

## Session Four – The Voices of Women

Ecofeminism is a movement that grew in the 1980s and 1990s and continues to flourish as an important strand in the ecological movement of our time. Put most simply, ecofeminism is about exploring the connection between the exploitation of nature and the domination of women. You have no doubt heard it said that the great overarching problem for our earth is one of anthropocentrism. This is the belief that humans are the centre of the universe and hence everything in the universe is for human use and benefit. Eco-feminists go one step further. They see the problem as being one of androcentrism: *men* in patriarchal societies dominate both women and nature. In identifying this problem they argue that no less than a transformation of culture is required to save the earth.

The eco-feminist point of view is consonant with the radical feminist critique which sees *all* kinds of oppression – whether it be racism, classism, colonialism, clericalism, heterosexism, ageism, and so on – as interconnected because they all spring from the same root cause: patriarchy. “Radical feminism regards patriarchy not merely as a system of male domination of females...but as the basic dominative social system which is the ground and paradigm for all forms of social domination” (Schneiders 1991, 22). The feminist analysis perceives that the hierarchical dominance of male over female translated into a system of universal hierarchical dualism in which opposites were seen to be superior or inferior. In every case, the thing that was considered superior was superior by reason of its association with maleness. So mind was superior to body, spirit to matter, culture to nature, life to death, light to darkness, intellect to feeling, reason to intuition, and so on. According to the radical feminist critique, it is this thinking that lies at the heart of all oppression, and oppression will only cease when the root of patriarchy is severed and a new society based on egalitarian relationships comes into being.

In considering what some of the eco-feminists are saying, I want to start with Charlene Spretnak. She has been a prominent American ecofeminist from the beginning and she is still actively writing and speaking. She was a cofounder of the US Green Party in 1984. This is her definition of ecofeminism:

Ecofeminism is a global phenomenon that is bringing attention to the linked domination of women and nature in order that both aspects can be adequately understood. Ecofeminists seek to transform the social and political orders that promote human oppression embedded in ecocidal practices. The work consists of resistance, creativity, and hope (Spretnak 1994, 188).

In 1987 she gave a keynote address called “Ecofeminism: Our Roots and Flowering” at an international conference on ecofeminist perspectives held at the University of Southern California. (You can read the whole of her speech on the internet.) I would like to tell you a few things that she said in that address.

First of all, she distinguishes three main paths to an ecofeminist awakening: it may come about through the study of political theory and history, or through exposure to nature-based religion (which is usually associated with worship of the Goddess) or it may come about through environmentalism. Once awakened,

however, the real work begins: “We have to be willing to educate ourselves about the major ecological issues of our day and to understand the economic and political forces at work” (1987, 4). She is quite clear that the ultimate goal is to transform patriarchal culture “into new possibilities informed by justice, wisdom and compassion” (1987, 4). However (and I find this wonderful), intellectual work is only part of the process. She says, “Extremely important is a willingness to deepen our experience of communion with nature...My own life is a rather embarrassing example of how long one can be absorbed in ecofeminist intellectual deepening, political activism, and ritual honoring of nature after the moment of awakening and still know almost nothing of the richness and profound depth of communion that nature can offer” (1987, 4). Charlene is a practical woman. She suggests, “A starting point for ecofeminists who are as backward in their direct knowledge of nature as I certainly was might be to learn about ten birds and ten plants native to their bioregion. The rest will come quite naturally” (1987, 5).

The second part of Spretnak’s address deals with the ecological crises of the 1980s and the response of ecofeminists. Much of what she says reminds me of the tone and attitude of Pope Francis’ *Laudato Si’*. Listen to this: “It is our refusal to banish feelings of interrelatedness and caring from theory and practice of ecofeminism that will save our efforts from calcifying into well-intentioned reformism, lacking the vitality and wholeness that our lives contain. We need to find our way out of the technocratic alienation and nihilism surrounding us by cultivating and honoring our direct connections with nature” (1987, 8).

Since that time Charlene Spretnak has continued to research and write. You can find her on youtube talking about the interrelatedness of all things, or you can read her latest book, *Relational Reality*, which came out in 2011. In this book, Spretnak argues that there is a momentous shift of consciousness occurring in our world at the present time. She calls this the Relational Shift. The mechanistic world view generated by the scientific discoveries of the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries, a worldview that sees everything as separate entities made up of discrete parts working together, is now being replaced by a relational worldview which regards nothing as separate in itself, isolated from the rest of reality. Rather, the reality is that everything is interrelated with everything else, and we are beginning to see this being recognised and acknowledged increasingly in fields of research as diverse as education, health, architecture and economics. Reality is relationship. Spretnak is no theologian but if you put her ideas side by side with the eco-theologians, they complement each other very well. And this is how she ends the book, in language that can only be described as spiritual:

...the Relational Shift - which is truly a Relational Renewal – brings us into a deeper realization of our inherent relationship with the sacred whole, the entire creative presence, the divine mystery of it all...The new – and very ancient – perception of the self in dynamic, relational context is far more healthy, creative and responsible. This is the liberation the Earth Community has been waiting for us to achieve (Spretnak 2011, 203).

Elizabeth Johnson gave an eco-feminist lecture in 1993, which she entitled “Women, Earth, and Creator Spirit.” In this lecture she proposes that the solution

to the dualistic and hierarchical way of thinking of the Western world is to forge a new spirituality founded on a new way of seeing reality. This is a spirituality of communion with both God and earth, in which “the intuition of inter-connectedness in women’s experience deconstructs the pyramid of hierarchical dualism and constructs in its place a circle of mutual, unfettered inter-connectedness” (Johnson 1993, 28). Johnson believes that the key to developing such a spirituality is contemplation, which Johnson defines as “a way of seeing that leads to communion” (Johnson 1993, 63).

Johnson is also very clear about the wider social justice dimensions of our ecological crisis, as is Pope Francis’ encyclical, *Laudato Si’*, where the suffering of the poor is never very far from his sight and compassion. In paragraph 196, he says, “The mindset which leaves no room for sincere concern for the environment is the same mindset which lacks concern for the inclusion of the most vulnerable members of society.” Of course, this is the mindset that ecofeminists would characterize as patriarchal. This is the root of the problem and changing the patriarchal paradigm, they would argue, is the necessary work to be done.

Spretnak and Johnson write from quite different perspectives, one a social critic and cultural historian, the other a theologian, and yet quite clearly they share an agenda of communion with nature and a passionate desire to change society in such a way that men and women forge relationships of equality with one another and with the non-human world around them. It is interesting, too, that their writing finds resonance in *Laudato Si’*.

I would now like to look at the work of another feminist theologian, Sallie McFague, an American Christian, who began writing as a theologian in the 1960’s. Now in her eighties, she is still active – her latest book was published in 2013. It was sometime in the 1980’s that McFague began to experience a paradigm shift in her theological thinking and the outcome, in her own words, was an understanding that “we need to work together, each in his or her own small way, to create a planetary situation that is more viable and less vulnerable” (McFague 1991). From that time on, all her writing has been concerned with theology that has the planet at its heart, with a view, always, to inspiring her readers to become activists for the earth.

One of McFague’s great contributions to eco-theology, in my opinion, is her exploration of the relationship between the world and God in terms of the world imagined as God’s body. The metaphorical language about God that we are most used to imagines God as king over all the earth, but such imagery is, in McFague’s view, no longer helpful in the age we live in. While there are many alternative ways of speaking metaphorically about God, and McFague explores the metaphors of God as mother, lover and friend, in her book, *Models of God*, she is particularly taken with the possibilities of “the world as the body of God” metaphor. Furthermore, she reminds us that “while that notion may seem a bit shocking, it is a very old one with roots in Stoicism; it tantalized many early Christian theologians, including Tertullian and Irenaeus: it surfaces in a

sacramental understanding of creation -- the world charged with the glory of God, as poet Gerard Manley Hopkins puts it" (McFague 1998).

What are the implications of such a metaphor? McFague suggests three. First, "to see the world as God's body brings us close to God. God is not far off in another place, a king looking down, as it were, on his realm, but here, as a visible presence. The world is the bodily presence, a sacrament of the invisible God" (McFague, 1998). Second, in such an understanding, physical bodies matter. Salvation becomes not just eternal life in the next world, but living a life that cares for the material universe in all its manifestations. And finally, such a metaphor demonstrates a God willing to make Godself vulnerable, willing to suffer for and with the world. This is not unfamiliar territory, is it, when we think of Jesus of Nazareth, the Son of God, who came to bring us life to the full but ended up on a cross. Such a God "cares profoundly for the world" (McFague 87, 74).

I believe that this metaphorical description of the world as God's body is both persuasive and attractive, as McFague herself suggests, and has the capacity to open up our minds and hearts to much greater sensitivity and love towards the whole of creation. Moreover, it suggests a very different definition of sin to the ones we are accustomed to. To sin is "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" (McFague 87, 77).

Another significant contribution of McFague is one that Denis Edwards has taken up in his writings. This is the concept of "the loving eye," as opposed to the arrogant eye. I would like to take some time now to consider what this loving eye is, as I believe we could learn much from it. In an article entitled "Planetary Spirituality: Exploring a Christian Ecological Approach," written in 2010 for an Australian theological journal, Denis Edwards writes:

A sound eye, seeing things rightly, is of the essence of the way of Wisdom. Sallie McFague contrasts the 'arrogant eye' with the 'loving eye.' The arrogant eye is characteristic of the typical Western attitude to the natural world. It objectifies, manipulates, uses and exploits. The loving eye does not come automatically to us. It requires training and discipline to see things with a loving eye. McFague points out that the loving eye requires detachment in order to see the difference, distinctiveness and the uniqueness of the other. Too often we imagine we know who or what the other is, instead of taking the trouble to find out (Edwards 2010, 21).

McFague writes:

This is the eye trained in detachment in order that its attachment will be objective, based on the reality of the other and not on its own wishes or fantasies. This is the eye bound to the other as is an apprentice to a skilled worker, listening to the other as does a foreigner in a new country. This is the eye that pays attention to the other so that the connections between knower and

known, like the bond of friendship, will be on the real subject in its real world (cited by Edwards 2010, 21-22).

Denis Edwards expands on this:

What is required is that we learn to love others, human and non-human, with a love that involves both distance and intimacy. This involves cultivating a loving eye that respects difference. This is the way of Wisdom, a way of seeing each creature in relation to God, in Christian terms as a unique manifestation of divine Wisdom, as embraced by God in the incarnation and destined to share in the redemption of all things in Christ. Wisdom finds expression in us in conversion from the model of individualism and consumption to the simplicity of what McFague calls 'life abundant': where what matters are the basic necessities of food, clothes and shelter, medical care, educational opportunities, loving relationships, meaningful work, an enriching imaginative and spiritual life, time with friends, and time spent with the natural world around us (Edwards 2010, 22).

I'd like now to stop for 15 minutes and let you meditate in silence on what McFague is saying here and then we might share some of our thoughts together.

McFague's most recent book, *Blessed Are the Consumers*, published in 2013, is probably her most radical and challenging work. When you read in the preface that she considers that when it comes to motorcars the question is no longer about what kind of car is most ecological, but whether one should have a car at all, you know that you are going to be seriously challenged. In this work, McFague is driven by the urgency of the ecological crisis and the quintessential question of what is needed for us to change our lives radically. She believes that we can look to the lives of the saints to serve as disorienting parables for our own times and as models for how we might live wisely. She chooses three saints for us to scrutinise: John Woolman, an 18<sup>th</sup> century American Quaker who advocated against slavery and other injustices of his day, Simone Weil, a 20<sup>th</sup> century French mystic and Dorothy Day, a 20<sup>th</sup> Century American worker for the poor, and through the prism of their lives explores a way of conversion.

If McFague once hoped to change us by encouraging us to imagine the world as the body of God, she now proposes that we seek to see the world as *our* body. She wants you and me to be able to say, with utter truthfulness, "The world is my body." This is resonant with Pope Francis' words in *Laudato Si'*: "Our goal is not to amass information or to satisfy curiosity, but rather to become painfully aware, to dare to turn what is happening to the world into our own personal suffering and thus to discover what each of us can do about it" (19). McFague calls this new way of looking at the world "the universal self," the self that has no boundaries.

The pathway to reach this desirable goal is no easy one. McFague proposes that we start by embracing voluntary poverty as a wild space,

a place to stand and to interpret one's culture from the "outside," as it were. This opening allows us to see *differently*, to imagine other possibilities, to pay attention to others...It is a movement that most religions find to be essential to

change, real deep change, change of mind and behaviour. Many call it “conversion.” It is the beginning of a long process of discipline, patience, and self-emptying that allows us to recognize that something outside of ourselves is real and has needs (McFague 2013, 85-6).

Voluntary poverty will mean different things to different people, depending on our personalities and contexts, but whatever form it takes, McFague is adamant that it is the *sine qua non* of a life transformed in Christ. Perhaps this is what Jesus meant when he said that it is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven (Mt 19:24). Dispossessing ourselves frees us for clarity of vision. You cannot pay attention if your ego is in the way. Or, to quote McFague again,

For folks like us, some movement toward voluntary poverty is probably the most powerful wake-up experience possible, for it has the ability to undercut our sense of privilege and power in a way few other things would do. In a consumer culture, we define ourselves by our possessions: they are the physical and spiritual defence of our exceptionalism. Once that fortress is breached, we are open to other ways of interpreting the world in contrast to the conventional one, for it is paying attention to this alternative awareness of self and others that is essential to the process of changed behaviour (McFague 2013, 97).

Voluntary poverty is a term that I am sure many of us are uncomfortable with. I am even certain that many of us would reject the idea completely as out of touch with the reality of the lives we lead. Perhaps it depends on what connotations we place on the word “poverty”. Whatever the case may be, perhaps we could replace the term with one that sounds more attainable: voluntary simplicity, though even that is hard enough for most of us today.

According to McFague, voluntary poverty or, if you prefer, voluntary simplicity, opens us up to the possibility of paying radical attention to the needs of others, which in turn makes possible the development of the universal self, which identifies itself with the whole world. What we are talking about here are all attitudes of mind, ways of seeing the world, that require nurturing on a daily basis. They grow out of the mundane, daily actions of a life that is lived both personally and publicly as a total self-giving for others, and, in turn, they feed that life. McFague is very clear about the importance of public and political involvement in the justice issues of our day, and indeed decries compassion that is limited to a personal level as being self-serving and narcissistic. These are hard words. But she has understood the gospel. It is not enough to care for one’s family and friends. We must care for the whole world, and we do that by learning that we ARE the whole world. If only we could learn to understand ourselves as beings in relationship, totally interdependent and interconnected with every living thing!

At the end of the book McFague acknowledges that she herself falls far short of her own ideals, but she is insistent nonetheless that we all have the capacity to change and that it is important to keep moving in the right direction. The worst thing would be to stay where we are.

In the final chapters of this book, McFague concludes that Christianity has something of value to offer our world standing on the brink of ecological disaster and dominated by cultures that promote individualism, consumerism and economic growth as the paths to happiness. What is this something? It is the strange notion of kenosis. “Kenosis is the recognition that restraint, openness, humility, respect for otherness, and even sacrifice (diminishment and death) are part of life *if* one assumes that individual well-being takes place within political and cosmic well-being” (McFague 2013, 144). Of course, that *is* her assumption. She continues,

The Christian (and postmodern) view of the self...is constituted by its response to an external call – a call from the other, the neighbour, and/or God...Its journey is not one of self-discovery, but of attention to others, both as source of its own existence and as call to respond to their hungers...

...What Christians see in their interpretation of salvation – total self-giving of Jesus the Christ for the flourishing of the world – becomes for them also the story of God. Hence, “God” is not a superindividual who expresses the divine will by controlling the world; on the contrary, God is the epitome and foundation of total openness and self-giving. The Trinity *is* God: the total openness of self-giving of the “persons” of the trinity to one another – and to the world. The “Trinity” is an attempt to express selfhood as nothing but the self-emptying of one into the other (Creator, Savior, Spirit). It constitutes what Christians understand creation to be (God’s self-emptying to create a world other than the divine self), salvation (God’s self-emptying in and for this world in the life and death of Jesus as the model for the abundant life), and discipleship (human self-emptying for the neighbor by participating in God’s love). Hence, kenosis is central throughout the Christian narrative (McFague 2013, 153-4).

I think we all know this at some level of our understanding. What is almost impossibly hard is living the kind of life that this implies. “Really letting go of all possessions and living daily without assurance of control” (McFague 2013, 167), as McFague describes it, is too difficult for most of us, even though she tries to convince us that the only way we save our lives is by losing them, that self-sacrifice is the path to self-fulfilment. However, if anything is going to move us, or start us in the right direction, it might well be her exposition of kenotic theology, grounded as it is in current knowledge of evolution, the witness of Christian lives (i.e. of the three saints under scrutiny in this book), and most importantly the life of Jesus of Nazareth. I propose that kenosis is well worth meditating on as a path to deeper conversion in the Christian life and hence as a path to ecological conversion. This is a way of self-spending and self-emptying to make space for all that is other.

Sallie McFague has so many precious insights about kenosis. I shall share just one:

A deeply incarnational understanding of Christianity claims that at every stage – who God is, what creation is, who we are, and how we should live – the focus is on *embodiment*. Jesus gives himself in his life and message of empathetic love to others, gives his body on the cross in solidarity with all who suffer, and thus points to God as the divine giver par excellence...Likewise, creation is the pulling in of the divine self to allow space for others to live fully embodied, physical

lives, and Christian discipleship is following the pattern we find in Jesus' life and in the Trinity of limitation, restraint, self-sacrifice of one's own body that other bodies might flourish.

If we were to reach for a single word that summed up kenotic love as the heart of Christian faith, it would be *food* (McFague 2013, 202).

What McFague has to say about food seems to me to be resonant of Monika Hellwig's book, *The Eucharist and the Hunger of the World*. Both these women envisage the Christian vocation as metaphorically feeding the world.

Sallie McFague is under no illusions. She finishes her book not at all confident that humanity will change to save the planet, but nonetheless convinced that Christians, at least, must accept their responsibility to follow the gospel and to spread its message. In this day and age, that means practising the inclusive, universal self, "through effort, training and formation" (McFague 2013, 208). It means living lives of simplicity and restraint, pursuing our professional lives in an ecological way, educating ourselves and others about the issues that matter, working politically to make systemic changes where they are needed, and doing all this infused with gratitude to God and generosity towards others.

As I said earlier on, I found this book radical and challenging. I don't think we can anymore claim that Christian spirituality is solely about our personal relationship with God or the salvation of our individual souls. It is about feeding the world, at the most basic level of food for the body. It is about receiving our own daily bread in such a way that everyone else gets a fair share. It is about learning the truth of the universe, the truth about our planet Earth and discerning what we are called to do in our own place. It is about living as simply as possible, struggling against the forces of consumerism, engaging politically to change unjust systems. And of course, it is about constant conversion and renewal, within a relationship with the great Mystery of God. It is a work that we undertake humbly each day, with love and gratitude.



## Session Four Readings

### Sallie McFague – from “The World as God’s Body” 1998

But 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. This is a markedly different *basic* understanding of the God-world relationship than in the monarch-realm metaphor, for it emphasizes God's willingness to suffer for and with the world, even to the point of personal risk.

The world as God's body, then, may be seen as a way to re-mythologize the suffering love of the cross of Jesus of Nazareth. In both instances, God is at risk in human hands. Once upon a time in a bygone mythology, human beings killed their God in the body of a man. Now we once again have that power, but, in a mythology more appropriate to our time, we would kill our God in the body of the world.

*Could* we actually do this? No, because 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*. If we thought of the world as God's body, would we not begin to think of the world as somehow sacred ground, not as something to be used and misused but treasured and protected just as we treasure and protect the bodies we love?

What this experiment regarding the world as God's body comes to, finally, is an awareness, both chilling and breathtaking, that we, as worldly, bodily beings, are in God's presence. We do not have to go to some special place -- a church, for instance -- or to another world to find God for God is with us here and now. This view provides the basis for a revived sacramentalism – that is, a perception of the divine as visible and palpably present. But it is a kind of sacramentalism that is painfully conscious of the world's vulnerability. The beauty of the world and its ability to sustain a vast multitude of species cannot be taken for granted. The world is a body that must be carefully tended, guided, loved and befriended both as valuable in itself -- for like us, it is an expression of God -- and as necessary to the continuation of life.

Needless to say, were this metaphor to enter our consciousness as thoroughly as the royal, triumphalist one has, we would live differently. We could no longer see God as worldless or the world as godless. Nor could we expect God to take care of everything, either through domination or through benevolence.

We see through pictures; we do not see directly. The picture of a king and his realm and of the world as God's body are ways of speaking, ways of imagining the God-world relationship. The one pictures a vast distance between God and the world; the other imagines them as intrinsically related. At the close of day, one must ask which distortion (assuming that all pictures are false in some respect) is better, by considering what attitudes each picture encourages. This is not the first question to ask, but it may well be the last.

The monarchical model encourages 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 responsibility and care for the vulnerable and oppressed; it is a nonhierarchical image that acts through persuasion and attraction; it has a great deal to say about the body and nature. Both are pictures: which distortion is more true to the world in which we live and to the good news of Christianity?

<http://www.religion-online.org/showarticle.asp?title=56>

**Denis Edwards, “Planetary Spirituality: Exploring a Christian Ecological Approach,” Compass 4 2010.**

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How do we cultivate a loving eye?