but it is a continual process of analysis, explanation, conversation, and application with both theoretical and practical aspects. Such knowledge is grounded in concrete history within the norms, values, and hopes of communities.”\(^{267}\)

\(^{265}\) McFague, “The Theologian as Advocate,” 88.

\(^{266}\) McFague, Life Abundant, 102.

\(^{267}\) McFague, “The Theologian as Advocate,” 88.
McFague suggests that since we lack direct access to God in God’s self, we only know God as we experience God’s effects, in and through relationships in the world. This is the reason that we must measure the truth of our claims about reality in practical, pragmatic ways. As Reynolds suggests in his article, Two McFagues, he believes that McFague separates moral truth from moral justification, meaning that “justification can be contextual, without truth itself being relativized;”\(^{268}\) there is a separation that takes place between truth and justification. Moral truth transcends context, but truth cannot be monitored except in contexts, since we lack universal, unmediated knowledge and access to it. Moral justification refers to the warrants for our claims, based on context and experience. These are the ways that we can comment on truth, as it plays out in the particular. In this way, Reynolds points out McFague’s weak correspondence view of truth. As Reynolds puts it, McFague starts with the firm belief “that there is a God, Who is on the side of life and its fulfillment and Who has made persons in Her image. On this basis, McFague makes claims to truth, which she seeks to justify contextually.”\(^{269}\) McFague’s measurement of truth is heavily pragmatic, but this does not discount or reduce the truth of/to her (shy) ontological claims.

**Conclusion**

In many ways, the methods Merton and McFague employ and ways that they articulate reality are very similar, with slight variations based on the aspects of context

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\(^{268}\) Reynolds, 303. Reynolds cites Jeff Stout as the original thinker behind the division of moral truth and moral justification. Reynolds compares McFague and Stout and finds that McFague’s position lines up with Stout’s claims.

\(^{269}\) Reynolds, 304.
considered in the last chapter, the most significant of these being their philosophical and theological influences. Thus we see that in regards to method, albeit in their own ways, both Merton and McFague rely heavily on experience, as well as imagination, and both stress the need for a change in consciousness, which changes how we see and relate to God and the world around us. In addition, while Merton and McFague use language differently, they both recognize the “is” and “is not” character of language to capture or express God and reality. Thus there exist striking similarities in their methods, despite their having different agendas and contexts.

Merton and McFague’s conceptions of reality also share many similarities, namely that both equate reality with God and describe God as Being itself. Both recognize that our reality is found and participates in the reality of God. In addition, both reject the Cartesian subject-object dichotomy, opting instead for a more postmodern take on our relationality in/of the world. Yet despite all of these resemblances, Merton and McFague express very different understandings of the relationship between language and reality, Merton being the more willing of the two to metaphysically ground language in reality and truth, whereas McFague remains cautious and resistant to absolutes, opting instead for shy, limited claims that can be pragmatically verified. While we are able to note several similarities, they clearly remain their own, independent thinkers.

Having “set the scene” and laid the contextual framework for thinking through Merton and McFague’s claims, we are now ready to move on to consider their understandings of God, self, and world in Part Two. Not surprisingly, readers will be able to see how their interpretations of God, self, and world correspond with and build on their conceptions of reality, which function as the framework for all of their ideas.
PART TWO

Part one “set the scene” with Merton and McFague’s contexts, methodologies, and general worldviews, so that we can critically examine the question of how we are called to live as Merton and McFague might respond to it. In order to pinpoint Merton and McFague’s responses to this question, which will take place in Part Three, we must first look at the assumptions on which the question is framed. How are we called to live? This question assumes certain knowledge and understanding about who we are, who calls us, and how we see ourselves in or as a part of the world. Part Two serves to break down these assumptions, by examining Merton and McFague’s conceptions of God, self, and world, which will in turn help us draw deeper understanding from their conclusions seen in Part Three.
CHAPTER THREE: GOD

*How are we called to live?* The question states that we are *called* to live a certain way, implying that our lives are not completely our own, but are a response to a source outside or beyond ourselves. For both Merton and McFague, how we live is rooted in our understandings of God, who calls us to certain ways of life. Therefore, in order to respond to the question, we must first consider the one that calls us. Who is God? How do we experience or know God? How is God present? In what sense is God accessible to us? Does God “call” us? All of these are questions considered in this chapter. As readers will see, Merton and McFague’s conceptions of God fit with and build on their agendas, philosophies, and understandings of reality that were laid out in the preceding section.

**Merton**

*Who is God?*

Merton spent the majority of his life longing and searching for God. While there were times early on in his life that he did not actively pursue God, he never doubted God’s existence. Who was this God that Merton acknowledged and what did Merton consider God to be like? In exploring these questions, we must keep in mind that Merton was not a theologian in the traditional sense. While trying to speak of God, he was not doing so in an overtly theological way, but rather was trying to capture God as a believer
and as a contemplative monk. Many of the comments Merton makes are therefore vague and incomplete; not all of his thoughts are fully developed. Still, Merton gives various descriptions in an attempt to capture the essence of God, all of which fit with Christian tradition. Along these lines, Merton supports ideas that God is present, powerful, personal, good, and loving. Such attributes are reflected in the names that Merton uses to speak of God, such as Lord, Father, Creator, Almighty, Thou, and I AM, among others.

Merton uses a variety of descriptions and names for God in an attempt to capture the many sides of God, yet he still recognizes that God eludes all descriptions and names that can be given. Ultimately, God is a mystery. No words can adequately capture the essence of God; despite our best efforts, we cannot explain and define God or pin God down. God is more than our words can convey; he transcends all human, finite conceptions of power, goodness, and love. Also, as Merton explains, God cannot be grasped because God is not something that can be grasped; God is not an object. In this way, God is elusive. Despite its best efforts, language cannot capture God in God's self. Merton states, “The Almighty One… is seen not as an inert ‘object,’ but is revealed in spirit and in power as the Ruler and Creator and Mover of all things.”

Put even more simply, Merton states, “God is neither a ‘what’ nor a ‘thing; but a pure ‘Who.’” In the experience of contemplation (which takes primacy for Merton), God is encountered in an existential way; we experience God directly, beyond the level of words, which try to capture God.

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270 Merton, The Inner Experience, 17.

While Merton insists this is the case, that our experience of God, and God in God's self, transcends language, he clarifies that “this should not be taken to mean that man has no valid concept of the divine nature.” He simply means that “in contemplation abstract notions of the divine essence no longer play an important part since they are replaced by a concrete intuition, based on love, of God as a Person, an object of love, not a ‘nature’ or a ‘thing’ which would be the object of study or of possessive desire.”²⁷² Thus, while Merton’s descriptions and names for God are helpful insofar as they provide a sense of who God is and what God is like, they do not completely capture God in God’s self, because such an experience transcends or exceeds the capabilities of language.

Merton offers several descriptions and names for God which reflect this higher level of intuition and experience, such as references to God as the Source, Absolute Reality, Truth, Being, and Love. Such titles show the way God transcends all “things.” God is the creator or source behind and under all that is. Merton sometimes refers to God as the “ground” of our being and existence, as well as the ground of love. This language, as well as the elusive nature of God, is evident in various places in his writing, such as in his correspondence with Dr. Amiya Chakravarty, an Indian poet, philosopher, and world scholar, in which Merton states,

It is not easy to try to say what I know I cannot say. I do really have the feeling that you have all understood and shared quite perfectly. That you have seen something that I see to be most precious—and most available too. The reality that is present to us and in us: call it Being, call it Atman, call it Pneuma… or Silence. And the simple fact that by being attentive, by learning to listen, we can find ourself engulfed in such happiness that it cannot be explained: the happiness of

²⁷² Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation*, 13. This is a footnoted idea in reference to his statement that God is not a "what" or "thing," but a "Who." Emphasis is mine.
being one with everything in that hidden ground of love for which there can be no explanations.  

Merton’s statement leaves readers with several implications to consider. God is present to us and in us, and goes by many names. Yet Merton does not consider the name to be important, but rather the experience itself. Merton seems to acknowledge that God transcends not only language, and with that, the names that we attempt to give God, but God also transcends boundaries built by any one religious group or tradition. God is “the reality that is present to us and in us” all, everywhere, and is the “hidden ground of love” in which all people can flourish, coming together to find peace, purpose, and unity. Along these lines Merton elsewhere states, “God is everywhere. His truth and His love pervade all things as the light and the heat of the sun pervade our atmosphere.”

Merton’s language of God’s presence and permanence reflect and fit with his conception of reality as presented in the last chapter. God is everywhere because God is considered by Merton to be at the heart of reality, or to be absolute reality itself. Thus there is nothing outside of God; the existence of all people and things in this world are tied to God. To call God the Creator is an acknowledgment of this reality. God is the Creator of all things, the ground of all that is. In this way Merton understood God not a being among other beings, but God is Being itself, the ground of our being. This is to say that we are all included and have our existence in God; there is nothing outside of God. Just as babies would never be conceived and brought into this world without their

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biological parents, God is understood as our parent or Father, the source or ground of our existence and love, whom without, we cease to be.

**Experiencing God**

Having identified God as the source or ground of our existence, our Father and Creator, who is at the heart of all that is and therefore defines Truth itself, we must consider what Merton believes to be our relationship to/with God. How do we understand, experience, know, and relate to God? Fitting modern precepts of the time in which he lived, Merton wholeheartedly believed that God is present and accessible. As the heart of reality and truth and ground of our existence, Merton saw no other possibility but that God be available to us, though not in a direct or physical way. The paradox which Merton so often speaks of is that we can know God without knowing anything at all (at least by human measurements of knowledge). Our experience of God transcends all human faculties and senses. Thus as Merton suggests, we intuitively know God, through faith.

**Experiencing God through Faith**

Our faith provides the way to meet God, in which we move beyond ourselves and our own finite ideas and meet God as God is, rather than what we think or imagine God to be. Merton explains,

> Faith is first of all an intellectual assent. It perfects the mind, it does not destroy it. It puts the intellect in possession of Truth which reason cannot grasp by itself. It gives us certitude concerning God as He is in Himself; faith is the way to a vital contact with a God Who is alive…. Faith is not expected to give complete satisfaction to the intellect. It leaves the intellect suspended in obscurity, without a light proper to its own mode of knowing. Yet it does not frustrate the intellect, or
deny it, or destroy it. It pacifies it with a conviction which it knows it can accept quite rationally under the guidance of love. For the act of faith is an act in which the intellect is content to know God by loving Him and accepting statements about Himself on His own terms.\textsuperscript{275}

We intuitively know and experience God through faith. But more than just an assent of the mind, faith is “a grasp, a contact, a communion of wills.”\textsuperscript{276} It is an experience of the heart by which we reach out to/for God, while God is the one who ultimately reveals God’s self. Intuitively knowing God means experiencing a relationship with God and having a sense of God’s presence. It is not about proving God’s existence or gaining rational knowledge about God. As Merton puts it, “Faith goes beyond words and formulas and brings us the light of God Himself…. Above all, faith is the opening of an inward eye, the eye of the heart, to be filled with the presence of Divine light.”\textsuperscript{277}

Faith is, as Merton puts it, the “key to the universe.”\textsuperscript{278} If God is at the heart of reality, then true meaning and depth to our existence are rooted in God. Faith is therefore our access point, the key to unlocking it all. Central to Merton’s philosophy was the idea that all of humankind possesses the desire to seek and know truth, to grasp reality. Merton understood this to be an innate quality possessed by all people, that built into our being is the desire to search for and to know God, truth and reality itself. Thus all people desire or pursue God, though many all the while are unaware that God is what (Who) they are ultimately looking for. Yet how exactly do we discover God? How is it possible to know God and what does it mean to have such an experience?

\textsuperscript{275} Merton, \textit{New Seeds of Contemplation}, 127.

\textsuperscript{276} Merton, \textit{New Seeds of Contemplation}, 128.

\textsuperscript{277} Merton, \textit{New Seeds of Contemplation}, 129-130.

\textsuperscript{278} Merton, \textit{New Seeds of Contemplation}, 130.
Merton believed that God reveals God’s self to us, but that God does so in specific ways. The simplest way that God reveals God’s self is in and through creation and created concepts, a way that God is available equally to all of us. While the significance of the natural world in/to Merton’s life have been largely left untreated, it is clear from Merton’s journals that nature played a significant role in his life, undoubtedly because of this precept—that God is present in and through the created world. For Merton, the natural world is a sign of God’s goodness and love. Yet not only is it a sign, but it is a gateway for experiencing God, functioning in iconic ways. It provided for Merton a point of contact, in which we are able to meet God simply by paying attention to God’s presence in and through the natural world. Merton states, “I live in the woods out of necessity. I get out of bed in the middle of the night because it is imperative that I hear the silence of the night, alone, and with my face on the floor, say psalms, alone, in the silence of the night.”

Merton was insistent on listening to the natural world with such conviction because he believed that it conveys God. Yet how exactly did Merton understand this to be so?

Merton understood creation to be inspired and filled with the Spirit of God. Our ability to perceive the Sacred in the natural world is essentially wrapped up our acceptance of the Spirit of God in us and the gift of wisdom. Such a gift allows us to recognize God’s presence in creation. This level of spiritual awareness in creation can be seen in Merton’s poetry, in which he states,

There is in all visible things an invisible fecundity, a dimmed light, a meet namelessness, a hidden wholeness. This mysterious Unity and Integrity is

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279 Thomas Merton, *Dancing in the Water of Life*, 240.
Wisdom, the Mother of all, *Natura naturans*. There is in all things an inexhaustible sweetness and purity, a silence that is a fount of action and joy. It rises up in wordless gentleness and flows out to me from the unseen roots of all created being, welcoming me tenderly, saluting me with indescribable humility. This is at once my own being, my own nature, and the Gift of my Creator’s Thought and Art within me, speaking as Hagia Sophia, speaking as my sister, Wisdom. I am awakened, I am born again at the voice of this my Sister, sent to me from the depths of the divine fecundity.

Merton clearly believes that it is possible to encounter the Divine in and through the natural world. Creation reveals God; yet creation does not reveal God completely. Merton warns that our experience of God in and through creation is always limited. It unavoidably remains a mediated experience. We know God insofar as the things in/of the world around us participate in God and point to God. “Since created things participate in a limited way in the qualities and perfections of the One who alone is absolutely Real, we can draw on our experience of them and use these experiences as metaphors or symbols to express our experience of God.”

Additionally, while creation serves as a point of contact with the Divine, Merton is clear that we must not mistake God to be a thing that can be found in and among created things. While God reveals God's self in and through creation, God is not reduced to creation; God transcends creation.

Merton describes this form of experience in and through the natural world as “active contemplation,” which he defines as “the intuition of divine things in and through the reflection of God in nature and in the symbols of revelation.”

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282 Merton, *The Inner Experience*, 68.
what all Christians are called to, to actively work and to prepare ourselves to recognize God as God reveals God’s self in Scripture, liturgy, and the natural world around us.

*Experiencing God in Pure Contemplation*

Active contemplation is not the only way to know and experience God that Merton insists upon; beyond this mediated form of encounter in and through creation, Merton believed to be a deeper, unmediated form of contact with God that is possible for all people. This is what Merton refers to as “pure contemplation,” a mystical experience of direct contact with God. “Pure contemplation is a direct, quasi-experiential contact with God beyond all thought, that is to say, without the medium of concepts.”283 While both of these modes of contact allow us to know and experience God, pure contemplative experience far transcends the level of contact of that of its active counterpart in and through the natural world. At this level, our experiences of God are always mediated; the experience is limited to the level of the senses and intellect. We can see, smell, touch, hear, and taste the natural world around us. At this level we can sensually absorb God’s presence and relationship with us (even though God is still not visible to us in/as God’s self). To this extent, in this lower, mediated context, we can comprehend God, albeit in a limited way.

Pure contemplation, a heightened and more direct experience of God, involves the full submersion and devotion of one’s being to God. While all people can (and should) experience God in and through creation, Merton insists that pure contemplative experience is more limited. It is open to all people, but requires a great deal of faith and

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283 Merton, *The Inner Experience*, 68.
devotion in terms of concentration and time, which the majority of people lack in our current, busy world. Furthermore, not everyone that does commit their time and energy to this endeavor succeeds and achieves union with God; ultimately, pure contemplative experience is gifted and therefore is more passive in form. Merton explains, “Entrance into this supreme mystery is not a matter of spiritual effort, of intellectual subtlety, still less of learning. It is a matter of identification by charity, for charity is the likeness of the soul to God.”

God’s grace and love are ultimately what make such an experience possible. Based on this, Merton defines pure contemplation as “a supernatural love and knowledge of God, simple and obscure, infused by Him into the summit of the soul, giving it a direct and experimental contact with Him. Mystical contemplation is an intuition of God born of pure love. It is a gift of God that absolutely transcends all the natural capacities of the soul and which no man can acquire by any effort of his own. But God gives it to the soul in proportion as it is clean and emptied of all affections for things outside of Himself.”

In this experience, God works in us so that we may intuitively know and experience him. As Merton explains, this experience is gifted to us, but only in proportion as our souls are prepared or purified. Thus, while it is ultimately God that reveals God’s self, there are things that we can do to prepare for the experience.

Merton believed that we must prepare our hearts and minds for the revelation of God. As Jesus taught in the parable of the sower, seeds have the best chance of developing into a full, healthy plant when they are planted in fertile soil as opposed to in

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rocks, thorns, or heavily traveled paths. Merton understood the contemplative life to require and consist of several critical components that functioned as “fertile soil,” meant to prepare and purify one’s soul for an encounter with God. Most simply, Merton understood these components to comprise cloistered life in the monastery. Merton saw life in the world to be too busy and loud for in depth self reflection, solitude, and prayer. St. Bernard spoke of cloistered life, stating, “Our life is a life of abjection, humility, voluntary poverty; of obedience, peace, joy in the Holy Spirit… Our life is the practice of silence, fasting, vigils, prayers, manual labor, and above all… TO FOLLOW THE MORE EXCELLENT WAY WHICH IS CHARITY… and to progress in all these things daily and persevere in them until the last day.” Most basic to contemplative experience were/are silence, solitude, poverty, and detachment. Merton understood everything about cloistered life to promote these goals, employing various methods to help prepare and purify men and women’s souls so that they might experience God in this way.

For Merton, life as a Trappist monk meant three specific methods for achieving such purification—opus dei, or liturgical praise, manual labor, and lectio divina, or spiritual reading and meditation. Praise and worship were/are central to the monastic life. Cloistered life is essentially a life devoted to prayer, adoration, and praise to/of God. Manual labor, another aspect of Trappist life, is an additional method of preparation for contemplation. Yet how, exactly, does manual labor help one reach contemplative

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286 Luke 8:4-15


288 Anon., Trappist Life, 10.
experience? It is explained in a publication by Merton’s monastery that “the way of contemplation is essentially a way of love, and if manual labor is to lead to contemplation it must in some way be connected with the love of God and one’s neighbor. Manual labor must itself be love.” The offering of their bodies and their work is in and of itself a prayer and offering of love. To this effect, manual labor serves to purify their souls so that they may be filled with God’s love and charity.

Lectio divina, which literally translates as “divine reading,” is the final practice in place for Trappists to lead them to the experience of contemplation. This refers to the study and meditation of Scripture, which is seen as a source of inspiration and revelation of God. Different than scholarly, theological study of the Bible, this form of study involves a prayerful reading of the text and an openness to its truth. Life as a Trappist monk meant that Merton spent time, daily, devoted to lectio divina, prayerfully reading and meditating on the Scriptures, patiently waiting for Scripture to speak to him. “One first reads, which leads one to think about (i.e. meditate on) the significance of the text; that process in turn leads a person to respond in prayer, and that prayer, in turn, should point to the gift of the quiet stillness in the presence of God (contemplation).”

Reading of the Sacred Scriptures, meditation, and prayer are what the contemplative life consist of, or rather, they form the ladder one must climb to reach contemplation itself. While these are steps toward contemplative experience, or union with God, they must not be thought of too rigidly. These aspects of Trappist life are both the way to union with God

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289 Anon., Trappist Life, 47.

as well the makings of the very experience itself. Their relationship is fluid; they compliment one another and do not stand alone or apart from one another.

Essentially, pure contemplative experience requires complete obedience and abandonment or humble submission to God. This is the reason that *lectio*, meditation, and prayer are predominantly monastic concerns, reserved for those who devote their whole lives and being to God alone. Those living out in the world can only experience such aspects of contemplative experience in fleeting or short lived snippets. Still, preparation for contemplative experience does not stop there; in addition to prayer, adoration, labor, and meditation over the Scriptures, Merton also practiced solitude and detachment as ways to learn to surrender fully to God, and to prepare and purify his soul for the experience of God’s love. These spiritual practices will be explored at more length in our upcoming chapter on the self, but let us here address their basic content and necessity in bringing one to God in/through the contemplative life.

Merton described the experience of contemplation as one of love, in which the soul, having been purified and emptied, becomes full of God’s love. This is the way that we know God in and through love. Merton states, “For the man who is perfect in love becomes like God Who is Love, and in this he is able to experience within himself the presence of the Three Divine Persons, the Father, the source and giver of Love, the Son, the image and glory of Love, and the Spirit Who is the communication of the Father and the Son in Love.”

As Merton explained it, the only way it is possible for one’s soul to become filled with God’s presence and love is if the soul has been prepared and purified to receive God. Along with prayer and meditation, this requires detachment and solitude.

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As Merton explains, detachment and solitude have more to do with an emotional and spiritual disposition than with physical presence. Detachment and solitude do not mean or require isolation or withdrawal from the world. Rather, detachment and solitude have to do with teaching one to align him/herself with God, so that his/her will and God’s will ultimately become one, allowing him/her to see the world as God does. Along these lines, Merton comments that “solitude is not separation”\(^{292}\) and that “we do not detach ourselves from things in order to attach ourselves to God, but rather we become detached from ourselves in order to see and use all things in and for God.”\(^{293}\) The kind of solitude that Merton speaks of is interior solitude; it has to do with creating peaceful space within one’s heart for God to reveal God’s self. Likewise, detachment means casting aside one’s own interests and selfishness and instead fill oneself with God’s interests and love. In this way solitude and detachment prepare and purify one’s heart to receive God and God’s love in the experience of contemplation.

Merton speaks of contemplation as contact with God in and through Love, by which we draw near to God and God draws us in all the more. Yet contemplative experience is marked not only by love, but also by the experience of darkness and unknowing. As we have said, pure contemplative experience transcends the level of the senses, intellect, and tangible world. Somehow, beyond all senses, images, and concepts, we come to “know” and “see” God. It is both an intuitive and paradoxical experience, knowing in unknowing.


As we previously saw in our discussion of his influences, Merton relies on Christian mystics before him to speak about the darkness and period of unknowing, often referencing St. John of the Cross, who describes this period of darkness as a passive purification in which we renounce all that we know. As we surpass the level of the senses and intellect, we find ourselves at a level simply beyond words, beyond all things that we know and understand. This is referred to as darkness because of the silence that it demands and the blind faith is requires as we proceed to meeting God. Merton also understood the darkness, or dark night, to be the effects of meeting God directly. He states, “Direct exposure to supernatural light darkens the mind and heart.” Relying on earlier mystics, Merton meant to convey the way our own impurities prevent us from seeing the purity of God, resulting in blindness and deep rooted anguish. Realizing this, in the dark night the contemplative endures the painful process of solitude and detachment from all things, both secular and spiritual, of the mind and imagination and of the material world around us. The contemplative must transcend all sense of individuality and ego and lose him/herself, focusing solely on God. As one can imagine, such a period and process requires strict ascetic discipline, by which one learns to transcend all things. Ultimately, at work in the contemplative during this time is love, God’s love, which drives him/her to God. As Merton insists, “The deciding factor in contemplation is the free and unpredictable action of God. He alone can grant the gift of mystical grace and make Himself known by the secret, ineffable contact that reveals His presence in the depths of the soul. What counts is not the soul’s love for God, but God’s

love for the soul.”\textsuperscript{295} Such an encounter is only possible because God wills it to be so. It is an act of divine charity.

Merton acknowledges the challenge of conveying such an experience in words, since it clearly transcends words. It is a real, genuine contact with God despite our ability to fully comprehend it. Merton borrows language from Zen, such as “awareness,” “realization,” and “awakening”\textsuperscript{296} to capture the intuitive quality and depth of the experience. Yet the inability to fully express and communicate the experience still leaves readers with questions as to how, exactly, we know and experience God in contemplation. As Merton has stated, in pure contemplation we know God only by uniting and completely submitting to God. We must lose ourselves, being totally consumed and engulfed in God’s love. Thus in a sense, we do not know and experience God as individuals, because there is no sense of separation in this union by which we could know God as removed from God. Such contact, then, means the complete dissolution of the individual self. This idea needs developing; what this looks like exactly will be explored in more depth in the next chapter on the self, but essentially, it is not by our own power that we come to know and experience God, but by God’s power and love alone. It is God’s supernatural power and love at work in us. As Merton has been saying, “Contemplation is a supernatural love and knowledge of God, simple and obscure, infused by Him into the summit of the soul, giving it a direct and experimental

\textsuperscript{295} Merton, \textit{The Inner Experience}, 73.

\textsuperscript{296} This language is frequently found in \textit{New Seeds of Contemplation}.
contact with Him. Mystical contemplation is an intuition of God born of pure love.”  

Most simply, God’s Love drives and pervades the entire experience.

Despite Merton’s best efforts to explain how we come to know and experience God in contemplation, readers are likely left unsatisfied. We could completely exhaust language and still not capture the full experience, because, ultimately, it is wrapped up in Mystery. While Merton knows and acknowledges this, he does continue to try to express and explain the experience anyway, in an attempt to shed more light on the question of how such an experience is possible and what it looks like exactly. This is seen in Merton’s claims about Christ and the Holy Spirit and the role that they play in contemplation.

Merton does not often speak explicitly about Christ or the Holy Spirit, however, a careful examination of Merton’s ideas shows that both hold critical roles in the contemplative experience, ultimately responsible for making union with God possible. While God is transcendent, exceeding any ideas or words we can muster to conceive of God, both Christ and the Holy Spirit are marked by immanence, meaning that they provide more tangible ways of seeing and understanding God’s presence. Merton understood the way to talk about God and to draw near to God as having to do with both affirmation and denial. To experience God directly involves darkness and unknowing, via negativa. It is marked by apophaticism, focusing on God in God’s self and all that God is not. But denial is not the only approach that we can take or our only experience of God—Merton also believed wholeheartedly in cataphaticism, or affirmative theology. This approach sheds light on what we can say about God and the ways that we can see

297 Merton, The Inner Experience, 73.
and know God. Both Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit fit this mode of thinking. They are both ways that God reveals and manifests God’s self and is present in and among the world.

Jesus Christ is perhaps the most concrete way that Merton understood God to reveal and manifest God’s self in and to the world. In the Incarnation, God took form in and through the person of Jesus Christ. Merton held to a high Christology that in focusing on the Incarnation paid full attention to the Risen Christ. Along these lines, Merton almost always referred to Jesus as “Christ” rather than “Jesus,” reflecting his emphasis on the Risen Christ rather than Jesus’ life before his death on the cross. Thus Merton gave little attention to the humanity of Jesus in his writings. He claimed that “the mature contemplative ‘gazes upon the divinity’ of Christ.”

For Merton, the focus was on the paschal mystery of Christ’s “passing over” or transformation, in which Christ participates in and is united with God and has the power to bring us to God.

While heavily focused on the divinity of the Risen Christ, Merton was careful with his theological claims and was sure to remain consistent with Catholic teaching. He is clear that the separation of Christ’s humanity and divinity is one limited to abstract theological reflection. Thus he states, “If in our contemplation we so separate the humanity and divinity of Christ that we ‘pass beyond the humanity,’ to ‘rest in the divinity,’ we will tend to divide Christ into ‘A Man’ and ‘A Divine Person,’ whereas in actuality God and man in Him are completely indivisible and inseparable in the Unity of His Person.”

Despite Merton’s claims on the indivisibility of the human and divine


natures in Christ, he spent significantly more time writing on the divinity of Christ than his humanity. Merton’s fixation with the Risen Christ ultimately had to do with his understanding of Christ’s role in contemplation.

Merton understood Christ to play a significant role in the experiential awakening that is contemplation. As has been suggested, Merton understood God to be hidden, unknowable, and invisible. Yet in contemplation, one is paradoxically able to experience, know, and see God. Merton insisted that Christ mediates the experience, and is therefore the one ultimately responsible for our encounter with God. In this way, while Merton’s understanding of God was apophatic, his understanding of Christ was strongly cataphatic; “Christ is the revealer and manifestation of the hidden God. Merton’s Christology is one of light.”

Paradoxically, contemplative experience is both an experience of light and darkness. In the midst of the darkness and unknowing, there is light when, in Christ, “the divine and supernatural becomes ‘connatural,’ or accessible, to us.” Therefore, Christ is the leading light in/to the dark night. He is responsible for our experience of God in contemplation.

Merton described contemplation as a “deep and intimate knowledge of God by a union of love.” As Merton insists, Christ is ultimately the mediator of this experience. Christ makes such an experience possible, that we are able to come face to face with the ineffable Mystery of God. But still, readers are left wondering, how? Merton believed

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302 Merton, What is Contemplation?, 11.
that contemplation, as an experiential knowledge of God, is the experience of Christ. It is
“a sharing in the Paschal Mystery of Christ: His death and resurrection.” Merton understood Christ to be the ultimate example of what it means to be contemplative. Merton states, “Jesus is Himself the very embodiment of contemplation—a human nature united in one Person with the infinite Truth and Splendour of God. We become contemplatives to the extent that we participate in Christ’s Divine Sonship.”

The dependence of the contemplative’s experience on Christ’s nature and role is evident; we can only become contemplatives by knowing and participating in Christ. For Merton, this meant “knowing Jesus, being one of his disciples, being a member of the loving community which is called together in his merciful love, called to share his body and his blood together around the table of the Eucharistic banquet, called to realize in our love for one another and in our love for Jesus his presence in us.” Knowing and participating in Christ means to follow him and to share in his death and resurrection. It also means discovering Christ’s presence within our selves. The precise way(s) that we participate in Christ’s death and resurrection, share in his identity, and that he is present in us will be explored in the following chapter in our discussion of the self. But it is important to note here that a transformation in identity/the self are an important part to the contemplative process towards union with God.

Most basically, Merton believed, as Paul teaches in the Scriptures, that followers of Christ are called to imitate and put on the mind of Christ, and in doing so, find

303 Conner.
304 Merton, What is Contemplation?, 30.
305 Merton, Contemplation in a World of Action, 251.
themselves led to and united with God. Christ raises us up, eradicating our sins and purifying our souls, so that we can experience union with God just as Christ himself experiences this union. All of this will get hashed out further in the next chapter, but it cannot be stressed enough the importance that Christ has in making union with God possible. In/through the Incarnation, the natural and supernatural come together and are united. In this way, Christ both embodies and mediates contemplative experience.

For Merton, Christ is able to embody and mediate contemplative experience, manifesting and revealing God, ultimately because of Christ’s kenotic, or self emptying, nature. Merton states, “In dying on the Cross, Christ manifested the holiness of God in apparent contradiction with itself. But in reality this manifestation was the complete denial and rejection of all human ideas of holiness and perfection…. If, then, we want to seek some way of being holy, we must first of all renounce our own way and our own vision. We must ‘empty ourselves’ as He did.” We find in the cross the model for self emptying that we must employ; Christ is the exemplar, and imitating and following Him, we participate in this experience of self emptying. This is what the contemplative practices of prayer, meditation, manual labor, solitude, and detachment are all about—purging and purifying the soul to prepare and make room for God and God’s love.

Having removed our own wants, we make room for God in our hearts, minds, and souls. It is then that we are able to experience pure contemplation or union with God.

While Christ is the one mediating our experience of union with God, and is both teaching us how to live and restoring us to a state of purity and holiness, Merton is clear

306 Kilcourse argues that the kenotic Christ is central to Merton's Christology.

that Christ does not do these things alone. Christ’s power is ultimately the power of God; he is only successful in bringing us to God because God wills it to be so. But Christ’s transforming power as mediator is also only possible with the presence and power of the Spirit. Merton understands the Spirit to play a significant role in drawing us to God, so that we can experience union with God. As Merton understands it, the Spirit unites us to God through the Risen Christ.

While not overly concerned with the details and disputes of within theological scholarship, Merton grounds his conception of the role of the Holy Spirit in contemplation in Augustine’s understanding, which describes the Spirit as the bond of love between God and Christ, Father and Son. Merton’s definition clearly reflects that thinking; he states: “The Holy Spirit is the bond of union between the Father and the Son, their ‘peace,’ their ‘love,’ their ‘unity.’”308 As Merton stressed in his emphasis on the Risen Christ, it is Christ who mediates our experience of God. Christ is able to do this because of the special relationship that he has with God. As Augustine believed, and as Merton supported, God and Christ share a mutual, reciprocal love and bond between them, which is wrapped up in the Holy Spirit. The Spirit is that bond. By following Christ, we too are able to share in that love and bond.

Merton believed, based on the teaching of the Apostle Paul in Scripture, that those that accept and follow Christ receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. He states, “In order to receive anything at all of the Holy Spirit and of His love, we must first be baptized: that is to say that we must enter either sacramentally or by martyrdom or at least by a most

perfect desire into the Mystery of the Passion and Resurrection of Christ.” Baptism itself is a participation in the death and resurrection of Christ, in which we cast aside our old ways and taking up the ways and mind of Christ. Receiving the gift of the Holy Spirit requires our commitment to Christ, at which point the Spirit, present in us, leads and helps us share in the paschal mystery. Merton explains,

To enter fully into this mystery one must receive the Holy Spirit, who is the Love of God (I Corinthians 2:10-12). The Holy Spirit dwells in the Church, giving life to all who live in Christ, as members of His Church. The Holy Spirit gives light and love to those who are enlightened by the word of the Gospel and who seek truth and life in Jesus Christ. The Holy Spirit, Who is the bond of union between the Father and the Son, is also the bond of union between the faithful who have been reconciled to the Father through the Son, and with one another in the Church. Before His death on the Cross, Jesus told His disciples that He would soon come to them not visibly but in the Holy Spirit, and would dwell in them by His Spirit…. As Christ passed through death to life in the Spirit (I Peter 3:18) so the Christian follows Christ on His Paschal Mystery through death to life.

Merton is clear that we need the Holy Spirit to know and experience God, in and through Christ. As the bond between God and Christ, the Holy Spirit is given to us so that we can share in and experience that same bond. The Spirit makes it possible for us to know the love of God, just as God loves Christ.

As Merton has suggested, we share in the mutual love exchanged between God and Christ to the extent that we share and participate in Christ’s death and resurrection. By the gift and power of the Holy Spirit, followers of Christ are raised up and held with Christ, making it possible to know and experience God as Christ does. The work of the Holy Spirit in us is transforming, allowing us to share and participate in Christ’s divine

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309 Merton, No Man is an Island, 178.

sonship. Merton explains, “Our sonship before God is not a mere metaphor, or a legal fiction. It is a supernatural reality. This reality is the work of the Holy Ghost who not only confers upon us certain rights in the eyes of God, but even heightens and perfects our personality to the point of identifying us, each individually, with the only-begotten Son of God, Christ, the Incarnate Word.” Essentially, the Holy Spirit leads believers, in our participation in Christ’s death and resurrection, through personal transformation, which affects both the individual as well as larger community of the faithful. On an individual, personal level, one experiences a transformation of self in the process of taking on the identity of Christ. The details of that process and transformation will be explored in the next chapter. Yet not only do we experience this elevated positioning of divine sonship as individuals, but we experience it communally; there is a sense of oneness in the Risen Christ, also made possible by the Holy Spirit working in us. Merton again grounds this idea in the teaching of the Apostle Paul, who taught that, by the Spirit, believers together make up the body of Christ. Merton states, “The Holy Spirit is the principle of life, unity, and action which draws the souls of men together to live as one in the ‘Whole Christ.’” The Holy Spirit draws us not only to God in and through Christ, but also to one another. In taking on the identity of Christ, we all are brought together as one, in mystical union.

The Holy Spirit clearly plays a prominent role in contemplative union with God: in allowing us to share and participate in Christ’s death and resurrection, not individually but communally, we are able to identify with Christ and experience God as Christ does.

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311 Merton, *No Man is an Island*, 175.

312 Merton, *No Man is an Island*, 177.
The Holy Spirit makes it possible for us to know God in God’s self in contemplation. Yet the presence and power of the Holy Spirit do not stop there. God reveals God’s self not only to the contemplative, but by way of the Spirit present in believers, to all of the world. Merton states, “God reveals Himself to the world in the Mystical Christ, the Church, which is the community of those who are reconciled to the Father, in Christ, because they are united with one another in the Holy Spirit.”313 As a result of our participation in Christ, by which we come to know God, we in turn reveal and manifest God to others, as the mystical body of Christ. Thus Merton states, “The Holy Spirit has for His chief function to draw us into the mystery of the incarnation and of our redemption by the Word made flesh. He not only makes us understand something of God’s love as it is manifested to us in Christ, but He also makes us live by that love and experience its action in our hearts.”314 Life in the Spirit means uniting with God through Christ, but it also means reaching out and uniting with one another. It is a life of love and compassion extended in all directions.

Merton clearly believed that our experience of God in contemplation is one that transcends our own faculties, and is dependent on both the Risen Christ and Holy Spirit. Merton was not overly concerned with the theological aspect of the Trinity, but he was careful to stay in line with Christian tradition. “When Merton attempts to describe the Trinity, he does so in terms readily available to him in the Christian tradition. It is the teaching of Chalcedon, later formulated at the Council of Florence (1442), in these


314 Merton, *No Man is an Island*, 176.
words: ‘Everything in God is one except where there is opposition of relationships.’”

Merton focused on the unity of God. In contemplation, one is united with the triune God. He states,

The One God does not subsist apart and alone in His Nature; He subsists as Father and as Son and as Holy Ghost. These Three Persons are one, but apart from them God does not subsist also as One. He is not Three Persons plus one nature, therefore four! He is Three Persons, but One God. He is at once infinite solitude (one nature) and perfect society (Three Persons). One Infinite Love in three subsistent relations. The One God Who exists only in Three Persons is a circle of relations in which His infinite reality, Love, is ever identical and ever renewed, always perfect and always total, always beginning and never ending, absolute, everlasting and full.316

Contemplation is the experience of one God in three persons. Merton did not view Christ or the Spirit as assistants to God, separated, or outside of God; they are a part of God. Merton described their relationship as being cyclical, in which divine love is always flowing and being shared. Along these lines he states, “If you follow Love forward and backward from Person to Person, you can never track it to a stop, you can never corner it and hold it down and fix it to one of the Persons as if He could appropriate to Himself the fruit of the love of the others. For the One Love of the Three Persons is an infinitely rich giving of Itself which never ends and is never taken, but is always perfectly given, only received in order to be perfectly shared.”317 Thus Merton describes the three persons as “relations of selflessness, overflowing and superabounding in joy in the Gift of their One Life.”318 The contemplative life is a participation in this shared love and joy.

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316 Merton, New Seeds of Contemplation, 68.


The Trinity is paradoxically both elusive and revealing when it comes to manifesting God. It is, at the same time, both apophatic and cataphatic. As Merton describes,

He is hidden. He is unthinkable. We cannot name Him, until the Spirit of Christ, springing up within the depths of our own Spirit, makes us know Him by making us sons: sons of the Hidden One, sons of the Beginning, sons of the Source, sons in the Word He speaks out of the infinite depths of His own unspeakable silence. Sons because, like His Son, our whole being knows it comes from Him and tends to Him Who is hidden, Who has “made darkness the cloak about him.” [Psalm 17:12]

This darkness is forever impenetrable unless the Father reveals Himself to us in the Son. Even the Son is unknown to anyone but the Father. But the Son manifests Himself and His Father in the Holy Spirit Whom He gives to us…. He Who alone has power to enter into the depths of our being, into those depths which lie far beyond our own domination, can there unlock an ontological abyss that opens out within us upon the darkness of the Beginning, the Source, the Father.  

Entering the mystery of the triune God does not tell us anything about God, but it makes it possible for us to perceive God in darkness, and in some way, experience God directly. God does reveal God's self, but he does not reveal God's self completely. “The God who has revealed Himself to us in His Word has revealed Himself as unknown in His intimate essence.” Ultimately for Merton, the contemplative “experiences the ineffable reality of what is beyond experience. [He/she] ‘knows’ the presence of God, not in clear vision but ‘as unknown.”

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According to Merton, God, the source and ground of our being, who we call our “Father,” is real and accessible. While God is elusive and engulfed in mystery, it is possible to come to know God and be united with God in contemplation. This capacity to know and experience God, which we all possess, raises the question of God’s presence. In what way is God present? If we meet and experience God in contemplation, where, exactly, does this encounter occur? It should come as no surprise that Merton viewed God’s presence to be just as paradoxical as his nature and revelation. Merton states, “In a sense, God is everywhere, in a sense He is nowhere. In a sense He is especially present in heaven, in another sense He is especially present in ourselves. Everywhere His presence is to us a mystery.”

Merton’s statement leaves us with much to consider. Where is God? This question naturally fits with the various ways that God chooses to reveal God’s self. Merton understood God’s presence in three distinct ways: God residing in heaven, in us, and in the world. While perhaps the most traditional and primary way Christianity envisions God is as present in heaven, which Merton did acknowledge, of the three ways God is present, heaven receives the least amount of attention in Merton’s writing. As a Christian, Merton certainly believed in heaven (although he very rarely spoke of heaven, but instead referred to it as the Kingdom of God). He left clear implications in his writing that we will be united with God at death, at which point we fully enter God’s Kingdom. Yet the emphasis for Merton was really on the potential for union with God here and now, rather than after death.

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As Merton understood it, the Kingdom of God not only refers to heaven, or a place where we are united with God upon death, but the Kingdom of God has already come and is present here and now. This means recognizing God’s presence as not just in heaven, but also in our current world. It is important to note that Merton did not view this as downplaying the end. He states, “Eschatology as I understand it is not simply an ‘end of the world’ belief, but, in light of the New Testament, a belief in the decisive and critical breakthrough in man’s destiny,”\textsuperscript{323} which Merton believed had already begun. Merton was concerned with the way God has already broken into history, through the incarnation, death, and resurrection of Christ, making it possible to experience union with God here and now, not just after death. “The restoration of the whole world in Christ… is envisaged not as a future prospect but as a present fact. The ‘last things’ are already present and realized in a hidden manner. The Kingdom of God is thus already ‘in the midst of us.’”\textsuperscript{324} Only those that have faith and know God through Christ realize the presence of God and God’s Kingdom here and now, but as Merton claims, it is here, mysteriously present.

In this way, God is present both in heaven and in our world. We can know and experience God in both ways and places. God’s Kingdom is both in heaven and on earth, because of the in-breaking through the Risen Christ. In this way, contemplative experience is eschatological; it is a participation now in the promise of future and full union with God in God’s Kingdom. “Christian contemplation is not merely lost in God. It also includes in its vision an eschatological understanding of the world redeemed in


\textsuperscript{324} Merton, \textit{Seasons of Celebration}, 53.
Christ. It sees the world transformed in the divine light, it sees all things recapitulated in Christ (Eph. 1:10). It is aware of the victory of Christ and the reality of his Kingdom in the world even now, in all the confusion, the chaos and the risk of this historical and revolutionary time of crisis which we call the atomic age.”325 Contemplation is eschatological in its future orientation and participation in the Kingdom, both here and in heaven.

God is present in our world because of the Incarnation; the Word became flesh. Yet God is also present in our world because God is the Creator, present in and through God’s creation. As was already described, the natural world is the most accessible way that God reveals and manifests God’s self. God is present in the world insofar as creation participates in God, having been made by God. Merton states, “The forms and individual characters of living and growing things, of inanimate beings, of animals and flowers and all nature, constitute their holiness in the sight of God. Their inscape is their sanctity. It is the imprint of His wisdom and His reality in them.”326 Creation is perfect and holy because it reflects the perfection and holiness of God, its Creator.

Unfortunately, we live in a world that has lost an appreciation for and understanding of the relationship between God and the world. Creation is misunderstood, abused, distorted. Its birth and reflection of the Creator have been lost or neglected by many. But the active contemplative is able to keep this connection; they hold “a kind of intuitive perception of God as He is reflected in His creation;” “the contemplation of God in nature… is a positive recognition of God as He is manifested in the essences of all

325 Merton, Contemplation in a World of Action, 175.

326 Merton, New Seeds of Contemplation, 30.
things.” Thus God, the Creator, is present in creation, though is not reduced to it. As was suggested, God is not an object or a thing, but a pure “Who.” As such, God is not and cannot be reduced to any particular state or mode of being in creation. God is pure Being. In this way, Merton posits panentheism: God is present, but not identical to creation. Creation reveals God, but no certain thing in creation is God. “This paradox may be expressed in this way: God is not to be found among the creatures God made, yet these creatures cannot be separated from the God who created them.” In this way, we see both God’s transcendence and immanence. God is present in creation, but not absolutely. The natural world is but one way that God is present and reveals God's self.

The final way that Merton describes God’s presence is in terms of our own selves. While the self will be the subject of the next chapter, let us briefly examine here the way Merton understood God to be present in us. As we have said, contemplative union with God means participation in the death and resurrection of Christ Jesus. In identifying ourselves with Christ, we become filled with the Spirit and are able to know God directly. In this way, God is present in us. God is present in all believers by way of the Spirit, received at baptism.

Yet God is present in contemplatives in a way that transcends or surpasses traditional Christian experience of the Spirit. Contemplation is a mystical and supernatural contact, in which we know God not as individuals apart or removed from God, but as united to God in God's self. In this way, we do not unite with God with our own love or will, but with the love and will of God that has filled us. This is precisely

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327 Merton, *The Ascent to Truth*, 27.

what the contemplative works so hard for—to prepare and purify their souls so that they
might be filled with God’s love, knowing and loving God by/with God’s own love.
Merton states, “The inner self of the mystic, elevated and transformed in Christ, united to
the Father in the Son, through the Holy Spirit, now knows God…through its own
divinized subjectivity. Truly a difficult thing to convey in words, and still more difficult
to imagine, if one has not experienced it.”\(^{329}\) Ultimately, God’s presence in us is
engulfed in the mystery that surrounds contemplative experience. Somehow, in
contemplation we are so united to/with God that we lose our own sense of self and
identify instead with God through Christ.

The Significance of God

We have so far examined who/what God is for Merton, the ways in which we can
know and experience God, as well as the ways God is present and available to us. What
is left to consider is the significance of God’s existence and presence to/for us in the
world. All that we have concluded about God’s nature and attributes would be a wash if
God were not knowable. Further still, God’s availability and presence would be
worthless if not backed by a sense of purpose and meaning. So what is God up to? What
is God doing in the world and what, exactly, does God want from us?

Merton believed that God is present in the world at God’s own free choosing. He
states, “The presence of God in His world as its Creator depends on no one but Him.”\(^{330}\)
Completely independent of us, Merton understood God’s presence in the world to an
outpouring of God’s love. Merton did not understand God’s presence in the world to be

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\(^{329}\) Merton, \textit{The Inner Experience}, 69.

tied to the condition of sin, but rather to God’s love and desire for a relationship with us. He explains, “The Lord would not only love His creation as a Father, but He would enter into His creation, emptying Himself, hiding Himself, as if He were not God but a creature. Why should He do this? Because He loved His creatures, and because He could not bear that His creatures should merely adore Him as distant, remote, transcendent and all powerful.”

God, the Creator, wants to know and have a relationship with God’s creation.

As a personal and loving God, Merton understood God to be interested and invested in our lives. Thus God desires a relationship with every created being. Merton explained that created beings are able to know God and share a relationship with God simply by being what they have been created to be. He states, “A tree gives glory to God by being a tree. For in being what God means it to be it is obeying Him. It ‘consents’ so to speak, to His creative love…. Therefore each particular being, in its individuality, its concrete nature and entity, with all its own characteristics and its private qualities and its own inviolable identity, gives glory to God by being precisely what He wants it to be here and now, in the circumstances ordained for it by His Love and His infinite Art.”

Yet what about human beings? Merton is clear that humanity has a choice in whether we submit to God in our identity or not. Our identity is more of a challenge than that of a tree, bird, or rock. We have the freedom of choice. “Trees and animals have no problem. God makes them what they are without consulting them, and they are perfectly satisfied. With us it is different. God leaves us free to be whatever we like. We can be

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331 Merton, New Seeds of Contemplation, 292.
ourselves or not, as we please. We are at liberty to be real, or to be unreal. We may be true or false, the choice is ours.”

The questions, then, of what God is doing and what God wants from us are questions that require discernment. We have the choice to tune our hearts and minds to God or not, to perceive God as present and at work in the world, or not. We have the choice of a relationship with God in which we could potentially experience contemplative union with God, or not. The complexities surrounding our identity will be explored at length next chapter, but we here note that God is present and desires to know us; in a sense, God calls to us and we must simply listen and respond. “His presence in the world as Man depends, in some measure, upon men. Not that we can do anything to change the mystery of the Incarnation in itself: but we are able to decide whether we ourselves, and that portion of the world which is ours, shall become aware of His presence, consecrated by it, and transfigured in its light.”

God does not coerce or use force to make God's self known, but God does desire a relationship with us. “The ‘will of God’ comes to us not merely as an external dictate of impersonal law but above all as an interior invitation of personal love.”

Discernment then takes a critical role for humankind. Figuring out what God wants from us/for us can be challenging. What is God’s will? How and to what does God call us? Merton states, God’s will is a profound and holy mystery…. God’s will is more than a concept. It is a terrible and transcendent reality, a secret power which is given to us, from moment to moment, to be the life of our life and the soul of our own soul’s life…. God’s will is not an abstraction, not a machine, not an esoteric system. It is a living concrete reality in the lives of men, and our souls are created to burn as flames within His flame. The will of the Lord is not a static center drawing our souls


blindly toward itself. It is a creative power, working everywhere, giving life and
being and direction to all things, and above all forming and creating, in the midst of
an old creation, a whole new world which is called the Kingdom of God.  

The process of discernment will be explored in the next chapter; it is ultimately tied to
our identity and our acceptance of God’s personal and loving presence in our lives and in
the world. As Merton states, “If I am to know the will of God, I must have the right
attitude toward life. I must first of all know what life is, and to know the purpose of my
existence.” Discerning the will of God and what, exactly, God wants from us and calls
us to, requires right vision, which comes with a right attitude about our identity, place in
the world, and relationship to/with God. More than anything, God wills and calls us to
God’s self, to know and experience God in a deep and real way.

To summarize: beyond all things, Merton understands God to be real, personal,
and loving. As our Father and our Creator, God is a relational God and desires to know
his creation. Because of this, God is present in the world, so that we might know God.
While some created beings are able to participate in God simply by being what they are,
humanity has the choice of affirming or denying God. As we will see in the next chapter,
Merton strongly believes that if we are true to ourselves, then we will acknowledge
God’s presence and call.

Let us now turn to McFague to see how she understands God’s nature, presence,
and call.

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336 Merton, No Man is an Island, 52-53.

337 Merton, No Man is an Island, 63.
Questions surrounding the topic of God—who God is, where God is, how God is known, and what God wants from us—are more difficult to wade through when considering McFague than Merton. Merton, working within the confines of Modernity, believed that God is not only real and absolute, but that God is really and absolutely accessible to us. He saw no break or disconnect between our experiences, language, and truth and reality itself. Yet it is different for McFague. We saw in previous chapters that McFague holds more of a postmodern sensibility; she does hold to the objective reality of God, but she insists that God is not accessible in God’s self. As readers discovered, the reason for this is that she understands experience and language to be contextual, not universal. She states, “We cannot ‘speak of God,’ but only of God from this or that perspective, this or that worldview.”  

One’s context sets the parameters for his or her experiences and articulation of God; none of us experience God in an absolute and universal way.

As McFague suggests, it is not possible to experience “raw” reality. But this does not mean it’s not there and not real. As we saw when examining McFague’s conception of reality, she walks a fine line in her convictions about God, claiming God’s existence while at the same time attempting to refrain from further metaphysical and ontological claims about God’s nature. Let us take a look, now, at how McFague manages this balance, examining the questions of who God is and what McFague believes God to be like.

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338 McFague, Life Abundant, 127.
Who is God?

Given McFague’s conviction that God exists, but is not fully accessible, the question of who God is a challenging one to respond to. Throughout McFague’s work, she is clear that she intends a “minimalist Christian theology, one that avoids metaphysical claims.” So what, then, can be said about God? Are we able to make any claims as to God’s nature and relationship to/with us? As was raised in the previous section, this is a brazen criticism raised about McFague’s work. Despite the seeming despair that the picture that she paints portrays, she does admit to making shy ontological claims, and evident in her work, she clearly holds certain ideas to be true about God.

At the most fundamental level, McFague posits God’s existence as absolute truth. She states that “God is reality. This is another way of saying God is ‘being itself, or the ground of all that is real, is actual, exists.’” Elsewhere she states, “The only absolute, the only certainty, the only universal, is God.” Thus God exists and is real for McFague, and on this basic premise, McFague finds herself in agreement with Merton. God is reality, the ground and source of all that is.

Still following in the footsteps of Merton, McFague insists that we cannot fully articulate who/what God is; we are unable to pinpoint or define God in God’s self. For Merton, this was not due to a lack of accessibility, but rather due to the limitations of language and the fact that God is a living presence, not an object to be studied under a microscope. Thus Merton focused on apophaticism and our direct experiences of God

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beyond language. McFague, on the other hand, insists that we lack direct experiences of God altogether because we are embodied and rooted in particular contexts. We have no way of directly or universally knowing God, but rather only encountering God from this or that perspective. Acknowledging this, McFague is interested in the way our contexts shape our understanding of God, particularly language and its ability to convey truths of/about God to us and to the world. Therefore, McFague insists that our access point to knowing God is metaphor. She states, “Metaphor is the… way to try and define something for which there is no dictionary meaning; it is [the] attempt to be precise and clear about something for which ordinary language has no way of talking.”

We use metaphor in the absence of direct and universal language and understanding.

What we see in McFague’s work, then, are various metaphors applied to God in an attempt to express something about God and the relationship that God has with us. These metaphors are rooted in our experiences; they are contextual, formed within particular worldviews, and are therefore limited. Our metaphors for God cannot say everything about God because our knowledge of God is limited to the particular context and worldview that we live in, which functions as lens through which we learn about and experience God. Any metaphors we create are a reflection of these particulars, which shape and influence us. Yet this does not mean, for McFague, that any and all metaphors for God are valid. McFague maintains that our metaphors do correspond to God and with reality (albeit indirectly). Good metaphors capture God just as much as they capture and reflect us and our contexts.

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Ultimately, McFague insists that we are not just playing with words. Our metaphors have meaning because they (indirectly) correspond to and are rooted or based in reality. She states, “Metaphorical meaning depends upon a literal, conventional base as our point of contact.”343 “This base, difficult as it is to stipulate, deals, it seems to me, with our sensuous, affectional, and active lives at the most primordial level. There are some things that lie too deep for words, among them, for instance, the touch of another human being, what occurs in human silence, the terror that can grip us in the night, or an act of human compassion. These are not metaphors, but the stuff from which metaphor is made.”344 While rooted or based in this deeper reality, metaphor can only indirectly access and articulate it. That means that our metaphorical language cannot capture reality as it is, but rather redescribes it; it interprets reality for a particular context. “Each models reality in a different way; none has direct or literal access to it. Metaphor is basically a new or unconventional interpretation of reality, whether that interpretation refers to a limited aspect of reality or to the totality of it.”345

While McFague insists on metaphor as our point of contact with God, since we lack direct access to God (as she states, “No one has ever seen God; no one can make empirical statements about who God is or what God is doing.”346), McFague does seem to hold a few basic assumptions about God, beyond mere existence, that are foundational to all of her metaphorical constructions, namely, the notion that God is a personal and

343 McFague, Metaphorical Theology, 39.
344 McFague, Metaphorical Theology, 37.
345 McFague, Metaphorical Theology, 40.
346 McFague, Life Abundant, 29-30.
McFague bases this on her Christian reading of Scripture. She states, “If we look at Jesus as a parable of God, we have no alternative but to recognize personal, relational language as the most appropriate language about God. Whatever one may wish to say about him, he was a person relating to other persons in loving service and transforming power.”

Based on what McFague sees in the story of Jesus, she believes that God exists not as some abstract or remote figure, but that God, as the source or ground of our being, is personal and relational. For McFague, this means that “reality is good and God is love…. Reality (God) is… ‘personal’ in that we can use words such a love and fulfillment regarding reality’s ‘intention.’ This assertion about reality’s intention is what faith, rock-bottom faith, is: trust that love and not indifference, neutrality, or malevolence is at the heart of things.”

McFague maintains that her claims are “faith statements,” or relative absolutes, meaning that they are convictions based on her interpretation of God’s existence from a Christian perspective, and therefore relative, but they function as absolutes in that they inform everything else that she thinks or says about God and God’s relationship to/with the world. Thus they are foundational; all of McFague’s metaphors follow from her basic belief in God’s inherent goodness and personal and loving presence.

McFague’s trust in the inherent goodness of God, as well as God’s personal and relational nature is evident throughout her writing. She acknowledges that Scripture and the Christian tradition include impersonal images of God as well, such as thinking about God as our rock, First Cause, fortress, and so on. Yet McFague only gives these a

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nodding glance. Her real attention is turned to thinking about God as personal, loving, and relational. As was said, she bases her claim on her reading of the story of Jesus, who models relationships. Yet McFague gives an even deeper reason for thinking about God as personal and relational. She explains that she has emphasized the word “person” purposefully. “As we were made in the image of God (Gen. 3:27), so we now, with the model of Jesus, have further support for imagining God in our image, the image of persons. This means that personal, relational images are central in a metaphorical theology—images of God as father, mother, lover, friend, savior, ruler, governor, servant, companion, comrade, liberator, and so on.”

As McFague sees it, we, as persons, rely on our experiences and contexts (both consciously and subconsciously) to understand God and God’s relationship with us and the world; and our experiences as persons are personal and relational. Thus it only follows that these would be the characteristics most fitting for us to grasp God.

What are we to make of McFague’s explanation of God’s personal and relational qualities? If readers feel confused, know that you are not alone. As we have said, McFague admits to making shy ontological claims, although she clearly states her preference to avoid metaphysical claims altogether. Her treatment of God as personal and relational is perplexing; on the one hand, we can pinpoint places in her writing where she refers to such claims as statements of faith that God truly is personal and relational, that that is reality. On the other hand, she seems to indicate that such claims are simply a reflection of our own experiences as persons. From this standpoint, what we say about God is just as much about us as it is about God, if not more about us.

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349 McFague, Metaphorical Theology, 20.
I believe that McFague does not intend for these two stances to conflict, but rather to fit together. McFague, for the most part, steers away from claims about reality itself because she is aware of the inability to validate or confirm such claims; we simply do not possess access to do so. What we do have access to are our experiences, however limited they may be, and therefore that is what McFague intends to work with in terms of anything that we claim about God. As we saw when we looked at McFague’s understanding of theology in chapter one, she acknowledges that our God-talk requires a delicate balance. Let us recall her sentiment:

Theological statements are universal in scope but not in quality of judgment. Another way to express this proper stance of the theologian is to insist on “radical monotheism”: the only absolute, the only certainty, the only universal, is God. Postmodernism and the liberation theologies are not the first to remind theology of this; in fact, it has been the awareness of every great theologian. All have been conscious that certainty is neither in oneself nor in one’s words, but in God alone. It is, however, the sense of certainty about and trust in the one, absolute, universal God—perhaps the most defining characteristic of the Jewish and Christian traditions—that accounts for the rightful sense of conviction in theological statements. For example, from Paul and John, the first two Christian theologians, to current liberation theologians, statements have been made about God’s comprehensive, absolute, and permanent love. It makes no sense, at least in this tradition, to speak of God as “maybe” loving the world, or loving “parts” of it, or loving it “now and then.” The point of uncertainty is what we say about God’s love, how we understand it, how we apply it. Theological statements, then are risky, partial, uncertain assertions made by relative, historically bound creatures about universal matters—God, world, and human beings.  

As a Christian, McFague understands God’s existence to be personal and relational. She takes this to be a relative absolute. From this starting point, she encourages a multitude of metaphors, because no single metaphor or model is all encompassing. Because our language is tied to our experience, it is limited and cannot express everything about the

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McFague, Life Abundant, 28-29.
reality of God. Therefore, the more metaphors the better to grasp the many qualities of God.

McFague acknowledges and encourages an unlimited number of possibilities for metaphorically speaking of God. Many of these extend beyond the ideas of God as personal and relational. Yet as we suggested, McFague wants to focus on the metaphors and models that do fit with and support the belief that God is personal and relational and that there is an inherent goodness to reality, or as McFague says, a power on the side of life and fulfillment. Still, of all the metaphors that fall under this umbrella, McFague insists that some capture the truth/reality of God more than others. As she explains, all metaphor exists somewhere between nonsense and truth, possessing both an “is” and “is not” component. Whether metaphors fall closer to truth (is) or nonsense (is not) is dependent on a few variables, namely how current the metaphors are in capturing the experiences of persons today as well as the way in which God’s personal and relational character is interpreted and understood. As we have seen, for McFague, our understanding/interpretation of truth is tied to our contexts. Thus names and titles for God from the past that were created in a different time and place may not capture the truth about God for people today. For example, thinking about God as king or ruler, older and more traditional images within Christianity. McFague explains, “The primary metaphors in the tradition are hierarchical, imperialistic, and dualistic, stressing the distance between God and the world and the total reliance of the world on God. Thus, the metaphors of God as king, ruler, lord, master, and governor, and the concepts that accompany them of God as absolute, complete, transcendent, and omnipotent permit no
sense of mutuality, shared responsibility, reciprocity, and love." McFague is expressing is the way that the truth of these metaphors has been lost with the change in context and interpretative lens people use to view the world.

Pinpointing the ways that our older, more traditional images within Christianity no longer function well in depicting God for our time, McFague suggests new metaphors. As she suggests, “What our time lacks, and hence a task of theology must address, is an imaginative construal of the God-world relationship that is credible to us.” This means “remythologizing”: “identifying and elucidating primary metaphors and models from contemporary experience which will express Christian faith for our day in powerful, illuminating ways.” McFague believes strongly in looking in/to the contemporary world for images that convey God and God’s relationship to/with the world. Those images that we have in the Bible were at one time current, contemporary images; we possess the same freedom to construct new images today. McFague maintains that using old, worn out names and metaphors for God is harmful and hurtful; it limits us in our relationships to/with God and one another. It also causes a dangerous disconnect between our language and experiences, preventing us from living authentically and holistically.

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351 McFague, Models of God, 19.
352 McFague, Models of God, 32.
353 McFague, Models of God, 32.
What metaphors, then, does McFague suggest that promote holistic living and support the idea of a personal and relational God? McFague names several fresh, imaginative ways for us to think about God, namely as our mother (parent), lover, and friend. McFague explains that these metaphors/models depict the three most basic forms of relationships that we have experienced as persons. In addition, these three metaphors shine light on a side of God that has been as McFague suggests, neglected or perhaps even repressed in the past. The metaphors of mother, lover, and friend are new images or ways of thinking about God that address the question of God’s relationship to/with the world for our time. More specifically, with these three metaphors McFague highlights the ways that God is present and acts in the world. She states,

In different ways all three models suggest forms of fundamental intimacy, mutuality, and relatedness that could be a rich resource for expressing how in our time life can be supported and fulfilled rather than destroyed. They are all immanent models, in contrast to the radically transcendent models for God in the Western tradition. As we have seen, part of the difficulty with the dominant model of God is its transcendence, a transcendence undergirded by triumphalist, sovereign, patriarchal imagery that contributes to a sense of distance between God and the world. The relatedness of all life, and hence the responsibility of human beings for the fate of the earth, is supported by models of God as mother, lover, and friend of the world.  

McFague’s words convey her twofold agenda: to find new, imaginative language for talking about God and more specifically, to find new, imaginative language for talking about God in a way that addresses ecological concerns. Thus she chooses these metaphors not only because they are a new way of capturing God, but even more so because they are helpful images, promoting holistic thinking about our world.

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McFague, Models of God, 85.
McFague recognizes that how we view God has great bearing on how we view ourselves and how we treat one another. The models of mother, lover, and friend focus on God’s presence; they are personal and relational images of love, promoting concern and care for the other. As McFague explains, “These metaphors project a different view of power, of how to bring about change, than the royal model. It is not the power of control through either domination or benevolence but the power of response and responsibility—the power of love in its various forms (agape, eros, and philia) that operates by persuasion, care, attention, passion and mutuality.”355 In this way, these new models capture the very essence of what Christ was about—they are as McFague says, “the way of the cross”, following “the model of servant.”356

McFague understands these new models to function in the same capacity as traditional Trinitarian language of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. For McFague, it is not so much the Trinitarian titles we give to God that matter, but the deep rooted meaning and nature of God behind the names that matters, namely that God is Creator, Liberator, and Sustainer, all three in one. Referring to God as Father, Son, or Holy Spirit indicates specific ways (models) that these characteristics of creating, liberating, and sustaining are channeled and/or revealed. Calling God Mother, Lover, or Friend are likewise models that demonstrate God’s presence, power, and love.

McFague suggests that the metaphor of motherhood promotes the belief that God is our Creator through its maternal imagery, which suggests creating, nurturing, and disciplining, among other traits. At the base of this model is the idea that a mother gives

355 McFague, Models of God, 85.
356 McFague, Models of God, 85.
Christian Scriptures teach that creation was an act of God, spoken into being in Genesis 1 and brought about by God’s hands in Genesis 2. Thinking about God as our mother presents a further alternative image, that of God giving birth or bodying forth the universe. This is acceptable to McFague because she takes the creation accounts in Genesis to be myth or fiction. As she explains, the Genesis creation accounts fit with the worldview and scientific understandings of a certain (dated) time; today we hold to a more contemporary worldview informed by scientific developments over time. In addition to the physical act of giving birth associated with motherhood, McFague also insists on the nurturing qualities, suggesting that God loves and cares for all of creation. God is not a disinterested God based on this model. Just as a mother loves her children unconditionally, God’s love knows no bounds. With this love comes a desire for justice, that all of God’s creation would thrive and find fulfillment.

The next model McFague suggests, God as our lover, may seem quite unnatural and uncomfortable to Christian readers; McFague points out the way Christians claim “God is love,” but never God as our lover. Traditionally sexuality and eroticism have been downplayed or ignored by Christians. We can find hints of this language in the verses of Song of Songs or in the Christian description of the Church as the beloved bride of Christ, but such examples are rare. McFague asks, “As the most intimate of all human relationships, as the one that to the majority of people is the most central and precious, the one giving the most joy (as well as the most pain), does it not contain enormous potential? If the relationship between lovers is arguably the deepest human relationship, then it should be a central metaphor for modeling some aspects of the God-world
relationship.” Essentially, what the relationship between lover and beloved models is desire, passion, and genuine interest in the other. This model expresses God’s invested interest in knowing us and desire for a deep relationship with us. This suggests an image of one standing beside their partner through both pleasure and pain, through the good, the bad, and the ugly. The lover celebrates with as well as suffers with their beloved.

McFague explains, “The crux of being in love is not lust, sex, or desire (though these are expressions of a human love relationship); the crux is value. It is finding someone else valuable and being found valuable.” Thus we see that the metaphor/model of God as lover is an alternative way of thinking about God’s saving, liberating, and healing presence and power. The lover model suggests a God that is actively involved and concerned, playing a supportive and encouraging role in our lives.

The third model McFague puts forth is that God is our friend. This is, of the three metaphors, the freest human relationship. By that McFague means that it is entered into freely and has no ties to “biological processes of life and its continuation.” A friendship is a free relationship, without duty or obligation. With this come two points of interest to McFague: for one, this friendship model stresses acceptance of the other for who he/she/it is. If not out of obligation, these friends must truly enjoy each other and each other’s companionship. It signifies mutual affection and respect. However, the lack of duty and obligation mean that the relationship is not guaranteed. This is the second point of emphasis for McFague: it is a reciprocal relationship, in which both parties must

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357 McFague, Models of God, 126.
358 McFague, Models of God, 128.
359 McFague, Models of God, 159.
actively contribute to keep the relationship strong. McFague explains that the power friendship holds is precisely its freedom, its open bond of trust and willing commitment. McFague understands this kind of relationship to be sustaining. Because God freely loves us and we freely love God, we both freely commit to knowing one another, and more than this, encouraging one another by listening and letting the other be what he/she/it/God is.

In addition to the three metaphors/models of Mother, Lover, and Friend, McFague suggests another alternative model for thinking about the God-world relationship: the world as God’s body. In this model, McFague encourages her readers to consider the world to be the body of God and the implications that would have on how we think about God’s presence and how we treat the earth. Of all the metaphors/models McFague suggests, this is most central in/to her work. Yet this model is different than the others in that it is not so much about God in God’s self (and therefore is not a name or title), but is rather a metaphor for imagining God’s relationship with us. As such, this metaphor will be addressed again in our exploration of the God-world relationship specifically, in chapter five.

Also noteworthy is McFague’s use of the model of God as Spirit, which she uses to accompany the model of the world as God’s body and help correct some of its weaknesses. McFague finds her body model open to criticism of being pantheistic, which overly identifies God with the world. In an attempt to correct this, McFague introduces the metaphorical language of God as Spirit, by which she means that God is the giver and renewer of life and of the body. She states, “God’s spirit is the breath of
Such a view corrects any idea that God is reduced to or fully identified with creation, but rather reminds us that God is in creation while also being removed and separate from it. She explains, “Everything that is is in God and God is in all things and yet God is not identical with the universe, for the universe is dependent on God in a way that God is not dependent on the universe.”

Thus the model of God as Spirit helps balance the image of the world as God’s body and the way that God is present in creation; it reminds us that God is not just a passive participant in/of creation, but is also our Creator, Liberator, and Sustainer. In all of these roles, McFague is clear that God works not as “the orderer and controller of the universe but its source and empowerment, the breath that enlivens and energizes it.”

This metaphor/model, like all of McFague’s models, points to the radical, inclusive love of God. God as Spirit is our source of strength, power, and life.

Having looked at these various new metaphors and models presented by McFague, her insistence on having many metaphors is clear. Why? Embracing multiple images prevents one metaphor from becoming hardened or absolutized, which results in us taking the idea as a literal depiction of God in which we are unable to consider any alternatives that may be true of God. Thus multiple metaphors provide balance. For example, considering God as our mother narrows our thinking about God to a particular kind of relationship. Including alternative images of God as lover and friend balance out

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the maternal imagery. Yet even with a variety of images, McFague points out the ways that we still sometimes hit a dead end in a model. As she notes, metaphors have both an “is” and “is not” component, and no matter how well a metaphor may play out into a larger model and framework of thinking, we will eventually have to face the limits of the metaphor. There are only so many ways that God is like a mother; one will also find it possible to point out ways God is not like a mother. In addition, while some metaphors may fit nicely together to construct a larger picture of God, not all will. We can think of God as both our mother and lover, but to think of God as being both of these things at the same time does not work so well. We run into a similar problem in thinking about God as both mother, and therefore giving birth to creation, and the world as God’s body. How can God be both? McFague reminds us that we cannot take the metaphors literally. Thus, the contradictions and limits are just part of metaphor, built into the “is not” dimension of them. A variety of metaphors helps us overcome the inclination to literalize our language. McFague encourages everyone to focus on the ways that these metaphors convey God as personal, relational, loving, and present, rather than their weaknesses or limits.

So what impression are we left with of God based on the new metaphors/models McFague has provided? As was suggested, McFague is hard at work to create new metaphors that promote the ideas that God is personal, relational, and loving. More specifically, she looks for metaphors that promote the idea that God is personally, relationally, and lovingly present. As she puts it, “Since our theologies will always be ‘wrong,’ is it better to err on the side of the presence or the absence of God?”363 Her

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363 McFague, New Climate for Theology, 115.
answer is resoundingly “presence.” All of her metaphors model intimate relationships, relationships that show love in its various forms. McFague works to maintain the Christian beliefs in God as Creator, Liberator, and Sustainer, but does so in her own, new, imaginative ways. She insists that Christian tradition has focused so heavily on certain images of God that promote thinking of God as absolute, all powerful, transcendent, and removed from the world that it has become nearly impossible to think about God in any other way. What we see in McFague’s work is an alternative view of God, which focuses rather on immanence and God’s presence in the world and considers the power of God in a radically different way than is depicted in traditional images such as “King” or “Lord.”

McFague’s personal and loving models of mother, lover, friend, and the world as God’s body all paint pictures of God as less of an authority figure and more of an encourager, supporter, and partner. As McFague believes, “God alone is not in charge.” In all of McFague’s suggested models—mother, lover, friend, or the world as God’s body—God both celebrates with and suffers with creation. McFague places an emphasis on shared experience and human responsibility as a result.

**Experiencing God**

As we have seen, McFague believes that it is not possible to know God directly and therefore it is not possible to speak of God’s nature. As one critic notes regarding McFague’s thinking, “Information concerning the divine is not to be had by such

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creatures as ourselves, the most we can hope for is life-transforming insight.”

McFague explains, “What we have and all that we have is the grid or screen provided by this metaphor or by that metaphor. The metaphor is the thing, or at least the only access that we highly relative and limited beings have to it.” So for McFague, what we can know about God is through the screen of metaphors, such as mother, lover, friend, or thinking about the world as God’s body. What is most noteworthy about these metaphors is that they speak to/of God’s relationship to/with the world more so than they speak about God in God’s self. This makes perfect sense given McFague’s position that God is mysterious and unknowable. What we can speak of are the points of contact that we have with God, our experiences of God.

What do these points of contact look like for McFague? How do we experience and gain insight into God? How do we understand God, and our relationship to God, as a result? McFague indicates a few avenues for making contact with the divine, namely by way of our metaphors, but also, like Merton, through revelation, Jesus Christ, and the Spirit. As McFague understands it, language always stands between us and God/reality. Thus we can only know God indirectly through language, specifically metaphor. Functioning as a grid or screen, metaphor does not relay information about God/reality as God/reality are, but rather, interprets God/reality. This belief divides McFague and Merton. Merton insisted on the possibility for direct experience of God beyond language; McFague completely rejects Merton’s position here. For McFague, anything we say or know to be true of God is interpreted. There exists no neutral ground for experience.

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365 Bromell, 486-487.

366 McFague, Speaking in Parables, 29.
Thus not all experiences of God are the same; they are heavily dependent on context and the language employed to speak of God, which results in diverse understandings of God. The only absolutes that McFague holds to here are that God exists and that language is our point of contact with God. That much is universally true.

Because language is our sole access point, and because our metaphors redescribe God/reality rather than capture them in themselves, we ultimately hold the power to construct the model(s) of reality in which we live. Thus McFague places heavy emphasis on the power of the individual to change and to better his/her metaphors, resulting in a different and potentially stronger relationship with God/reality. This points to an important characteristic of the God-world relationship for McFague: our understandings and experiences of God are not static or permanently fixed; they are personal and unique, and capable of undergoing change and improvement. As McFague explains, each new metaphorical construction is created with the goal of being better than those that came before it. We are not simply looking for new ways to understand God and our relationship to/with God, but we are really looking for better ways, ways that are closer to the “is” than the “is not.”

Whatever metaphors we come up with in our attempt to inch closer to God, McFague insists that experience is primary. It is the ground of all of our language; we only think to call God mother, lover, or friend because of our experiences of those types of relationships and the meaning that they have to us. Likewise, experience is the ground for revelation. McFague acknowledges the problems with experience—its subjectivity and inability to be verified or tested—but she insists that it is too foundational to avoid. As she explains, we feel or catch glimpses of God’s personal and loving presence in our
lives—in our experiences. This is the very makeup of Scripture itself and it continues today.

How, exactly, then, does revelation work and what role does McFague understand revelation to play in our relationship with and proximity to God? As McFague states, “Revelation is an insight about God and the world that changes your life.”

It takes place when an experience becomes heightened or illuminated, motivating one to act. Based on McFague’s description, we see that revelation, or heightened experience, of God’s personal and loving presence awakes in us a reaction and response. We are not passive participants in the God-world relationship; this is a relationship, like any other, that requires effort to truly see and hear the other.

McFague raises the question, “What makes a revelation of God’s love Christian?”

She recognizes that such an answer requires some basic understanding of what Christianity is, which is difficult to respond to in one simple reply given the range of interpretations across Christian communities. What can be simply stated as the widespread base of Christianity is that it is built on and around Jesus Christ. Thus for McFague, what makes revelation specifically Christian is that it is an illuminated experience that moves one to act informed by and based on the person of Jesus. This means interpreting all of our experiences through the model of Christ. She explains, “We look Godward through Christ and say that God loves us; we look at the world through Christ and say it is where God is incarnate and where God wants us to flourish; we look at ourselves through Christ and learn what sin and salvation, living a lie and living the

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truth, mean. Jesus Christ is the *sine qua non* of the Christian paradigm; we go by his name. One cannot call oneself a Christian unless one’s interpretation of God, world, and human being include Christ.” Still, McFague acknowledges the sheer number of possibilities for what this means and how Christians understand Christ.

**Experiencing God through the Paradigm of Jesus**

How does McFague understand Jesus and his role in revealing God to us?

McFague describes Jesus as a parable of God, his life being paradigmatic or a model for the God-world relationship today. She states, “For the earliest Christians and for all subsequent ones, Jesus of Nazareth became the Christ as they (we) confess that he is the revelation of God. In his face, Christians see the hidden face of God; in his ministry, death, and resurrection, they perceive the way God would have them live. Jesus’ life is a parable of God for Christians and a model for our own lives. He is the mediator, the channel, between God and the world which allows us to say who God is and how human beings should live in the world.”

Scholar Shannon Schrein, who has studied McFague’s Christology, explains McFague’s claim that Jesus is a parable of God, stating,

Jesus as the parable of God embodies the characteristics of an extended metaphor. In this way Jesus of Nazareth brings the extraordinary, that is, himself, into conjunction with the ordinary, the everyday life of humanity in this world. The result is a tensive shock or surprise, a revelation of God in the world. In Jesus the truth of God is embodied, expressing and communicating simultaneously. To know Jesus, to hear Jesus, is to know and hear God. This is God in human form; here is the surprise, the revelation, for God is enfleshed in humanity. The element of similarity and dissimilarity, which maintains the tension in the metaphor, is recognizable in the presence and hiddenness of God in Jesus. God is revealed and

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yet the fullness of God’s reality is beyond the grasp of humanity. This is expressed exquisitely in the person of Jesus.  

Schrein insists that we must not misread McFague as claiming Jesus to be both fully human and fully divine. Nowhere does McFague make such a claim; rather, McFague holds that “Jesus ‘is and is not’ God.” As she explains, “Metaphorical statements are never identity statements.” Thus McFague holds a low Christology, “starting from ‘below,’ starting with the work and moving indirectly to the person.” She describes her Christology as a “parabolic Christology.” “A parabolic Christology is not a weak or lightweight Christology which sees Jesus merely as a heuristic fiction, helpful but dispensable. A metaphor is not an ornament or illustration, but says what cannot be said any other way; likewise, Jesus as parable of God provides us with a grid or screen for understanding God’s way with us which cannot be discarded after we have translated it into concepts.” Jesus’ life is paradigmatic for Christians; it is the lens through which we see and interpret God, ourselves, and the world. It is the lens for interpreting our relationships. McFague points out that what we see when we look at the story of Jesus is that he was without question personal, relational, and loving. Other aspects of his life may be up for debate, but this much most certainly is not. McFague notes that “Jesus’ mode of relating to other people and to God could be characterized as radical, shocking,

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and unconventional.” McFague names three precise moments in the story of Jesus as evidence of this: his speaking in parables, his table fellowship with outcasts, and his death on the cross.

McFague’s reading of the story of Jesus fits with other liberation theologians. What she sees in Jesus’ parables, eating habits, and death show heavy emphasis placed on relationships, indicating for her that God truly is on the side of life and its fulfillment, for all of creation. How do we see this in Jesus’ parables? McFague explains that Jesus’ parables were destabilizing. She states, “They work on a pattern of orientation, disorientation, and reorientation: the parable begins in the ordinary world with its conventional standards and expectations, but in the course of the story a radically different perspective is introduced, often by means of a surrealistic extravagance, that disorients the listener, and finally, through the interaction of the two competing viewpoints tension is created that results in a reorientation, a redescription of life in the world.”

Jesus’ parables brought the religious into the secular, collapsing these two dimensions of life in on one another. With the destabilizing of this and all dualisms, new vision is possible, which ultimately leads to new relationships being possible.

Jesus’ table fellowship with outcasts is the second example from Jesus’ life and ministry that McFague highlights. Stories of Jesus spending time and eating with tax collectors and sinners are also destabilizing, but as McFague points out, they also point to Jesus’ inclusive love and vision. She explains, “The central symbol of the new vision of

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376 McFague, Metaphorical Theology, 52.

377 McFague, Models of God, 50.
life, the kingdom of God, is a community joined together in a festive meal where the bread that sustains life and the joy that sustains the spirit are shared by all."\textsuperscript{378} Jesus shocked and offended many by sharing meals with outcasts, rather than spending that sacred time with friends. His actions taught that God loves all of us and none are to be excluded.

The destabilizing and inclusive vision and love that Jesus had and displayed is further exemplified in his death on the cross. McFague states, “The cross epitomizes the retribution that comes to those who give up controlling and triumphalist postures in order to relate to others in mutual love.”\textsuperscript{379} McFague insists on an interpretation of the cross that fits with other aspects of Jesus’ ministry, such as his parables and eating practices. This means an interpretation of his death on the cross as manifesting God’s love for all, all places and all times. McFague views both Jesus’ life and death “as a paradigm of God’s way with the world always,”\textsuperscript{380} emphasizing destabilizing, inclusive, and nonhierarchical vision and love.

Based on McFague’s reading of the story and the person of Jesus, she faithfully claims that God is present, and that as a loving, personal, and relational God, God is on the side of life and fulfillment. McFague believes that Jesus is a revelation of God, but Jesus is not the \textit{definitive} revelation of God. For McFague, Jesus is unique, but not exclusive. McFague thinks it absurd to say that God was incarnate in the world for only 30+ years in all of the billions of years that the earth has existed. She states,

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\item McFague, \textit{Models of God}, 52.
\item McFague, \textit{Models of God}, 53.
\item McFague, \textit{Models of God}, 55.
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The scandal of uniqueness is absolutized by Christianity into one of its central doctrines, which claims that God is embodied in one place and one place only: in the man Jesus of Nazareth.... 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 on planet earth.... The claim is not only offensive to the integrity and value of other religions, but incredible, indeed, absurd, in light of postmodern cosmology. It is not remotely compatible with our current picture of the universe.\(^{381}\)

Rather, McFague reads the story of Jesus as suggestive of God's presence in and throughout creation, in all times and in all places. She relativizes the incarnation making it possible to universalize the incarnation; God was not just embodied in Jesus, but God is present and embodied in all of creation. Thus, "A parabolic Christology relativizes Jesus’ particularity while universalizing the God of whom Jesus is a metaphor."\(^{382}\)

McFague speaks of the scope of God's presence in and among creation in terms of the "cosmic Christ." By this, she is referring to the resurrected Christ, "the Christ freed from the body of Jesus of Nazareth,"\(^{383}\) who is present in all of creation. This is what it means, for McFague, to say that God's love is inclusive and personal.

McFague’s Christology is thought provoking and controversial;\(^{384}\) her claims are radical and unconventional; then again, as she points, Jesus was radical and unconventional. Does this not warrant an equally radical and unconventional response?

\(^{381}\) McFague, Body of God, 159.

\(^{382}\) McFague, Metaphorical Theology, 52.

\(^{383}\) McFague, Body of God, 179.

\(^{384}\) Many scholars have taken aim at McFague in light of the Christology that she presents. Her position leaves her open to questions and criticisms regarding her position and placement within Christian tradition. The controversies surrounding McFague's Christology, while interesting and worth pursuing, are not the focus of this project. I have simply presented her understanding of Jesus in an attempt to articulate how her thinking here shapes her thinking about God's character and relationship to/with us.
Jesus’ parables, eating habits, and death all point to his destabilizing, inclusive, and nonhierarchical vision. Everything about Jesus’ life and ministry lead us to conclude that God is present and concerned with earthly matters. As McFague states, “From the paradigmatic story of Jesus we will propose that the direction of creation is toward inclusive love for all, especially the oppressed, the outcast, the vulnerable.”385 Because of Jesus, and the interpretive grid or screen his story lends, Christians claim that God can be known and experienced in the world; God’s personal, relational, and loving presence can be felt.

**Understanding God’s Presence**

Without a doubt, we have seen that McFague’s portrayal of God is one in which God is personally present. Where is God? Why, here of course, as our mother, lover, and friend; as the cosmic Christ; as the Spirit of creation and as creation itself! All of these are metaphors and models rather than descriptions of God’s presence. As McFague puts it, they are ways of thinking “about God’s transcendence in an immanental way—that ‘the world is our meeting place with God.’”386 They all relay the idea that God is embodied. Let us look more closely at McFague’s understanding of God’s embodied presence.

As we saw in the previous section, McFague’s understanding of God’s presence in the world is based on her reading of the story of Jesus. Jesus was/is a revelation of God; God was embodied in Jesus. But McFague does not stop there: “The proposal is to

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consider Jesus as paradigmatic of what we find everywhere: everything that is is the sacrament of God (the universe as God’s body).”³⁸⁷ Thus God was not only present in and through the person of Jesus, but God is present in and through all of creation. God’s presence among us was not limited to a thirty year span of history; God is present among us throughout time. McFague asks, “If the entire universe is expressive of God’s very being—*the* ‘incarnation,’ if you will—do we not have the beginnings of an imaginative picture of the relationship between God and the world peculiarly appropriate as a context for interpreting the salvific love of God *for our time*?”³⁸⁸

McFague suggests a specific imaginative picture (metaphor) for envisioning the God-world relationship: the world as God’s body. All of her thinking about God’s presence is based in/around this model. In this model, God is embodied; all of creation is the body of God. Thus God is very much present in our everyday lives. Yet this model does not promote complete immanence or a complete lack of transcendence; as McFague describes, it provides a way to think about God’s transcendence in an immanental way. What does this mean? McFague describes it as “a radicalization of both divine transcendence and immanence.”³⁸⁹ The world as God’s body is a radicalization of divine immanence in that God is present and embodied in *all* bodies. But as McFague points out, never in this model do we see God directly. “We do not see God’s face, but only the back.”³⁹⁰ Thus McFague describes this as a “back side” theology; one that catches

glimpses of God in and through creation, but never directly. Our experience or contact with God is always mediated through creation and through the world. The world is the place where we meet God. But McFague is clear that this is not pantheism; “Radicalizing the incarnation by using the model of the universe as God’s body is neither idolatry nor pantheism: the world, creation, is not identified or confused with God. Yet it is the place where God is present to us.”

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The Significance of the God-World Relationship

McFague’s imaginative metaphors and models, particularly her picture of the world as God’s body, leave many important implications in terms of the God-world relationship. If Jesus’ destabilizing, inclusive, and nonhierarchical vision is paradigmatic of God, suggesting that God is personally and relationally present, where does that leave us in our relationship with such a God? As was previously relayed, McFague’s various metaphors and models paint an alternative picture of the power dynamic between God and the world than traditionally imagined. We saw that McFague’s imaginative new language of mother, lover, and friend promotes thinking about God as possessing a gentler, more persuasive, and loving form of power than images of a king or master who uses coercive force. In addition, McFague stated that she understands God as Spirit to be the source of life, but noted that God is not a controller or orderer. Furthermore, in the image of the world as God’s body, we see the idea that God participates in our experiences; God shares in all aspects of the earth, including suffering. The implication

391 McFague, Body of God, 134.
this image leaves is that when we treat the rest of creation poorly, we are not only
harming the earth, but we are in fact hurting God.

All of these models support the idea of the God-world relationship as one that is a
genuine relationship, involving give and take on both sides. McFague’s models
emphasize the fact that healthy, meaningful relationships work two ways, not one way.
This means that in the God-world relationship expectation and responsibility is placed on
us, regardless of which of McFague’s models one is working within. A mother expects
certain things from her children. A lover has certain expectations of his/her beloved.
Friends share a mutual love and respect for one another. What, exactly, is this
expectation and responsibility? McFague believes that humankind in particular has a
special call or vocation, in ways that transcend the rest of creation. We possess an
awareness of our relationship with God and with the rest of creation, and with this
awareness comes responsibility to see and live according to God’s presence in the world.
For McFague, this means helping all of creation flourish.

McFague believes that God is on the side of life and fulfillment; she also believes
that God does not act coercively and does not supernaturally intervene. Imagining the
world as God’s body reminds us of that fact; it is up to us to show and share God’s
inclusive love. A more detailed examination of this responsibility and how, exactly, we
share in it will be explored later on in chapter six; it is, after all, the crux of our response
to this dissertation’s leading question, “how are we called to live and to experience God
in the world?” But let us here note that actively working to share God’s inclusive love
with the rest of creation is what McFague believes God asks of us. She insists that God
does not “call” us in some special or magic way, but rather in and through the natural world, our meeting place for God.

**Conclusion**

Mcfague’s understanding of God is not altogether different from Merton’s. As we pointed out, they do differ in their understandings of God’s accessibility, but both accept God to be personal, loving, and most importantly, present. And both believe that with our relationship with God comes human responsibilities and expectations. In order to more fully explore what these responsibilities are, we will now move into the next chapter on the self. As readers will see, Merton and McFague’s understandings of the human person are also foundational in grasping their sense of God’s call.
CHAPTER FOUR: THE SELF

Last chapter we examined Merton and McFague’s understandings of God, addressing questions such as: Who is God? How do we experience or know God? In what way(s) is God accessible to us and present in the world? And what is God doing, in the world? This exploration set us on our way to discovering Merton and McFague’s answers to the question of how we are called to live, based on their understandings and experiences of God. As our study revealed, the significance of God’s existence, presence, and nature leave us with a sense of expectation and responsibility, as well as the freedom to acknowledge, listen, and respond to God or not. This shifts the focus from God to us.

Why is identity or selfhood so important? We are only capable of grasping God’s relationship with us insofar as we know who we are and what we bring to the relationship. For both Merton and McFague, understanding God’s presence and activity in the world requires authenticity; we can only see God and reality for what it is if we are first honest with ourselves about who we are and how/where we fit. This chapter, therefore, seeks to explore Merton and McFague’s conceptions of the self, asking questions such as, who am I? How and where do I fit into this world? What is expected of me?
While not offered in any systematic fashion, Merton has much to say on the subject of the self. Merton struggled with the question of identity on both a personal and universal level, striving to discover and better understand his own sense of self as well as selfhood/identity in general. This is evident in both his personal journals and writings on contemplation, in which he conveys the way the search for identity is entangled in the search for God.

On a personal level, Merton sought to live authentically and to be in accord with God and reality. At different times in his life, he was more or less successful in this mission. Recognizing this, he took a growing interest in his sense of self, the state of his soul, his level of happiness, fulfillment, and responsibility, and where, exactly, he fit in the world. This is clearly seen in his autobiography, *The Seven Storey Mountain*, as well as his journals. He struggled with the issue of identity firsthand. Yet he did not believe he was alone in this struggle; Merton believed identity to be a universal question and problem. As we saw in chapter two, in our examination of Merton’s worldview and conception of reality, Merton believes that seeing God and reality for what it is requires right vision, or a grounded, authentic sense of self. As he explained, sin has cast illusions of dualisms and division on us that prevent us from correctly grasping God, ourselves, and the world. This means that on a universal level, we all struggle to know and be our true selves. Deep down, the questions, “Who am I?” and “How do I fit into this world?” haunt all of us.

Merton sheds light on these questions and provides much needed answers, through the lens of contemplative experience. Contemplation, ultimately, cannot exist
without the theme of identity and the concept of the true self; discovering one’s self is very much a part of contemplative experience itself. Thus it is impossible for Merton to speak of one theme without the other. As Merton states, “The very first step to a correct understanding of the Christian theology of contemplation is to grasp clearly the unity of God and man in Christ, which of course presupposes the equally crucial unity of man in himself.” Union with God requires us to determine and discover who we are; it is impossible to experience contemplative union with God if we are not being and living as our true selves. Not surprisingly, this experience and process is riddled with paradox. While Merton states that we must have unity within ourselves before being able to truly know God, he also suggests that contemplation is itself the discovery of our true selves; through the contemplative experience of union and knowledge of God, we come to know who we truly are. He states, “Contemplation is a mystery in which God reveals Himself to us as the very center of our own most intimate self… When the realization of His Presence bursts upon us, our own self disappears in Him and we pass mystically through the Red Sea of separation to lose ourselves (and thus find our true selves) in Him.” As Merton described it, contemplation is the “most paradoxical form of self-realization.” How, exactly, did Merton understand the self and the role that identity plays in contemplation? And what does this mean for us and our own identities?

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392 Merton, The Inner Experience, 39.
393 Merton, The New Man, 19.
394 Merton, The New Man, 19.
The True vs. False Self

Merton embedded the question of identity in the language of the true self and the false self. As he understood it, the true or real self resides in God, while the false self remains distanced or removed from God. As Merton describes it,

There is an irreducible opposition between the deep transcendent self that awakens only in contemplation, and the superficial, external self which we commonly identify with the first person singular. We must remember that this superficial “I” is not our real self. It is our “individuality” and our “empirical self” but it is not truly the hidden and mysterious person in whom we subsist before the eyes of God. The “I” that works in the world, thinks about itself, observes its own reactions and talks about itself is not the true “I” that has been united to God in Christ. It is at best the vesture, the mask, the disguise of that mysterious and unknown “self” whom most of us never discover until we are dead. Our external, superficial self is not eternal, not spiritual. Far from it. This self is doomed to disappear as completely as smoke from a chimney. It is utterly frail and evanescent.  

The False Self

Merton’s approach to defining the true self was much like his approach to contemplation, namely, beginning by pinpointing what it is not. Thus the best way we can grasp Merton’s concept of the true self is to begin with his understanding of the “false self,” a notion that he borrowed from Bernard of Clairvaux, from his own Cistercian tradition. Our sense of “I” that we call “self” is not really our true self; it is not our true, spiritual self—the self that lives in/for God. The “I” that we think we are and that we show ourselves as in the world is not who we truly are before God. It is a false self, nothing more than an illusory shadow or shell that covers or hides our true self.


Merton’s understanding of the false self is ontological in nature. “The adjective ‘false’ conveys the notion of unsubstantiality, of lacking in any fullness of being. The false self is deficient in being—deficient especially in the sense that it is impermanent, not enduring.” Thus the false self does not have any depth. It is an “external self” that consists of “superficial consciousness” and ego. Merton describes it as “exterior,” “empirical,” and “illusory.” It is concerned with worldly affairs and more specifically, the impact that such worldly affairs have on/to the false self. The false self sees itself as the center of the universe; all of creation exists for the benefit of the false self. Merton states,

The obstacle [in contemplative union with God] is in our “self,” that is to say in the tenacious need to maintain our separate, external, egotistic will. It is when we refer all things to this outward and false “self” that we alienate ourselves from reality and from God. It is then the false self that is our god, and we love everything for the sake of this self. We use all things, so to speak, for the worship of this idol which is our imaginary self. In so doing we pervert and corrupt things, or rather we turn our relationship to them into a corrupt and sinful relationship…. We use them to increase our attachment to our illusory self.

Thus the false self is “petty;” it is concerned only with itself and the surface level of reality, which results in it failing to truly grasp reality (God) whatsoever. It replaces God, who is center of the universe, with itself and its own egocentric desires.

Merton indicates that the false self, obsessed with superficial consciousness and ego, consumes one’s whole being. While lacking depth, the false self does include both our conscious and unconscious levels of existence. In addition, the false self is not

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398 Merton, New Seeds of Contemplation, 6.

399 Merton, New Seeds of Contemplation, 21-22.
limited to the physical, but involves our minds and wills as well (however twisted and manipulated they may be). As Merton explains, “The ego… is a self-constructed illusion that ‘has’ our body and part of our soul at its disposal because it has ‘taken over’ the functions of the inner self…. Man has been turned, spiritually, inside out, so that his ego plays the part of the ‘person’—a role which it actually has no right to assume.”

Merton believed that too many people were stricken with this experience. He states, “One of the most widespread errors of our time is a superficial ‘personalism’ which identifies the ‘person’ with the external self, the empirical ego, and devotes itself solemnly to the cultivation of this ego.” As Merton saw it, the problem was not with the existence of the false self, but rather our inability to distinguish and identify what and who we are. Merton believed that the exterior or false self plays a vital role, helping us function day in and day out in the world. The problem, for Merton, is that we focus too heavily on this self and too closely identify ourselves with it, thinking this is fullness of who we are, as well as thinking we are at the center of things. We forget that there is more at work in/to reality than my “self.” Merton explains, “The ‘ego,’ the ‘outer self,’ is respected by God and allowed to carry out the function which our inner self can not yet assume on its own. We have to act, in our everyday life, as if we were what our outer self indicates us to be. But at the same time we must remember that we are not entirely what we seem to be, and that what appears to be our ‘self’ is soon going to disappear into nothingness.”

To act as if this self is our deepest, most authentic self is erroneous,

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casting illusions and masking our true identity. Merton is clear that the false self is not in and of itself evil; rather it is our misuse of this self that is wrong. As Merton states, “The fact that it is unsubstantial is not to be imputed to it as some kind of crime…. As long as it does not isolate itself in a lie, it is blessed by the mercy and the love of Christ.”

Merton believed all people to be afflicted with the struggle between the true and false self. This is a universal problem, ultimately a result of sin. Merton states, “To say I was born in sin is to say I came into the world with a false self. I was born in a mask. I came into existence under a sign of contradiction, being someone that I was never intended to be and therefore a denial of what I am supposed to be.” As one Merton scholar notes, Merton understood sin in an ontological rather than moral way. “For Merton, the matter of who we are always precedes what we do. Thus, sin is not essentially an action but rather an identity. Sin is a fundamental stance of wanting to be what we are not. Sin is thus an orientation to falsity, a basic lie concerning our own deepest reality.” Merton himself states that “all sin starts from the assumption that my false self, the self that exists only in my own egocentric desires, is the fundamental reality of life to which everything else in the universe is ordered.” Thus, sin is equated with the identity of the false self.

Merton understood this (universal) experience of sin to be linked to the fall of Adam, as recorded in Scripture, which Merton symbolically understood to be a fall from


unity (with God and within ourselves). Referencing St. Augustine’s theology, Merton posits:

In the Fall Adam, man’s interior and spiritual self, his contemplative self, was led astray by Eve, his exterior, material, and practical self, his active self. Man fell from the unity of contemplative vision into the multiplicity, complication, and distraction of an active, worldly existence. Since he was now dependent entirely on exterior and contingent things, he became an exile in a world of objects, each one capable of deluding and enslaving him. Centered no longer in God and in his inmost, spiritual self, man now had to see and be aware of himself as if he were his own god…. In such a condition, man’s mind is enslaved by an inexorable concern with all that is exterior, transient, illusory, and trivial. And carried away by his pursuit of alien shadows and forms, he can no longer see his own true inner “face,” or recognize his identity in the spirit and in God, for that identity is secret, invisible, and incommunicable. ⁴⁰⁷

Merton understood this story of the fall in Genesis to be symbolic of our experiences today. Focused on the present, he understood Adam to be “an archetypal mirror of ourselves… not seen as some historical figure who committed a particular act that brought about a kind of ontological birth defect that is handed down from child to child. Rather, Adam is now. Adam is ourselves in disobedience to God.”⁴⁰⁸ Understood in this way, Merton interpreted the fall to mean that we are cut off from God and from our true selves (as are those before and after us). Cut off from this truth, we have lost the ability to see the truth about reality, therefore living within and under an illusion about who we are and our relationship with God, one another, and the world around us.

The result of the fall and the loss of unity and clear vision about reality mean that the false self, in its sinful state, thinks only of itself. It is a selfish self, using and taking advantage of others and the world. It seeks fame, success, and power. Merton suggests that the false self is overly concerned with these things because it is faintly aware of its

⁴⁰⁷ Merton, The Inner Experience, 35-36.
⁴⁰⁸ Finley, 33.
own superficiality and lack of substance and being, which it tries to cover up. He states, 
“\textquote[\textit{Merton, New Seeds of Contemplation, 35.}]{I use up my life in the desire for pleasures and the thirst for experiences, for power, honor, knowledge and love, to clothe this false self and construct its nothingness into something objectively real.}^409 \textquote[\textit{Merton, New Seeds of Contemplation, 34.}]{In this way, the false self/ego is rooted in illusion and myth. The trouble with this, as Merton points out, is that “we are not very good at recognizing illusions, lease of all the ones we cherish about ourselves—the ones we are born with and which feed the roots of sin.”}^410 \textquote[\textit{Merton, New Seeds of Contemplation, 11.}]{Too many of us go through life buying into the lie; we never discover our true selves.}^411

The True Self

While Merton believed that we all enter into a dismal, distorted reality, he also insisted that it does not have the final word or power over us. There exists another option, another way, in which we can recover and rediscover the unity that was lost and again see the truth surrounding reality, God, and our true selves. We may all be born wearing the mask of our false self, but the opportunity exists to be our true selves.

Before getting into the process itself of how we discover our true self, it only makes sense to begin with the questions, what does it mean to be one’s true self? What is the true self? Whereas Merton describes the false self as exterior and superficial, he speaks of the true self as our real self, the inner and “deep self,”^411 that is transcendent and concerned with spiritual awakening. While the true self is concerned with spiritual

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409 Merton, \textit{New Seeds of Contemplation}, 35.
affairs, Merton is clear that it is not to be completely identified with the soul. He states, “This is an understandable mistake, but it is very misleading because after all body and soul are incomplete substances, parts of one whole being: and the inner self is not a part of us, it is all of us. It is our whole reality.” As readers discovered in our previous discussion of Merton’s conception of reality, he believed in the merging of the natural and supernatural. In line with this belief, he understood the body and soul together to make up the true self, not just one or the other. The true self, while concerned with the spiritual dimension of reality, is our whole or complete self. Further articulating this point, Merton states, “The inner self is not a part of our being, like a motor in a car. It is our entire substantial reality itself, on its highest and most personal and most existential level.”

The true self, including body and soul, involves being who we most authentically are. Merton’s description of the true self can be (mis)interpreted to mean that it is a perfected or idealized self, which we are always striving for/after. Yet this is not accurate; as Merton explains, “The inner self is not an ideal self, especially not an imaginary, perfect creature fabricated to measure up to our compulsive need for greatness, heroism, and infallibility. On the contrary, the real ‘I’ is just simply ourself and nothing more. Nothing more, nothing less. Our self as we are in the eyes of God.” Merton understood sainthood along these lines. Sainthood is not about striving to be an ideal person; it is not something involving heroism, but rather about having the honesty


and humility to be one’s true self. Merton states, “For me to be a saint means to be myself.”

Merton’s description of the true self sounds simple enough: be who you are. Yet the problem or struggle is that it is not as easy as just being who we are. This is true for two reasons. First, as Merton suggested, we are not born that way; we are born in a mask of illusion. Thus the true self is something that we have to become aware of, desire, and pursue. Second, even if we become aware of the possibility of achieving or reaching our true self and decide to pursue it, the journey of discovery is an extremely challenging one, ultimately due to factors such as our free will and the evasiveness and paradoxical nature of the true self itself.

As was previously mentioned, Merton understood identity to pose a challenge to humankind unlike that of any other being or aspect of creation. As Merton saw it, this is because of the freedom we experience over and beyond the rest of creation. He states, “A tree gives glory to God by being a tree…. Each particular being, in its individuality…gives glory to God by being precisely what He wants it to be here and now.” Flowers, bugs, and birds are their true selves by simply blooming, buzzing, and chirping. Yet when it comes to humankind, we must do more than just exist and live, because we would be doing so as our false self, not really grasping the deeper levels of reality. “Unlike the animals and the trees, it is not enough for us to be what our nature intends. It is not enough to be individual men…. Trees and animals have no problem. God makes them what they are without consulting them, and they are perfectly satisfied.

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With us it is different. God leaves us free to be whatever we like. We can be ourselves or not, as we please. We are at liberty to be real, or to be unreal. We may be true or false, the choice is ours.”\(^\text{417}\) The rest of creation comes into existence as its true self. Yet we, humankind, are all born into and shadowed by a false self. Therefore we experience a freedom that the rest of creation simply does not have; we are at liberty to be true or false; we have a say in what kind of life we live.

Yet Merton maintained that the freedom of choice is only the lowest form of freedom. As he posited, beyond the mere freedom of choice between the true and false self exists perfect freedom, which he defined as “the inability to make any evil choice.”\(^\text{418}\) This means that real freedom always involves choosing what is good and best. Thus given the gift of free will, we have the choice of what kind of life we live, but it is only in choosing and pursuing the inner, true self that we are truly exercising our highest level of freedom. This choice is available to all of us; as Merton explains, the seeds of opportunity to know our true selves are planted in us: “The seeds that are planted in my liberty at every moment, by God’s will, are the seeds of my own identity, my own reality, my own happiness, my own sanctity. To refuse them is to refuse everything; it is the refusal of my own existence and being: of my identity, my very self.”\(^\text{419}\)

The choice to be our true self is itself fraught with challenges and ambiguity. We may be at liberty to be real or unreal, but how do we become aware of this choice? And once we realize that the choice is ours, what is the next step? How do we become our

true self? These are tough questions because of the elusiveness of the true self. Merton understood the true self to be wrapped up in mystery. Merton felt strongly that the true self is not a “thing” to be studied or pinned down. Fitting with his understanding of God, Merton understood the true self to be vibrantly alive as subject, not object. Thus examination of the true self is beyond our reach; rather, all we can do is experience it firsthand. In this way, Merton describes the true self as being shy, avoiding observation, “like a very shy wild animal that never appears at all whenever an alien presence is at hand, and comes out only when all is perfectly peaceful, in silence, when he is untroubled and alone.”

Thus the true self is never on display; we cannot watch the true self, we can only live it. As Merton suggests, it requires that we, paradoxically, “forget ourselves on purpose,” stop self-reflecting, and simply be.

Adding to the elusiveness and mystery of the true self, Merton describes it as being both secretive and hidden. He states, “The inner self is as secret as God and, like Him, it evades every concept that tries to seize hold of it with full possession.” Merton elsewhere describes the true self as not only being as secret as God, but as actually being hidden in God. “The secret of my full identity is hidden in Him. He alone can make me who I am, or rather who I will be when at last I fully begin to be.” According to Merton, the realization and discovery of our true self is tied to faith in and a relationship

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with God. We cannot know who we are without God, and we also cannot come to truly
know God without being our true selves. In this way, the experience of contemplation is
intimately intertwined with the realization and discovery of the true self, which is,
ultimately, the reason behind the complexity and mystery surrounding the true self.

Ultimately, then, our search for identity is a spiritual journey, in which our search
for self is linked to our search for God. These searches, as well as their final discoveries,
are intimately woven, fitting together as two sides of one coin. Contemplation has to do
with union with God, but it also has to do with the awakening of the true self. Only as
our true self can we ever have real union with God, for the true self is the “truly hidden
and mysterious person in whom we subsist before the eyes of God.”  Contemplation is
an intuitive awareness and awakening that the external mask we wear in the world is not
who we are at the most fundamental level of our existence, requiring us to cast aside this
false self and find our true self. “Contemplation is precisely the awareness that this ‘I’ is
really ‘not I’ and the awakening of the unknown ‘I’ that is beyond observation and
reflection and is incapable of commenting upon itself.” As Merton explains, the true
self cannot be commented on or examined because it does not appear in the world; shy
and secretive, it remains hidden in God.

Merton describes this experiential awareness of the contemplative’s discovery of
the true self as the pure experience of SUM, or “I AM,” an experience of the true self in
“existential mystery.” “Not in the sense of a futile assertion of our individuality as

ultimately real, but in the humble realization of our mysterious being as persons in whom God dwells.”\footnote{Merton, \textit{New Seeds of Contemplation}, 9.} Merton understood our being to be wrapped up in the very being of God, who is the great “I AM.” This, for Merton, is what the experience of contemplation is all about: union with God, whereby we become one with God: God in us and us in God.

This mystical kind of union requires that our natural self be elevated or raised to be able to participate in the supernatural. Ultimately, for Merton, the Scriptures suggest that this is done on our behalf. As was previously discussed, Merton read the Genesis narrative as a fall from perfection and paradise, in which Adam (humanity) lost clear vision of God and self, resulting in humankind being born into and living as the false self, preventing real union with God. Yet this was/is not the end of the story. As a Christian, Merton whole-heartedly believes that God has broken into our world in and through the person of Jesus Christ, to save us.

How are we to make sense of this claim? Christ, the son of God, whom Merton referred to as the New Adam, bridged the gap between the natural and supernatural, making it possible for us to reclaim our lost identity and know and unite with God again. Merton states, “God Himself must become Man, in order that, in the Man-God, man might be able to lose himself as man and find himself as God. God Himself must die on the Cross, leaving man a pattern and a proof of His infinite love. And man, communing with God in the death and resurrection of Christ, must die the spiritual death in which his exterior self is destroyed and his inner self rises from death by faith and lives again ‘unto God.’”\footnote{Merton, \textit{The Inner Experience}, 36.} Christ is, therefore, the foundation for discovering both God and the true self.
Christ is the ultimate example for Merton of this two-fold discovery, as well as the very embodiment of it: “a human nature united in one Person with the infinite Truth and Splendour of God.”\textsuperscript{429} Thus, Merton insists that “we become contemplatives to the extent that we participate in Christ’s Divine Sonship,”\textsuperscript{430} which means sharing in Christ’s death and resurrection and recognizing, through this participation, Christ’s presence in us.

In Galatians 2:20, St. Paul stated, “I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I that live, but Christ lives in me.” Merton believed this basic Christian experience to be the heart of contemplation. It is the awakening or realization that Christ lives inside us as our true self. Merton states, “When we speak of ‘life in Christ,’ according to the phrase of St. Paul, ‘It is now no longer I that live, but Christ lives in me’, we are speaking… of our discovery of our true selves in Christ. In this discovery we participate spiritually in the mystery of His resurrection.”\textsuperscript{431} Accepting Christ within ourselves and sharing in his death and resurrection means that we, ourselves, experience death and resurrection. The false self, everything we think we are in the world, must die. We must shed this illusory mask so that the true self can emerge from hiding, blossom, and live.

Merton believed that this new birth happens on a deep, spiritual level of reality. He states, “We die on a certain level of our being in order to find ourselves alive and free on another, more spiritual level.”\textsuperscript{432} In discovering and living as our true selves, we

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\bibitem{430} Merton, \textit{What is Contemplation?}, 30.
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\bibitem{432} Merton, \textit{Contemplative Prayer}, 72.
\end{thebibliography}
identify with and share in Christ. Christ, living in us as our true self, raises us up to share in Christ’s own relationship and union with God. As Merton explains, “Dwelling in us He becomes as it were our superior self, for He has united and identified our inmost self with Himself. From the moment that we have responded by faith and charity to His love for us, a supernatural union of our souls with His indwelling Divine Person gives us a participation in His divine sonship and nature. A ‘new being’ is brought into existence. I become a ‘new man’ and this new man, spiritually and mystically one identity, is at once Christ and myself.”

Merton understood our identification with Christ and sharing in the divine sonship to be a result of the Holy Spirit at work in us. The Spirit “is truly, as St. Thomas says, our possession, which means to say He becomes, as it were, our own spirit, speaking within our own being. It is He that becomes, as it were, our spiritual and divine self, and by virtue of His presence and inspirations we are and we act as other Christs. By Him and through Him we are transformed in Christ.” The Spirit breathes into us divine life, so that it is no longer us that live, but Christ living in us. And we, in some mystical sense, become “Christs;” “we become sons of God by adoption in so far as we are like Christ and His brothers.”

Merton scholar, Anne Carr, points out Merton’s reliance here on the early church Father’s concept of human divinization. As she states, “Merton bases this theology of the

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434 Merton, *The Inner Experience*, 45.


true contemplative self on the ancient Christological doctrine of the union of the human and divine natures in the one divine person of Christ.”  Merton himself cited St. Athanasius’s declaration that “God became man in order that man might become God.”  For Merton, the resurrection restores human nature and makes the divinization of all human beings possible. Humanity is able to share in the hypostatic union because of Christ. As Merton states,

“This awakening would not only enable us to discover our true identity “in Christ,” but would also make the living and Risen Savior present in us. Hence the importance of the Divinity of Christ—for it is as God-Man that He is risen from the dead and as God-Man that He is capable of living and acting in us all by His Spirit, so that in Him we are not only our true personal selves, but are also one Mystical Person, one Christ…. Each one of us, in some sense, is able to be completely transformed into the likeness of Christ, to become, as He is, divinely human.”

This experience of divinization allows for a supernatural union between us and God. Christ, living in us, makes it possible for us to participate in the special relationship that he has with God. We become “Christs” insofar as we share and participate in the oneness of this union.

Merton is cautious not to describe this experience of union as being overly individual, isolated, or unique to any one person. We all possess a true self, and the possibility exists for Christ to live in all of us. Yet this does not mean that our true selves are individual “Christs.” Rather, it meant a shared participation in the One Mystical Christ. Merton explains, “Transformation into Christ is not just an individual affair: there is only one Christ, no many. He is not divided. And for me to become Christ is to enter

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437 Carr, 49.

438 Merton, The Inner Experience, 38.

439 Merton, The Inner Experience, 38.
into the Life of the Whole Christ, the Mystical Body made up of the Head and the members, Christ and all who are incorporated in Him by His Spirit.\textsuperscript{440} The communal nature of the true self will be explored at more length in the following chapter, which seeks to examine the world, and how the true self fits in and with others. But it is important to note here that while the discovery of the true self is unique for each of us, the root of our identity is shared by all of us.

\textit{The Process of Discovery}

The secret of my identity is hidden in the love and mercy of God. But whatever is in God is really identical with Him for His infinite simplicity admits no division and no distinction. Therefore I cannot hope to find myself anywhere except in Him. Ultimately the only way that I can be myself is to become identified with Him in Whom is hidden the reason and fulfillment of my existence. Therefore there is only one problem on which all my existence, my peace and my happiness depend: to discover myself in discovering God. If I find Him I will find myself and if I find my true self I will find Him.\textsuperscript{441}

The discovery of the true self is a paradoxical discovery. We discover ourselves insofar as we discover God, who is Mystery, and we discover God by discovering our identity, which is also hidden and elusive. How do we actually discover either, the self or God, if both are as elusive as Merton suggested? What does the process of discovery entail? How is it possible that the search can go either direction, from self to God or God to self? As confusing as the order and development of the process appear, Merton’s paradoxical language clearly conveys the lack of linear direction the process of discovery

\textsuperscript{440} Merton, \textit{New Seeds of Contemplation}, 157.

\textsuperscript{441} Merton, \textit{New Seeds of Contemplation}, 35-36.
(for both God and self) takes. As Merton said, “We are invited to forget ourselves on purpose, cast our awful solemnity to the winds and join in the general dance.”

Merton is clear that we have the freedom to participate in this dance or not. As he describes, we have a choice. It is God who ultimately reveals God’s self to us; it is truly not by our own efforts that we discover God or our true self, which is hidden in God. Yet Merton insists that we must desire this for ourselves and must be willing to work with God in discovering it. “Our vocation is not simply to be, but to work together with God in the creation of our own life, or own identity, our own destiny.” As Merton describes it, this is the working out of our salvation, which we participate in with God. Salvation, for Merton, meant “the full discovery of who he himself really is,” which he understood to be “an objective and mystical reality—the finding of ourselves in Christ, the Spirit, or, if you prefer, in the supernatural order.”

How, exactly, can and do we work with God in this discovery? Merton is insistent that no single spiritual exercise can bring us to God; God must reveal God’s self in/to us. Yet Merton does suggest that there are things that we can do to open ourselves up to God and to create a space inside ourselves for God to work in us and reveal God’s self. In this way, it is more about an attitude and attentiveness than a method itself.

“There is and can be no special planned technique for discovering and awakening one’s inner self…. All that we can do with any spiritual discipline is produce within ourselves something of the silence, the humility, the detachment, the purity of heart, and the

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442 Merton, New Seeds of Contemplation, 297.

443 Merton, New Seeds of Contemplation, 32.

444 Merton, No Man is an Island, xv.
indifference which are required if the inner self is to make some shy, unpredictable manifestation \(^{445}\) and if we are to find God. In order to create this space of peace within ourselves, Merton stresses the need for withdrawal, solitude, and detachment. As has been mentioned previously, most of what we think we are in this world is illusory; we are unable to be and live in the world honestly because we, as well as the world, are marked by falsity, division, and ungodly desires. We must free ourselves from this mask of deception which the false self puts on us and places us in, and the only way to do so is by retreating from it all. Still, Merton is cautious about what retreatment means and entails. What this type of withdrawal, solitude, and detachment look like, exactly, will be explored in the next chapter, as they pertain to our place in the world, but it is important to mention here that the search for identity does involve this kind of purification or cleansing of the self from all worldly desires and inclinations that center around “me,” because as the true self, we realize it isn’t about me, but rather it is about God.

*What is Asked of the True Self?*

Last chapter, one of the questions that we explored was what God wants from us. Readers discovered Merton’s understanding of a personal and loving God, who seeks to know us and have a relationship with us. As has been articulated this chapter, to share in a deep relationship (union) with God, we must be our true selves. Merton states, “So let me clearly realize first of all that what God wants of me is myself. That means to say that His will for me points to one thing: the realization, the discovery, and the fulfillment of

my self, my true self, in Christ.”\textsuperscript{446} Thus there is an additional responsibility or expectation placed on us. Not only are we to seek God, but we are to seek authenticity in our own lives. And, as was previously mentioned, God wants us to participate in this process of discovery. “God’s will for us is not only that we should be the persons He means us to be, but that we should share in His work of creation and help Him to make us into the persons He means us to be.”\textsuperscript{447} Given the freedom of choice concerning the type of life we live, it begins with the awareness of distorted reality surrounding us and the desire to instead seek truth. Exercising our highest freedom, we choose the true self, by/from which we come to know God, which is what God wills for us.

As Merton explains, living as our true selves means accepting Christ as present and living inside us, and essentially, living as “Christ’s” in the world. With this comes a deep rooted sense of responsibility and ethical dimension to human life. Living as our true self, with Christ present in us, means seeking/putting God first, before all else, including our own wants and desires. It means focusing on God rather than ourselves and seeking God’s will rather than our own, or perhaps better put, living a life in which our own will unites with the will of God so that our wills essentially become one. This is the contemplative experience, in which we identify with Christ and possess God’s own will and love as our own; this is what God wants for us. Merton reminds us of this, stating, “Our happiness consists in doing the will of God. But the essence of this happiness does not lie merely in an agreement of wills. It consists in a union with God.”\textsuperscript{448}

\textsuperscript{446} Merton, \textit{No Man is an Island}, 64.

\textsuperscript{447} Merton, \textit{No Man is an Island}, 64.

\textsuperscript{448} Merton, \textit{No Man is an Island}, 52.
Merton was insistent that God’s will is, ultimately, “a profound and holy mystery.” Yet, somehow, contemplative experience involves knowing and accepting the will of God, “to be the life of our life and the soul of our own soul’s life.” How, then, do we know and take on the will of God as our own, or in union with our own? In responding to the challenge this question poses, Merton makes the distinction between doing the will of God and willing the will of God. He insists that God’s will, as holy mystery, is not always clear or readily available to us. Yet it is still important that we pursue it and seek to know it. “It is not always necessary to find out what God wills in order to do it.” We can do the will of God without full understanding of what God’s will is. But a step beyond this is when we take on the will of God, and consciously desire the will of God and will it for ourselves. Merton states, “If we are to will what He wills we must begin to know something of what He wills. We must at least desire to know what He wills.”

How do we know what the will of God is? In the contemplative experience of union with God, we become intuitively aware of God’s love and desires for us and for the world. Still, Merton is clear that this requires a great deal of discernment, listening to God, and obedience, beginning with a deep examination of our intention(s). Merton insists that our intentions must be pure; “our intentions are pure when we identify our advantage with God’s glory, and see that our happiness consists in doing His will because

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449 Merton, *No Man is an Island*, 52.
450 Merton, *No Man is an Island*, 53.
451 Merton, *No Man is an Island*, 57.
452 Merton, *No Man is an Island*, 57.
His will is right and good. In order to make our intentions pure, we do not give up all idea of seeking our own good, we simply seek it where it can really be found: in a good that is beyond and above ourselves.”

Thus as our true selves, the good we seek aligns with and is in fact the very same good that God wills. In this way, with pure intention(s), we are able to pursue the will of God because we truly grasp that it is the greatest good. It is what we ultimately want/desire.

Such pure intention requires that we be both “clear-sighted and prudent,” both of which qualities of discernment possessed by the true self. The false self is lured in to/by the illusions that the world casts; the false self is blinded by its own selfishness. We must be able to see past/beyond the falsities of the world, so that we can fully understand that there exists something much more meaningful and important beyond ourselves. Only once we see past this deception can we grasp the will of God. As Merton states, “If I am to know the will of God, I must have the right attitude toward life. I must first of all know what life is, and to know the purpose of my existence.”

Merton believes that God’s will for us is that we truly know God, ourselves, and one another. As will be developed in the next chapter, relationships are critical. Foundational to these relationships and everything we “do” in the world, Merton believes that God wills us, first and foremost, to simply be; to be who we are. As he explains, “What I do must depend on what I am. Therefore, my being itself contains in its own specific nature a

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453 Merton, *No Man is an Island*, 54.
454 Merton, *No Man is an Island*, 55.
455 Merton, *No Man is an Island*, 63.
whole code of laws, ways of behaving that are willed for me by the God Who has willed me to be.”

**Conclusion**

The importance of the true self in/to Merton’s theology cannot be stressed enough. It holds a fundamental and pivotal role in our relationships, with God, others, and the world. If we are ever going to break through and stop the cycles of falsity and division that we are embedded in, we must realize the truth about our identity. We must realize the “more” to it all; that it is not just about us. We must shed the mask of the false self and realize who/what we really are, the true self. Doing so will awaken in us new awareness and meaning in/to this world and help us live and act authentically, which we will develop more in the following chapters.

**McFague**

McFague’s treatment of the self and question of identity includes a radically different approach and direction than Merton’s. Readers discovered how prominent the topic of the self was in Merton’s life and writing. His focus fit the framework of modern philosophy, with the self as his primary starting point, studying the individual person as removed from the world and any/all contexts. He treated both the true and false self as universals, relevant to and experienced by all people. If readers recall, not all of Merton’s ideas on the self were in line with leading modern philosophers—he reinterpreted Descartes’ logic “I think, therefore I am” placing the focus on being itself,

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456 Merton, *No Man is an Island*, 57-58.
simply stating, “I am.” Yet Merton did follow in Descartes’ footsteps in choosing to begin with the individual person, demonstrating his modern bias.

Unlike Merton, McFague rejects this entire modern approach in her thought and writing. McFague does not feel that this kind of treatment of the self matches our understanding of the human person today. Appropriate for her time, she opts for a postmodern reading, exploring the self as always existing in relationship, never able to be removed or isolated from the contexts in which we live. Thus it follows that, for McFague, no statements on the self can ever be universal because no context is exactly the same, and a plurality of voices are therefore necessary and required in any hopes of speaking fully about the self. (Really, for McFague, the very language of “the” self likely conjures modern thinking, because contextually, there is only his or her self or this or that self.)

Understood along postmodern lines, McFague’s contribution is only one of many. She is clear about this, that her ideas are but “one square in the quilt, one voice in the conversation, one angle of vision.” As such, McFague makes no sweeping statements about our identity, always acknowledging that her ideas are limited and incomplete. Thus rather than simply ask, “Who am I?”, we can only ask, “Who am I from this or that perspective?” or “Who am I in this or that context?” McFague frames these questions in her own way, asking: “Who are we in the scheme of things?” Her phrasing of the question in exploration of the self demonstrates her bias for postmodern thinking. First of all, we can’t examine the individual by him/herself, because we are relational beings. Thus McFague prefers the question, “Who are we?” rather than “Who am I?”.

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she does not leave the question at that; she asks, “Who are we in the scheme of things?” Her question reflects the contextual (postmodern) nature of her thought and writing. We do not exist apart from the communities in which we live and have been raised. Thus McFague wants to examine who we are within a particular context, or the scheme of things. The self does not exist in a vacuum; we cannot know the self apart from his/her context. Ultimately, this means, unlike Merton and modern philosophers, we do not begin with the self. Rather, we begin with the context itself—the scheme of things.

*The Scheme of Things*

To answer McFague’s question, “Who are we in the scheme of things?”, we must know what the scheme of things is. What is the context of which McFague writes? For McFague, we are defined by the contexts we find ourselves in, and we discover and reveal different parts of ourselves based on the context we are in. For example, if you were to ask various people in my life who I am, you would likely receive different answers based on the group of people you asked: family, friends, teachers, students, coworkers, etc. These people know me in different ways, based on a particular context and vantage point, which shapes their opinion of me. All of the varying groups, or contexts, in this example are of one variety: human persons. There are still other contexts, or schemes, to be considered, some wider, some more narrow. McFague insists that theology has three classic contexts: the individual, humanity, and the planet. Of these, McFague’s focus is the world, or the planet. Anything she says about the self is within the context of the world at large. This cosmological context is universal in scope.

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She states, “a cosmological context says that theology should be done from the perspective of the well-being of the entire planet and all its creatures in which I am a subject in a community of subjects, both human and earth subjects, all of whom have value.” McFague’s statement hints at her position on the self: “we are subjects in a community of subjects.” Her statement shows her ecological concern for the planet, and how we fit into it. On a general level, this is the scheme of things. Ecology and the cosmos are the context in which she explores selfhood.

The world is the formal subject of the next chapter, but it is important to briefly touch on McFague’s interpretation of it here in order to answer the question of who we are in our exploration of the self. McFague is clear that our understanding of the self is directly tied to and wrapped up in our understanding of the planet; our identity is informed and shaped by the scheme of things that we see ourselves in, or the world around us. How, then, does McFague interpret the world? And how does this interpretation impact her perspective on the self? McFague acknowledges that there are many different ways to interpret the world and our identity. Postmodern thinking allows for (and is helpless against) such diversity. Yet McFague insists that certain worldviews are more accurate and helpful than others, resulting in a ripple effect when it comes to the question of identity and selfhood. How we see ourselves is a result of how we see the world; it is a result of our accepted conventions about what is.

Since our worldview shapes the very conception we have of ourselves, and we are concerned here with the context of the planet, McFague insists that we consider the

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460 The array of worldviews will be explored in the following chapter. We are here only concerned with McFague's position.
findings of contemporary science as one of our informative sources regarding the world and our identity. McFague is specifically interested in what science can share with us about the process of creation and the kind of relationships that the process suggests between us and different life forms in the cosmos. This leads McFague to consider what she calls the “common creation story,” or evolutionary account, of the beginning stages of life as we know it. McFague is clear that as a resource to theology and ecology, the common creation story is a *story*. It is not set in stone; she states, “the contemporary scientific view of reality is not monolithic (there is more than one interpretation) and it is a view (a picture, not a set of permanent, absolute facts).” The implications of this will be explored further in the next chapter on the world itself, but it is important to note here that McFague is reliant on the broad, sweeping strokes that the picture provides rather than the details and any potential discrepancies themselves. She reminds us that her approach to and inclusion of the common creation story is from the standpoint of ecological theology, stating that her purpose is modest: “it is the practical one of attempting to understand what it means to take the cosmos as the context for doing theology.”Thus the common creation story is but a starting point for McFague’s conception of the self (and the world). She ultimately uses it as a resource to rethink the relationships between God, the world, and us. And in doing so, our very interpretations of God, the world, and us change.

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461 McFague’s reliance on contemporary science was previously introduced and explained in Chapter Two, in our exploration of methodology.


What is the common creation story? How does it help us remythologize and reimagine ourselves and the world? An evolutionary account of all life forms, McFague describes it as a cosmology, or “an account of the universe as a whole or of the whole of reality,”\textsuperscript{464} that promotes both radical unity and diversity. As she explains, the essence of the common creation story is that “from one infinitely hot, infinitely condensed bit of matter (a millionth of a gram) some fifteen billion years ago, have evolved one hundred billion galaxies, each with its billions of stars and planets…. Everything that is, from the fungi and protozoa on our planet to the black holes and exploding supernovas in distant galaxies, has a common origin: everything that is comes from one infinitesimal bit of matter.”\textsuperscript{465} McFague is struck by the sense of oneness and unity of all things; in the beginning we were one. Yet this oneness erupted into an array of different life forms. As McFague describes, “What began as one, nothing but one, when matter was infinitely hot and condensed, became over billions of years infinitely (for all intents and purposes) diverse.”\textsuperscript{466} Yet still, in the midst of this seeming diverse conclusion, the common creation story helps us recognize our continual connection to one another, or as McFague describes it, the “interrelationships” and “interdependence” that exist among all life forms. Thus unity exists on two levels: our origin and history as well as our complex networks of interdependence today. We are all different and unique, while also intrinsically related and dependent on one another. As McFague describes it, this picture

\textsuperscript{464} McFague, \textit{Body of God}, 40.


\textsuperscript{466} McFague, \textit{Body of God}, 45.
presented to us can be described as “organic,” in the way it emphasizes unity, while still acknowledging and allowing diversity and individuality.

One of the ways McFague highlights the organic picture the common creation story creates with its paradoxical blend of unity and diversity is by focusing in on a central aspect of the creation account, namely, physical matter, which she refers to the phenomenon of “embodiment.” McFague uses this concept of embodiment as the starting point for her ecological agenda, taking note of the way that the common creation story demonstrates embodiment to be the most basic or fundamental aspect of reality. She states, “The common creation story allows for and indeed encourages a basic stance toward reality that privileges embodiment.”467 It forces us to confront the truth that all life forms possess bodies, without which they would cease to exist. The common creation story ultimately reminds us that bodies matter.

McFague describes embodiment as being both paradoxically mundane and complex. It is mundane in that it is the most basic factor to/of our existence, true of all life forms. All beings consist of physical matter and have some type of body; this is most definitely a mundane truth in its recognition of one of the most basic factors surrounding our existence. Yet embodiment is also highly complex. How so? Its complexity is best demonstrated in the relationship of unity and diversity that the common creation story is all about. Embodiment is a universal experience; all beings are embodied. As McFague states, “Embodiment gives us a commonality with everything else on the planet

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(including even such remote bodies from ours as trees, rocks, and mountains).”\textsuperscript{468} Thus it is something we all share in and it therefore unifies us in this way.

The mundanity of embodiment stops here; there lies beyond this basic unity a deeper, more complex, form of unity. As we discussed in our description of the common creation account, the story indicates that we are all a result of one condensed bit of matter that evolved into the diverse and complex life forms that exist today. What this means is that embodiment is genuinely a shared, unifying, experience: we have a common origin; all beings actually come from and possess in their physical makeup the same, shared matter that erupted 15 billion years ago. With this, unity turns to diversity and the complexity of embodiment continues. Embodiment, seen in its vast number of forms today, confirms the uniqueness and individuality of all beings. The common creation story conjures images of a complex universe of diverse bodies. Thus while we all share in our physical makeup, our physical bodies radically differ. This is true among different life forms as well as within specific species. For example, turtles and trees radically differ from one another, as do turtles and trees compared to others of their same species. No two turtles or trees are exactly the same. No two human beings are exactly the same. McFague insists that “there is no one universal, ideal embodiment but many, diverse forms of it.”\textsuperscript{469}

This is the scheme of things in which McFague entertains ideas surrounding our identity and true self. It is one that takes seriously the findings of contemporary science and the common creation story, in which we find ourselves embodied in a web of

\textsuperscript{468} McFague, \textit{Body of God}, 48.

\textsuperscript{469} McFague, \textit{Body of God}, 48.
interrelationships and interdependence that promotes unity and diversity amidst the vast cosmos. That web, and our embodied, place in it, needs more exploration. Who are we in the scheme of things? Where do we fit in to this picture? Understanding our place in the scheme of things will help us pinpoint and fully grasp who we are.

The Implications of Embodiment: Our Place in the World

The picture of the cosmos presented by contemporary science and the common creation story sheds light on who we are in new and profound ways, particularly with its emphasis on embodiment, which has several implications when it comes to our identity and sense of belonging in the world. Although it is just a model, the story, with its focus on embodiment, highlights aspects of our identity in new ways. McFague reminds us that it can’t do everything, and she is not defining or describing the self, but she is investigating it from the standpoint of embodiment. The concept of embodiment is therefore the critical starting place for McFague in regards to any type of anthropology or exploration of the self. The common creation story conveys that we are, first and foremost, embodied earth creatures: living, breathing beings among an array of other diverse and embodied life forms on our planet.

As embodied earth creatures, we are both like and unlike other life forms (displaying the unity and diversity of the universe). We share much in common with other beings; we have the same physical makeup, needs, and home. Yet at the same time, we are uniquely our own. No two people are embodied in exactly the same way. We are each unique, and have intrinsic value and worth in being what we are. Ultimately, as McFague believes, this results in a vision of selfhood that treasures individuality as well
as interrelatedness and interdependence. We exist as unique, embodied individuals in interrelated webs of interdependence.

These webs reveal commonalities between us and other life forms that help us grasp our place in this world. Ultimately, we discover a sense of sameness in our physical makeup, needs, and home. Let us recall that our commonalities are a result of the evolutionary process that is at the heart of the common creation story. Approximately 15 billion years ago the cosmos erupted with a big bang explosion. “From this beginning came all that followed, so that everything that is is related, woven into a seamless network.”\(^{470}\)

We share the very same physical matter and makeup as everything else, because of our origin, unifying us in this way. What about our shared needs and home? How are we related and dependent on other beings in these ways?

McFague is clear that a focus on embodiment means a focus on the needs of the body—physical needs such as food, water, shelter, air, and so on that a body needs to survive. We as humans need these things, as do plants and insects, and all other living things. The notion of embodiment drawn forth in the common creation story makes us consciously aware of our physicality and earthly needs. Of all of these earthly, physical needs, McFague insists that space is a priority. She explains, “A theology of embodiment takes space seriously, for the first thing bodies need is space to obtain the necessities to exist—food, water, air.”\(^{471}\)

Our physical needs of food, water, shelter, etc. are reliant on our access to space. This is true for humans as well as all beings. The space of which we speak is the earth

\(^{470}\) McFague, *Body of God*, 104.

itself, a limited space. Thus not only do we share the same physical needs, but we share access to them. Our resources are therefore limited—food, water, air, space—which we must all share to survive. This point of commonality between us and other life forms has two important implications as far as our identity goes: namely, that “space is a leveling, democratic notion that places us on a par with all other life-forms”\textsuperscript{472} and that we are, in fact, radically dependent on other life forms to produce and serve as resources to us, critical to/for our own human survival and ability to thrive.

Basic needs are important to us and to all life forms. Our need for food, water, shelter, and ultimately, space, means that we are all, in a sense, the same. As McFague puts it, we are all “citizens of planet earth,”\textsuperscript{473} which is, so to speak, a shared citizenship. Yet this leveled playing field only speaks of our equal need for space, food, and water; it does not imply that all life forms are equal in every sense or that they require the same things. It is not difficult to see, when we look at the world around us, that beings exist of varying degrees of complexity, humans being the most complex. McFague is clear that levels of complexity do not translate into levels of importance or worth. Our position in the chain of complexity does not mean that we are superior to other life forms or set apart from them. On the contrary, the more complex the life form, the more dependent it is on life forms beneath it. McFague states, “What is significant for a theological anthropology is not only the continuity from the simplest events in the universe to the most complex, but also their inverse dependency, which undercuts any sense of absolute superiority…. The higher and more complex the level, the more vulnerable it is and dependent upon the

\textsuperscript{472} McFague, \textit{Body of God}, 100.

\textsuperscript{473} McFague, \textit{Body of God}, 109.
levels that support it.” As complex creatures, we are reliant on simpler life forms for resources for our survival; but this does not signify that we are removed from or better than the rest of creation. As McFague states, “The common character of the story undercuts notions of human existence as separate from the natural, physical world; or of human individuality as the only form of individuality, or of human individuals existing apart from radical interdependence and interrelatedness with others of our own species, with other species, and with the ecosystem.” However complex we are, and whatever else we might think that we are, as embodied earth creatures, we are very much a part of creation; we are citizens of the planet, and as such, share in the limited resources available to all.

Our shared status with the rest of creation helps us realize our place, and space, in the world. We come to see that not only do we share in our physical, material makeup and needs, but we also share the same home. Our space and place is here on earth. As embodied, living, breathing beings, the earth is our home. This may be seem like a mundane point, but it is a point that McFague stresses in hopes of correcting misconceptions about our identity within Christianity and traditional Christian theology. McFague suggests that most frequently Christian discussion comprises of modern talk about the thinking self, or spiritual self, as if we were spiritualized beings. The body is given little to no attention. McFague insists that this lack of recognition that we are our bodies and that the earth is our home “has often meant that Christian reflection on human existence has been ‘docetic’: human beings come off as a little lower than the angels—

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474 McFague, Body of God, 106.

475 McFague, Body of God, 105.
not fully human.”476 With this comes the idea that our home is a spiritual one, with God, namely heaven. Thus, “Most of us live with the strange illusion that we are other than our bodies, that we and those we love can and will exist apart from them, that our spirits will live on, here or ‘in heaven,’ after death.”477 McFague believes this type of Christian treatment of the self is both flawed and dangerous. It does not take seriously the findings of contemporary science, thereby painting an untruthful picture of reality. This results in dualistic thinking and destructive treatment towards our bodies, as well as the body of the earth.478

As a resource to theology, McFague believes that the common creation story is able to correct this imbalance and danger. The story’s emphasis on embodiment reminds us that we are not spiritualized beings; we are embodied. This means that the spirit or soul functions within, and not removed from, the body, and we are, as McFague puts it, “inspired bodies—living, loving, thinking bodies.”479 Explaining the relationship between body and soul, McFague states,

Whatever more or other we may be, we are bodies, made of the same stuff as all other life-forms on our planet, including our brains, which are on a chemical continuum with our physical being. We do not have bodies, as we like to suppose, distancing ourselves from them as one does from an inferior, a servant, who works for us (the “us” being the mind that inhabits the body but does not really belong there). We are bodies, “body and soul.” One of the most important revelations from postmodern science is the continuum between matter and energy (or more precisely, the unified matter/energy field), which overturns traditional hierarchical dualisms such as nonliving/living, flesh/spirit, nature/human being… Whatever we say about that part of ourselves we call brain, mind, or spirit, it evolved from and is

476 McFague, Body of God, 103.

477 McFague, Body of God, 16.

478 This idea will be explored at more length in the next chapter.

479 McFague, Body of God, 20.
continuous with our bodies. If we like the part of ourselves we call ‘mind’ or ‘spirit,’ then we ought to honor that part which is its base or root—the body—for they belong together.  

McFague does not negate that we are spiritual beings; but she works hard to articulate that this is not all we are. As embodied earth creatures, we are both body and soul, existing together, and it is wrong to focus solely on the soul, to the detriment of the body. The truth is, as McFague reminds us in one of her later works, that we are “super, natural”, not “supernatural” beings, and our embodied nature means that we are grounded in/on earth, our home.

The common creation story confirms that we are embodied, living, breathing beings. We share the same physical matter as all life forms. We also share the same physical needs of food, water, and ultimately, space, which is our home, the earth. These shared physical attributes confirm our place in this world, and demonstrate the interrelatedness and interdependence that exists between and amongst all life forms. But that is not all that the common creation story and contemporary science reveal; what about our individuality and uniqueness, as human beings? We have seen how we are like other beings; how are we different?

**The Question of Uniqueness**

It should be no surprise that, as embodied creatures of the highest complexity, human beings are like and unlike other beings in complex ways to varying degrees. Speaking of our shared makeup, McFague states, “An oak tree and I are made of the

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same stuff. If you go back far enough, we have a common ancestor. If some degree of intimacy is true of us and oak trees, it is astonishingly true of us and other animals. We not only are animals but we are genetically very similar to all other animals and only a fraction of difference away from those animals, the higher mammals, closest to us.” Yet we are not the same as dogs, dolphins, or gorillas. Something about our form of embodiment is specifically our own; it is uniquely human. What makes us who we are? How are we different?

Human beings are thought to possess something “more” or “different” than other life forms, which sets us apart. What is it that makes us unique? Let us first consider the spirit or soul, which McFague insists is so much a part of our identity. McFague resists any claims that the spirit or soul is unique to humankind. She believes that all (healthy) bodies are inspirited. Yet the human capacity for a relationship to/with the divine seems to extend beyond that of the rest of creation, at least as seen from our vantage point.

What are we to make of this? McFague offers little directly on this subject. She is clear that all of creation is loved by God and in a relationship with God. This includes humankind; yet she also suggests that there is something different about us and our relationship to/with God.

The most common way to address the uniqueness of humankind, with our relationships with the divine and with one another, is to consider the intellect. This is most often perceived as the point of difference between us and other life forms. McFague states, “We are rational, linguistic, logical beings and therefore unlike all other

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482 McFague, Body of God, 118.
animals.” Using this argument, we are able to know and grasp God in ways beyond the rest of creation. We are also able to comprehend more about ourselves and our world, resulting in deeper and more meaningful relationships. McFague is well aware of the arguments that have been made against the intellect as being uniquely human, namely that certain (non-human) animals have been found able to communicate and show the ability to reason, suggesting that these functions are not unique to humankind. While this may be so, it has also not been documented or proven that any other animals have or possess these gifts in the same capacity as human beings.

Still, our capacity to reason does not set us apart or remove us from other animals. As McFague suggests, in our organic world, “We are on a continuum with them as they are with us; it is not us versus them but us and them.” We have simply chosen to focus on the intellect and our ability to reason as the distinguishing features of humanity, treating them as though they make us superior. Such thinking fits our mistaken sense of identity—the idea that we are a thinking self, devoid of body and feeling. It also shows our desire to use our own type of body as a way of measuring all other bodies—that all other life forms ought to possess the same reasoning abilities as humans. This is nothing but an attempt to compare apples to oranges, ultimately a fruitless effort. As she states, “We are profoundly and complexly united with other animals as well as profoundly and complexly different from them and they from each other.” The truth is that we need to appreciate other beings “in their difference, their differences from us and from each other.

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483 McFague, Body of God, 119.
484 McFague, Body of God, 119.
485 McFague, Body of God, 120.
that require, for instance, special and particular habitats, food, privacy, and whatever else each species needs to flourish.”

This means acknowledging that our ability to reason and communicate are our own; they look different than in any other life form.

With our own unique capacity for and ability to reason and communicate come additional gifts and responsibilities that do seem to be limited to humankind. As McFague suggests, we are special in ways different than typically imagined. We often think and act as though we are at the center of things, marginalizing the rest of creation. We believe we are superior, even removed from nature. Yet the common creation story expresses another picture, one that conveys that these ideas are simply not true. The story presents a picture of the universe in which all that exists evolved from one bit of matter. We have equal part in that, the same as any other life form. Also, as we have noted, the world and other life forms existed for 15 billion years before humankind even entered the picture. Our presence is barely visible on that timeline. As McFague puts it, “On the universe’s clock, human existence appears a few seconds before midnight.”

What are we to make of this? Many believe that this story indicates that humanity is the climax of creation. McFague insists that the implications are more sobering; “this suggests, surely, that the whole show could scarcely have been put on for our benefit…” Nevertheless, since it took fifteen billion years to evolve creatures as complex as human beings, the question arises as to our peculiar role in this story, especially in relation to our planet.”

The common creation story does put forth the long evolutionary process, by

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486 McFague, Body of God, 121.

487 McFague, Body of God, 104.

488 McFague, Body of God, 104.
which life forms have grown increasingly complex, humankind currently being the most complex. But this does not mean that we are the finale or conclusion to the story. As McFague explains, this is a story that is *in process*. It has a beginning and middle, but the end remains unknown. We live in the midst of the (evolving) story. Our existence is a relatively new part of the story, yet McFague suggests that humanity holds a special and critical role: we possess the power to determine the direction that the end of the story will take. As she believes, this is ultimately due to our special capacity for reason and the gifts that come with it, which make us “partners in creation, as the self-conscious, reflexive part of the creation that could participate in furthering the process.”

For McFague, the question surrounding our uniqueness or specialness is one centered on our relationship to/with the earth, and our ability to help creation flourish. She states, “According to the common creation story, we are not the center of things by any stretch of the imagination, although in a curious reversal, we are increasingly very important.” We are both insignificant and special, critical role players, all at the same time. While we are not the center of creation, we hold a profound role as potential partners in creation. This role is ultimately due to our special and unique gifts. As McFague suggests, “We are, to our knowledge, the only creatures on our planet who *know* the common creation story, the only creatures who not only participate in it but *know* that they do.” Ultimately, we are special not only for our ability to reason and communicate, but for our capacity for reflection, or as she refers to it, “self

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consciousness.” Thus she states, “The ability to step back, to reflect on that we know and what we know—in other words, self consciousness—may well be our peculiar specialty.”

To the best of our knowledge, human beings are the only creatures on our planet capable of this kind of reflection, on our lives, origin, and world. As McFague describes it, such reflection is an experience of wonder and awe; it “is the basis of free will, imagination, choice, and whatever one calls that dimension of human beings that makes us capable of changing ourselves and our world.”

Unlike any other life form, we possess the ability to imagine another world. And not only that, we possess the ability to make it happen.

**What is required of us?**

Our special gift for reflection, or self-consciousness, brings with it heightened responsibility. Our free will means that we must make the choice to act as partners in creation. Or we have the choice to ignore this special role and opportunity. As McFague puts it, “We have the knowledge and power to destroy ourselves as well as many other species and we have the knowledge and power to help the process of the ongoing creation continue. This means, in a way unprecedented in the past, that we are profoundly responsible.”

The choice is ours; as reflective, self-conscious beings, we know the story of our origin and relationship to/with other life forms. It is up to us whether we accept this as true, and live accordingly, or not. Whether or not we accept

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this responsibility, McFague reminds us that we are all faced with the truth of our identity:

We are profoundly interrelated and interdependent with everything living and nonliving in the universe and especially on our planet, and our peculiar position here is that we are radically dependent on all that is, so to speak, ‘beneath’ us (the plants on land and the microorganisms in the ocean as well as the air, water, and soil). At the same time we have become, like it or not, the guardians and caretakers of our tiny planet. In a universe characterized by complex individuality beyond our comprehension, our peculiar form of individuality and interdependence has developed into a special role for us. We are the responsible ones, responsible for all the rest upon which we are so profoundly dependent.  

Our capacity for reflection on who we are brings with it a mound of responsibility. It is up to us whether we help creation, which we are a part of, flourish or not. As McFague puts it, this kind of reflection produces “dual awareness” and responsibility regarding our place within creation and role to help it thrive; “we are the self-conscious ones who can think about, weep for, and speak of nature, but we are also one in flesh and bone with nature. It is this dual awareness of both our responsibility for nature and our profound and complex unity with it that is the heart of the appropriate, indeed necessary, sensibility that we need to develop.”

As was previously mentioned, our ability to reflect on and accept our identity and responsibility is fully dependent on our vision and worldview. As McFague suggests, “Who we believe we are in the scheme of things influences what we think about others and how we act toward them.” We will only step up and into our role as self-conscious partners in creation if we truly learn to see ourselves as part of creation, instead of

495 McFague, Body of God, 109.
496 McFague, Body of God, 124.
497 McFague, Super, Natural Christians, 2.
removed from it. We must be able to see through all of the misguided conceptions of who we are that are out there and see the truth that contemporary science and the common creation story are suggesting. For starters, this means that we need to stop thinking of ourselves strictly as individuals and stop acting as though individualism were the truth about human nature. As conveyed by the common creation story, “Individuals exist only in networks of interrelationship and interdependence;” we are relational beings. McFague explains, “We do not decide when we want to form relationships with other people and the earth, for we are in the most intimate and complex relationships from before our birth until after our death.” To continue to think and act as though we are individuals has dangerous consequences, resulting in misunderstanding of our place and role. We see ourselves as removed or set apart from others and the world; we think that we, as individuals, are superior and elite. The result is a dualistic sense of entitlement and snobbery. We think and act as though we are better than other people and species.

Referencing the common creation story, McFague reminds us that this is not an accurate picture of who we are. We do not live alone, and our sense of self is not established in seclusion. We are not isolated individuals, but relational, embodied earth creatures. “Who are we? As members of the household called Earth, we are relational beings, defined by our needs that make us dependent on others and by our joys that make us desire one another. We are not just self-interested individuals; in fact, according to the ecological economic picture of reality, we are basically and primarily communal beings.

498 McFague, A New Climate for Theology, 148.

499 McFague, A New Climate for Theology, 148.
who become unique individuals through help from and response to others."  
Rather than thinking in dualistic terms, McFague encourages us to think more organically; we all share in interrelated webs of interdependence.  Put simply, in sharing the earth, which is home to all of us, we inevitably always in contact with one another.  McFague describes this continuum as developing an enlarged sense of self; as she puts it, “The borders of the self do not stop with my own body: I am, I exist, only as I am in touch with the others, the other subjects who influence me and whom I influence.”  
Such perspective keeps us from thinking of ourselves as individually elite and superior, which in turn, keeps us from treating other people, life forms, and the earth, as less important or valuable.  Thus McFague makes an important distinction: humankind may be the dominant species on our planet in terms of our complexity, knowledge, and power, but we must be extremely cautious not to confuse this with complete domination.  McFague acknowledges our ability and power to help or hinder creation; this is true.  Also true is that the earth and other life forms on it are not resources for our (sole) well-being.  All of creation has intrinsic worth and value.  This is the basic claim of embodiment, witnessed in common creation story.

McFague ultimately calls out humanity for living falsely.  As she puts it, we are living a lie.  We have not been honest with ourselves and one another about who we are, and our relationships to/with other people, life forms, and the earth.  In this way, McFague claims regarding identity ring resoundingly similar to Merton, who distinguished between the true and false self (who we really are vs. our mistaken sense of

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self). While not relying on this same terminology, McFague is, essentially, making the same distinction. There is the (true) self as revealed by contemporary science and the common creation story—embodied and relational—and there is the (false) self that we assume we are based on pop culture and consumerism, which highlight the individual, over and above creation. Yet unlike Merton, McFague stresses, “‘Who we are’ is an interpretation, not a description. Therefore, it can be changed. If we discover that our current view of ourselves is destructive—that it is not, in spite of appearances, the good life—we can work towards changing it.”

McFague insists that our lack of appreciation and respect for our relationships with one another and the created world are detrimental to the development of our character and identity in and before God. Thus it is both a physical and spiritual problem; one that she labels a sin. As McFague explains, “Sin is not just breaking divine laws and blaspheming God; rather, it is living falsely, living contrary to reality, to the way things are.” As McFague understands it, sin is “living a lie,” living out of proper relations with God, self, and other beings. Thus sin is the failure to grasp our true identity and relationships, and act as such; it is something we are all guilty of, but with God, have the potential to overcome.

As the dominant species, we have the capacity for self-reflection. With this comes the possession of knowledge and power. As McFague states, we are the responsible ones; we have a responsibility not only to ourselves, but also to God and to our home, the earth. McFague reminds us, “On our planet we are the self-conscious

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502 McFague, Life Abundant, 71.
503 McFague, Body of God, 114.
504 McFague, Body of God, 114.
aspect of the body of God, the part of the divine body able to work with God, the spirit who creates and redeems us, to bring about the liberation and healing of the earth and all its creatures.\textsuperscript{505} This is a special role that we can only grasp with clarity and right vision about who we are, and where we fit in this world.

\textit{Conclusion}

The picture of reality portrayed by the common creation story and contemporary science—the scheme of things—reveals a great deal about our identity and sense of self. The starting place of embodiment reveals McFague’s concern for the questions of “what” and “who” we are, rather than the questions of “why” or “how” we came to be. Articulating her agenda and goal, McFague states, “We could focus on the \textit{what} rather than the \textit{why} and \textit{how}: on what (who) we have become, both in our relations with other life-forms (our place in the cosmos) and our special responsibilities, rather than on how we got the way we are. The latter epistemological question has always fascinated the West, but a more practical kind of question perhaps ought to be: \textit{Who are we in the scheme of things, and what is required of us?}\textsuperscript{506} This is the question we have sought to explore this chapter—an understanding of self in an ecological context. The “why” and “how” questions have commandeered theology, but McFague reminds us that the “what” and “who” questions are equally valuable, and are too, spiritual questions. As Christians we believe that we are both body and soul; we live in an incarnate world, in which the divine is present. McFague insists that “an incarnate religion demands an incarnate

\textsuperscript{505} McFague, \textit{Body of God}, 124.

\textsuperscript{506} McFague, \textit{Body of God}, 79-80. Italics added for emphasis.
spirituality…. When life is seen as intrinsically valuable and all life exists in networks of interrelationship and interdependence, then there is no split between spirit and flesh, with religion concerned mainly with the spirit.”

We are, body and soul, embodied earth creatures. We are both like and unlike other life forms. We share in complex webs of interrelationships and interdependence with other life. Yet we are also completely unique and our own; we are the only life form capable of self-reflection, by which we fully grasp our origin, identity, and place in the world. Thus we hold a special role and responsibility, to live authentically and to help the rest of creation do the same.

So this is where I, we, fit, not as a little lower than the angels but as an inspirited body among other living bodies, one with some distinctive and marvelous characteristics and some genuine limitations. I am of the earth, a product of its ancient and awesome history, and I really and truly belong here. But I am only one among millions, now billions, of other human beings, who have a place, a space, on the earth. I am also a member of one species among millions, perhaps billions, of other species that need places on the earth. We are all, human beings and other species, inhabitants of the same space, planet earth, and interdependent in intricate and inexorable ways. I feel a sense of comfort, of settledness, of belonging as I consider my place in this cosmology, but also a sense of responsibility, for I know that I am a citizen of the planet. I have an expanded horizon as I reflect on my place in the common creation story: I belong not only to my immediate family or country or even my species, but to the earth and all its life-forms. I do belong to this whole. I know this now. The question is, can I, will I, live as if I did? Will I accept my proper place in the scheme of things? Will we, the human beings of the planet, do so?

McFague’s questions are important. They get at the heart of this project—to grasp how we are called to live. Our exploration on identity this chapter unearthed the special role and responsibility of humankind. This is something that we will have to explore further in the final chapter. But first, we need to deepen our understanding of the world and our

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relationship to/with it. If we are truly to act as partners in creation, it is critical that we fully understand the life forms we seek to help. With that, let us to turn our attention to the next chapter, the world, in/of which we are so deeply a part.
CHAPTER FIVE: THE WORLD

This chapter, focusing on the world, is in many ways a continuation of the previous chapter on the self. Both Merton and McFague sought definitions of selfhood relevant to our world. As we have said, we do not live in a vacuum; we are shaped by our surroundings and interactions with one another and the world we live in, and we in turn, shape others and the world, as well. This chapter seeks to grasp Merton and McFague’s understandings of the world and where/how we fit into this big, complex web of creation. Specifically, what do our relationships look like with one another, and with the natural world? Merton and McFague’s conceptions of the world, along with their unique understandings of the relationships that constitute it, are important in shaping their responses to the question of how we are called to live, which we will explore next chapter. Put simply, any ideas that we have about how we are called to live hinge on our conception of the world, and our relationship to/with it.

Merton

Personal Revelation

Merton wrestled with his conception of the world over the course of his life. To be sure, Merton’s ideas on God and the self grew and matured with time, but Merton’s feelings toward the world evolved rather drastically, moving from an understanding of the world as a detrimental and dangerous, if not outright evil, place to more of a
sacramental understanding of its goodness in/before God. Thus it is important to trace this transition if we are to fully grasp his position on this subject.

Merton’s early writings reveal a great deal of angst regarding the world in his younger years. He saw the world as a place of selfishness and hopelessness. At the time of entry and in the beginning years of monastic life, Merton believed his entrance into the Abbey of Gethsemani to be an escape from it all. He thought of the monastery as a place of refuge, where he could withdrawal from the world, and all of its despair, and “disappear into God.”\footnote{Merton, \emph{The Sign of Jonas}, 18.} This language is most clearly seen in his early journal entries and in his autobiography, in which he wrote of his first exposure to the Trappists, stating, “What wonderful happiness there was, then, in the world! There were still men on this miserable, noisy, cruel earth, who tasted the marvelous joy of silence and solitude, who dwelt in forgotten mountain cells, in secluded monasteries, where the news and desires and appetites and conflicts of the world no longer reached them.”\footnote{Merton, \emph{The Seven Storey Mountain}, 346.} Merton’s language expressed his extreme dislike and distrust for the world. Why? Merton’s journal entries and autobiography expressed his own experiences of loneliness and restlessness in the world. He struggled to find meaning in/to it all—the busyness, radical independence, and corruptness that abounded all around. He witnessed atrocities such as war and death. He was left with a sense of bitterness regarding society and the direction that it was headed. He wanted an escape, and entrance into the Church and monastic order gave him that. Or so he thought.
It didn’t take Merton long once in the monastery to realize that the busyness and business of the world permeate in/behind cloistered walls as well. Merton was surprised at how active the contemplative life actually was, with its lack of privacy and heavy work load. He wrote in his journal, “I am a contemplative who is ready to collapse from overwork.” Also, Merton came to realize that the cloistered walls did not function as a barricade between monks and the world. News of problems in/of the world trickled into the monastery, and Merton found himself aware and concerned with it all. He came to realize that his early thinking was naïve and problematic. He admitted to treating the world as evil and corrupt, a place “to be ridiculed, then spat upon, and at last formally rejected with a curse.” Continuing with his revelation, he stated,

Actually, I have come to the monastery to find my place in the world, and if I fail to find this place in the world I will be wasting my time in the monastery…. Coming to the monastery has been for me exactly the right kind of withdrawal. It has given me perspective. It has taught me how to live. And now I owe everyone else in the world a share in that life. My first duty is to start, for the first time, to live as a member of a human race which is no more (and no less) ridiculous than I am myself. And my first human act is the recognition of how much I owe everybody else. Merton’s revelation was fueled by his newly achieved American citizenship, which he received in 1951, after 36 years without a national identity. His citizenship led him to experience a shared identity with the rest of the country. He felt a connection to/with others out there in the world in a way that he never anticipated.

Merton’s appreciation and affection for others out there in the world grew with time. In 1958, while running an errand in Louisville, Kentucky, Merton experienced a sudden vision or revelation of unity, which he later described in his journal: “In

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Louisville, at the corner of Fourth and Walnut, in the center of the shopping district, I was suddenly overwhelmed with the realization that I loved all those people, that they were mine and I theirs, that we could not be alien to one another even though we were total strangers. It was like waking from a dream of separateness, of spurious self-isolation in a special world, the world of renunciation and supposed holiness.”

This revelatory experience of oneness left Merton with new perspective regarding the world and his place in it. He finally understood that monastic life was not an escape from the world; his vows did not separate or cut him off from the rest of humanity, and to have ever thought so was illusory. As he described,

The whole illusion of a separate holy existence is a dream… the conception of “separation from the world” that we have in the monastery too easily presents itself as a complete illusion: the illusion that by making vows we become a different species of being, pseudoangels, “spiritual men,” men of interior life, what have you. Certainly these traditional values are very real, but their reality is not of an order outside everyday existence in a contingent world, nor does it entitle one to despise the secular: though “out of the world” we are in the same world as everybody else, the world of the bomb, the world of race hatred, the world of technology, the world of mass media, big business, revolution, and all the rest. We take a different attitude to all these things, for we belong to God. Yet so does everybody else belong to God. We just happen to be conscious of it, and to make a profession out of this consciousness. But does that entitle us to consider ourselves different, or even better, than others? The whole idea is preposterous. 

Merton finally came to realize that there was no escaping the world. And not only that, he finally realized that the world, as appalling and full of despair as it may sometimes seem, is full of beautiful people; people that share in the image and likeness of God just like Merton. Thus Merton’s personal thoughts evolved and he came to reach a more balanced understanding and appreciation for the world, with its blend of absurdity and


splendor. True to his monastic calling, his search for solitude continued and even intensified. Yet he also developed a growing concern for the world, evidenced in his ever increasing letter writing and communication with those in the outside world and writings on the social issues of his time.

**Understanding the “World”**

Readers were introduced in chapter two to Merton’s conception of reality. As we noted then, Merton’s understanding is that reality is one, although humankind’s experience of it tends to be dualistic and divisive as a result of sin. The drastic result of the Fall was a lack of clarity in our vision; we are unable to see and grasp the truth about the world around us. This conception of reality left Merton with a view of the world that is both challenging and complicated for us to pinpoint. There is the world as perceived by mass society, and there is the world as it truly is. How does Merton make sense of the world? His personal experiences and revelation reveal that he came to love and appreciate the world, with its blend of absurdity and splendor. What did this mean for Merton? “The world” is a rather ambiguous place and concept, which Merton himself admitted. How do we distinguish and pinpoint the splendor from the absurdity? How is it that we are to love and appreciate the world, exactly?

In addressing the subject of the world, Merton was well aware of the negative connotation that the world held in traditional Christian teaching. He noted that the Church has traditionally embraced the Carolingian worldview, in which “the ‘world’ is identified simply with the sinful, the perilous, the unpredictable (therefore in many cases
the new and, even worse, the free),” and is therefore to be rejected. With this attitude, Christianity is seen as opposed to the world and removed or set apart from it. It is world denying. Merton found this traditional imagery and description of the world and Christian life troubling, describing it as both “seriously flawed” and “no longer viable at all.” He believed this theology oversimplifies the world and our relationship to/with it.

Merton posited a more open and dynamic worldview that stressed openness and freedom. He understood the world to be complex and challenging place, in which our being is firmly rooted. Thus the world cannot be escaped or avoided, and it should not be treated as removed from us. Merton states, “The world as pure object is something that is not there. It is not a reality outside us for which we exist. It is not a firm and absolute objective structure which has to be accepted on its own inexorable terms…. We and our world interpenetrate…. It is an extension and a projection of ourselves and of our lives, and if we attend to it respectfully, while attending also to our own freedom and our own integrity, we can learn to obey its ways and coordinate our lives with its mysterious movements.” Rooted in this understanding Merton grasped both the absurdity and splendor that the world possesses. It is a complex mix of good and bad. As he describes, “It is a complex of responsibilities and options made out of the loves, the hates, the fears, the joys, the hopes, the greed, the cruelty, the kindness, the faith, the trust, the suspicion of all.” This complex freedom that we possess in our relationship with the world

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515 Merton, *Contemplation in a World of Action*, 145.

516 Merton, *Contemplation in a World of Action*, 149.

517 Merton, *Contemplation in a World of Action*, 151-152.

518 Merton, *Contemplation in a World of Action*, 143.
makes us the ones ultimately responsible for our attitude toward (and treatment of) the world, whether we focus on the evil and corruption or the beauty and goodness, because there is both.

Much of Merton’s time spent on the world focused on the negative: the corruption, manipulation, selfishness, and lies. He described the world as a secular, worldly society: “a life of vain hopes imprisoned in the illusion of newness and change, an illusion which brings us constantly back to the same old point, the contemplation of our own nothingness.” Merton’s description captures the state of a fallen world—a world stuck in a cycle of division, alienation, and illusion which humankind seeks to escape, but cannot do it with overcoming the consequences of sin (only possible through Christ Jesus). Much of what Merton had to say about the world was in this context, and was descriptive of the world’s present and fallen state. He wrote of what he saw: a society of lost people, aimlessly lost, wandering, following, imitating one another, and seeking to get ahead. Thus Merton described this world as having and requiring a set of servitudes, which having entered the monastery he was happy to avoid:

Servitudes to certain standards of value which to me were idiotic and repugnant and still are. Many of these were trivial, some of them were onerous, all are closely related. The image of a society that is happy because it drinks Coca-Cola or Seagrams or both and is protected by the bomb. The society that is imaged in the mass media and in advertising, in the movies, in TV, in best-sellers, in current fads, in all the pompous and trifling masks with which it hides callousness, sensuality, hypocrisy, cruelty, and fear. Is this “the world?” Yes. It is the same wherever you have mass man.

Merton believed that secular society pervades all places and all times. It is inescapable because of the pervasion of sin in the world. But he insisted that there exists a deeper

\[519\] Merton, *The Inner Experience*, 51.

level to reality than this. Thus the world is not doomed to despair. We may live in a secular world, but there is beauty in freedom, by which we can choose not to be enslaved to it. By wholeheartedly accepting and following God, Merton insists that we can rise above the cycles of the secular world. A sacred attitude is required of us, by which we pierce the darkness and despair of the secular world with Christian love, mercy, and compassion. This is not an escape from secular life, but rather a confrontation of it in which we come to recognize the illusions for what they are. Merton understood this sacred attitude to essentially be contemplative. Thus as he states, “There is a subtle but inescapable connection between the ‘sacred’ attitude and the acceptance of one’s inmost self.”

As our true selves, we experience a change in perspective. We realize that the world does not exist apart from us and that we can never escape it. We see through secular society’s attempts to feed us lies about who we are and how we fit into this world and with one another. Merton states, “The way to find the real ‘world’ is not merely to measure and observe what is outside us but to discover our own inner ground. For that is where the world is, first of all: in my deepest self.”

Possessing a sacred attitude, as our true selves, we are able to grasp that the world “is an extension and a projection of ourselves and of our lives…. It is a living and self-creating mystery of which I am myself a part, to which I am myself my own unique door.” Thus division and alienation are fictitious lies; they are impossible because we are a part of this world and it is a part of us.

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521 Merton, The Inner Experience, 54.
522 Merton, Contemplation in a World of Action, 152.
523 Merton, Contemplation in a World of Action, 152.
In his work, *Contemplation in a World of Action,* Merton posed the challenge of knowing and understanding the world by asking the question: “Is the world a problem?” Merton held that the world itself is not a problem, but rather we are the problem. Our problem with the world is actually a problem of identity, as we spoke of last chapter, in which too many of us are living as our false selves. He states, “The world is a ‘problem’ insofar as everybody in it is a problem to himself;”\(^524\) “the world itself is no problem, but we are a problem to ourselves because we are alienated from ourselves, and this alienation is due precisely to an inveterate habit of division by which we break reality into pieces and then wonder why, after we have manipulated the pieces until they fall apart, we find ourselves out of touch with life, with reality, with the world and most of all with ourselves.”\(^525\) Thus the world itself is good; it is created by God and therefore holy. But we fail to see this goodness and holiness unless we are living as we should as our true selves, and mass society fails to do so.

The sheer number of individuals living illusory lives as their false selves is what gives the world its negative connotation. The false self, a “worldly self,” is the cause behind all of the alienation, division, selfishness, etc. Alienated, divided individuals make for an alienated and divided world. As a result, we are born into, surrounded by, and lost “in the falsities and illusions of a massive organization.”\(^526\) We are immersed “in the sea of lies and passions which is called ‘the world.’”\(^527\) Deeply embedded in such a

\(^{524}\) Merton, *Contemplation in a World of Action,* 143.

\(^{525}\) Merton, *Contemplation in a World of Action,* 153.

\(^{526}\) Merton, *Contemplation in a World of Action,* 60.

\(^{527}\) Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation,* 38.
world, we do not know who we truly are. And lacking real understanding of our own selves, we lack the ability to reach out and share in healthy relationships, with one another and with the world. The result is a world full of selfishness, and therefore divided and alienated individuals. Merton is clear that “the moral disintegration of an affluent society, to broken homes, alcoholism, irresponsibility, delinquency and other widely prevalent evils”\(^{528}\) such as “lusty passions” or “unrestrained pleasure” are not the real issues; these are certainly negatives that infest our world, but they are not the problem itself. “What is wrong with the world is not the satisfaction of carnal desires but universal confusion and frustration, leading to a collapse of real interest in life, the danger of despair, and the search for an outlet in various forms of extremism, fanaticism, or nihilism: or else, more commonly, a mindless and routine conformity to the demands of a highly organized social machine. These are symptoms. They are not the problem itself.”\(^{529}\) The problem is an identity crisis; it is a problem of authenticity that begins with the self, and then proceeds into the world at large.

*False Self = False Vision*

Ultimately a problem of identity and authenticity, Merton’s thoughts on the world are intimately connected and woven into his ideas on the true self and false self and contemplative experience. If we are living as our false selves, we do not know who we truly are. This means we lack understanding of our relationships with one another and the world around us. The falsehood of the false or worldly self falsifies all of its

\(^{528}\) Merton, *Contemplation in a World of Action*, 58.

\(^{529}\) Merton, *Contemplation in a World of Action*, 59.
relationships. How so, exactly? Last chapter in our study of identity, we described the false self as being illusory, lacking depth, and being tightly associated with the ego. More specifically, the false self is obsessively concerned with itself, so that it thinks the world revolves around it. Thus the false self is supremely selfish. This selfishness twists or distorts our vision of reality, the world, and our relationships. Describing this, Merton states, “It is man’s own technocratic and self-centered ‘worldliness’ which is in reality a falsification and a perversion of natural perspectives, which separates him from the reality of creation, and enables him to act out his fantasies as a little autonomous god, seeing and judging everything in relation to himself.” As our false selves, we do not see or appreciate the world for what it is; instead, we take and use other people and creation itself for our own purposes and desires. We lose perspective, and we become obsessed with the idea of “progress” at the detriment of ourselves and nature. In reality it is nothing more than an abusive, destructive situation and a distortion of what really is. Merton explains, “Instead of conforming ourselves to what is, we twist everything around, in our words and thoughts, to fit our own deformity.” This improper treatment of the world results in us alienating ourselves from others, creation, and God. It is the cause of the divisions and dualisms that we think we see in the world. As we have suggested, this new, distorted reality is a result of the Fall, which Merton understood as a loss of clear vision and insight into our identity and relationships. The result of the Fall is that we think of ourselves as independent, autonomous beings.

530 Merton, Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander, 294.

531 Merton, No Man is an Island, 190.
We mistakenly think that we have to stand out and be on top to really identify ourselves. Merton explains,

People who know nothing of God and whose lives are centered on themselves, imagine that they can only find themselves by asserting their own desires and ambitions and appetites in a struggle with the rest of the world. They try to become real by imposing themselves on other people, by appropriating for themselves some share of the limited supply of created goods and thus emphasizing the difference between themselves and the other men who have less than they, or nothing at all. They can only conceive one way of becoming real: cutting themselves off from other people and building a barrier of contrast and distinction between themselves and other men. 532

This is just one of the lies surrounding the false self. Merton is clear that it is impossible to truly discover yourself if living in division, over and against one another, because this is not reality; this is a distortion of the world and our (lack of) relationships in it. Yet the false self still thinks that it sees and knows the truth surrounding reality. This arrogance only further intensifies our confused efforts of being real and knowing God.

Many of us living as our false selves still desire and seek to know and have a relationship with God. Yet with distorted vision, our efforts only lead us further away from the truth. One example Merton gave was the renunciation of creation as evil, thought to be avoided in attempts at growing in our relationship with God. He states, “Those who try to escape from this situation by treating the good things of God as if they were evils are only confirming themselves in a terrible illusion.” 533 Rejection of the world only intensifies our alienation, division, and illusionary vision; it does not fix it.

Merton insists that the world and all of creation is good and holy, having been created by God. This is evident in comments he made such as, “The universe is not evil,

532 Merton, New Seeds of Contemplation, 47.

533 Merton, New Seeds of Contemplation, 22.
Merton believed in the sacredness of the world; each aspect of creation is perfect in its simple existence and in being what it is, since created by God. Thus the world and created things in it are not to be cast off or rejected in search of God; this only further alienates us. On the contrary, Merton insists that the created world is to be embraced. It is rather the illusory false self that must be rejected. He states,

> Do we really choose between the world and Christ as between two conflicting realities absolutely opposed? Or do we choose Christ by choosing the world as it really is in him, that is to say, created and redeemed by him, and encountered in the ground of our own personal freedom and of our love? Do we really renounce ourselves and the world in order to find Christ, or do we renounce our alienated and false selves in order to choose our own deepest truth in choosing both the world and Christ at the same time? If the deepest ground of my being is love, then in that very love itself and nowhere else will I find myself, and the world, and my brother and Christ. It is not a question of either-or but of all-in-one.  

Merton saw nothing wrong with the world itself, the problem resides in our vision, attitude, and relationship to/with the world, with others and with creation itself. This vision is a matter of identity. The truth surrounding our relationship to/with the world is only grasped by those who have discovered their true selves. How, exactly, does being our true selves fix our relationship to/with the world?

**True Self = True Vision**

The question of how the true self fixes our relationship to/with the world is a good one. Up to this point in the project, Merton’s ideas on contemplative experience and the

534 Merton, *The Inner Experience*, 50.


true self have been described in an overly individualistic way. We have focused on the individual and his/her own discovery of self and relationship to/with God. But this is not the totality of who/what we are. We have not yet spoken of the contemplative’s place or role in the world, or the relationship between the true (or false) self to/with others and creation. Thus we do not yet have a complete picture; our description to this point does not capture the fullness of the experience of being one’s true self and finding union with God.

Without speaking about relationships, we naturally assume that for contemplative union God, we must withdraw from the world in search of this inner, spiritual true self that resides in God. This was even suggested last chapter, with the need for solitude, detachment, and withdrawal as part of the contemplative journey of self-discovery and the discovery of God. It is not difficult, then, to see how one could come to the (wrong) conclusion that the external world must be rejected in search of God. So much of the contemplative life is about solitude, withdrawal, and detachment. Thus the real meaning of these practices becomes extremely important. If misunderstood, their purpose fails; they end up isolating and alienating us instead of helping us find union with our self and God. Merton himself noted the problem, stating, “If we imagine that our inmost self is purely and simply something in us that is completely out of contact with the world of exterior objects, we would condemn ourselves in advance to complete frustration in our quest for spiritual awareness.”

What are detachment, solitude, and withdrawal, and what are their uses and functions? Merton was clear they are part of contemplative life. What is important to

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537 Merton, The Inner Experience, 19.
grasp about these things is that they are a means to an end: union with God. They are not
the end itself. As the means to contemplative union, these practices and dispositions have
to do with discernment and the ability to decipher between our own selfish will and the
will of God. Merton states that “the real purpose of asceticism is to disclose the
difference between the evil use of created things, which is sin, and their good use, which
is virtue.”\textsuperscript{538} Thus they help us with our vision and the way we see and relate to the
world around us. Detachment and withdrawal are necessary because we develop
unhealthy relationships with the people and world around us, selfishly considering
everyone and everything in relation to ourselves, as if we were at the center of it all. As
Merton explains, “Everything you love for its own sake, outside of God alone, blinds
your intellect and destroys your judgment of moral values. It vitiates your choices so that
you cannot clearly distinguish good from evil and you do not truly know God’s will.”\textsuperscript{539}
We must give up self-interest in things and take on the interest of God. Then, Merton
insists, we will find even greater pleasure in created things. Detachment, withdrawal, and
solitude help combat this corrupted, sinful view and relationship with the world. They
make it possible to be our true selves and having united with God, love the world as God
does. How, exactly, do these practices guide us to the truth?

Merton states that “we experience God in proportion as we are stripped and
emptied of attachment to His creatures. And when we have been delivered from every
other desire we shall taste the perfection of an incorruptible joy.”\textsuperscript{540} Yet Merton insists

\textsuperscript{538} Merton, \textit{No Man is an Island}, 106.
\textsuperscript{539} Merton, \textit{New Seeds of Contemplation}, 203.
\textsuperscript{540} Merton, \textit{New Seeds of Contemplation}, 268.
that detachment is not so much about created things as it is about shedding the false self so that we can find our true selves. He states, “Detachment from things does not mean setting up a contradiction between ‘things’ and ‘God’ as if God were another ‘thing’ and as if His creatures were His rivals. We do not detach ourselves from things in order to attach ourselves to God, but rather we become detached from ourselves in order to see and use all things in and for God.”

Merton is clear that detachment does not mean insensitivity or indifference to the world around us. Detachment from the world is not so much about abstaining or withdrawing from the world, but it is more of an attempt to stop being selfish and focusing on how things benefit us. Thus detachment is really a realignment of priorities, correcting our misuse of created things. As Merton states, “When we love God’s will we find Him and own His Joy in all things. But when we are against God, that is, when we love ourselves more than Him, all things become our enemies.”

Detachment corrects our relationship with the world around us. It allows us to acknowledge creation for what it is, as created by God.

Solitude and withdrawal aid in our detachment from the false self and further help us experience contemplative union with God. As was suggested, Merton was insistent that we do not and cannot escape the world, but this did not lessen the tremendous need for some amount of withdrawal. Merton was cautious of worldly affairs; he recognized the difficulty of discovering our true selves in a world in which the majority of people live as their false selves. How can we ever hope to find our true selves in the midst of such chaos? For this reason, Merton was weary, at one point stating, “Do everything you

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can to avoid the noise and business of men. Keep as far away as you can from the places where they gather to cheat and insult one another, to exploit one another, to laugh at one another, or to mock one another with their false gestures of friendship. Be glad if you can keep beyond the reach of their radios. Do not bother with their unearthly songs. Do not read their advertisements… No man who seeks spiritual freedom can afford to yield passively to all the appeals of a society of salesmen, advertisers and consumers.”

Merton felt that the best hope we have at finding our true selves is to avoid the lies and illusions presented to us and that surround us in the world. Thus there must be some amount of withdrawal, although it is not a renunciation of the people in the world or of creation itself.

Such withdrawal and detachment from the illusions and falsities in our world make it possible to achieve and experience real solitude. Merton understood real solitude to be about interior solitude; he states, “The truest solitude is not something outside you, not an absence of men or of the sound around you; it is an abyss opening up in the center of your own soul.” Thus solitude has to do with a disposition or attitude that we have and an open awareness of God’s presence in us and in the world. This kind of solitude requires some withdrawal and detachment, but it is not an escape from the world. Merton is clear that “solitude is not separation.” Isolation and alienation are marks of the false self; they are illusory. Real, interior solitude and attentiveness to God makes us realize that we “do not go into the desert to escape people but to learn how to find them; we do

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not leave them in order to have nothing more to do with them, but to find out the way to do them the most good.” Merton goes so far as to say that if we go into the solitary desert to escape humankind, we will only take them with us. Solitude serves a purpose; it is not meant to be separation or isolation, as these are mere markings of a falsified world. It is meant to help unite us to/with God and give us clarity of vision. It helps us realize who we truly are, and what our relationship with the world really is.

Asceticism helps us ultimately reach contemplative union with God, in which we experience the fullness of God’s being, which is Love. This is not something that we passively revel in; it is rather something that we actively share and participate in. As Merton insists, “Christian contemplation is the perfection of love,” and solitude, detachment, and withdrawal help us achieve this perfection of love. When they are misunderstood they end up excluding all love, alienating us, rather than leading us to it. Thus the discovery of the true self may take some introspection and withdrawal, but it does not leave us removed from the world. These practices, when used and understood correctly, actually help us realize, as our true selves, our place in and relationship with the world. As Merton understood them, they awaken in us the relational part of our being and give us clarity in our vision.

The spiritual “I” obviously stands in a definite relationship to the world of objects. All the more is it related to the world of other personal “subjects.” In seeking to awaken the inner self we must try to learn how this relationship is entirely new and how it gives us a completely different view of things. Instead of seeing the external world in its bewildering complexity, separateness, and multiplicity; instead of seeing objects as things to be manipulated for pleasure or profit; instead of placing

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ourselves over against objects in a posture of desire, defiance, suspicion, greed, or fear, the inner self sees the world from a deeper and more spiritual viewpoint.\textsuperscript{548}

Thus we come to realize the truth about ourselves and the world. The true self does not live, nor is it discovered, in isolation; the true self is by its very nature a relational self. And so our identity is linked not only to God, but also to the rest of humanity. Quoting John Donne, Merton insists that “no man is an island, entire of itself; every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main.”\textsuperscript{549}

Relationships are built into our being. The question of identity, then, should not be asked as “Who am I?” but rather “Who am I in relation to this world?” or “Who are we?” To truly find and live as our true selves, we must find ourselves and live in community. Thus Merton insists that we discover our true selves not only in God, but also in humankind. We help one another on this path of discovery. Merton is clear that “the individual person is responsible for loving his own life and for ‘finding himself.’ If he persists in shifting this responsibility to somebody else, he fails to find out the meaning of his own existence.”\textsuperscript{550} I, myself, am solely responsible for finding and living as my true self. And others cannot tell me who I am; this will only cause me to blindly follow, living all the more as my false self. But as relational beings, others do play a role in our journey. Merton states,

No man could arrive at a genuine inner self-realization unless he had first become aware of himself as a member of a group... In other words, the inner self sees the other not as a limitation upon itself, but as its complement, its “other self,” and is even in a certain sense identified with that other, so that the two “are one.” This unity in love is one of the most characteristic works of the inner self, so that

\textsuperscript{548} Merton, \textit{The Inner Experience}, 19.

\textsuperscript{549} Merton, \textit{No Man is an Island}, xxiii.

\textsuperscript{550} Merton, \textit{No Man is an Island}, xii.
paradoxically the inner “I” is, not only isolated but at the same time united with others.”

The most basic explanation behind the importance of relationships and community for the true self is that it is, in fact, the essence of contemplation. Merton states, “The contemplative life is primarily a life of unity,” and “the more we are one with God the more we are united with one another.” This is because contemplative experience allows us to meet God in God’s self and grasp God’s love and the supreme realization that God is Love. And so in uniting with God, love becomes our own identity, which is able to occur because Christ lives inside us and transforms us. Merton explains, “When we all reach that perfection of love which is the contemplation of God in His glory, our inalienable personalities, while remaining eternally distinct, will nevertheless combine into One so that each one of us will find himself in all the others, and God will be the life and reality of all.”

This experience of oneness and unitive love is expressed in two ways: we find ourselves intimately connected specifically within the Christian body of believers as well as with the world at large. As was mentioned last chapter, we become “Christs,” but not in an individualistic way; rather we come together to make the body of Christ. Thus we are “One Christ.” Merton explains, “The ultimate perfection of the contemplative life is not a heaven of separate individuals, each one viewing his own private intuition of God; it is a sea of Love which flows through the One Body of all the elect, all the angels and

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551 Merton, The Inner Experience, 22.
552 Merton, The Inner Experience, 147.
553 Merton, New Seeds of Contemplation, 66.
554 Merton, New Seeds of Contemplation, 70.
saints, and their contemplation would be incomplete if it were not shared.”

All those that live in Christ, and Christ lives in them, form one “Mystical Person.” In this way, contemplation is unifying for Christians.

Yet contemplation is unifying on a larger scale as well: it teaches us an openness and love for all of humanity, in a way not possible based on our own efforts. As Merton explains, we need a supernatural Love to be able to recognize our true relationship with others and love them in a healthy, honest way. Our own natural selfishness interferes with our ability to do so. But in contemplative union with God, we take on the love of God; God’s love becomes our own identity, and so we are able to see and love humankind as God does. This helps us recognize the goodness in humanity rather than focusing so heavily that we only see the negative. As Merton states, “If we love one another truly, our love will be graced with a clear-sighted prudence which sees and respects the designs of God upon each separate soul.”

Merton grasped this clear-sightedness, evident in his own awakening experience on Fourth and Walnut, in which he stated,

I have the immense joy of being man, a member of a race in which God Himself became incarnate. As if the sorrows and stupidities of the human condition could overwhelm me, now I realize what we all are. And if only everybody could realize this! But it cannot be explained. There is no way of telling people that they are all walking around shining like the sun…. It was as if I suddenly saw the secret beauty of their hearts, the depths of their hearts where neither sin nor desire nor self-knowledge can reach, the core of their reality, the person that each one is in God’s eyes.

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556 Merton, *No Man is an Island*, 9.

Merton had gained clarity and new perspective regarding humanity. He experienced God’s love for the world in a radically new way, and he came to see the sense of community and oneness of humankind.

This new perspective and understanding of God’s love carries great responsibility. We recognize that we are relational beings, shaped and impacted by one another, and dependent on one another. We share, together, in God’s Love and goodness. Thus it is critically important that we understand the real meaning of community and live and share in that community rightly. Merton attempted to clear up all misconceptions about community and the sense of oneness and togetherness that we share in. He states, “Mere living alone does not isolate a man, mere living together does not bring men into communion.”

Contrary to popular belief, Merton insisted that the contemplative monk, living behind cloistered walls, shares more with others and the world than the majority of those living in its midst. He explains,

The true contemplative is not less interested than others in normal life, not less concerned with what goes on in the world, but more interested, more concerned. The fact that he is a contemplative makes him capable of a greater interest and of a deeper concern. Since he is detached, since he has received the gift of a pure heart, he is not limited to narrow and provincial views. He is not easily involved in the superficial confusion which most men take for reality. And for that reason he can see more clearly and enter more directly into the pure actuality of human life… he has a much more spiritual grasp of what is “real” and what is “actual.”

As Merton understood it, real community, whether reaching from behind monastic walls or out in the world, is about real, genuine communication; it is about sharing each other’s lives and stories. Where communication is lacking, real community is as well. Thus, living in the world is not in itself enough; it does not guarantee real communion or

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communication. Merton states, “Where men live huddled together without true communication, there seems to be greater sharing, and a more genuine communion. But this is not communion, only immersion in the general meaninglessness of countless slogans and clichés repeated over and over again so that in the end one listens without hearing and responds without thinking.”\textsuperscript{560} The contemplative monk, albeit physically removed from the world, is able to paradoxically achieve real communication and communion with the world because he is real. This is true for contemplatives in the world as well; becoming our true selves and reaching contemplative union with God, by which we grasp God’s love and obtain new vision of reality, deepens our relationships with one another and with the world. It not only allows for real communication and communion; it is the only way we can have real communication and communion. It is the only way we will recognize our oneness. Thus, those of us that have grasped a hold of this vision have a responsibility to/for the world, to share this vision of Love and help others in understanding and reaching it.

Ultimately, we have a responsibility to possess and share “clarity of compassion,”\textsuperscript{561} that we are to extend to all people, good or bad. We are to withhold judgment and simply love as God loves. As Merton explains, “When we love others with His Love, we no longer know good and evil but only good. We overcome the evil in the world by the charity and compassion of God, and in so doing we drive all evil out of our own hearts.”\textsuperscript{562} Loving others as God loves them means recognizing the goodness that

\textsuperscript{560} Merton, \textit{New Seeds of Contemplation}, 55.

\textsuperscript{561} Merton, \textit{New Seeds of Contemplation}, 57.

\textsuperscript{562} Merton, \textit{No Man is an Island}, 215.
they possess in and before God. We focus on this good in hopes of bringing out the good in them. In this way, we help and build one another up, utilizing compassion and forgiveness. Merton was careful to distinguish, though, between loving and liking all of humankind. As he explains, “We are obliged to love one another. We are not strictly bound to ‘like’ one another. Love governs the will: ‘liking’ is a matter of sense and sensibility.” Thus loving others and living in communion with them does not mean that we will all agree or necessarily get along; but it requires us to recognize that they are made in the image and likeness of God just as we are, and acknowledge their humanity, vulnerability, and capacity for truth and love. Loving others in this way means loving in an unselfish manner, and truly wishing what is best for them. Not only that, but we share in the good of the other. Their good becomes our own. Merton explains, “Love shares the good with another not by dividing it with him, but by identifying itself with him so that his good becomes my own. The same good is enjoyed in its wholeness by two in one spirit, not halved and shared by two souls.” Thus unselfish love “increases in proportion as it is shared. There is no end to the sharing of love, and, therefore, the potential happiness of such love is without limit.”

The Natural World

While Merton primarily focused on the responsibility this love presents in our relationships with humankind, he also insisted that the change in vision brought on by

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563 Merton, No Man is an Island, 169.
564 Merton, No Man is an Island, 4.
565 Merton, No Man is an Island, 3.
contemplation transforms our relationship to/with the natural world, or creation. We find that the goodness that we are finally able to see in humanity is present in all of creation, in all other creatures and created things in the world, and in the world itself. In a letter to Rachel Carson, Merton wrote, “The whole world itself, to religious thinkers, has always appeared as a transparent manifestation of the love of God, as a ‘paradise’ of His wisdom, manifested in all His creatures, down to the tiniest, and in the most wonderful interrelationship between them.”

Thus, finally able to grasp creation as the reflection of its Creator, we have a responsibility in this regard, too, to treat the world with love and respect, recognizing its beauty and goodness in and before God. But this is only possible with right vision, if we possess the love of God as our true selves. When we are living as our false selves, we distort and corrupt creation, twisting it to serve us. We fail to acknowledge it for what it is, but only what it can do for us. Such thinking is highly destructive, and it is simply built on illusion. It is not the truth.

Merton described saints and contemplatives as having the best understanding of the world and our relationship in/to it. He states, “It is not true that the saints and the great contemplatives never loved created things, and had no understanding or appreciation of the world, with its sights and sounds and the people living in it. They loved everything and everyone…. It was because the saints were absorbed in God that they were truly capable of seeing and appreciating created things and it was because they loved Him alone that they alone loved everybody.” As our true selves, our perspective shifts from ourselves to God, and then to the world. Merton explains,

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Because we love God alone, beyond and above all things, and because our love shows us that He infinitely exceeds the goodness of them all, we become indifferent to all that is not God. But at the same time our love enables us to find, in God Himself, the goodness and the reality of all the things we have renounced for His sake. We then see Him Whom we love in the very things we have renounced, and find them again in Him. Although the grace of the Holy Spirit teaches us to use created things “as if we used them not”—that is to say, with detachment and indifference, it does not make us indifferent to the value of the things in themselves. On the contrary, it is only when we are detached from created things that we can begin to value them as we really should. It is only when we are “indifferent” to them that we can really begin to love them. The indifference of which I speak must, therefore, be an indifference not to things themselves but to their effects in our own lives.568

And so we are finally able to appreciate, love, and enjoy creation in an unselfish way.

We are finally capable of seeing the beauty it holds in and of itself, and not just in relation to us. Speaking of our ability to witness such beauty, Merton wrote,

There is another spiritual activity that develops and liberates its hidden powers of action: the perception of beauty. I do not mean by this that we must expect our consciousness to respond to beauty as an effete and esoteric thing. We ought to be alive enough to reality to see beauty all around us. Beauty is simply reality itself, perceived in a special way that gives it a resplendent value of its own. Everything that is, is beautiful insofar as it is real—though the associations which they may have acquired for men may not always make things beautiful to us. Snakes are beautiful, but not to us. One of the most important—and most neglected—elements in the beginnings of the interior life is the ability to respond to reality, to see the value and the beauty in ordinary things, to come alive to the splendor that is all around us in the creatures of God. We do not see these things because we have withdrawn from them. In a way we have to. In modern life our senses are so constantly bombarded with stimulation from every side that unless we developed a kind of protective insensitivity we would go crazy trying to respond to all the advertisements at the same time. The first step in the interior life, nowadays, is not, as some might imagine, learning not to see and taste and hear and feel things. On the contrary, what we must do is begin by unlearning our wrong ways of seeing, tasting, feeling, and so forth, and acquire a few of the right ones.569

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568 Merton, No Man is an Island, 103.

569 Merton, No Man is an Island, 32-33.
**Conclusion**

Merton’s description reflects our struggle to know the world today. The world—both creation and the people in it—possesses so much goodness and beauty. But we will miss it all if we fail to discover and live as our true selves, united in/with God. Thus the world can be our friend or enemy, depending on the life we choose. The choice is ours.

**McFague**

We began to delve into McFague’s understanding of the world last chapter. McFague’s postmodern approach to the self required that we approach it contextually, in McFague’s case, particularly in the context of the cosmos. We highlighted the basic tenants of the common creation story last chapter, and we addressed the important role that worldview has in shaping our understanding of self. As readers may recall from chapter two in our discussion of McFague’s conception of reality, McFague insists that reality exists, but that we do not have direct access to it. Our experience is mediated in/through language and its constructs. Thus we access reality in/through the metaphors and models we create, which form worldviews in/by which we live. What are the most notable worldviews, and how does McFague interpret them? What worldview best captures the world and is most appropriate for today? Worldviews shape our sense of self, and they therefore inevitably shape our relationships to/with the world—with one another and with the rest of creation. According to the worldview McFague proposes, what is our relationship to/with one another and to/with the world? As we discovered last chapter, we as human beings hold a dual role—we are both a part of creation as well as responsible for it. How, then, does our special and unique role reveal itself in our
relationships? These are all questions that we began to explore last chapter, but will fully answer here in this chapter.

**Postmodern Perception**

Articulating McFague’s position on the world is not as simple as pinpointing a concrete image or definition. This is because of her postmodern take on the world; as previously stated, McFague adheres to postmodern tenants such as the idea that reality is not simply what we see “out there,” but is rather a construction that we have chosen to live in. She also insists that truth is relative and perspective based. How do these postmodern tenants apply to the world? Ultimately, McFague’s postmodern sensibilities warrant an understanding of the world that is quite different than Merton; it is admittedly contextual and descriptive, rather than universal and absolute.

McFague admits the lack of objectivity that exists in discussing the world. Postmodern perception calls for an air of openness, and a plurality of voices. McFague insists that there is not one single way to view and relate to/with the world, but many. The result is a complex mix of subjective images of what constitutes the world and our relationship to/with it. As defined in chapter two, these images constitute our “worldviews,” or “pictures of reality held at a very deep level.”

McFague insists that a multiplicity of worldviews exist based on context. Thus the differing times, places in which we live, and the cultures of which we are a part, contribute to our perception of the world. As McFague suggests, “Worldviews, then, are not innocent” or pure. Because

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571 McFague, *Life Abundant*, 42.
we are embodied and embedded in the world, we cannot objectively capture and define the world from a neutral stance. We only have access to it from our particular place. Thus the picture that we obtain is purely descriptive and relative to our experience. As such, it is limited and incomplete, finding balance in the plurality of voices. And it can be changed, as our experiences change and grow.

The idea that worldviews can change and be changed with experience may come as a surprise to some readers. Common perception is that our perspective of the world reflects “the way things are.” But McFague reminds us that this is not accurate; that our worldviews vary by context indicates that they are expressive of the particular culture. McFague continues to explain, “We are seldom conscious of world models; they are simply ‘the way things are’ in a culture. Yet… they are value laden and deeply influence our behavior toward other people and toward nature.”572 The truth is that our worldviews and world models are constructions that we have and continue to create. As McFague explains, “While they appear to be ‘natural,’ they are in fact socially constructed.”573

Ultimately, the realization that our worldviews are not just what is “out there,” but rather constructed based on culture and experience, leaves us with new awareness. We come to realize that we have a choice in the view and understanding of the world that we embrace. Whether conscious of it or not, we accept a worldview, or picture of reality, and then we live in it. As McFague reminds us, “The choice is not between reality and a picture of reality, but between two pictures of reality.”574 This, in turn, leaves us with a

572 McFague, Life Abundant, 42.
573 McFague, Life Abundant, 42.
574 McFague, Body of God, 93.
further sense of urgency and responsibility: if worldviews are not neutral, then our choice of worldview matters. McFague explains, “Since we cannot see apart from these most basic contexts (there is no raw experience or innocent eye), then it matters profoundly which worldview is operating in our culture.” Any worldview we accept has consequences. It shapes and molds the way we see ourselves, and our relationships with one another, creation, and the world itself. And because we are not inherently embedded in reality itself, but rather living in a constructed picture of reality, we have the choice to continue on with our lives and relationships within the current worldview, or to change it. But that is a choice that can only truly be made when we become consciously aware of the dominant worldviews in our culture and our ability to construct new models.

**Prevalent Worldviews**

Central to McFague’s project is the idea that older models and metaphors need to be eradicated and replaced when they become dangerous, idolatrous, and/or irrelevant. As McFague explains, “We live most of the time and in most ways by outmoded, anachronistic names. We are not naming ourselves, one another, and our earth in ways commensurate with our own times but are using names from a bygone time. However helpful and healing these names may have been once upon a time, they are hurtful now.” McFague’s project is essentially one of both deconstruction and reconstruction. She not only pinpoints the models and metaphors that are harmful, but imagines new ones as well. This process is applicable not only to our religious language, but to our

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575 McFague, *Life Abundant*, 44.

worldviews as well, as “worldviews are anchored by models or root-metaphors.” What, then, are the prevalent models on which our worldviews are based? Which models does McFague insist are harmful? And what new models does she hope to put in their place?

McFague believes that we are living in a world today that functions on the basis of models from times past. McFague names two specific, outdated models or root-metaphors on which worldviews have been shaped: the classic organic model and the mechanistic/machine model. By naming these models and calling them to our attention, McFague argues that we become consciously aware of their limitations and weaknesses, and we are finally able to entertain new models that better fit our current experiences. Thus it is impossible to move forward without grasping our past and current worldviews.

The construction of new models and metaphors on which our worldviews are based does not happen in a vacuum; it occurs naturally in response to old(er) models that, for various reasons, no longer fit our needs. Understood in this way, McFague recalls the classic organic model in an attempt to articulate what the common creation story, a new(ish) model of reality that we defined last chapter, is not. As we saw, the common creation story is a postmodern story about our origin and relationship to/with the earth that brings together unity and diversity; McFague describes it as a new kind of organic model, not to be misunderstand as the classic organic model, “a model that not only absorbs the many into the one, differences into a unitary universalism, but is also anthropocentric and androcentric.” Let us break down McFague’s critical description.

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Variations of the organic model have existed throughout the ages. McFague cites examples of the organic model in different contexts, reflecting a variety of times, locations, and cultures. “Whether we look at ancient cosmogonies, Goddess traditions, or Native ones (just to take a sampling), we are struck by the widespread acceptance, in one form or another, of the organic model as well as its reemergence in contemporary movements such as deep ecology and ecofeminism.”\(^{579}\) Specifically within our Western, Christian culture, the organic model found the most strength and popularity during the Medieval period, up until the Reformation in the 17\(^{th}\) Century.

During this time and within the context of Christianity, this model emphasized the image of “the church as the body of Christ” as representative of the classic organic model.\(^{580}\) The result was an image of a spiritualized world, rather than a natural, physical world. In thinking about the “cosmic Christ” in Scripture, McFague explains that “the organic model…was transferred from a creation to a redemption context.”\(^{581}\) In this context, attention is given to the spiritual body, with Christ as its head, rather than all bodies in the natural world. This narrowed, spiritualized vision of the body of Christ has severe consequences. As McFague noted, it is both anthropocentric and androcentric. Thus the classic organic model loses “its cosmic reach, the inclusion of the natural world and all human beings.”\(^{582}\) Instead of promoting unity and inclusion, which all variations of the organic model agree upon, the classic model ultimately causes division in the form


\(^{582}\) McFague, *Body of God*, 32.
of dualisms and hierarchies. How so? In focusing so emphatically on the spiritual body of Christ, the model placed heightened importance on the human male body as the ideal body image, undercutting women, children, and all other “bodies” or life forms in the natural world. McFague is critical of the model’s idolization of the male human body, to the detriment of all other bodies. Why this one body? Much of the logic is a reflection of the time. Since Christ was a human male, it followed that the church as the body of Christ would be imagined that way as well. Beyond this, Christ was seen as head of the spiritual body, demonstrating rationality and, therefore, masculinity. McFague explains, “In the Christian version of the organic model, the divine (here manifest in Christ) is not present in the whole of creation or even in the whole of the human being, but is located in and limited to the rational/spiritual part of the human being, the head. And since rationality was identified with masculinity, and the physical aspects of existence (including sex) with females, the dualism in the model further encouraged the disparagement and at times abhorrence of both women and sexuality.” Women, not associated with the rational or spiritual part of the human being, were seen as inferior and subordinate to men. They were rather viewed like other life forms and nature itself.

Ultimately, the classic organic model does demonstrate the organic themes of unity and inclusion, while also allowing for, and perhaps even creating dualisms and hierarchies. This is evidenced in two ways. First, as McFague explains, “The model supports a kind of universalism: one body underscores sameness, not difference.” This kind of universalism promotes unity among human males, while also downplaying the

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583 McFague, Body of God, 35.
584 McFague, Body of God, 37.
differences among them. This is evidenced in labels such as “mankind” or “all men.”\textsuperscript{585} Yet because of the limits of the \textit{one} body, women, children, and nature are left out, calling into question the true universalism of the model, and making the dualisms and hierarchies it creates quite obvious.

This warped sense of unity and inclusion are also evident in the model’s emphasis on the body as a whole, without any attention given to its members/parts. As McFague states, “The organic model is a unitary notion that subordinates the members of the body as parts of the whole.”\textsuperscript{586} The classic organic model’s attention on the body inevitably means that the whole is more important than its parts; a body is not a body without all parts of the body coming together. Thus there is the making of a unified body, and, as we just suggested, a limited group (human males) participate in the formation of that body. But the emphasis on the body as a whole without acknowledgement for its parts calls into question the model’s methods for unity and inclusion. McFague’s criticism here is that the classic organic model finds no way to take seriously the individual’s needs and/or freedoms. The model inevitably ignores and/or erases all individuality and uniqueness for the sake of the organic, unified whole.

This lack of appreciation for individuality and uniqueness is further reflected in a secondary model/worldview that accompanied the classic organic model during the medieval period: sacramentalism. The basic premise of sacramentalism is that the natural world is symbolic. As McFague puts it, “it signified God for humans.”\textsuperscript{587} McFague

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\textsuperscript{585} McFague, \textit{Body of God}, 37.
\textsuperscript{586} McFague, \textit{Body of God}, 36.
\textsuperscript{587} McFague, \textit{Super, Natural Christians}, 54.
explains that this classic/traditional form of sacramentalism is founded on the Incarnation. Just as God, the divine, was/is present in the human person, Jesus Christ, so too the rest of creation can reveal God to us. McFague states, “All creation has the potential for serving as a symbol of divine immanence. The natural and human orders of creation are not flat but two-dimensional: each thing is itself, but as itself, it is also something else… The world is alive with the presence of God; it ‘figures,’ shows forth, the divine in all its myriad particularity.”

This sacramental understanding of the world fits with the classic organic model’s emphasis on spiritual reality. However, they emphasize the spiritual in different ways. Whereas the classic organic model ignores the natural world altogether focusing on the spiritual body of Christ, sacramentalism preserves the importance of nature. This view acknowledges the natural world and calls for humankind to live in its midst and even pay attention to it. Yet according to the sacramental view, the natural world’s value and worth are not for its own sake. The world rather serves a specific function for humankind: to symbolically point to and reveal God. McFague explains, “Medieval people did not pay attention to nature in order to care for it better, nor did they have a romantic desire to bond with it. On the contrary, nature for them had a higher calling—in fact, the highest calling. Like the Bible, it was a book, the book of nature, which humans were to learn to read rightly in order to find their way to God…. It was a way God had chosen to lead humans into the divine presence.”

Thus, sacramentalism too is heavily focused on the spiritual world. Things of the world are “not appreciated in their own

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integrity as having intrinsic value but rather as stepping stones on one’s pilgrimage to God.”

The natural, physical world holds worth only as religious symbols.

Like the classic organic model, the classic/traditional sacramental worldview is anthropocentric, focusing on how the natural world benefits humans and their relationship to/with God. Likewise, the unity that sacramentalism promotes is much like the classic organic model in its failure to acknowledge the individual’s intrinsic worth, ultimately creating dualisms and hierarchies that are themselves worked into the unified whole. Articulating this system of relationships, McFague states, “The medieval understanding of unity did not preserve individuality... It was based on a symbolic ontology: the assumption that all things participate in the ground of being and hence symbolize one another due to ontological similarities. While this worldview brought everything together into an ordered whole, it tended to subsume the lesser under the greater: the things of this world were either symbols of divine presence or created to benefit human beings, as in the case of the plants and other animals.”

Both the classic organic and sacramental models express a worldview of another time. They are representative of a medieval world promoting a spiritual vision of universalism, unity, and inclusion, actually built on dualisms and hierarchies in and against the natural world. These models eventually met their demise, and were replaced by the machine/mechanistic model, which took root in the 17th and 18th Centuries as a result of the changing times, philosophies, and technologies seen particularly in the Protestant Reformation, the Scientific Revolution, and the Enlightenment.

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590 McFague, Body of God, 183.

591 McFague, Super, Natural Christians, 51.
The machine model is a radical departure from the organic and sacramental understandings of the natural world. Ultimately, attention shifted away from the spiritual to the physical world; nature came to be seen less as symbolic of God and more as a functional resource to/for humankind. The Enlightenment and modern philosophy brought on a new understanding of self—the rational self—which was removed from the body and nature. With this transition, the natural world, separate from the thinking self, came to be seen as an object to be studied, mastered, and controlled. The anthropocentric focus, as well as the dualisms and hierarchies seen in the earlier models carried over to the machine model, albeit in more explicit ways. More than ever, humankind understood themselves to be the central subjects, over and above nature. The natural world, below the human subject, was believed to be an object and tool for humankind, as captured in the coining of “natural resources.”

This mechanical worldview, a drastic change from classic organic and sacramental thinking, developed naturally as a result of science and its desire to explain. With increasing developments in technology, scientists sought to break down the complexities in/to the natural world. In doing so, the world took on a new model, the machine, which fit modern science’s absolutist philosophy and drive for objectivity. Rather than thinking about the world as an organism, the world was treated as a machine. Pinpointing the origin of this change, McFague states, “Scientific discovery and technology, notably mining, needed a new root metaphor, and the machine model was perfect for the task as Francis Bacon, one of the ‘fathers’ of modern science, illustrates when he speaks ‘of entering and penetrating into the holes and corners’ to disclose the
McFague notes that the promotion of this new model was likely not conscious; it was simply the result of changing times and philosophy. Rather than an attitude of awe at the intricacy and interdependence of all the parts of the organism/body, humankind sought scientific explanation, conquering the world’s secrets.

The mechanical (machine) model’s popularity soared, and it quickly became the prominent worldview in/of the West, functioning as the foundation for much of our thought still today. As McFague explains, our lives function day in and day out on the basis of this model; it is the model on which our country was founded and has thrived. She states, “The United States constitution, with its checks and balances, is built on the machine model, as are many other aspects of our culture: workers in our industrial plants are seen as interchangeable cogs programmed to perform certain functions; malfunctioning parts of our bodies (including the most vital ones) can be replaced with better parts from other bodies; and even the environment can be fixed with the right technology, according to some. We believe in, live in, the machine model as fishes live in the sea; it is not to most of us a construct, but the way things are.”

We all were born into this worldview; it seems and feels natural to us.

McFague’s description reveals her distaste for the machine model. Ultimately, McFague believes that the rational control this model suggests humankind has over the natural world is both dangerous and unhealthy. She cites the nuclear situation as the prime example, stating, “Our ability to diminish if not destroy life through nuclear energy is perhaps the clearest proof of our power, but damage to other species and the ecosphere

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592 McFague, Body of God, 33.

593 McFague, Body of God, 34.
through a variety of pollutants makes the point as well." The machine model’s urge to master and control has far reaching effects. Living within this model, we do not learn to appreciate and truly respect the natural world, resulting in its mistreatment. We also fail to see ourselves as part of creation, skewing our perspective on our relationship to/with the world. These effects reflect the limitations of the machine model; no model or worldview is absolute or universal in scope; every model functions as a lens that allows us to narrow in and raise awareness on certain aspects of the world while minimizing others. Thus, as McFague explains, we have become so entrenched in the machine model that we do not even realize what the model has sacrificed and lost, namely our relational “sense of belonging” in and to our world. McFague explains, “We have lost the sense of belonging in our world and to the God who creates, nurtures, and redeems this world and all its creatures, and we have lost the sense that we are part of a living, changing, dynamic cosmos that has its being in and through God.” McFague believes that our sense of belonging can be recovered, but not in the mechanical/machine model. We are, thus, forced to look at our options. What model offers the best worldview for today?

*The Organic Model Reconsidered*

Models and root metaphors emerge as a response to a particular time and place. They reflect the accepted reasoning of that particular group, based on philosophy and science. In today’s world, this means looking at contemporary, postmodern philosophy and science for the formation of contemporary models and root metaphors. Specifically,

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as we saw last chapter with the formation of the self, this means starting with the common creation story. As McFague puts it, “The reason for looking to this story is simple: it is the view of reality current in our time.”596 As readers discovered last chapter, the common creation story is concerned with the origin, evolution, and existence of all that is. It is a story that “radicalizes both oneness and difference.”597 From our shared origin of one small bit of matter erupted the immensely diverse array of life forms that we see today. Thus we are radically unified as well as diverse and unique.

The common creation story is our current picture of reality. Before it existed other, more primitive stories that sought to explain and capture the “how” and “why” of the world’s existence. These stories, in their own ways, reflected the people and place(s) of their time(s). The Genesis creation myth is an example of one of the accounts. It offered a view of reality corresponding with the biblical world, a world that is no longer ours. As such, McFague argues that it no longer offers us a functional, working cosmology today. With advancements in science and current, postmodern trends in philosophy, a new story was needed, and the common creation story meets these needs.

As the current picture of reality, the common creation story is the framework for creating new, functional and healthy models and worldviews today. McFague reminds us that it is only a story, and as such, is not absolute. She states, “The contemporary scientific view of reality is not monolithic (there is more than one interpretation).”598 Thus the common creation story is open to different interpretations and, depending on

596 McFague, Body of God, 28.
597 McFague, Body of God, 38.
598 McFague, Body of God, 39-40.
how it is interpreted, can function as the foundation for a variety of models and root metaphors.

McFague’s own interpretation of the story is clear. She believes that the common creation story’s radical display of interdependence, interrelationship, and diversity among/between various life forms does not support either of the previous prevalent models and worldviews. The common creation story does not display the kind of unity expressed in the classic organic model, and it does not, in any way, present the earth as object or machine. Rather, the common creation story emphasizes the relational aspects of life. It is organic, but it is organic in a new and fresh way. Contemplating a return to the organic model, McFague considers the model’s appeal and power in/for our time:

The range of contemporary cosmic, organic thinking is wide, diverse, and raises an interesting question: How has it survived? How has it managed to survive not only Christian asceticism and other-worldliness, but also scientific mechanism, Cartesian dualism, and the contemporary destruction of the planet? We find it not only in the Goddess and Native American traditions, ecofeminism, and deep ecology, but also, as we shall see, in the Christian tradition up through the Reformation (although with some ambivalence). It is also a central model in process theology. What postmodern science is telling us—that the universe is a whole and that all things, living and nonliving, are interrelated and interdependent—has been, for most of the world’s history, common knowledge. . . . The organic model is reemerging as the original, primordial grass roots movement, not as another fad but as that which speaks to the deepest layers of our being. Many are finding it persuasive, that is, meaningful and true because it connects us to our most basic context, the source of our very life: the body of the earth to which we all belong.  

As McFague indicates, the organic model’s insight into the relational nature of existence gives it great potential to be a healthy, functional model for our time. It has the depth and power to express a contemporary, postmodern worldview today. It is simply a matter of choice and interpretation. We can continue to live within the reigning

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mechanical/machine model, treating the world as a resource to/for humankind, or we can construct a new model, a fresh version of the organic model, based on a contemporary reading of the common creation story, that reflects our place in/of the world today. As she explains, “Oversimplified, the debate moves between two models for understanding the natural order, an organic and a mechanical one, the world as body or machine.”

Both models are interpretations; they are different readings of reality based on different schools of science and philosophy. But of these options, McFague argues that the organic model is the better choice for our time.

McFague believes that the mechanical model is outdated, and therefore irrelevant, and hazardous. The mechanical/machine model’s dualistic and hierarchical treatment of the natural world as a “resource” to be studied, controlled, and ultimately used to serve man is an interpretation of the world that emulates modern philosophy and science, which characterize Enlightenment thinking, a previous time in history, not today. It is not current, and therefore not an accurate depiction of today’s world. Yet even more troubling than its irrelevance are its basic tenants, which McFague argues are dangerous and unhealthy. The machine model perpetuates dualistic, disembodied reasoning, resulting in mistreatment of the earth as an object and resource at our disposal. The power that the model yields to/for humankind is life threatening, to us and the rest of the natural world. McFague insists that “the awareness of our power over the ecosystem implies… the necessity for changing our images of our relationship to it from ones of domination to ones of care and nurture.”

If we are going to be honest with ourselves in

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600 McFague, Body of God, 15.

601 McFague, Models of God, 15-16.
our reading of postmodern science, we will admit the need for a new model, one that
bridges the gap between us and the natural world and overcomes harmful hierarchical and
dualistic thinking.

McFague insists that the organic model is the best choice for our time. This may
not always be the case; as times change in the future, perhaps another model will be
constructed that better fits our view of reality and fits our needs, but for now, the organic
model is best. Envisioning the world in an organic way, as a living organism, best
captures what science is telling us about the workings of the world, and it promotes the
health and flourishing of all creation. It does so, ultimately, by taking on the
characteristics of life. McFague explains, “The model is most appropriate to life, and
hence the qualities of life—openness, relationship, interdependence, change, novelty, and
even mystery—become the basic ones for interpreting all reality.”602 Whereas the
mechanical model treats the world as a nonliving object and machine, the organic model
treats the world and everything in it, as a living subject, to be known and loved. Such
thinking is relational and postmodern, and breaks down the hierarchies and dualisms of
previous models.

As stated, the organic model that McFague is suggesting is different than the
traditional, classic organic model. Relying on the common creation story as a resource,
the new organic model is evolutionary and ecological, emphasizing unity and inclusion in
a radically new way that does not sacrifice the individual or minority group. This is
ultimately possible by reexamining the body, on which the organic model is based.

McFague asks,

602 McFague, Models of God, 10.
What if the organic model did not assume a human (male or female) body for its base, but bodies, all the diverse, strange, multitude of bodies (matter in all its millions, perhaps billions of forms) that make up the universe? What if we changed our perspective from its narrow focus on the one, ideal, human (male) body as the base of the model to a cosmic focus, so that what came to mind when we thought of body was bodies—in other words, not sameness, but difference? What if, when we thought of ourselves and all other creatures as organically interrelated and interdependent, we thought of the rich diversity and difference that marks that kind of unity and not the sameness that comes to mind with the image of the human body? 

McFague’s question reveals the evolutionary, ecological nature of the new model. By changing and widening our understanding of body from the human, male body in a spiritualized context to all bodies in the physical world, the new organic model proves to be radically holistic and inclusive, in a way that continues to value diversity and difference. Thus the new evolutionary, ecological organic model corrects the anthropocentrism, dualisms, and hierarchies of the traditional, classic organic model, as well as the machine model. We cannot draw hard lines between male/female, human/nonhuman, living/nonliving, and so on. Everyone and everything in the natural world is embodied and included.

The ecological organic model’s all-inclusive nature is dependent on a way/model of knowing and relating to the world that promotes relationships and interdependence. McFague refers to this as the subject-subject model, in which we come to know and relate to other life forms as subjects, rather than objects to/for us. As McFague explains, “subjects both affect others and are affected by them.” Subjects are relational. To treat all beings in/of the natural world as subjects is to recognize that their value is not only instrumental, but intrinsic. It is the acknowledgement, appreciation, and even awe,

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603 McFague, Body of God, 37-38.

604 McFague, Super, Natural Christians, 8.
that all beings contribute to our world in their own ways. “In the evolutionary, mutualistic model, all entities are united symbiotically and internally in levels of interdependence but are also separated as centers of action and response, each valuable in its own ‘beingness,’ however minimal or momentary that may appear to us.”605 As McFague believes, this subject-subject model is the better way of knowing and relating to the world; it is expressed in the common creation story, and it is what ultimately helps us live in a healthier, more ecologically conscious world.

What does it mean to treat other life forms as subjects, and how is this possible? McFague acknowledges that “the subject-subjects model is based on human relationships.”606 But she insists that the model can/should be extended to nature. This is because we as human beings—embodied, earth creatures—are a part of nature; there is no division between us and nature. “In this model the self is not just related to nature; rather, nature is constitutive of the self. Whatever we are has its roots in nature… we are physical.”607 This perspective sheds light on our profound closeness with the natural world. Nature is not something removed from us, but rather something of which we are a part, and in its midst. McFague states, “Nature is everything, including ourselves.”608 Thus all of nature can be thought of as subject, which means treating all of nature with love and respect.

605 McFague, Models of God, 11.
606 McFague, Super, Natural Christians, 103.
607 McFague, Super, Natural Christians, 104.
608 McFague, Super, Natural Christians, 16.
McFague couches this relationship in terms of paying attention to the natural world with a loving eye, rather than arrogant eye. The arrogant eye fits the mechanical model; it knows/relates to nature from a distance, treating it as an object, to be controlled, explained, and used. In contrast, the loving eye fits the ecological organic model and treats the world as subject. To do so, we must recognize our place as participants in nature. This approach calls for contact and intimacy, and is thoroughly relational. As such, McFague argues that this “subjective” approach is actually more “objective.” She explains, “The loving eye is not the sentimental, mushy, soft eye; rather, it is the realistic, tough, no-nonsense eye, acknowledging what is so difficult for us to recognize: that reality is made up of others…. It is, in a nice twist, being ‘objective.’” Treating the other as subject, with a loving eye, means that we are comfortable letting them be what they are. It is “to recognize that the wood tick is not merely an object in our world (for instance, an annoyance if lodged under one’s clothing), but a subject in its own world. It is an agent; it has an intention, though not necessarily a conscious one.” In this way, the ecological organic model is all-inclusive without sacrificing the individual. It expresses radical unity and diversity.

By approaching the natural world as subject, with a loving eye, the ecological organic model dissolves all the hierarchies, dualisms, and division of the classic organic and mechanical models. The inclusivity, love, and respect that the ecological organic model expresses suggests that all life forms exist on a continuum. As McFague states,

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609 McFague, Super, Natural Christians, 36.
“Everyone and everything is somewhere on the subject continuum.” While all/each uniquely our own and therefore hugely diverse, the webs of interrelatedness and interdependence that constitute our existence hold us together. As McFague explains, “Thinking on a continuum has profound implications for both human dignity and the integrity of creation: it means that all humans are intimately related to one another, whether they be male or female, black or white or brown, straight or gay, rich or poor, able-bodied or physically challenged, Muslim or Christian.” It also means that other life forms are intimately related to one another, and that we are intimately related to them. The continuum brings together individuals/groups that the previous models divided. It recognizes that we are all individuals and therefore unique, but we are unique individuals in relationships.

A Christian Interpretation

Based on its reading of the common creation story, the ecological organic model offers a worldview that is relevant and healthy for our time. It offers us contemporary perspective on who we are, our relationships to/with one another, and the natural world. But, McFague insists, the common creation story and the ecological organic model do not offer the whole picture. As a theologian, McFague argues that we must also consider Christian faith. “What does, can, the Christian faith contribute to an embodied theology,

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611 McFague, Super, Natural Christians, 97.

612 McFague, A New Climate for Theology, 148.
to an ecological sensibility?” McFague insists that Christian faith in God can and does fit with, and actually strengthens, the ecological organic model. As she explains, “Faith seeking understanding sees traces of divine purpose, love, and care in our cosmic story.”

God’s presence, purpose, love, and care—spiritual concerns—are not revealed in the physical, earthly, account of the common creation story itself, but McFague believes that they can be read into the story from a position of Christian faith. As a Christian, McFague insists that “the universe is neither indifferent nor malevolent but that there is a power (and a personal power at that) which is on the side of life and its fulfillment.”

What is this personal power and presence on the side of life and its fulfillment? McFague believes it is God, illuminated to/for us in and through the paradigmatic Christian story/person of Jesus.

In our discussion on God in chapter three, we examined God’s presence in the world, and the way(s) that Jesus was/is paradigmatic, revealing God’s presence and love to/for us. God was/is present in the person of Jesus, breaking into the world and becoming flesh, confirming the importance and goodness of bodies and our physical, natural world and God’s presence in them. In chapter three we also noted three aspects of Jesus’ ministry and life—his parables, table fellowship, and death on the cross—that demonstrated God’s destabilizing, inclusive, and nonhierarchical vision and love. Jesus’ actions, expressing the falsities of dualisms and the truth of inclusivity, not only support

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613 McFague, Body of God, 163.
614 McFague, Body of God, 78.
615 McFague, Models of God, x.
the interdependence and interrelatedness of the ecological organic model, but give such unity a sense of direction and purpose. As McFague explains, “From the paradigmatic story of Jesus we will propose that the direction of creation is toward inclusive love for all, especially the oppressed, the outcast, the vulnerable. This paradigm suggests a trajectory for creation, one that we cannot read off evolutionary history but, from our wager of faith in the destabilizing, nonhierarchical, inclusive life, teachings, and death of Jesus of Nazareth, we can read back into natural, historical, and cultural evolution as its goal.”

Based on the paradigmatic story of Jesus, McFague believes that this inclusive love extends to all of creation. Jesus’ entire ministry and life was about love, especially for the needy and poor. In an ecological context, this means extending our love and respect to nature, which has been stripped of its many riches because of misuse/abuse in/from the mechanical model, to the point that nature can be considered the “new poor” today. Ultimately, the direction toward inclusive love means that the webs of interrelationships and interdependence in which we live are not neutral; our relationships have meaning and purpose—we are unified in/before God, and called to love and respect one another. We are to have solidarity and empathy for the other. We are to share in one another’s experiences—the good and the bad. This responsibility, particularly for humankind, will be explored more in the next chapter as we consider our leading question, how we are called to live, based on our experience of God in the world. It is clear how such thinking strengthens the ecological organic model’s loving eye and

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616 McFague, Body of God, 160. Italics added for my own emphasis.
Subject-Subject models. Christian faith helps us see the intrinsic value of all life and that all life is loved and valued in/before God.

Based on this understanding of the world, and God’s presence and love in it, McFague suggests that we think of the world in terms of another model that fits in/with the ecological organic model: the world as the body of God. Touched on in chapter three, this metaphor/model encompasses all of McFague’s beliefs about the world, God, and our relationship to/with both. It affirms the importance and worth of all bodies and basic needs. It helps us recognize the intrinsic worth of all life forms, and our radical interdependence and interrelatedness, in and before God. It helps us appreciate and treat nature as subject, with a loving eye. The model confirms the goodness of creation, and God’s presence in/through the natural world, albeit in an indirect way that allows for both transcendence and immanence, as explained in chapter three.

Ultimately, the model of the world as God’s body helps us see the spiritual side to/of the world. It claims that the world is sacramental, but in a radically new and different way than the traditional sacramentalism associated with the classic organic model. Traditional sacramentalism acknowledged the value of beings insofar as they symbolized and pointed to God. McFague has two major problems with this: first, it does not capture our world today; we no longer live in this symbolic/sacramental world. The mechanical model’s urge to explain and break down has flattened and literalized our world, so that it no longer functions on symbol. Second, the symbolic ontology on which traditional sacramentalism is built expresses blatant disregard for the being itself, focusing solely on its function/use: to reveal God to us. Such thinking is heavily anthropocentric—that other life forms exist for our spiritual benefit, serving as resources
or tools to help *us* draw closer to God—and ultimately fails to recognize the intrinsic worth of each creature in/of itself, in and before God.

Imagining the world as God’s body helps us see the world in a new, sacramental way that is based on metaphor rather than symbol that is appropriate for our time. Metaphor has both an “is” and “is not” component; the world *is* the body of God and at the same time it *is not* the body of God. This is to say that God is present in/through creation, while not completely identified with it. The “is not” component prevents natural, earthly beings from becoming spiritualized and overly identified with that which they convey; it keeps all beings earthy and natural. It confirms the goodness of bodies—all bodies—in and of themselves. Their value and worth is not in what they signify, but simply in what they are. Thus the model of the world as God’s body corrects the imbalances of traditional sacramentalism, minimizing anthropocentrism and promoting both intrinsic value and inclusive love. The model helps us realize that we ought to value all of creation just as God does, and we ought to treat it as such, as if it were the body of God. And so, based on the paradigm of Jesus, who expresses care and compassion for all, McFague suggests that we “focus not on the use of all earthly bodies but on our care of them.”

This, she argues, is the form of Christian sacramentalism relevant and necessary to/for our ecologically-minded world today.

**Conclusion**

The Christic paradigm, along with the model of the world as God’s body, confirms the ecological organic model’s depiction of unity and diversity in a way that

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also provides direction, purpose, and meaning. Our world is not stagnant, but is constantly changing and evolving. As McFague puts it, “This is an unfinished universe, a dynamic universe, still in process.”618 While created by God and dependent on God for its existence and continuation, McFague insists, as we saw last chapter, that we, as human beings, have a unique role and responsibility as partners in creation. We are to help the natural world and all of creation flourish and thrive, which is only possible in/through relationship and respect, by which we come to see its intrinsic worth. As Christians and imitators of Christ, we are concerned with inclusive love, meaning that we commit to work toward “the liberation, healing, and fulfillment of all bodies,”619 imparting God’s endless love to/for the world.

McFague is clear that humankind is not the focal point of creation and not the center of things, but we do have an important role, responsibility, and calling. What does this calling look like exactly? And how are we to pursue it and carry it out? That question, is, essentially, at the heart of this entire project. How are we called to live? Having looked at both Merton and McFague’s understandings of God, self, and the world, we are ready to answer the question.


PART THREE

This project’s aim from the beginning has been to explore the question of how we are called to live in an attempt to pinpoint the meaning of authentic Christian living and discipleship in today’s world, relying on Merton and McFague as case studies. Part One of this project provided an in depth look at Merton and McFague’s contexts. As we stressed, we can only take their contributions and points of convergence and divergence seriously when it comes to the question of how we are called to live if and when we ground their ideas within their contexts and frameworks of thought. Thus we looked at each of their agendas, influences, philosophies, methods, conceptions of truth and reality, etc. Part Two sought to uncover Merton and McFague’s understandings of God, self, and the world and any assumptions they have on these subjects, which inevitably effect and shape their answers to the question of how we are called to live. Having addressed their contexts, frameworks of thought, and assumptions on God, self, and world, here, in Part Three, we are finally ready to examine the question itself and consider Merton and McFague’s responses to it and the implications and significance that their responses have for us. How are we called to live? What does Christian living and discipleship look like for us in today’s world?
CHAPTER SIX: REVISITING THE QUESTION

*How are we called to live?* At the heart of the question is an exploration into the meaning and purpose of life. It is an open question, open to any and all to answer. But it comes with a clear set of assumptions and biases. All inquiries into the meaning and purpose of our existence are contingent upon particular notions and precepts that provide the basis for thinking about what that purpose might be. Our ranging opinions on meaning and purpose are dependent on our ranging conceptions of God, self, and the world. As we have been clear from the beginning of this project, our question is one formed and asked within the context of Christian faith. *How are we called to live?* Such a question assumes God's existence, presence, and availability to us in the world. It assumes calling and purpose as fundamental aspects of human life, which require that we both know and live as our authentic selves.

Merton and McFague's particular understandings of God, and God's availability to us, fit with and shape their understandings of identity, how they see themselves, and our world. Thus the previous chapters have paved the way and prepared us for this question. We are finally able to pinpoint and articulate how Merton and McFague might respond to the question of how we are called to live, as well as how we might answer the question ourselves, based on our own experience(s) of God in the world. As we will see, Merton and McFague’s responses to the question bring together faith and action, prompting what we will here refer to as “engaged spirituality,” or spiritually rooted social action. This is,
ultimately, what Christian living and discipleship is all about, for all of us—imitating Christ and embodying love in the world.

**Merton**

If the question of how we are called to live was posed to Merton, and he were alive today to answer it, I believe he would respond that the answer is hidden, and can only be found, in and through the experience of contemplation. We have discussed contemplation in previous chapters as relevant to Merton’s conception of reality and his thoughts on God, self, and the world. As we have stated, contemplation is not only a central theme in Merton's writing, it was the central aspect of his life, pulling together all aspects of life (God, self, and world) in an intimate and intricate way. How so? Contemplation is, most simply, union with God, which as we discussed, demands that we discover and be our true selves. Union with God is only possible if and when we grasp our identity. Paradoxically, we come to realize our true identity only in and through our discovery of God. The result is a new level of consciousness or awareness with regard to God, self, and the world. The discovery of God and the true self helps us see reality with clarity and grasp our position and relationship in/to our world. Thus contemplation is essentially the discovery of God, self, and world. As Shannon, an avid Merton scholar and critic, describes, "Contemplation... involves the experience of (1) seeking God, (2) coming to know one's true self, and (3) learning one's relationship to the world." 620 It involves a change of consciousness by which we see God, self, and the world with new

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perspective, making it possible for us, in uniting with God, to see ourselves and the world as God does.

Merton believed that this kind of raw and pure experience is open to all people. Beyond that, he insists that it is "the reason for our creation by God." Thus the question of meaning and purpose in our lives finds its answer in the experience of contemplation. As he describes it, contemplation is “the response to a call.” What does this mean, exactly? How did Merton believe that we are called to live? What does contemplation have to do with this call? As we discussed in previous chapters, Merton believed God to be both personal and loving, invested in our lives. As such, God desires a relationship with us, which is only possible if we are being honest with ourselves about who we are. This is the essence of contemplation, and this is what (Who) we are called to: God, in and through the experience of contemplation.

Contemplative experience yields a change in consciousness, by which we discover the truth of reality. Merton believed we are all called to recognize and live by this truth, which involves intimate knowledge and love for God, self, and world. This is a basic, primary calling to/for all humanity. As Merton insists, “Our vocation is not a sphinx’s riddle.” It is simple: We are called to discover and unite with God. We are called to recognize and live as our true selves. And we are called to go out into the world and share the love and compassion that we find in God with others.

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623 Merton, *No Man is an Island*, 131.
These three components of contemplation, nonnegotiable and inseparable, capture our call and the critical balance between *being* and *doing* which God asks of us. As Merton explains, on a most fundamental level, contemplation has to do with *being*, the experience of union with God as our true selves. It is the experience “I AM,” in which our very being becomes elevated and engulfed in the being of God, the Great I AM. As we saw in chapter three, Merton described God as Being itself, the ground of our being. Our true identities are found in and before God, because nothing exists outside of God. When we follow and participate in Christ and his divine sonship, we are able to see this truth and identify with and participate in the experience “I AM,” as our true selves. This experience, lifestyle, and truth is something that we are all called to. While in various ways we may actively work in/towards our response to this call, this is a call to simply *be*; to be real and present in and before God. This part of our contemplative calling is significant and fundamental; our being is foundational to our doing, or activity in the world.

One could say that our being is the root of contemplative experience, while our doing is the fruit produced from it. Contemplative experience does not end in union with God. In uniting with God as our true selves we discover the truth about our relationships to/with the world around us. Just as Merton realized his love for others on a busy street corner in Louisville, we too realize that we love humankind; we love our world. “When we find God in contemplation, we find the rest of reality, especially our fellow human beings. We discover them not as a faceless mass, but as individual persons, each distinct and unique in the eyes of God, yet not separate from God or from one another. All are bound together in a network of interlocking relationships, and each finds his or her
identity and uniqueness in God, who is for all the Hidden Ground of Love."\(^{624}\) Our discovery of God and self, then, yields the discovery of God’s people and world; a people and world which we are participants in. Having awakened to this truth, we do not and cannot passively sit still; to love God is to love all reality in God. We respond to God’s call fully by sharing God’s love with the world. Thus our doing is directly tied to our being. Merton states, “We must first recover the possession of our own being before we can act wisely” and that “the value of our activity depends almost entirely on the humility to accept ourselves as we are.”\(^{625}\) If we are living as our false selves, our actions lack direction and are inevitably misguided, because we are not living in and according to the truth about reality. In addition, the false self’s lack of being and substance translate into an over identification with our actions, as if our doing were the crux of our being, rather than the fruit from it. In this case, “the less he is able to be the more he has to do.”\(^{626}\) Merton is clear that this is imbalanced and not healthy or truthful. Our being calls for action, but we are not to be identified by our actions. He explains, “What we are is to be sought in the invisible depths of our own being, not in our outward reflection in our own acts. We must find our real selves not in the froth stirred up by the impact of our being upon the beings around us, but in our own soul which is the principle of all our acts.”\(^{627}\) Our doing is dependent on our being. When we discover our true selves and unite with


\(^{625}\) Merton, No Man is an Island, 123-124.

\(^{626}\) Merton, No Man is an Island, 119.

\(^{627}\) Merton, No Man is an Island, 117.
God, we discover the radical truth about the world, and God’s love for it, and we choose to authentically participate in it.

Our calling, then—to discover, come to know, and love God, self, and the world—concerns both our being and doing. There is a necessary balance. We need to figure out who we are, who God is, and what God wants from us. Beyond that, we need to act on what we discover. Both aspects of our calling, our being and doing, involve seeking and residing in God and perfecting love. These go hand in hand; love is our access point for direct contact with God. We know God not by our intellect, but in and through experiential love. Through this, we discover that union with God is the experience of Pure Love, a love that we thereby participate in, and naturally share with the world. As Merton explains, the contemplative “loves with a purity and freedom that spring spontaneously and directly from the fact that he has fully recovered the divine likeness, and is now fully his true self because he is lost in God. He is one with God and identified with God and hence knows nothing of any ego in himself. All he knows is love. As Merton quotes St. Bernard: ‘He who loves thus, simply loves, and knows nothing else but love.’”

We love God, our selves, and the world because we are consumed in God’s love and know nothing but love. In this identification and union, love becomes our identity and selflessness our true self. Thus we cannot help but love.

In seeking and residing in God, we are in the very process of perfecting and sharing God’s love. We become, as Merton says, “Christs” in the world, expressing the same selfless, unceasing, and boundless love to and for the world that Christ exhibited to

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and for us. What does this love look like? How do we love the world? On a most basic level, Merton insists that this means treating others and the rest of creation with respect and recognizing the value in and of all. This is not determined or measured in terms of their worthiness, but rather based on their very being and creation in and before God. This is summed up most basically in what Merton refers to as “Natural Law:” “that we should treat others as we would like them to treat us, that we should not do to another what we would not want another to do to us... that we should recognize in every other human being the same nature, the same needs, the same rights, the same destiny as in ourselves.”  

Beyond respect, Merton is clear that we need to have and demonstrate compassion if we are really living truthfully in response to God and God’s call. Compassion encompasses empathy and understanding. As Merton explains, “I must learn to share with others their joys, their suffering, their ideas, their needs, their desires. I must learn to do this not only in the cases of those who are of the same class, the same profession, the same race, the same nation as myself, but when men who suffer belong to other groups, even to groups that are regarded as hostile.”  

To be able to share this kind of compassion and love, and to be able to participate in the other’s experiences and life in this way is to recognize our unity and oneness in and before God, not just with our neighbor, but with the world at large. It is to identify with others, perhaps even an enemy, and treat them as equal subjects, rather than objects. As Merton describes, “Love means an interior and spiritual identification with one’s brother, so that he is not regarded

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630 Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation*, 76.

as an ‘object’ to ‘which’ one ‘does good.’… Love takes one’s neighbor as one’s other self, and loves him with all the immense humility and discretion and reserve and reverence without which no one can presume to enter into the sanctuary of another’s subjectivity. From such love all authoritarian brutality, all exploitation, domineering and condescension must necessarily be absent.”

The kind of love and compassion of which Merton speaks, expressed in both our being and doing, has the potential to be quite influential in and to our world. It is a creative force, drawing its power from its divine source, God. Our call to share in the divine sonship and to become “Christ” is a call to love as God loves. This means extending love and compassion to all others, and withholding all forms of judgment and negativity. Merton is clear that this is not “a matter of mere sentimental complacency,” rather, it has to do with dynamic transformation, in which we are changed and we help change the world. Yet how do we do this? What does this change look like?

Our calling is universal, but our experience of God’s call and response(s) to it are always particular and contextual. We come to know and love God, self, and the world in specific and concrete ways that look different for each of us, based on our unique personalities, identities, and contexts in the world. No two people have quite the same experience; there are different ways to experience God and God’s call and to live it out. Noting both the universal and particular nature of our calling, Merton states, "We are all


called by God to share in His life and in His Kingdom. Each one of us is called to a special place in the Kingdom."\textsuperscript{634} Our special place in the Kingdom is determined by our special and unique personalities, identities, and contexts. This is to say that we love the world with God’s own love, which we participate in, in very precise and particular ways. It is not enough to sweepingly profess our love for the whole world; we need to demonstrate God’s love in concrete ways, in whatever corner of the globe in which we live. This means that how we live looks differently from person to person, but it all stems from the same place (God) and it all demonstrates the same love (God’s). Merton explains, “All vocations are intended by God to manifest His love in the world. For each special calling gives a man some particular place in the Mystery of Christ, gives him something to do for the salvation of all mankind. The difference between the various vocations lies in the different ways in which each one enables men to discover God's love, appreciate it, respond to it, and share it with other men."\textsuperscript{635} Thus just as we discover, know, and love God, self, and world in different and particular ways, so too in showing compassion for the world in whatever way that we do, we help others discover, know, and love God, self, and world, albeit in different and particular ways.

\textit{Considering Merton Himself}

We are all called to know and love God, our true selves, and the world, but this does not mean that we are all clones of one another or that our lives are identical. Our callings are universal while also particular and contextual. Let us consider Merton

\textsuperscript{634} Merton, \textit{No Man is an Island}, 131.

\textsuperscript{635} Merton, \textit{No Man is an Island}, 153.
himself. How did Merton feel called? What did his response to God’s call look like?

Merton shared much of his own story in his journals and autobiography, which provide a glimpse into his calling. He conveyed his struggle of discernment. Was he meant to live and serve in the world or in the monastery? Was he called to write and teach, live in poverty and serve the poor, or take a vow of silence behind the cloistered walls of Gethsemani? Merton toyed with all of these ideas. He suffered a great deal of anxiety over which of these was truly his vocation. But in the end, Merton did ultimately discover how he was called to live.

After graduating college, Merton became a teacher and wrote short stories, novels, and poetry on the side. These things came naturally to him, and therefore appealed to him, but he did not feel challenged by them, and he sought more. Merton was at the same time growing in his Catholic faith, having become baptized and practicing his faith more and more. A new passion emerged inside of him for Catholicism; he felt particularly drawn to religious life. Just two years after his baptism, Merton applied and was accepted to the Franciscans. But he struggled with whether this was his true vocation, experiencing guilt and doubt over his past transgressions, which ultimately kept him from entering the monastery. With this door seemingly having closed, Merton continued on with his teaching and writing, residing himself to be a lay Catholic. One particular school break, Merton took a week-long retreat at the Abbey of Gethsemani and found himself deeply moved by his time there. His experience rekindled the flame inside him for monastic life. He wrote in his journal: “I desire only one thing: to love God. Those who love him keep his commandments. I only desire to do one thing: to follow his will. I pray that I am at least beginning to know what that may mean.
Could it possibly mean that I might someday become a monk in this monastery? My Lord, and my King, and my God!” The thought of becoming a Trappist monk excited Merton, but he also thought it nothing more than a dream. Based on his earlier encounter with the Franciscans, he did not believe himself to have a monastic vocation, no matter his desire for it.

After the conclusion of the retreat Merton returned to writing and to his teaching position. One particular night at his school he happened to hear a guest speaker, Baroness de Heuck, who had founded the Friendship House in Harlem for the underprivileged. Merton was struck by both her presence and project, and he felt convicted. What was he doing with his life? He wasn’t helping with the problems or the world, nor was he free of them. Merton suddenly felt that his teaching and writing contributed little to the world. While gifted in his writing and ability to teach, he was unsatisfied. As he described, he came to realize that teaching “had outlived its usefulness in my spiritual life…. It was too tame, too safe, too sheltered. It demanded nothing of me. It had no particular cross.” Thus Merton decided to move on from teaching, to work alongside the Baroness at the Friendship House in Harlem, helping in the fight against prejudice and poverty, demonstrating God’s love.

Yet still, the thought of the Trappists lingered in Merton’s mind. Conflicted, he wrote in his journal, “Should I be going to Harlem, or to the Trappists? Why doesn’t the idea of the Trappists leave me? Perhaps what I am afraid of is to write and be rejected…. Perhaps I cling to my independence, to the chance to write, to go where I like in the


637 Merton, The Seven Storey Mountain, 393.
world…. Going to live in Harlem… is a good and reasonable way to follow Christ. But going to the Trappists is exciting, it fills me with awe and desire. I return to the idea again and again: ‘Give up everything, give up everything!’ Ultimately, Merton’s earnest desire for monasticism won out. In his autobiography, he describes the sudden confirmation of his monastic calling: “I suddenly found myself filled with a vivid conviction: ‘The time has come for me to go and be a Trappist.’ Where had the thought come from? All I knew was that it was suddenly there. And it was something powerful, irresistible, clear…. At that moment, it was as if scales fell off my own eyes, and looking back on all my worries and questions, I could see clearly how empty and futile they had been. Yes, it was obvious that I was called to the monastic life: and all my doubts about it had been mostly shadows.” Seeking the support and encouragement he needed, Merton fought all of his doubts, and found himself at the front gate, bidding admittance to the Abbey of Gethsemani, to which he was accepted.

Trappist life was not necessarily what Merton dreamed or imagined it to be upon his entrance. With grand visions of seclusion and silence, he was surprised by the amount of noise and commotion in the monastery. It felt as though aspects of the world had followed him in, which he had expected to leave behind and be free of. Life was busy and active, and there was little privacy or time to oneself. Solitude and contemplation were difficult. But Merton was careful not to let these imperfections steer him away from his calling. As he explained, “My vocation is the one I love, not because

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639 Merton, The Seven Storey Mountain, 399-401.
I think it is the best vocation in the Church, but because it is the one God has willed for me. And so Merton remained a Trappist monk for all the remaining years of his life.

Merton ultimately found ways around the shortcomings of his community that allowed him to remain true to his calling. At the prompting of his superiors, he kept up with his writing. While at first resistant to the idea of writing, Merton came to embrace this as part of his life at Gethsemani. It offered sweet relief from the community’s noise and activity. Merton notes, “I am finding myself forced to admit that my lamentations about my writing job have been foolish. Writing is the one thing that gives me access to some real silence and solitude.” “It is writing that helps me most of all to be a solitary and a contemplative here at Gethsemani.” Merton’s writing paved way for construction of his own personal hermitage in his later years, providing him more refuge and the peace and quiet he so desperately needed to grow in God.

As a result, Merton grasped how he was called to live more than ever before. He understood the call to discover our true selves, so that we might find union with God. More than that, Merton finally understood that union with God is not an experience of isolation; it is an experience of God’s outpouring love and compassion for all. Merton had entered the monastery under the illusion that cloistered life was a renunciation of the world and its problems; that in turning his back on the world, he was instead turning towards God. Yet as he realized on the corner of Fourth and Walnut in Louisville: he loved all those people. The truth is that solitude and detachment yield clarity, making it

640 Merton, *No Man is an Island*, 138.


possible for Merton to see the truth about his place at Gethsemani and in the world. Thus the contemplative, while behind cloistered walls, is turned towards God and the world. As Merton understood it, this revelation and conviction meant “involvement in the affairs of people outside the cloister, identification with them in their desires, problems, struggles, dangers; it means vital concern about a world of total war, genocide, race riots, social injustice, misery, poverty, violence, lust, every kind of disorder.”

Merton’s interest in and engagement with the world sky rocketed from that point on. He described his role as a contemplative to be to “try to get to the spiritual and metaphysical roots of these problems.” From his position in the monastery, Merton saw a world struggling with identity. The untruth of the false self creates illusory lies of division, hate, and fear. As a contemplative monk, Merton felt called to stand up against disorder and injustice, to be both a presence and voice of truth in the world, and to convey the unity and love that exist underneath it all.

Teaching, writing, social activism, or monastic life? Merton struggled to determine which of these was truly his call and vocation. Paradoxically, it turned out that all happened to be a part of his call. But they looked radically different than he expected. Like all of us, Merton was primarily called to know and love God in and through contemplation. His particular call was to monastic life, in and through which he was able to use his gifts for teaching and writing for God, fighting injustice in the world, and sharing God’s love with the world. Thus he writes, “All of my days are now completely

643 Merton, Contemplation in a World of Action, 130.

ordered to God’s work in prayer and teaching and writing. I have no time to be anything but a contemplative or a teacher of the contemplative life.”

From a universal standpoint, our calling is the same as Merton’s. “Our vocation is precisely this: to bear witness to the truth of Christ.” This means that we are all called to contemplation, and to the perfection of love, in our being and doing. But our calling is also particular and contextual. “Whether you teach or live in the cloister or nurse the sick, whether you are in religion or out of it, married or single, no matter who you are or what you are, you are called to the summit of perfection: you are called to a deep interior life perhaps even to mystical prayer, and to pass the fruits of your contemplation on to others.”

Merton is clear that the choice is ultimately ours, whether we acknowledge and respond to our calling or not. As he explains, "Our destiny is in our own hands since God has placed it there, and given us His grace to do the impossible. It remains for us to take up courageously and without hesitation the work He has given us, which is the task of living our own life as Christ would live it in us." We are all called, but we do not all listen or respond. Merton spent years of his life avoiding God and God’s call before finally consenting. Like Merton, we too have the opportunity every day to seek out God and God’s love, and to live our lives as we are meant to live them.

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646 Merton, *No Man is an Island*, 135.
648 Merton, *No Man is an Island*, 134-135.
“Who are we in the scheme of things, and what is required of us?”

McFague’s question was initially raised in chapter four, when we considered notions of selfhood. The second part of the question, what is required of us, is quite similar to the question of how we are called to live. Both questions focus on what our present activity ought to look like, and both are informed by and build on the dynamic relationships between God, self, and the world. Who we are, how is God involved in our lives, and what is our place in the world? These are foundational questions that McFague answered for us in the previous chapters that make it possible for us to fully examine the questions of what is required of us and how we are called to live today. As we saw, McFague clearly emphasizes the context of her work to be ecology, considering all things in and from the perspective of the cosmos. In this context, the “scheme of things” refers to the common creation story and to contemporary science, which present us with a certain picture of our world. This picture, in turn, sheds light on our identity, helping us see that we are not the center or climax of creation. Instead, we found that, while not the central focus, we are a part of creation, entangled in the webs of interrelatedness and interdependence. But we do hold and serve in a special and unique role alongside God as “partners in creation, as the self-conscious, reflexive part of the creation that could participate in furthering the process.”

As was suggested, this places a terrific responsibility upon humankind. “If we are interdependent with all other creatures as well as radically dependent on God, the source of reality and goodness—who is transcendentally immanent in the world and

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expects us to be partners in earthly flourishing—then what should we do?"\textsuperscript{651} What should we do? What do our responsibilities as partners in creation look like? What, exactly, is required of us?

McFague has no shortage of ideas when it comes to what we should, and must, do. As we saw in chapter four, the responsibility that comes with being the conscious and reflexive ones in creation means that we are called to live a certain kind of life. Like Merton, McFague insists that our calling is both universal and particular: “The planetary agenda is a universal vocation, a calling (in the sense of an urgent summons to a life’s work) to put our gifts, time, and energies into some small aspect of planetary well-being. This vocation has two features: universality (everyone is called) and particularity (each is called to a concrete, specific task).”\textsuperscript{652}

Our ability to respond to God’s call, and to act and to help the world flourish, hinges on our perception of God, self, and world, which McFague insists, needs adjusting. As she describes, we need to focus on “thinking differently so that we might behave differently.”\textsuperscript{653} Not all people have accepted the common creation story, or who we are in light of it. In order for us to act appropriately upon the responsibilities we have been given, we must first grasp the truth about who we are, and what our relationships with God and with the world truly are. This means being willing to see God, self, and the world through a different lens. Thus before we can do anything, we are all first

\textsuperscript{651} McFague, \textit{A New Climate for Theology}, 81.

\textsuperscript{652} McFague, \textit{Body of God}, 9-10.

\textsuperscript{653} McFague, \textit{Body of God}, 202.
confronted with a critical task: “to change consciousness, to develop a new sensibility about who we are in the scheme of things.”

This connection between our thoughts and activity in the world confirms the fact that our “being, knowing, and doing fit together,” and that, on a most fundamental level, we are called to keep them this way. As McFague describes, the very best life we can live is an embodied one, meaning that our lives, and all of our actions, become the very embodiment of what we think and know. McFague articulates this as possessing a working theology, or a “set of deeply held beliefs that actually function in [our] personal and public lives.” To put it simply, we possess a working theology when we live out our beliefs. Those often labeled as “saints” exhibit this quality: “each of them struggled to discern God’s action in and through their lives and then to express that reality in everything they did… As disciples of Christ they became mini-incarnations of God’s love… They are intimations of what it means to be ‘fully alive,’ living life from, toward, and with God. They are examples to the rest of us of what a Christlike life is.” But in reality, these saints are not just awe-invoking images of God held high on a pedestal; rather, we are all called to be saints in this world. We ought to all strive to live this kind of authentic and whole, embodied life.

Each of us is called to this vocation, the vocation of sainthood. Each Christian is asked to examine his or her life with the goal of discerning the action of God in it and then to express God’s power and love in everything. Each of us is expected to have a working theology, one that makes a difference in how we conduct our

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655 McFague, Super, Natural Christians, 2.
656 McFague, Life Abundant, 3.
657 McFague, Life Abundant, 3.
personal lives and how we act at professional and public levels. Becoming a mature Christian means internalizing one’s beliefs so that they are evident in whatever one says or does. Made in the image of God, humans are called to grow into that image more fully—to become “like God,” which for Christians means becoming like Christ, following Christ.658

While typically withholding her personal life in her writing, McFague shares the story of her calling and conviction about living an embodied life. She does so as an example to others of what the blending of being, knowing, and doing might look like.

Reflecting on her own spiritual “conversions,” she writes,

I was teaching theology at a divinity school. I had several books published and was progressing nicely up the career ladder. There was just one problem: most of my theology was still in my head. It wasn’t bad theology; in fact, it was pretty good. It just didn’t actually function in my life and I didn’t hold to my beliefs with much fervor. I was a theologian but I didn’t have a vocation. However, around 1980 I read an essay by another theologian, Gordon Kaufman, in which he claimed that, given the nuclear and ecological crises facing our planet, theology could no longer proceed with business as usual…. I believed that Kaufman was dead right. I revamped by teaming and research agendas in this direction and settled down to learning something about cosmology, evolutionary biology, and ecological science—about which I knew nothing.

This conversion, while intellectual and theological, was certainly vocational as well. I believed that teaching and writing books that attempt to help people, especially Christians, shift from an anthropocentric to a cosmological paradigm—a way of being in the world that supports the flourishing of all life—is a form of activism. I saw it as a way in which my beliefs, which were increasingly becoming more defined and deeply held, could be embodied. I believed that this kind of work was a form of Christian activism.659

But there was still a piece missing. That piece was me…. Finally after years of talking about God (what theologians are paid to do!), I am becoming acquainted with God. This conversion has occurred quite deliberately: I engaged a spiritual director and have undertaken a daily pattern of meditation. I am doing what is called ‘practicing the presence of God,” setting aside time for relating to God…. It

658 McFague, Life Abundant, 3.

659 McFague, Life Abundant, 7.
has been revelatory. Revelation, as I now see it, is God’s loving self-disclosure, and that I what I have experienced. I am meeting God and God is love.\textsuperscript{660}

These conversions helped McFague develop a working theology that not only functions, but is embedded and embodied in her daily life. She has experienced firsthand the truth that God is love, and as such, God loves the world, and that all of creation has its reality and being in love, in God (an idea that we first noted in her conception of reality in chapter two). Thus as Christians, striving to be like Christ, we participate in this love, and we express our love for God in loving the world.

McFague is clear that her experiences and theology are her own, but that they also express a working theology appropriate for our time, and therefore worthy for all of us to consider as our own. We are all called to possess a working theology and to embody our beliefs in our actions, but beyond this, we are called to possess a working theology and to embody beliefs \textit{of a certain kind}. As McFague notes, all of those that we affectionately think of as saints encapsulate and embody the inclusive and universal love which McFague herself experienced and has shared with us: the Dalai Lama, Dorothy Day, Martin Luther King, Jr., Bishop Tutu, etc. “One outstanding characteristic of these people is their universal love—love that seems to know no bounds. It does not stop with their own family, tribe, race, country, or even species. All life is honored just because it exists…. Like the saints, we need to practice developing a universal love that knows no bounds, a love that becomes more and more inclusive. How far can it go? Jesus suggests that the stretch must include the enemy—that is certainly an interesting proposal.”\textsuperscript{661}

\textsuperscript{660} McFague, \textit{Life Abundant}, 8.

\textsuperscript{661} McFague, \textit{A New Climate for Theology}, 147.
The call to and for all of us to embody love, sharing this love with the world and helping creation flourish, is an overwhelming and daunting task. Where do we begin? As McFague suggests, “our assignment becomes figuring out what loving the world means.” What does this kind of love look like? Both contemporary science and Christianity help us with this, directing us towards our call to stewardship and solidarity. As we saw in chapter four, the common creation story reveals both the unity and diversity that exists among all beings, and the special role of humankind. As the conscious part of creation, we have a responsibility to help the world flourish. Describing our unique position, McFague states, “We are profoundly interrelated and interdependent with everything living and nonliving in the universe and especially on our planet, and our peculiar position here is that we are radically dependent on all that is, so to speak, ‘beneath’ us (the plants on land and the microorganisms in the ocean as well as the air, water, and soil). At the same time we have become, like it or not, the guardians and caretakers of our tiny planet…. We are the responsible ones, responsible for all the rest upon which we are so profoundly dependent.”

Our unique position, and special role and responsibility to be guardians and caretakers, is a call to show love by being stewards of the earth. Ultimately, this means that we must possess a deep sense of appreciation for all others, acknowledging their otherness and treating them as subjects rather than objects. It also means that we need to develop an ethic of care and respect. “To care for another (person, animal, forest, river), appropriately one must learn what they need to

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662 McFague, *A New Climate for Theology*, 34.

flourish.”"\textsuperscript{664} This means truly paying attention to nature. As McFague explains, simply, “\textit{We cannot love what we do not know.”}\textsuperscript{665}

The common creation story and contemporary science show us who we are in the scheme of things—that we are not the center or climax of creation, but are stewards of the earth. While a critically important truth, this is not all that we are or all that we are called to do. As Christians, we also look to our faith and to God to help us discern who we are and how we are called to live and to embody love. As McFague explains, “For Christians it is also who we are as members of God’s body qualified by the liberating, healing, and inclusive love of Christ. This identification presses us beyond stewardship of life on earth to solidarity with all earth’s creatures, especially the vulnerable.”\textsuperscript{666} Thus while the common creation story helps us with our identity and call, it does not convey the whole truth of our vocation. We are decentered and recentered not only as stewards, but also as God’s partners in creation, called to help all of creation flourish. Our calling to embody love is ultimately “informed by both contemporary science and by Christian faith, for it is grounded in the mundane and the physical but shaped by a new calling that the common creation story and evolutionary science could never have envisioned—the calling to solidarity with all other creatures of the earth, especially the vulnerable and needy ones.”\textsuperscript{667}

\textsuperscript{664} McFague, \textit{Super, Natural Christians}, 154.

\textsuperscript{665} McFague, \textit{Super, Natural Christians}, 29.

\textsuperscript{666} McFague, \textit{Body of God}, 197.

\textsuperscript{667} McFague, \textit{Body of God}, 197-198.
Going beyond appreciation, care, and respect—the basics for living in community—solidarity means recognizing the intrinsic value of all, in and before God, and thereby working on their behalf. McFague admits the absurdity of the idea of helping the weak and vulnerable in the world; it goes against everything that science tells us about natural selection and survival of the fittest. But Christianity is concerned with radical inclusiveness, over and against what science tells us, based on the person of Jesus, who embodied love in the most radical of ways, and who tells us to follow him. As we have discussed in previous chapters, Jesus’ life and ministry reveal liberating, healing, and inclusive love to and for all, especially the poor, the needy, the vulnerable, the outcast. Thus Christian solidarity, rooted in Christ, is concerned with both “the liberation of the oppressed” and “suffering with those, who, nonetheless, suffer.”\(^{668}\) It is to truly identify with the other, in their pain, suffering, and/or joy and happiness, just as Christ did.

More than just loving others and the world from a position of comfort and privilege, solidarity is active identification with the other. As McFague explains, “We cannot understand our collusion in systemic suffering… unless we take the standpoint of those—the poor and the planet itself—that are being devastated by it.”\(^{669}\) This vantage point of the vulnerable and oppressed helps us see what changes must be made so that all beings can flourish and thrive. Based on the example of Jesus, we know that “a different world is possible.”\(^{670}\) It begins with the reassessment of the “good” and “abundant” life,


\(^{669}\) McFague, *Life Abundant*, 129.

\(^{670}\) McFague, *A New Climate for Theology*, 152.
as envisioned and lived out in our personal lives. As Christians, we need to reconsider these concepts in light of Jesus and the oppressed. Doing so, we find ourselves convicted: abundant and good for who? What is “good” for me is not necessarily good for the rest of creation. Often times what is good for me is downright harmful to the rest of creation. In light of this truth, McFague urges us to reconsider what our lives, as Christians, should look like. She states, “I believe Christian discipleship for twenty-first-century North American Christians means ‘cruciform living,’ an alternative notion of the abundant life, which will involve a philosophy of ‘enoughness,’ limitations on energy use, and sacrifice for the sake of others.”671 We need to start imagining the good and abundant life not from our own, privileged perspective, but from the vantage point of the poor. Then we will finally grasp the importance of sharing with others, of limiting our own intake, of sacrifice. We will see, as McFague states, that “the abundant life, for us, is the cruciform life.”672

The cruciform lifestyle of love and sacrifice which Christians are called to possess is critical in the shaping of a new world, but it is not all that we are called to do. McFague states, “Christians are called, I believe, not only to embody an alternative vision of the abundant life, but also to help move our social, political, and financial institutions in this direction.”673 This means that we need to profess and fight for the liberating, healing, and inclusive love depicted in Jesus in our own personal lives as well as in our social, political, and financial institutions. The good and abundant life needs to be

671 McFague, Life Abundant, 14.
672 McFague, Life Abundant, 186.
673 McFague, Life Abundant, 23.
reconsidered on both levels. As McFague explains, “Simplifying one’s lifestyle at the individual level will not bring about the systemic, institutional changes necessary for planetary justice and sustainability.” Loving nature and living frugally in our personal lives are important first steps, but they are not in and of themselves enough to change and better our world. We need to be involved, actively and in concrete ways, in the public sphere, to change the good and abundant life for all.

What does this look like? What kind of concrete action is called for? Ultimately, McFague argues that the fight for justice and sustainability in our social, political, and financial institutions comes down to economics. Quoting Steven Hackett, McFague defines economics as “the study of how scarce resources are allocated among competing uses.” Thus economics is intrinsically an ecological affair. As McFague notes, “economics,” “ecology,” and “ecumenicity” all share the same root word in Greek, oikos, which means “house.” Thus ecology and economics are directly connected. How we live (and use resources) directly affects, and ultimately determines, the flourishing of our planet.

McFague’s interest in economics has to do with its assumptions and the results it yields rather than the specific, technical details of economic theory itself. How do certain beliefs that we hold about resources and how we use them affect us and our planet? In her work, Life Abundant, McFague outlines two radically different and opposing

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674 McFague, Life Abundant, 199.


676 McFague, Life Abundant, 72.
economic models—the neoclassical and ecological economic models—as ways that we can live our lives today. The neoclassical economic model represents the predominant American view today. McFague notes that “neo-classical economics has one value: the monetary fulfillment of individuals provided they compete successfully for the resources.” Above all else, this model is concerned with the individual and growth. This is problematic, for McFague, when we consider the well-being of the planet and the flourishing of all beings. It means that not all are able to experience and participate in the good and abundant life, because resources are not being shared or evenly distributed. As McFague points out, “The grim results of this lifestyle are becoming apparent: a widening gap between the rich and the poor as well as unraveling of the irreplaceable life systems of the planet. Is this loving nature—or our neighbor?”

McFague is clear that the neoclassical economic model is a choice; it is a construction that we choose to live in that fits with the prevailing mechanical worldview, which we spoke of last chapter. While difficult to resist because of its persistent presence in American lives from birth until death, we do have the choice in how we see the world, and how we see ourselves in it. The call to stewardship and solidarity suggest that an alternative, and better, economic model is necessary for our time—one that is concerned with the flourishing of all life, not just some. McFague calls this the ecological economic model, which fits with the organic model and worldview and its emphasis on unity and interdependence. Whereas the neoclassical model focused on the individual and growth, the ecological model values community, and the flourishing of all beings. “The design

677 McFague, Life Abundant, 77.
678 McFague, Life Abundant, xi.
principle for economics changes from a line (of ‘progress’) to a circle (sustainability). We see ourselves now not as striving in a linear fashion toward a golden future of material comfort that each of us must reach on our own, but as living within a circle composed of networks of interrelationship and interdependence with all other beings, human and otherwise.”

If and when we see ourselves and our world this way, as a united bunch existing in community, we will allocate resources “on the basis of what it takes to achieve a just and sustainable society.” This is to say that resources should be distributed in a just way that promotes sustainability for the group as a whole.

This is what cruciform living is all about— that we work on behalf of the poor and oppressed in both our private and public lives to seek out justice and sustainability so that all may flourish. The good and abundant life, then, is not measured in terms of the individual’s increasing wealth and/or material goods. It is not about having “more.” Rather, the good and abundant life is conceived within the context of community—the planetary agenda—and what is good for the whole of creation. In this context, the good life is about having “enough.” It is about sharing with others, so that all have the opportunity to thrive. Ecology, economics, and ecumenicity do hold together—we share this planet as our home. As such, it only makes sense that there are some “house rules” that we all need to obey:

The first rule—as in any household—is to take no more than your share (do not raid the fridge). My share or your share is what we need for a decent life: food, shelter, clothing, medical care, education. If each of us has these things, we have the possibility of a reasonable chance at happiness (i.e., a long, healthy life with personal fulfillment). Following this rule will not guarantee that all will prosper, but it does help to level the playing field. The second house rule is to clean up after

ourselves, to take care of our waste and to recycle it so that its energy can be used again. The house is a sphere (the planet itself) that functions by a process of energy input and output. We cannot survive in a throw-away society where pollution (output) overtakes energy sources (input). The house will be unlivable: it will become full of hot, noxious gases instead of the clean air and food we need. The last rule is that we keep the house in good shape for the kids and the grandchildren. We don’t own this house; we don’t even rent it. It is loaned to us “free” for our lifetime with the proviso that we obey the above rules so that it can continue to feed, shelter, nurture, and delight others.\footnote{McFague, \textit{Life Abundant}, 122-123.}

The house rules are what ultimately make the good and abundant life possible. They do so by helping us all stay focused on the goals of justice and sustainability so that we all can flourish.

McFague has no qualms about our calling. It is extensive and it is specific. It begins with a change in consciousness and sensibility, so that we might see ourselves and the world as God does. This, in turn, helps us see the importance of possessing a working theology so that we can learn to embody our beliefs and live as saints, professing our love for the world. As embodiments of love, we are called to both stewardship and solidarity, which means showing our appreciation, respect, and care to and for the world, as well as working towards creation’s fulfillment in Christ. We do this concretely by taking on a cruciform life, limiting our own needs and wants and making sacrifices on behalf of the other. This life and call also means standing up for the needy and oppressed and actively fighting for justice and sustainability for all on a public, global scale. This entails reevaluating the economic models in place in our social, political, and financial structures and institutions.
Our calling, universal yet particular, is no small feat, for any of us. Yet as McFague suggest, “The most difficult task facing us… is summed up in one small word: hope.”$^{682}$ We have to believe that it is possible— that we can change our vision so that we can love the world this way and see it flourish. Thankfully McFague reminds us that we are not alone in our endeavor; as Christians we respond to God’s call together, as the Church. As McFague describes, the Church “is a sign of the new creation,” and “where the new vision of the liberating, healing, inclusive love of the embodied God in the Christic paradigm occurs, there is the church.”$^{683}$ With God and with one another, we can work for justice, sustainability, and love, and the fulfillment of all creation.

_How Are WE Called to Live? Considering Engaged Spirituality Today_

Merton and McFague each have their own way of answering the question, how are we called to live. For Merton, the call consists of contemplative union with God as our true selves, in and through which we come to see the truth about God, self, and the world and our relationships to and with each, making authentic love possible. As we saw, this was a call that Merton experienced firsthand, in his own particular way, which led him to monastic life. It is a call for all, but is presented and lived out differently in each of our lives. For McFague, we are called to live as saints, embodying love, and taking up the cruciform life in an ecological context. This entails self-sacrifice, stewardship, and solidarity, by which we care for, love, nurture, and suffer with creation.

$^{682}$ McFague, _A New Climate for Theology_, 168.

$^{683}$ McFague, _Body of God_, 206.
It also means that we actively fight for justice and sustainability, working on behalf of the poor and oppressed for their liberation, healing, and inclusion based on the life and ministry of Jesus. Like Merton, McFague also shared her personal experience of this call, and the concrete form it took in her life. She too insists that the call is universal, but that our responses to it look differently for each of us.

What are we to make of Merton and McFague’s conclusions? What significance do their conceptions of how we are called and how we ought to live have for us? What difference do they make in and to our lives? These are tough but critically important questions. Ultimately, while their ideas are interesting and thought provoking on their own, what is of particular interest and importance to us in this project is the point of intersection and contact between Merton and McFague when it comes to the question of how we are called to live. Both profess a call—a call to live an authentic life based on the imitation of Christ and embodiment of love. How is it that both come to this conclusion, given the significant differences in their contexts, philosophies, and conceptions of reality, truth, God, self, and world? This question intrigues us, as it should, because it is suggestive for how we are called to live.

This project began with the idea that we ought to consider how we are called to live, not just from one voice and perspective, but from two very different, possibly even opposing, voices and perspectives. Merton and McFague were chosen because they represent two different lines of thought and disciplines in theology. We have Merton at one end, a contemplative monk interested in mysticism and religious experience, and at the other end, we have McFague, a linguist and ethicist in ecological theology, actively working to promote justice and sustainability. Thus they come at the question of how we
are called to live from completely different angles—faith versus action—with two different agendas—contemplation versus justice.\(^{684}\)

This difference in approach and agenda are essentially a matter of personal interest and philosophical influence. When we consider Merton’s approach to the question of how we are called to live, from the perspective of faith, with a primary interest in contemplation, it is not difficult to see Merton’s emphasis on the call itself. How are we called? To what are we called? Both questions have to do with God. The contemplative experience of union with God as our true selves is, on a most fundamental level, our calling. *How we live* is more of a byproduct of the experience of the call itself (contemplation). This is to say that our actions are the fruit of the experience. How we live inevitably changes and improves when we unite with God in contemplation because we are finally our true selves, and we are finally able to see the world as God does. Thus we can’t help but love the world, having experienced Love firsthand, and having been (over)filled with the love of God. Thus as we stated earlier, Merton *is* concerned with both our *being* and *doing*, but *being* takes precedence. The discovery of the true self in God (our call) is what makes it possible to live as we should (sharing love) in the world.

As should be clear from previous chapters, Merton’s emphasis on the call—to *be* who we are in and before God (contemplation), is directly tied to his philosophical influences and context, which shaped his conception of reality. As we saw, modern philosophy stressed autonomy, reason, objectivity, and universal truth. This means that

\(^{684}\) This is not to say that either Merton or McFague emphasize one solely to the detriment of the other; as we shall see, both demonstrate the need for faith and action and contemplation and justice. But it is fair to say that each focuses heavily on one aspect over the other, which means they approach the question from different angles, providing us with a more comprehensive look at the question.
God and the true self can, and should, be found because they are universal truths that are directly accessible to and for all. Thus it naturally follows that Merton would emphasize the universal and supernatural experience of God as the true self, based on this conception of reality rooted in modern philosophy.

A complete contrast from Merton, McFague looks at the question of how we are called to live from the standpoint of action and justice. McFague is concerned with doing and living rather than our being or the experience of God in God’s self, of which the call consists. This is based on her reading of postmodernity, which calls into question modern precepts such as autonomy and metaphysics as uncertain and unknowable. Postmodernity claims that we cannot talk about being or God in any sort of universal or objective way because we lack direct access to truth or to God. All we have are the models that we construct and live in. It naturally follows, then, that in thinking about how we are called to live, McFague focuses on how we live and what we can actively do within the particular constructs and contexts that we find ourselves in. In McFague’s case, this specifically means considering how we ought to live in respect to the cosmos and planetary agenda.

Merton and McFague’s influences and contexts are different; their philosophies and conceptions of reality and truth are different; even their understandings of God, self, and the world are different. As such, it is no surprise that their approach and interest in the question of how we are called to live are different. Yet, somehow, despite all these differences, Merton and McFague intersect and align when it comes to the question of how we are called to live. Their responses to this question are not different; they are, remarkably, the same. What are the similarities and commonalities in their conclusions?
And how is it that they are able to come together and find points of agreement on how we are called to live?

As was suggested, Merton and McFague both confirm that we have a call: to imitate Christ and embody love. Each makes this claim in his/her own way, couched in language appropriate to and for his/her context. Despite variances in language and context, we can see clear points of convergence between them. To begin, both insist on a calling to and for humankind that is both universal and particular. We are all called, but our callings are our own, specific and concrete. The implication that all are called means that on a universal level, for both Merton and McFague, how we live matters. Both articulate the important task of being honest with ourselves about who we are and living authentically. This in turn allows us to be honest with ourselves about our relationships with God and with the world. Merton couches this in the language of the contemplative, true self versus the illusory, false self. McFague does so by asking who we are in the scheme of things and what is required of us, suggesting that we have a special role and responsibility. The result of this honesty and authenticity, whether discerned as the true self or as who we are in the scheme of things, is that we come to see the ethical dimension of our lives. It was evident in both Merton and McFague’s understandings of God, self, and world; all of these three point to it, and confirm that how we live matters.

Merton and McFague both push further still; their conclusion that how we live matters does not come solely from the learned value of honesty and authenticity in/to our

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685 For McFague, our calling can only be considered universal (a Modern precept) because it is working within the context of the cosmos, which includes all of humanity and creation.
lives; it is ultimately informed by Christian faith. Merton and McFague both answer the question of how we are called to live as faithful Christians. As such, they both argue that real honesty and authenticity about who we are and the truth of our relationships is learned in and through our relationship with Jesus Christ. According to Merton, the true self is an experience of identification with Christ, in which “it is no longer I that live but Christ lives in me.” For McFague, we are to look to and imitate Christ’s liberating, healing, and inclusive love as witnessed in the specifics of his life and ministry, such as his destabilizing parables, healings, and eating practices with outcasts. Thus for both, how we live—the ethical dimension in and to our lives—is directly tied to the person of Jesus and his influence in our lives.

As revealed to us in our identification and imitation of Christ, both Merton and McFague ultimately conclude that we are called to embody love in the world. This means that we both possess and express the love that we find in God, through Christ. As McFague described, embodiment has to do with authenticity in our convictions; we embody beliefs when we live them out. While Merton did not use that exact terminology, we see the concept of embodiment in his description of the fruits of contemplative experience. United with God as our true selves, in and through Christ, we experience an overwhelming outpouring of love for the world—ultimately because of our participation in God, who is Love, at which point love becomes our very identity and meaning of our existence. As we saw for McFague, she looks to Jesus and all the saints as great examples of embodiment; they show us how to go forth into the world and put love into action to and for all of creation.

With all of these similarities and points of convergence, we must ask, what is behind Merton and McFague’s unified conclusion? What we ultimately see when we look at Merton and McFague as case studies, is that, in both cases, faith prompts and begets action. Faith and action should not operate in isolation; they should be held tightly together. Merton and McFague come at the question of how we are called to live from different angles, with different agendas—Merton from the side of faith and contemplation and McFague from the side of action and justice—but neither rejects or neglects the other side. Both assert that how we are called to live incorporates action and justice, as embodiments of Christ’s love. And both come to this conclusion from the perspective of faith, guided by the practice of contemplation. Our just act(s) of embodied love in the world as Christians are rooted in faith and the contemplative experience of God.

Merton and McFague, representative of different times, philosophies, and conceptions of truth and reality, are able to come together and agree on how we are called to live—as embodiments of Christ’s love—because faith and action belong together. Merton and McFague both speak of this truth, albeit in their own contexts. For Merton, it took time to realize and accept this truth. As we saw, he thought that his entrance into the monastery was an escape from the question of how we ought to live in the world, that instead, his calling was to simply be present in and before God, and to focus solely on matters of faith, spirituality, and contemplation. But as he came to learn, faith, spirituality, and contemplation are concerned with more than the presence of God in our heart or soul. God desires more than our being. Contemplation is not just an experience of union with God; it is an experience of union with God that inevitably leads to the overflowing of love to and for the world. Thus Merton states, “Far from being essentially
opposed to each other, interior contemplation and external activity are two aspects of the same love of God." Contemplative union with God, while a mystical and spiritual experience of faith, always begets action. Having come to the realization and acceptance of this truth, Merton sought to live his life this way and to help others do the same.

McFague also saw the important connection between faith and action and between contemplation and justice. While she approaches the question of how we are called to live from the side of ethics and action, she acknowledges that the activity itself is, and must always be, rooted in our faith and experience of God. This is something that she too came to realize and accept through her own contemplative experience of God through prayer and meditation. As she states, “This adventure is showing me how deeply interconnected are the active and contemplative dimensions of the Christian life.”

McFague came to see the way that the saints illustrate and embody this truth, that the saints fighting for justice do so from a spiritual place, rooted in God. As she explains, “Persistent, lifelong cruciform living appears possible only through immersing oneself in God’s presence. Justice work and mysticism seem to be companions. To live this way is very difficult; it is, however, what I believe we middle-class North American Christians are called to.”

Contemplation and mysticism, then, are not necessarily isolated experiences of faith; they provide power and love to/for all forms of action and justice, sustaining our embodiment of love in the world.

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The fundamental belief that faith prompts and begets action, as expressed in Merton and McFague’s lives and work, is indicative of the call to “engaged spirituality” today. This is to say that Merton and McFague possess and advocate for a spirituality that is inherently engaged, and that we are called to do the same. In a general sense, “engaged spirituality” has to do with the ability to discover the resources within one’s own faith tradition that “nurture their being and enable them to engage in activities that move the world toward peace, justice, greater compassion, and wholeness.” It is concerned with the relationship between spirituality and social action and justice as it exists in any faith tradition. The concept comes from Thich Nhat Hanh, a Vietnamese Zen Buddhist monk, who coined the term “engaged Buddhism” to refer to his own religious commitments. Nhat Hanh was interested in the way that his own classic Buddhist teachings and practices, such as meditation, could empower forms of social action, such as peace and nonviolence.

The confines of this project mean that we are concerned here with specifically Christian forms of engaged spirituality today. Thus we ask, what does engaged spirituality look like in a Christian context? How does a specifically Christian spirituality, which encompasses faith, mysticism, and contemplative experience, prompt and beget social action and justice? As was previously stated, both Merton and McFague possess and advocate for engaged spirituality. Their lives and work are expressions of it in a Christian context, from which we can learn something about the meaning of Christian living and discipleship today.

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Neither Merton nor McFague implement the term “engaged spirituality” itself, but both embody the concept, as witnessed in their understandings of spirituality. Merton made little use of the term “spirituality” itself in his work, but it is clear that he possessed his own spirituality that had at its root a contemplative base, which he insisted was not an experience of complete seclusion or withdrawal from the world. As Kilcourse suggests, Merton’s spirituality was both “inclusive and engaged,” in growing fashion throughout his life. Merton used his contemplative base as an honest way into the world and its problems. As he saw it, social transformation begins with personal transformation. Thus contemplative practices such as solitude, meditation, and prayer serve a critical role in directing and aiding the active pursuit of justice. As Merton explained, “He who attempts to act and do things for the world without deepening his own self-understanding, freedom, integrity and capacity to love, will have nothing to give others. He will communicate to them nothing but the contagion of his own obsessions, his aggressiveness, his ego-centered ambitions…” Solitude, prayer, meditation, and other “spiritual” practices of contemplative life are the grounding for fruitful action; they ensure that the love that we share with the world is Godly and authentic.

McFague, while wary of the term “spirituality” and its many misconceptions, incorporates the term and concept in her work. Rather than thinking of spirituality as something individualistic or sacred, and therefore separate or removed from the world, McFague describes spirituality as being concerned with “developing the attention to, awareness of, knowledge about, the other (whether another person, a lifeform or entity in

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692 Merton, Contemplation in a World of Action, 160-161.
nature, God, or even the self) so that one can respond to that other appropriately.\textsuperscript{693}

According to this perspective, spirituality is inherently relational and engaged. It has to do with our relationship(s) with God, but also with the world, and all others. Relying on the concept of spirituality presented in liberation theology, McFague suggests that we are called to be “contemplatives in liberation,”\textsuperscript{694} practicing piety and praxis together. Thus as McFague states, “social justice and spirituality are not opposite tracks;”\textsuperscript{695} they fit hand in hand.

Merton and McFague share an understanding of spirituality that is open, inclusive, relational, and worldly. It is inherently engaged, and is concerned with the here and now. This kind of open and engaged spirituality, in the present, functions as the framework for all of their thoughts on God, self, and the world. As we have seen, both posit that God—personal and loving—is present and engaged in the world, indicative that the here and now matters—that how we live matters—and that our faith in God (spirituality) should itself be engaged—personal loving, and present in the world. Within the context of Christianity, Merton and McFague grasp tenets of Christian faith and tradition, such as sin and salvation, in this light.

We have made brief mention of Merton and McFague’s notions of sin and salvation already in this project, noting these Christian precepts as present day concerns connected to our identity and place in the world. As such, we saw that both Merton and

\textsuperscript{693} McFague, \textit{Super, Natural Christians}, 10.


\textsuperscript{695} McFague, \textit{Body of God}, 208.
McFague view salvation as an inclusive, worldly event. It is “engaged.” This is to say that, for both, salvation is not exclusively or primarily concerned with life after death. Merton insists that salvation has to do with a deep, spiritual change in our being, in present life. “Salvation,” according to Merton, is “the full discovery of who [one] really is,” and is concerned with “the fulfillment of [one’s] own God-given powers, in the love of others and of God.” As Merton describes, we are “saved” if and when we discover who we are in and before God, and embody and share in God’s love to and for the world. We are saved from our false selves and the illusions and lies that come with it that prevent us from living honestly and authentically in the world. This experience of salvation is ultimately an experience of God’s grace, experienced in and through Christ, that we universally share and participate in. We are concerned with our own salvation as well as the salvation of all others—that we might all become “Christs.” In this way the very notion of salvation prompts and begets action and love, so that we may help others discover Truth.

McFague also conceives of salvation as a present, worldly event. While she does not offer a specific definition, she insists that “salvation is the direction of creation and creation is the place of salvation.” Salvation, then, is not some otherworldly, spiritual event and concern. It is a present, worldly matter concerning all of creation. As she suggests, “Creation as the place of salvation means that the health and well-being of all creatures and parts of creation is what salvation is all about…. The liberating, healing,

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696 Merton, *No Man is an Island*, xv.
697 Merton, *No Man is an Island*, xv.
inclusive ministry of Christ takes place in and for creation.” To say that salvation is the direction of creation speaks to our ongoing role as partners in creation with God, to participate and aid in the salvation of all creation by promoting the well-being and flourishing of all, based on the example of Christ. McFague admits that this is, ultimately, a position and statement of faith. Contemporary science and the common creation story do not tell us that this is the direction of creation, or that the salvation of creation is wrapped up in its well-being, but this is how McFague reads the story from a spiritually engaged, Christian perspective.

Merton and McFague’s conceptions of God, self, world, and salvation, which is at the crux of Christian faith, are inherently engaged, and therefore promote action. They encourage us, in different ways, to go forth, based on the tenets of Christian faith, and participate in the very salvation of the world. Yet both Merton and McFague acknowledge a giant hurdle and hold up in whatever form of spiritually rooted social action that we might choose to pursue—the Christian notion of sin. Essentially, both Merton and McFague define sin as the misappropriation of love that has to do with selfishly living contrary to reality, which prevents faith from prompting action, or any kind of engaged spirituality.

We see the concept of sin in Merton’s work in relation to the true and false self, in which he describes sin as a “sickness of the spirit” in which “I have violated the inmost laws of my own being, which are, at the same time, the laws of God Who dwells within me.” Sin has to do with the failure to see and/or accept the truth about who we are in

699 McFague, Body of God, 182.

700 Merton, The Inner Experience, 119.
and before God—the truth of salvation. It has to do with the conscious decision to turn our backs to God and instead focus first and foremost on the (false) self. Thus Merton states that “sin is the will to do what God does not will, to know what He does not know, to love what He does not love.”

To live this way is to completely fail to imitate Christ and embody God’s love, instead twisting and turning love and attention in on the (false) self and all of its illusions and lies. As Merton explains, “All sin is simply a perversion of that love which is the deepest necessity of man’s being: a misdirection of love, a gravitation toward something that does not exist, a bond with unreality.” Our love is supposed to be an expression of the love of God, but the selfish misappropriation of love in sin means that we instead turn this love into something that it is not, preventing us from any form of meaningful action and justice in the world.

McFague likewise asserts that sin has to do with turning our backs on Truth. On a general level, she defines sin as “living falsely, living contrary to reality, to the way things are.” Within the context of the planetary agenda, this means “thinking, feeling, and acting in ways… contrary to the proper, right relations among the beings and entities that constitute reality.” We fail to see and/or accept who we are in the scheme of things and what is required of us, living dishonest, inauthentic lives. We live a lie concerning our relationships and the interdependence and interrelatedness that the common creation story conveys. Instead we are completely obsessed with our selves,

701 Merton, No Man is an Island, xv. 84
702 Merton, Disputed Questions, 102.
703 McFague, Body of God, 114.
704 McFague, Body of God, 114.
and our own needs and wants. Sin is, therefore, “the inability to identify with others outside of the self, the refusal to acknowledge that one is not the center of things.”

The call to stewardship, solidarity, and the cruciform life is rejected, and the sin of our own selfish lifestyles—“living disproportionate, falsely, inappropriately within this space, refusing to accept the limitations and responsibilities of our place”—prevent us from helping creation thrive and flourish. And in doing so, we fail to imitate and share Christ’s liberating, healing, and inclusive love.

It is easy to see how Merton and McFague’s conceptions of sin prevent us from living spiritually engaged lives. To fall trapped to this selfish manipulation of love prevents us from right relationships, with ourselves, God, and the world. Solidarity and social action are out of the question if and when we think and act this way. How do we get past it? As Christians both Merton and McFague believe that there is hope for us to move beyond our selfish lies and deceit, as witnessed in the hope of salvation. We don’t have to think and/or act this way; we have a choice to be real or unreal, to show humility and repentance, and to accept God’s saving grace and participate in it, or not. If and when we are “saved” from our own self-love—so that we can see ourselves and our relationships with God and the world for what they truly are—then we will finally be able to imitate Christ and embody real, agape, love; this is what engaged spirituality is about.

As advocates for engaged spirituality within the Christian context of sin and salvation, Merton and McFague act as imitations of Christ and embodiments of love in their own unique ways. This is no surprise given their different interests and contexts.

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What do their acts and expressions of solidarity and social action look like, specifically? We have looked at Merton’s spiritual journey, and the way that contemplative experience led him to openness, concern, and compassion to and for the world. He ultimately discovered a connection between love and justice, realizing that, “Love is measured by its activity and its transforming power. Christianity does not teach man to attain an inner ideal of divine tranquility and stoic quiet by abstracting himself from material things. It teaches him to give himself to his brother and to his world in a service of love in which God will manifest his creative power through men on earth.”

This truth is rooted in Christ, and his life and ministry. Merton saw in Jesus the epitome of justice and love, by means of peace and nonviolence, and concluded that we as Christians are called to imitate the “Prince of Peace.” Thus Merton states, “The Christian is and must be by his very adoption as a son of God, in Christ, a peacemaker (Matt. 5:9).” Merton was clear that the attitude and practice of peace and nonviolence do not have to do with passive, sentimental feelings of goodwill. Rather, it is active and hands on. As Merton explains, “Christ Our Lord did not come to bring peace to the world as a kind of spiritual tranquilizer. He brought to His disciples a vocation and a task, to struggle in the world of violence to establish His peace not only in their own hearts but in society itself.”

Merton took this to heart and encouraged all to take a stand against societal structures that rely on and/or promote violence and injustice.

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707 Merton, Love and Living, 150.


709 Merton, Passion for Peace, 105.
Merton was most concerned with the violence and injustice demonstrated in war, an issue that was quite pressing during his time in the 1960’s. As he saw it, war is an issue of critical importance because it threatens our peace and well-being personally, nationally, and globally. Thus as Christians, we have a responsibility and call to advocate for peace and nonviolence in the face of such injustice and violence, even if on a scale as large as war itself. In the context of war, this means working actively for peace and justice in concrete ways:

The duty of the Christian in this crisis is to strive with all his power and intelligence, with his faith, hope in Christ, and love for God and man, to do the one task which God has imposed upon us in the world today. That task is to work for the total abolition of war…. Christians must become active in every possible way, mobilizing all their resources for the fight against war. First of all there is much to be studied, much to be learned. Peace is to be preached, nonviolence is to be explained as a practical method, and not left to be mocked… Prayer and sacrifice must be used as the most effective spiritual weapons in the war against war, and like all weapons they must be used with deliberate aim: not just with a vague aspiration for peace and security, but against violence and against war. This implies that we are also willing to sacrifice and restrain our own instinct for violence and aggressiveness in our relations with other people. We may never succeed in this campaign but whether we succeed or not the duty is evident. It is the great Christian task of our time.\(^{710}\)

These are all practical, concrete ways that we can take a stand against the violence and injustices in/of war, working for peace as God calls us to do. Yet Merton insists that “the first job of all is to understand the psychological forces at work in ourselves and in society.”\(^{711}\) As a contemplative monk, Merton felt that he had great insight into this, as he was able to objectively see the world and its underlying spiritual problems. He notes, “The present world crisis is… a crisis of man’s spirit…. The moral evil in the world is due to man’s alienation from the deepest truth, from the springs of spiritual life within


himself, to his alienation from God.” Ultimately what this means is that our relationships with one another—personally, nationally, and globally—are damaged and divided, because we do not know God or our true selves, thereby failing to see the unity that we all share in and before God.

This kind of spiritual alienation results in forms of violence, oppression, and injustice such as war; it begins within in ourselves, and then is projected outwards in our relationships until it climbs its way into societal structures at large. On such a grand scale, Merton notes how easy it is to despair, to think that the problem is too large, that there is nothing we, as individuals, can do to combat it. But this is not true. War is, most simply, a result of the spiritual crisis of identity. As Merton insists, “the root of war is fear;” fear is nothing other than distrust, brought on by the false self and its illusory lies and deceit. When we discover our true selves, and help others to do the same, then we will see a natural decrease in violence and injustice, on personal, national, and global levels.

As Merton explains, outer peace is a matter of inner peace; the world will be at peace when people are at peace within themselves. This ultimately means that the abolition of war begins with the self. We need to look at our own contribution to the problem. Merton states, “Instead of hating the people you think are warmongers, hate the appetites and the disorder in your own soul, which are the causes of war. If you love peace, then hate injustice, hate tyranny, hate greed—but hate these things in yourself, not

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712 Merton, Passion for Peace, 83.

713 Merton, New Seeds of Contemplation, 112.
The fear and distrust that cause war make us want to point fingers, creating divisions and enemies. But the truth is that these “enemies” are just like us; they are people, in and before God, that deserve the same rights, love, and opportunity for well-being as us. We need to realize that “we are all more or less wrong.... we are all at fault, all limited and obstructed by our mixed motives, our self-deception, our greed, our self-righteousness and our tendency to aggressivity and hypocrisy.” Thus as Merton puts it, “the enemy is in all of us.”

Truth does not take sides; it does not leave room for false divisions, enemies, injustice, violence, or hate. Thus we need total solidarity today. We need to acknowledge the transgressions in us and in one another, and actively work towards spiritual unity and oneness, making peace possible. As Merton suggests, “If we can love the men we cannot trust (without trusting them foolishly) and if we can to some extent share the burden of their sin by identifying ourselves with them, then perhaps there is some hope of a kind of peace on earth, based not on the wisdom and manipulations of men but on the inscrutable mercy of God. For only love—with means humility—can exorcise the fear which is at the root of all war.” Our ability to stand up against violence and injustice, whether in the context of war or something else, is rooted in the power and love of God, which we will only ever know as our true selves. Merton encourages all of us to get involved and to act, based on this truth.

Rather than taking interest in the violence and injustice witnessed in human relations, particularly in regards to war, as we saw in Merton’s case, McFague chooses to emphasize the need for spiritually rooted social action when it comes to the planetary agenda, as has been made clear throughout this project. McFague insists that creation is the “new poor” today. We have made it poor by stripping it of its rich, vast resources out of our own selfishness, resulting in a crisis of sustainability. As the recipient of such violence and injustice, McFague argues that creation should be the focus of our liberating, healing, and inclusive love based on the example of Jesus.

As relayed earlier in this chapter, McFague believes that we imitate Christ and embody his inclusive love, working for the flourishing of all creation, through the reception of our call to stewardship, solidarity, and the cruciform life. This involves re-envisioning the good and abundant life through self-sacrifice and the implementation of an ecological economic model for all to follow and live in, focusing on sustainability through the just distribution of resources. As McFague insisted, it all really comes down to following the “house rules:” taking only our share, cleaning up after ourselves, and keeping the house in good shape for future occupants.

All of these aspects of our calling require action, rooted in faith. McFague’s concern for the cosmos—for its flourishing and well-being—demands an engaged spirituality, or spiritually rooted social action. This means going beyond polite conversation regarding the need for justice and sustainability. We need to make justice and sustainability happen, by getting our hands dirty. As McFague insists, this means thinking about justice and sustainability in concrete ways, with respect to specific, impending problems that threaten our world. For McFague, this means considering the
crisis of climate change today, and the way(s) that we, perhaps unknowingly, contribute to the continuing violence and injustice done in and to our world.

In McFague’s most recent book, *A New Climate for Theology*, she introduces the threat of climate change and its ramifications, as documented by the United Nations Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), informed by contemporary science. As McFague notes, “In this report, the overall assessment is ‘unequivocal’ confidence that global warming is under way, and ‘very high confidence’ (90 percent) that human activities are the cause.” Evidence of this includes the increase in “greenhouse” gases, extreme weather, and the global temperature. McFague notes the critical weight this issue has on/for us today, particularly because so many fail to see their contribution to the problem, or that there is a problem whatsoever. She states, “Most of us do not see an out-of-control climate when we wake up each morning to start our day. In many parts of the world, things seem fine. This is because there is a built-in delay before the dire consequences of global warming become evident…. Its effects are not immediate—and thus we have difficulty seeing the urgency for action.” But McFague reminds us that climate change is real and it is dire: “Climate is our planet’s largest, most important, and most vulnerable interlocking system: it allows for and sustains life.” It is the issue for our time, and as McFague suggests, it demands action.

What kind of action is called for in this context? How do we combat climate change? As a theologian, McFague sees her own contribution to this project as primarily

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linguistic: “suggesting different language for talking about God and ourselves—with the hope that different action may follow.”\textsuperscript{721} As she explains, we need to recognize the profound interdependence and interrelatedness that exists between us and the rest of creation. This is critical so that we act in ways that are appropriate to who we are and our relationship with the world. To make this point clear, McFague offers the concrete example of air travel that is a part of everyday life to middle-class Americans. As McFague notes, “A single return flight between New York and London produces 1.2 tons of greenhouse gases per passenger, the equivalent of a year’s allowable emissions if emissions were rationed fairly among all of the planet’s human beings.”\textsuperscript{722} It is easy to gather from this how our lifestyles and values need to change. We need to break free from our addiction to the high consumption lifestyle and the values associated with it. We need to drastically cut back, to self-limit in consideration of others and their right to resources, and ultimately, their (and our) right to life. The question is how we do this.

This change in attitude, lifestyle, and values is reflected in our call to the cruciform life. While a necessary component in the fight against global warming, it is not enough on its own. As McFague explains, “Many people are attempting to live simpler, more environmentally friendly, low-energy lives by changing behavior at the personal level. But what these folks soon realize is that the corporate and political institutions of our society pose enormous barriers to such personal changes: the lack of low-energy transportation and buildings; a constant barrage of advertisements for SUVs

\textsuperscript{721} McFague, \textit{A New Climate for Theology}, 3.

and high-energy electronics and appliances; a global food market that transports produce halfway around the world at an enormous expenditure of energy.”  We are confronted with an array of images built into our society and culture that promote individualistic, consumer type thinking, making it difficult to hold fast to the alternative vision of the good and abundant life. It is difficult to stand up against such mainstream thinking, and those that do, unfortunately, far too often do so alone. Their opposition to consumerism, by itself, is simply not enough to combat the consequences of global warming.

McFague insists that what is ultimately needed is a change in our society and culture, in our businesses and in our government. This means that we need to actively work for the alternative vision of the good and abundant life personally, publicly, and politically. As McFague insists, climate change is an attitude problem “in our hearts and minds and in our laws and institutions.” In order to think and act differently about who we are and our relationship to/with the rest of the world, we need to incorporate this view in our structures and institutions, so that they too promote such thinking. As McFague argues, we do this in and through our government and the leaders that we choose to elect. She explains, “We need to elect representatives to our governments who will create laws to limit human energy use at all levels—from emission caps on oil refineries to regulations on emissions from automobiles. The personal and the political need to join to legislate the kind of human action in the world that will create a just and sustainable planet. Individuals cannot do this simply by trying to live ‘environmentally’ within an energy-mad society. The system must be changed—the major forces within

723 McFague, A New Climate for Theology, 28.

724 McFague, A New Climate for Theology, 26.
society that regulate and control our use of fossil fuels.” As McFague sees it, by electing the right leaders in/to our government, we can instill laws that change the operations of businesses in the public sphere and change the way we live our lives in private, combating climate change, and promoting the well-being and flourishing of all creation.

Government is an important facet of/to this change in vision of the good and alternative life, affecting us personally and publicly. But it is not the sole contender of climate change. Our government, elected leaders, and the laws that they pass to alleviate the problems we have created, are only as successful as those that work with them, publicly and personally. We need to all come together, to find a solution together. As McFague states, “Global warming is not a contest between personal, business, and governmental levels to provide the solution: all are needed. To be sure, a smart emissions tax will encourage business to use its imagination to reduce emissions, with the result being more efficient cars, buildings, and forms of travel. Regulatory standards for electricity generation and for more efficient vehicles, building, and transit will also reduce our greenhouse emissions. And finally, individuals can reduce emissions by what they do in their personal lives—how they work, travel, eat, and play.”

McFague insists that we can combat climate change, and we can have a better world—where there is justice, sustainability, and the opportunity for all to flourish—but we have to work for it, together. We have to work for it, together, not only personally, publicly, and politically, but we have to work for it, together, with God, as God’s partners

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725 McFague, A New Climate for Theology, 29.

726 McFague, A New Climate for Theology, 24.
in creation. In this role our tasks ultimately are to care and to hope; our very care for creation is an expression of our hope, rooted in God, in and through Whom all things and all change is possible. In more concrete terms, “The first step in accepting responsibility as God’s partner in sustaining creation’s health is to admit that we are a major cause of the crisis facing the twenty-first century: global warming. Denial is no longer possible…. The second step is to become informed about climate change…”727 This means learning about all of the complex contributions to the problem, and working to find solutions—personally, publicly, and politically—on nature’s behalf. As McFague insists, “It is not something we want to be responsible for… but it is our calling, our destiny, and our duty.”728

**Conclusion**

What are we to ultimately conclude from all of this? What are we to take away from Merton and McFague and their contributions, as Christian expressions and advocates for engaged spirituality today? The answers to these questions are found in the three concrete, interrelated reasons Merton and McFague were included in this project and the purpose that they serve. First and foremost, Merton and McFague serve as radically different, yet exemplary examples of Christian living and discipleship for us in the world. Their lives as well as their teaching and writing serve as examples, and case studies, to and for us, regarding the question of how we are called to live. Merton and McFague both demonstrate the call to imitate Christ and to embody love, showing us the

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meaning of engaged spirituality today and what it looks like in two very specific forms. Secondly, beyond serving as mere examples, Merton and McFague convey truth to and for us, in their lives and work. This is to say that they are not only models or illustrations, but that they help us come to a realization within ourselves regarding how we are called to live. Thus their examples and the truth that they convey is indicative to and for our own lives, and how we are called to live and to possess an engaged spirituality today.

This truth is, most basically, that our lives have meaning and purpose. As Merton states, and McFague would agree, “Our life provokes us with the evidence that it must have meaning. Part of the meaning still escapes us. Yet our purpose in life is to discover this meaning, and live according to it.” As Christians Merton and McFague both believe that the evidence of meaning and purpose in and to our lives signifies something (someone) greater than ourselves. Our lives are a response to a call—a call from God. God calls all of us, universally, but the calling is also particular and contextual to each of us. As McFague describes, “In different ways each of us has a calling, is being summoned…” This means, as we have stated, that how we live matters. There is an ethical dimension to human life. Within the context of Christianity, this means living our lives based on the person of Christ; the ethical (active) dimension in and to our lives is informed by our Christian faith. Merton and McFague remind us of this very fundamental, but unheeded truth—that Christian faith always prompts and begets action; faith and action belong together.

729 Merton, No Man is an Island, xi.

730 McFague, Body of God, 8.
Ultimately, this is what engaged spirituality is all about—faith and action, together. “Engaged” spirituality—faith and action, together—is appropriate and necessary for today’s world. It is, as expressed in different ways in each and every context, remarkably fresh and relevant. Yet it is not radical or new. As we saw in Merton and McFague’s own definitions of spirituality, and as witnessed in the study of spirituality in the Christian tradition, an authentic Christian spirituality naturally incorporates social action. This has become overlooked and neglected in today’s world, as many have preferred to focus on quiet aspects of the spiritual life, such as meditation, prayer, and solitude. As a result, spirituality has become equated with nothing other than these concepts today.

The truth is, spirituality has to do with a way of life, which is a life of discipleship.731 This is true for both Merton and McFague, and it is true for us. As Christian disciples, living authentically in the world, we ought to examine and re-examine the question of how we are called to live, with all of its implications on God, self, and the world, renewing and revitalizing our responses to this question throughout life. As one Christian scholar puts it, “In Christian terms, spirituality refers to the way our fundamental values, lifestyles, and spiritual practices reflect particular understandings of God, human identity, and the material world as the context for human transformation.”732 Thus spirituality is inherently “engaged,” and should act as such in all of our lives.

731 Cunningham and Egan, 10.

Merton and McFague serve as reminders of this truth. Their examples and embodiments of truth inspire action in us, so that we not only come to know the truth, but act on it. This is the third and culminating purpose for their inclusion in and to this project—Merton and McFague awaken in us our call to actively embody Christ’s love in the world today, so that we all, in our own ways, express an engaged spirituality. They inspire us to consider the meaning, purpose, and truth in and of our lives, to contemplate God’s call so that we can act appropriately, as informed by our faith. Thus Merton and McFague, through whispers of conversation on the question of how we are called to live—based on their understandings of God, self, and the world—encourage us to take hold of and to express an engaged spirituality, today, that is uniquely our own. As a result, we see how our own faith in God, through Christ, yields action, justice, and love, and we act on this truth, living more authentic lives, and contributing to the making of a better world.

Our universal calling is clear—as Christians, we need to actively imitate Christ and embody love in and for the world. The particular details of this calling and how we ought to live are not always as clear to us. How should we imitate Christ and embody love in today’s world? We have seen what this looks like in Merton and McFague’s own lives and contexts, but what does it look like in our own lives and contexts? We need to discern what our own form of spiritually rooted social action looks like. Where, and to what are we called, specifically, given our different passions, talents, and contexts? How are we going to get involved, to concretely embody Christ’s love, today, tomorrow, next month, and next year? The specifics of our calling require discernment. But both Merton and McFague believe the answer is readily available to us and can be found in
and through our faith in Christ. We need to listen to and for God’s call, and we need to be open to where God moves us. Merton himself captures this desire for discernment to authentically act, which perhaps we all feel, reflected in his prayer:

My Lord God, I have no idea where I am going. I do not see the road ahead of me. I cannot know for certain where it will end. Nor do I really know myself, and the fact that I think that I am following your will does not mean that I am actually doing so. But I believe that the desire to please you does in fact please you. And I hope I have that desire in all that I am doing. I hope that I will never do anything apart from that desire. And I know that if I do this you will lead me by the right road though I may know nothing about it. Therefore will I trust you always though I may seem to be lost and in the shadow of death. I will not fear, for you are ever with me, and you will never leave me to face my perils alone.  

With humility, selflessness, and attention and devotion to God and where God is leading us, we too can find our authentic voice and activity in the world, and participate in the making of a better world. Merton and McFague both used their faith as platforms to advocate for peace, love, and well-being in the world. It is up to all of us today to use our faith as a platform to do the same, in our own unique and special ways.

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WORKS CITED


