

Eco-economics

by [H. Paul Santmire](#) in the [September 26, 2001](#) issue

Life Abundant: Rethinking Theology and Economics for a Planet in Peril. By Sallie McFague. Fortress, 251 pp., \$18.00.

Insanity has been defined as doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results each time. Why does nothing change when Christian preachers and teachers keep talking about ecological responsibility and social justice to congregations whose members love nature and care about the plight of the poor? Could it be that there is something fundamentally awry with the preaching and the teaching, on the one hand, and with the love and the care, on the other hand?

Sallie McFague believes that our planet is in such peril that doing the same thing over and over again is no longer acceptable. In this stunning volume, perhaps her best book in a line of distinguished studies (most recently: *Metaphorical Theology*, *The Body of God* and *Super, Natural Christians*), she argues insightfully that we must be liberated from both our economic and theological assumptions if we are truly to love nature and care for the poor.

This requires, in the first place, a radical critique of the neocapitalist worldview that we all take for granted because we all have bought into consumerism. Most of us, in fact, understand "life abundant" in terms of consumption, despite all our protestations against materialism and for faith. And consumerism, which presupposes the exploitation of both nature and the poor, is, in fact, the root of our world's evil.

McFague's learned discussion of "the contemporary economic model and worldview" is perhaps the single most important chapter of this lucidly written and tightly argued book. Her probing unearths what virtually all of us North American Christians believe much more deeply, passionately and constantly than the faith we proclaim.

Once we have grasped the pervasive and destructive power of the neocapitalist worldview, then, obviously, another worldview must take its place. Informed by a

number of sophisticated, postcapitalist economic thinkers, McFague argues for an "ecological economic model and worldview." And "ecological economics begins with sustainability and distributive justice, not with the allocation of resources among competing individuals."

Ecological economics comprehends the Great Economy, the whole household (*oikos*) of the earth, the needs of nature and the poor included, which must no longer be regarded as "externalities." The ecological and economic worldview presupposes that we humans are primarily communal beings who become unique individuals through help from and response to others. The ecological and economic paradigm consists of sustainability, the capacity of the natural and social systems to survive together indefinitely, and justice, the promotion of mutual well-being through the sharing of resources.

What does theology have to do with all this? Theology, McFague believes, always exists within and in tension with a worldview. Speaking from her own postmodern standpoint as an affluent North American feminist, McFague proposes a theology meant to inculcate the core convictions of the Christian faith, with a call to sacrificial moral action and radical social transformation. Her reflections in this volume both summarize and helpfully expand, clarify and simplify a number of her earlier arguments. For those new to her writings *Life Abundant* is an excellent introduction to her thought.

The three concluding chapters lay out her substantive, trinitarian theological vision, driven by the commitment to change lives and institutions (*praxis*), not just to speak the truth (*theoria*). Her discussion of "God and the World" summarizes her, by now, signature teaching that the world is God's body. The world, in this sense, is the primary sacrament. McFague eschews both the excessive transcendentalism of classical theism and deism and the excessive immanentalism of classical pantheism, in favor of a metaphorically projected panentheism. In her view, then, the command to love others as ourselves and nature, too, is as fundamental as the command to love God, because the whole creation is God's body.

In her discussion of "Christ and Salvation," McFague constructs what might be called an Abelardian Christology. For her, Christ is the chief and most compelling example of the general incarnation of God's love in the whole creation. She draws on some recent life-of-Jesus research to underline how the incarnate love of God in Jesus was predicated on the commitment to social transformation, especially for the sake of

the poor. Faithful followers of Jesus and his self-giving love will, she tells us, themselves walk along the same self-giving, socially transformative road toward deification ("we are God incarnate"). That road she then further describes in terms of "Life in the Spirit," focusing especially on the exemplary, saintly lives of personal and social revolutionaries such as John Woolman and Dorothy Day.

Will this book gain the widespread hearing it deserves? Some theological ideologues will doubtless write it off as one more predictable product of the theological left. But most pastors who have been preaching and teaching love of nature and care for the poor to congregations predisposed so to love and so to care, yet seemingly to no avail, will surely want to give McFague's analysis a careful hearing.

But will pastors find in this book all the theological substance they need to carry her economic and ecological analysis into their preaching and teaching? McFague rightly sets a high theological standard for herself. Although she wants to speak in her own voice from her own context, she also knows that her own experience is not enough, that any viable theological discourse within the church requires intrasubjective, communal criteria and, above all, the witness of Holy Scripture. She herself regards the Bible as "a classic" and as the "constitution" of the Christian faith: "It is our primary interpretive framework, our best pair of glasses, for saying something about God's relationship to the world."

Most Christians want preaching, teaching and organizing to be informed by the faith of the Bible. In this regard, McFague's most fundamental theological constructions may not be helpful to them. Is it true to the biblical witness to say, so undialectically, that the world is God's body and we humans, in particular, are God incarnate? What about the profound temptation to which Adam and Eve succumbed, the temptation "to be like God"?

Further, are the classical Christian interpretations of the cross, the Christus Victim and Christus Victor motifs identified by Gustav Aulén, as totally alien to biblical experience and the experience of the saints throughout the ages as McFague alleges? Does not the fact that the Gospels are "passion stories with introductions" mean something? Aren't the cross and the resurrection at the heart of the New Testament? And why have many of McFague's theological heroes, like Irenaeus and Bonhoeffer, accepted John 1:14's statement that the incarnation refers to Jesus alone?

For McFague the resurrection of Jesus is essentially a symbol of humanity's "way back to God" rather than a world-historical event of cosmic proportions which finally overcomes death and ushers in a renewed creation. Does that early Christian experience of the resurrection have no contemporary valency? Do other contemporary Christian voices--such as Jürgen Moltmann's, for example--have something to say in this respect, something which would deepen the biblical resonance of the kind of theological constructions McFague is proposing?

Such questions point to the single most important question raised by McFague's argument. She shares her theological journey, she tells us, "as a possible case study for readers who might want to undertake a similar one." Having heard her story, then, where do we go from there? Surely not back to the perplexing but unchallenged North American theological world where we will do the same thing over and over again, expecting different results. But can we go forward? Can we do better? Can theological constructions yet to be claimed publicly by the church broaden and deepen the church's theological narrative, combining McFague's economic and ecological saliency with a more generous reading of the biblical witness?