



READING I for Religious Life: A Deep down Impulse to Care and Make Creation Whole

Week One: Watering the Roots at the Wellspring of Mercy, June 2-7, 2013

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(Excerpts from Sallie McFague's MODELS OF GOD, Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987)

1. To be sure, other eras undoubtedly considered their times as unprecedented as we find ours. But the crux for those of us who find our time exceptional is that the "old ways," the old solutions, will not do for us. The nuclear threat is but the most extreme example of what some call the postmodern sensibility. If the Enlightenment was the first watershed, thrusting us into the modern world, then the contemporary era must be called the second watershed, for its assumptions differ from those of the Enlightenment that created the modern world. Any listing of these assumptions will vary but will probably include some of the following: a greater appreciation of nature, linked with a chastened admiration for technology; the recognition of the importance of language (and hence interpretation and construction) in human existence; the acceptance of the challenge that other religious options present to the Judeo-Christian tradition; a sense of the displacement of the white, Western male and the rise of those dispossessed because of gender, race, or class; an apocalyptic sensibility, fueled in part by the awareness that we exist between two holocausts, the Jewish and the nuclear; and perhaps most significant, a growing appreciation of the thoroughgoing, radical interdependence of life at all levels and in every imaginable way. These assumptions, I believe, form the context for theology if it is to be theology for our time.

Preface

2. Each generation must venture, through an analysis of what fulfillment could and must mean for its own time, the best way to express that claim. A critical dimension of this expression is the imaginative picture, the metaphors and models, that underlie the conceptual systems of theology. One cannot hope to interpret Christian faith for one's own time if one remains indifferent to the basic images that are the lifeblood of interpretation and that greatly influence people's perceptions and behaviour. One of the serious deficiencies in contemporary theology is that though theologians have attempted to interpret the faith in new concepts appropriate to our time, the basic metaphors and models have remained relatively constant: they are triumphalist, monarchical, patriarchal.

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3. Metaphor and concept are [] inextricably and symbiotically related in theology; there is no way to do theology for our time with outmoded or oppressive metaphors and models. The refusal to deal with the constructive task results in either a return to anachronistic models—a conservative retreat—or a move away from all images toward abstract language. The first ghettoizes Christianity; the other renders it sterile. In this situation, one thing that is needed [] is a *remythologizing* of the relationship between God and the world.

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4. We live in our imaginations and our feelings in a bygone world, one under the guidance of a benevolent but absolute deity, a world that is populated by independent individuals (mainly human beings) who relate to one another and to other forms of life in hierarchical patterns. But this is not our world, and to continue doing theology on its assumptions is hurtful, for it undermines our ability to accept the new sensibility of our time, one that is holistic and responsible, that is inclusive of all forms of life, and that acknowledges the interdependence of all life.

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5. We can approach the issue of difference between the bygone world and our world by evoking some images that may help us feel our world from the inside. The first is a passage from an early essay by Pierre Teilhard de Chardin called "Cosmic Life," which, despite being more lyrical than his later writings, is characteristic of his mature position. The essay, as he himself says, presents the "fire in his vision." In the passage he is attempting to feel "matter."

... and I allowed my consciousness to sweep back to the farthest limit of my body, to ascertain whether I might not extend outside myself. I stepped down into the most hidden depths of my being, lamp in hand and ears alert, to discover whether, in the deepest waters of the current that flows on, whether I might not hear the murmur of their mysterious waters that rise from the uttermost depths and will burst forth no man knows where. With terror and intoxicating emotion, I realized that my own poor trifling existence was one with the immensity of all that is and all that is still in process of becoming. He takes a journey into the unknown, the mystery of his own body and with lamp in hand tries to see and hear what he is not usually aware of: his connection with everything else that has been, is, and will be. The atoms, molecules, and cells that constitute his organic structure connect him in profound ways to everything else in the universe. As he remarks, "My life is not my own," for although he appears to be an individual to his own consciousness, there lies hidden within him the dense multitude of beings "whose infinitely patient and lengthy labour" has resulted in "the phylum" of which, as he put it, he is "for the moment the extreme bud."

The world that Teilhard helps us to feel is one whose heartbeat is relationship and interdependence. The poet Wallace Steven expresses it precisely: "Nothing is itself taken alone. Things are because of interrelations or interconnections." Moreover, in this world the absolute division between human being and other beings and even between the organic and the inorganic are softened, as are many of the hierarchical dualism that have accompanied those divisions: spirit/flesh, subject/object, male/female, mind/body. The holistic paradigm suggested in place of the atomistic paradigm has, I believe, revolutionary consequences for Christian theology. Not simply to accept this paradigm but to feel it, to incorporate I into our imaginations, is a necessary dimension of the new sensibility required of Christian theology in our time

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6. Some scholars now claim that the “appearance” of Jesus, the awareness of his continuing presence and empowerment, is what “really happened” in the resurrection: “. . . lo, I am with you always, to the close of the age” (Matt. 28:20b). That is to say, a critical aspect of Jesus’ story as paradigmatic of God’s relationship with the world is that it continues. The permanency of the way of the cross, the way of self-sacrificial, befriending love inviting all to fulfillment, is the permanency not just of an example but of an empowerment. The resurrection is a way of speaking about an awareness that the presence of God in Jesus is a permanent presence in our present.

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7. The appearance stories suggest, however, as Paul’s narration implies, that God in Christ will be present even to the last and the least. Whatever the resurrection is, if interpreted in light of the appearance narratives, it takes place in every present; it is the presence of God to us, not our translation into God’s presence.

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8. What if we were to understand the resurrection and ascension not as the bodily translation of some individuals to another world - a mythology no longer credible to us-but as the promise of God to be permanently present, “bodily” present to us, in all places and times of our world? In what ways would we think of the relationship between God and the world were we to experiment with the metaphor of the universe as God’s “body,” God’s palpable presence in all space and time? If what is needed in our ecological, nuclear age is an imaginative vision of the relationship between God and the world that underscores their interdependence and mutuality, empowering a sensibility of care and responsibility toward all life, how would it help to see the world as the body of God?

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9. We are asking whether one way to *remythologize* the gospel for our time might not be through the metaphor of the world as God’s “body” rather than as the king’s “realm.” If we experiment with this metaphor, it becomes obvious that royalist, triumphalist images for God - God as king, lord, ruler, patriarch - will be inappropriate. Other metaphors, suggesting mutuality, interdependence, caring, and responsiveness, will be needed. I will suggest God as mother (father), lover, and friend. If the world is imagined as self-expressive of God, if it is a “sacrament” – the outward and visible presence or body – of God, if it is not an alien other over against God but expressive of God’s very being, then, how would God respond to it and how should we? Would not the metaphors of parents, lovers, and friends be suggestive, with their implications of creation, nurture, passionate concern, attraction, respect, support, cooperation, mutuality? 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?

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10. The *monarchical model* of God as King was developed systematically, both in Jewish thought (God as Lord and King of the Universe), in medieval Christian thought (with its emphasis on divine omnipotence), and in the Reformation (especially in Calvin's insistence on God's sovereignty). In the portrayal of God's relation to the world, the dominant western historical model has been that of the absolute monarch ruling over his kingdom. This imaginative picture is so prevalent in mainstream Christianity that it is often not recognized as a picture. Nor is it immediately perceived as oppressive. More often it is accepted as the natural understanding of the relationship of God and the world-and one we like.

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11. This picture, while simplistic and anachronistic, continues in spite of its limitations, because of its psychological power: it makes us feel good about God and about ourselves. It inspires strong emotions of awe, gratitude, and trust toward God and, in ourselves, engenders a satisfying swing from abject guilt to joyous relief. Its very power is part of its danger, and any picture that seeks to replace it must reckon with its attraction. Many have criticized the monarchical model, and it has been severely rejected by a wide range of contemporary theologians. My criticism of it here focuses on its inability to serve as the imaginative framework for an understanding of the gospel as a destabilizing, inclusive, nonhierarchical vision of fulfillment for all of creation. In that respect, it has three major flaws: in the monarchical model, God is distant from the world, relates only to the human world, and controls that world through domination and benevolence.

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12. But such benevolence extends only to human subjects; in the monarchical model there is no concern for the cosmos, for the non human world this anthropocentric model is also dualistic and hierarchical; for instance, in the Chinese understanding of yin and yang, a balance is sought and neither is considered superior to the other, for too much of one or the other is undesirable. But a dualism of king and subjects is intrinsically hierarchical and encouraged hierarchical, dualistic thinking of the sort that has fueled many kinds of oppression, including (in addition to that of the nonhuman by the human) those arising from the cleavages of male/female, white/coloured, rich/poor, Christian/non-Christian, and mind/body. The monarchical model encourages a way of thinking that is pervasive and pernicious, in a time when exactly the opposite is needed as a basic pattern.

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If metaphors matter, then one must take them seriously at the level at which they function, that is, at the level of the imaginative picture of God and the world they project. If one uses triumphalist, royal metaphors for God certain things follow, and one of the most important is a view of God as distant from and basically uninvolved with the world. God's distance from and lack of intrinsic involvement with the world are emphasized when God's real kingdom is an other-worldly one: Christ is raised from the dead to join the sovereign Father – as we shall also be – in the true kingdom. The world is not self-expressive of God: God's being, satisfaction, and future are not connected with our world.

The monarchical model is dangerous in our time: it encourages a sense of distance from the world; it attends only to the human dimension of the world; and it supports attitudes of either domination of the world or passivity toward it.

The alternative : the world as God's body

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(Keep in mind that a metaphor or model is not a description. We are trying to think in an as-if fashion about the God-world relationship, because we have no other way of thinking about it.

For a metaphor to be acceptable, it need not, cannot, apply in all ways; if it did, it would be description.)

What if the "resurrection of the body" were not seen as the resurrection of particular bodies that ascend, beginning with Jesus of Nazareth, into another world, but as God's promise to be with us always in God's body, our world? What if God's promise of permanent presence to all space and time were imagined as a worldly reality, a palpable, bodily presence? What if we imagined God's presence as in us and in all others, including the last and the least?

Christians should, given their tradition, be inclined to find sense in "body" language, not only because of the resurrection of the body but also because of the bread and wine of the Eucharist as the body and blood of Christ, and the church as the body with Christ as its head.

There is a difference between the traditional uses of "body" and seeing the world as God's body: when the world is viewed as God's body, the body includes more than just Christians and more than just human beings.

In view of the contemporary holistic understanding of personhood, in which embodiment is the *sine qua non*, the thought of an embodied personal deity is not more incredible than that of a disembodied one; in fact, it is less so.

It is a view of the God-world relationship in which all things have their origins in God and nothing exists outside God, though this does not mean that God is reduced to these things.

In the metaphor of the universe as the self-expression of God - God's incarnation - the notions of vulnerability, shared responsibility, and risk are inevitable.

The world as God's body, then, may be seen as a way to *remythologize* the inclusive, suffering love of the cross of Jesus of Nazareth. God is at risk in human hands.

God is not in our power to destroy, but the incarnate God is the God at risk: we have been given central responsibility to care for God's body, our world.

God knows ...This knowledge is empathetic, intimate, sympathetic, closer to feeling than to rationality.

It implies that

- the action of God in the world is similarly interior and caring. If the entire universe, all that is and has been, is God's body, then God acts in and through the incredibly complex physical and historical-cultural evolutionary process that began eons ago;
- to trust in God whose body is the world is to trust in a God who cares profoundly for the world.

To say that God loves bodies is to redress the balance toward a more holistic understanding of fulfillment. It is to say that bodies are worth loving, sexually and otherwise, that passionate love as well as attention to the needs of bodily existence is a part of fulfillment.

The basic necessities of bodily existence – adequate food and shelter, for example - are central aspects of God's love for all bodily creatures and therefore should be central concerns of us, God's co-workers.

The denigration of the body, the physical, and matter should end. Such a split makes no sense in our world: spirit and body or matters are on a continuum, for matter is not inanimate substance but throbs of energy, essentially in continuity with spirit.

In the monarchical construct, God is implicitly in contest with evil powers, either as victorious kings who crushes them or as sacrificial servant who (momentarily) assumes a worldly mien in order to free his subjects from evil's control.

It suggests that the place of evil is the world (and ourselves)

In this construct, God is not responsible for evil, but neither does God identify with the suffering caused by evil.

In a physical, biological, historic cultural evolutionary process as complex as the universe, much that is evil from various perspectives will occur, and if one sees this process as God's self-expression, then God is involved in evil. But the other side of this is that God is also involved, profoundly, palpably, personally involved, in suffering, in the suffering caused by evil. The evil occurs in and to God's body: the pain that those parts of creation affected by evil feel God also feels and feels bodily. All pain to all creatures is felt immediately and bodily by God: one does not suffer alone. In this sense, God's suffering on the cross was not for a mere few hours, as in the old mythology, but it is present and permanent. As the body of the world, God is forever "nailed to the cross," for as the body suffers, so God suffers.

The way of the cross, the way of inclusive, radical love, is a kind of power, though a very different kind from kingly might. It does imply, however, that unlike God the king, the God who suffers with the world cannot wipe out evil: evil is not only part of the process but its power depends also on us, God's partners in the way of inclusive, radical love.

We think of ourselves as the *imago dei*, as not only possessing bodies but being agents.

We are not mere submerged parts of the body of God but relate to God as to another Thou. The presence of God to us in and through God's body is the experience of encounter, not of submersion. For the saving love of God to be present to human beings it would have to be so in a way different from how it is present to other aspects of the body of the world-in a way in keeping with the peculiar kind of creatures we are, namely, creatures with a special kind of freedom, able to participate self-consciously (as well as be influenced unconsciously) in the evolutionary process. This gives us a special status and a special responsibility: we are the ones like God; we are selves that possess bodies, and that is our glory. It is also our responsibility, for we alone can choose to become partners with God in the care of the world; we alone can - like God - mother, love, and befriend the world, the body that God has made available to us as both the divine presence and our home.

We are that part of the cosmos where the cosmos itself comes to consciousness.

What sin is in this metaphor of the world as God's body: it is refusal to be part of the body, the special part we are as *imago dei*. In contrast to the king-realm model, where sin is against God, here it is against the world. To sin is not to refuse loyalty to the Liege Lord but to refuse to take responsibility for nurturing, loving, and befriending the body and all its parts. Sin is the refusal to realize one's radical interdependence with all that lives: it is the desire to set oneself apart from all others as not needing them or being needed by them. Sin is the refusal to be the eyes, the consciousness, of the cosmos.

The world as God's body

- Is an awareness, both chilling and breathtaking, that we as worldly, bodily being are in God's presence
- is the basis for a revived sacramentalism, that is, a perception of the divine as visible, as present, palpably present in our world. But it is a kind of sacramentalism that is painfully conscious of the world's vulnerability, its preciousness, its uniqueness.

We meet the world as Thou, as the body of God where God is present to us always in all times and in all places. The resurrection becomes a worldly, present, inclusive reality, for this body is offered to all: "This is my body."

The *monarchical model* encourages attitudes of militarism dualism, and escapism; it condones control through violence and oppression; it has nothing to say about the nonhuman world. the *model of the world as God's body* encourages holistic attitudes of responsibility for and care of the vulnerable and oppressed; it is nonhierarchical and acts through persuasion and attraction; it has a great deal to say about the body and nature.

Our profound need for a powerful, attractive imaginative picture of the way God is related to our world demands that we not only deconstruct but reconstruct our metaphors.

REFLECTION

1. Hold the monarchical image of God in your consciousness. What attitudes does this image call forth? What possibilities do you see? What is released in you?
2. Hold the image of the universe as the body of Christ. What attitudes does this image call forth? What possibilities do you see? What is released in you?
3. Who do you say that I am? Use the following suggested theological reflection process.

What sort of divine love is suggested by your images?

What activity, work, or doctrine is associated with it?

What does each imply concerning the conduct of human existence?

THEOLOGICAL REFLECTION

Movement	Framework
1. When we enter our experience , we encounter our feelings.	1. Focusing on some aspect of experience .
2. When we pay attention to those feelings , images arise.	2. Describing that experience to identify the heart of the matter .
3. Considering and questioning those images may spark insight .	3. Exploring the heart of the matter in in conversation with the wisdom of the of the Christian heritage .
4. Insight leads, if we are willing and ready, to action .	4. Identifying from this conversation new truths and meanings for living .