A Promising Theology: In Conversation with Sallie McFague and Elizabeth A. Johnson

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Submitted in partial requirement for the

Master of Theological Studies

Adelaide College of Divinity/Flinders University

Submitted: **Monday 30th November 2020**

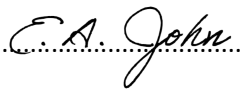
Contents

Abstract

Drawing into conversation Sallie McFague and Elizabeth A. Johnson, this study explores the promise of their respective approaches for contemporary theology. McFague and Johnson integrate creative construction with retrieval of Christian tradition to both practical and critical effect. Using feminist methodology, these scholars examine how a traditional doctrine of God functions in the current ecological and economic climate. They conclude that effective Christian response to serious issues is unlikely if exclusive, dualistic imagery remains unchallenged. Accordingly, each seeks to broaden language for God and develop alternate models; McFague constructs the "world as God's body" while Johnson's focus lies in a retrieval of Wisdom/Sophia and kinship. These steps reimagine the God-world relationship in terms of mutuality and interconnectedness, and their resultant theologies of kenosis and accompaniment generate practical thought experiments to help bridge the gap between theory and practice. Together, these scholars' theologies move Christians toward the kind of conversion necessary to address the current earthly and spiritual crisis. McFague and Johnson employ an open-ended and tentative, conversational and collaborative, iconoclastic and tensive approach which may be appropriate in addressing a range of contemporary issues that remain divisive in the Christian Church.

Declaration

I certify that this thesis does not incorporate without acknowledgment any material previously submitted for a degree or diploma in any university; and that to the best of my knowledge and belief it does not contain any material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made in the text.

Signed.....  .....

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I often wonder whether every serious theology is at its heart…an attempt to make the Christian faith intelligible within a changed world, to make the world intelligible within a Christian frame of reference.[1]

Introduction

Last century was, arguably, one of the most theologically creative and prolific in Christian history.[2] Despite such promise however, contemporary Western theology has become increasingly marginalised within both the academy and wider culture. Fragmented or absorbed into other disciplines, theology is perceived as either narrowly intellectual or anachronistic.[3] Ironically, the discipline's own side-lining of certain voices may have contributed to this predicament. Concurrently, theology's rationale has shifted away from its preoccupation with apologetics, prompting practitioners to reassess how theology can be useful at a time of global climate and economic instability.[4] What kind of theology is needed today?

The attempt to make Christianity understood in the world and the world understood in the Christian frame of reference has not had high priority in recent Christian theology.[5] This has led to a disconnect between the theory and practice of theology, manifesting in the difficulty outlined above. However, as Stanley Hauerwas suggests, this disjuncture, coupled with theology's diminishing credibility, may hold significant promise for future endeavour; now

[1] Benjamin Myers, *Christ the Stranger: The Theology of Rowan Williams* (London and New York: T&T Clark International, 2012), 112.
[2] Staale Johannes Kristiansen and Svein Rise, "A Century of Theological Creativity: Perspectives on the Renewal and Development of the Christian Tradition," in *Key Theological Thinkers From Modern to Postmodern* (ed. Staale Johannes Kristiansen and Svein Rise; Surrey, England; Burlington, VT, USA: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2013), 3–20, 3; David F. Ford, *The Future of Christian Theology* (Blackwell Manifestos; Chichester, West Sussex, UK: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), xi.
[3] David F. Ford and Rachel Muers, eds., *The Modern Theologians: An Introduction to Christian Theology since 1918* (Malden, MA, USA; Oxford, UK; Victoria, Australia: Blackwell Publishing, 2005), 13; Stanley Hauerwas, *The Work of Theology* (Grand Rapids, Michigan/Cambridge. U.K: William B Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2015),4. Hauerwas comments, "Theology is not considered a worthy scholarly subject to be included in university curriculums". He further gives a helpful survey on theology's development on pages, 107-108.
[4] Kathryn Tanner, "Shifts in Theology Over the Last Quarter Century," *Modern Theology* 26, no. 1 (January, 2010), 39–44.
[5] Hauerwas, *The Work of Theology*, 4 – 5.

that contemporary theologians have nothing to lose, they can write without apology.[6] Such freedom, claims Kathryn Tanner, implores scholars to demonstrate how Christian theology can and should contribute meaningfully to people's lives by engaging more fruitfully in a contemporary context.[7]

This project proposes that a theology for today is exemplified in the work of Sallie McFague and Elizabeth A. Johnson. Their theological endeavour, which this author has characterised as open-ended and tentative, conversational and collaborative, iconoclastic and tensive, has great potential to help theology make a vital contribution toward creating a just and sustainable world. While Johnson is an influential Catholic theologian, McFague was a liberal Protestant scholar.[8] Each has produced a substantive body of work contributing insightful and rigorous scholarship to the academy, having held long tenures at Fordham University and Vanderbilt Divinity School respectively.[9] Yet, in recognising that theological enquiry shapes action, each scholar has sought to methodically integrate robust scholarship with ethical Christian agency.[10] Their life-long teaching and publishing careers evidence full commitment to meticulously exploring theology's role in dissolving the divisions between theory and praxis. Over decades of personal and professional maturation, both McFague and Johnson pursue an "agential" theology via a unique trajectory that holds enormous capacity to invigorate both theology and the practice of the Christian faith in the world.

These two scholars appear together in existing secondary literature. Shannon Schrein's 1998 comparative study of McFague's and Johnson's work in feminist christologies concludes that both theologians seek an understanding of God which liberates the oppressed.[11] Gloria Schaab subsequently brought the two scholars into conversation regarding their respective trinitarian proposals urging the reader to "risk" a response to their challenges.[12] In 2008, Rian

[6] Hauerwas, *The Work of Theology*, 123.
[7] Tanner, "Shifts in Theology.", 40, 44.
[8] Susan Rakoczy, "The Theological Vision of Elizabeth A. Johnson," *Scriptura*, no. 98 (2008), 137–155, 137; Schrein, *Quilting and Braiding*, 2.
[9] Heidi Schlumpf, *Elizabeth Johnson: Questing for God* (Collegeville, Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 2016); Christian Century Staff, "Sallie McFague Obituary," *Christian Century* (18 December, 2019), 17; Schrein, *Quilting and Braiding*, 1-2. McFague's long career concluded at Vancouver School of Theology.
[10] Ellen T. Charry, "Introduction," in *Inquiring After God: Classic and Contemporary Readings* (ed. Ellen T. Charry; Blackwell Readings in Modern Theology; Oxford, UK; Massachusetts, USA: Blackwell Publishers, 2000), xvi–xxx, xxviii.
[11] Schrein, *Quilting and Braiding*.
[12] Gloria L. Schaab, "Of Models and Metaphors: The Trinitarian Proposals of Sallie McFague and Elizabeth A. Johnson," *Theoforum* 33, no. 502/51 (2002), 213–234, 234.

Venter illustrated the way McFague's and Johnson's scholarship highlights the need for "greater sensitivity to the function of God images, and the consequent ethical impacts".[13] Her work is primarily concerned with the implications of this link for the discipline of systematic theology.[14] Venter argues that, despite differences, McFague and Johnson employ a similar underlying structure in their methodology which exemplifies this connection.[15] Each, she claims, is motivated by the perception of crisis, critiques traditional theology "for its complicity", shows full understanding of theology's nature and purpose, offers a creative reconstruction as corrective of the crisis and develops an alternative ethic.[16] This current study picks up where these scholars leave off, building upon their valuable insights.

Both McFague and Johnson have published significantly in the last twelve years. Their most recent work charts a clear trajectory from initial concerns apropos the consequences of language and imagery for God to more immediate concerns for environmental and economic injustice. This progression provides substantial foundation for analysing how their rigorous scholarship, particularly in the doctrine of God, may help revitalise theology to motivate ethical Christian agency. Each complements the other not only in terms of different denominational perspectives, but also in style as McFague's work is dynamic and creative while Johnson remains faithful to the tradition in revisioning by retrieval. In addition to offering a more up-to-date treatment of their theological contributions, this current analysis argues that greater attention to their work is prudent at a time when not only the future of theology is in jeopardy. Commending their models as engaging more productively than mainstream theology with the contemporary milieu, this work considers that McFague and Johnson offer a helpful bridge between the academy, the Church and society.

This paper first explores each scholar's academic and personal life, mining their respective journeys for the essential questions that stimulate and guide their work, in particular speech for God. Second, it examines the way McFague and Johnson, in the context of feminist theology, critique paternal language, hierarchical dualism, and pervasive anthropocentrism in the standard doctrine of God. Third, it investigates the way these scholars, identifying as

[13] Rian Venter, "God Images, Ethical Effects and the Responsibility of Systematic Theology," *Acta Theologica*, no. 2 (2008), 146–162, 146.
[14] Venter, "God Images.", 146.
[15] Venter, "God Images.", 146. Venter studies Johnson and McFague alongside the work of Colin E. Gunton.
[16] Venter, "God Images.", 149.

constructivist and revisionist respectively, articulate their models as corrective of an inherent bias. Finally, this study analyses the way their reconstructions form the basis for a heightened eco-sensibility that leads to a series of thought experiments which may help equip Christianity in responding to current crises. It concludes by outlining a unique framework of key commonalities, and commends these thinkers' methods based on the fruit their work may yield for theology as a transformative practice in the world.

This paper has two objectives. The first, as discussed above, is to examine McFague's and Johnson's models as derived via a feminist methodology, and to analyse how these alternate proposals intersect with global environmental instability. The second is more prescriptive, identifying particular hallmarks of McFague's and Johnson's distinctive approaches that other theologians may consider taking up in their own work.

Why not let a thousand flowers bloom and rejoice that multiple thought patterns are able to express a contemporary understanding of divine mystery?[17]

1 Theological Method

Theological method is primarily concerned with orienting questions, particularly around God's revelation to the world.[18] The Bible, Christian tradition, human experience and reason are broadly agreed sources for stimulating theological enquiry.[19] However, because theology has been undertaken throughout history, time and place become equally important considerations. Locus shapes the type of theological questions asked meaning that some questions will remain the same, while others will evolve differently.[20]

1.1 What About the Women?

Fifty years ago, female consciousness burst onto the theological scene. In a "blinding flash" that was both disorientating and illuminating, the implicit became explicit: Christian theology, authored by males in a patriarchal culture, was inherently skewed.[21] Adopting a singular focus as "universally human", the vast majority of past theologians had unreflectively and unapologetically assumed male as normative.[22] To female scholars, it became strikingly clear that for centuries the field had ignored or misrepresented the experiences of women.[23]

[17] Elizabeth A. Johnson, "Forging Theology: A Conversation with Colleagues," in *Things Old and New: Essays on the Theology of Elizabeth A. Johnson* (ed. Phyllis Zagano and Terrence W. Tilley; New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 1999), 101.
[18] Paul L. Allen, *Theological Method: A Guide for the Perplexed* (London; New York: T&T Clark International, 2012) , 11.
[19] Mary M. Veeneman, *Introducing Theological Method: A Survey of Contemporary Theologians and Approaches* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 2017), 11-13.
[20] Veeneman, *Introducing Theological Method*, 10. Locus refers to the theologian's historic, geographic and demographic situation.
[21] Anne E. Carr, "The New Vision of Feminist Theology - Method," in *Freeing Theology: The Essentials of Theology in Feminist Perspective* (ed. Catherine Mowry LaCugna; New York, NY: HarperCollins Publishers Inc., 1993), 5–29, 7; David F. Ford, *The Future of Christian Theology* (Blackwell Manifestos; Chichester, West Sussex, UK: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), 10.
[22] Astri Hauge, "Feminist Theology as Critique and Renewal of Theology," *Themelios* 17, no. 3 (April, 1993), https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/themelios/article/feminist-theology-as-critique-and-renewal-of-theology/. No page numbers available on e-copy.
[23] Janet Martin Soskice, "Identity: Who Do You Say I Am?" in *Feminism and Theology* (ed. Janet Martin Soskice and Diana Lipton; Oxford Readings in Feminism; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 47–48, 47; Christopher Ben Simpson, *Modern Christian Theology* (London; New York: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2016), 329.

Fuelled by such insight, female scholars critiqued this traditional approach and began the search for God's revelation through the lens of women's experience.[24]

As women increasingly gained access to the academy during the 1960s and 1970s, a movement began in earnest and scholarship from a female perspective burgeoned.[25] Much of the impetus and energy drew largely on the activism of white, Western female theologians who addressed gender issues specific to the Christian community: calling for access to official church leadership, critiquing patriarchal traditions and institutional structures, and retrieving women's agency and histories.[26] During the 1980s and 1990s, as constructing a coherent theology from this new perspective began, a significant number of seminal pieces by female theologians were published.[27]

The impetus of female theological concerns alongside gender analysis in wider society gave rise to "one of the most significant events" in twenty-first century theology.[28] "Second-wave feminist" scholarship unleashed enormous potential for the development of new theological methods and innovative ethical application.[29] As standard imagery for God was investigated, female scholars challenged the prevailing doctrine of God.[30] Some argued that theological

[24] Jayne Svenungsson, "Postmodern Theology," in *Key Theological Thinkers: From Modern to Postmodern* (ed. Svein Rise and Staale Johannes Kristiansen; Surrey, England; Burlington, VT, USA: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2013), 569–579, 572; Soskice, "Introduction.", 47. Soskice emphasises that feminist theological discourse was not and is not homogenous, even though early rhetoric began from a distinctly white and middle-class perspective. Womanist and *mujerista* theologies are just two examples of a now worldwide movement.
[25] Rachel Muers, "Feminism, Gender and Theology," in *The Modern Theologians: An Introduction to Christian Theology Since 1918* (ed. David F. Ford and Rachel Muers; Malden, MA, USA; Oxford, UK; Victoria, Australia: Blackwell Publishing, 2005), 431–450, 432.
[26] Mary McClintock Fulkerson and Sheila Briggs, eds., *The Oxford Handbook of Feminist Theology* (Oxford, United Kingdom: Oxford University Press, 2012), 1.
[27] S.E. Alsford and S. Mann, "Feminist Theology," in *New Dictionary of Theology: Historic and Systematic* (ed. Martin Davie, Tim Grass, Stephen R. Holmes, et al.; Second ed.; London, England: Inter-Varsity Press, 2016), 336–341, 337. Some of the most significant monographs include: E.S. Schüssler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her* (1996); D. Hampson, *Theology and Feminism* (1990); A. Loades, *Feminist Theology: A Reader* (1996); R.R. Ruether, *Women and Redemption* (1998); R.R. Ruether, *Sexism and God Talk* (1983); A. E. Carr, *Transforming Grace: Christian Tradition and Women's Experience* (1990); S. McFague, *Models of God* (1987); E.A. Johnson, *She Who Is* (1993).
[28] Muers, "Feminism, Gender and Theology.", 431.
[29] Mary M. Veeneman, *Introducing Theological Method: A Survey of Contemporary Theologians and Approaches* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 2017), 142-147, 167. Anne M. Clifford, *Introducing Feminist Theology* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2001).Veeneman and Clifford give helpful surveys of first, second and third wave feminisms.
[30] Susan Frank Parsons, *The Cambridge Companion to Feminist Theology* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 4.

critique would not only lead to human liberation but, most importantly, held promise for "liberating God" from the distorting impacts of partial perspectives.[31]

Benjamin Myers argues that for Rowan Williams, "…the business of theology is to…unmask our fantasies, to subject our ideas about God to a searching criticism…in this way theology exposes our dangerous longing for the comfort of false images of God".[32] Both Williams and Ford agree that female theologians undertook and still undertake vital work to uncover established theological blind spots.[33] Furthermore, they insightfully critique many of the least appealing aspects of the broader profession including intellectual elitism and disengagement from the Church.[34] Some scholars argue this is a lens through which all theologians can and should look, realising how essential feminist critique may be for both the integrity and vitality of Christianity now and into the future.[35] McFague and Johnson, the focus of this study, have been some of the major architects of this vision.

Perplexingly however, the enormous potential of this vision, a positively "disruptive practice", was stymied as uniquely female perspectives were either dismissed or domesticated within a defensive and rigid theological academy.[36] Myers comments that, "the discipline of systematic theology has not been particularly hospitable to questions raised by feminist theologians".[37] Continuing to assume their own perspectives as universally human and unable to recognise the hermeneutical significance of gender, some male theologians have failed to discover or accept women's perspectives as legitimate and necessary.[38] Proposed new language and imagery for God was particularly vilified.

[31] Lisa Isherwood and Marcella Althaus-Reid, eds., *Controversies in Feminist Theology* (Controversies in Contextual Theology; London: SCM Press, 2007), 16.
[32] Myers, *Christ the Stranger*, 110.
[33] Rowan Williams, *On Christian Theology* (Challenges in Contemporary Theology; Oxford, UK; Massachusetts, USA: Blackwell Publishers, 2000), 77-78; Ford, *The Future of Christian Theology*, 10.
[34] Ben Pugh, *Theology in the Contemporary World* (SCM Studyguide; London: SCM Press, 2017), 108.
[35] Anne M. Clifford, *Introducing Feminist Theology* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2001), 32; Pugh, *Theology in the Contemporary World,* 108.
[36] Muers, "Feminism, Gender and Theology"; Pugh, *Theology in the Contemporary World*; Esther McIntosh, "Issues in Feminist Public Theology," in *Public Theology and the Challenge of Feminism* (ed. Anita Monro and Stephen Burns; London & New York: Routledge, 2015), 63–74, 65-66.
[37] Janice McRandal, *Christian Doctrine and the Grammar of Difference: A Contribution to Feminist Systematic Theology* (Emerging Scholars; Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2015). This quote is a Ben Myers endorsement on the back cover of McRandal's text.
[38] Hague, "Feminist Theology as Critique and Renewal of Theology", 4; Carr, "Freeing Theology.", 7-8.

Alvin F. Kimel Jr maintains that any change to the expression of Christianity's core construction alters the gospel's substance, giving rise to a new religion and creating a new God.[39] Robert Jenson concurs stating, "The current attack upon the received linguistic structure of Christianity…is occasioned by the invasion of an antagonistic religious discourse and represents a true crisis of the faith that cannot be dealt with by compromise".[40] Scholars such as these repudiate Johnson's and McFague's feminist perspectives on the grounds of perceived unorthodoxy. One such commentator defines McFague as an agnostic whose "self-contradictory" theology tends towards pantheism.[41] While another group deemed one of Johnson's most recent publications "theologically unacceptable".[42]

Are theologians such as McFague and Johnson proposing a false gospel or perpetuating a crisis of faith? Ford, Tanner and others argue that a far more adequate, necessary and respectful response from the theological establishment is required; one that neither neglects nor rejects but insightfully asks what truths could their work contain?[43] Astute commentators observe that a number of early female theologians were not explicitly taking aim at "male" theology but rather saw themselves as working productively within an extension of the modern liberal tradition.[44] This liberal tradition has generated what some scholars argue is a shift in core theological purpose.[45] Tanner concludes that while pre-1980 theologians were called to argue Christianity's plausibility – how Christian claims can be logically demonstrable – today's scholars face far more pressing issues than intellectual credibility.[46] This shift,

[39] Alvin F. Kimel, JR, "The God Who Likes His Name: Holy Trinity, Feminism, and the Language of Faith," in *Speaking the Christian God: The Holy Trinity and the Challenge of Feminism* (ed. Alvin F. Kimel, JR; Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1992), 188–208, 208.
[40] Robert W. Jenson, "The Father, He...," in *Speaking the Christian God: The Holy Trinity and the Challenge of Feminism* (ed. Alvin F. Kimel, Jr; Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1992), 95–109, 96.
[41] Paul D. Molnar, "Myth and Reality: Analysis and Critique of Gordon Kaufman and Sallie McFague on God, Christ and Salvation.," *Cultural Encounters* 1, no. 2 (Sum, 2005), 23–48, 38.
[42] Luke Timothy Johnson, "Censure or Critique? The Bishops and Elizabeth Johnson," *Commonweal* (3 June, 2011), 9–13, 10. L.T. Johnson discusses issues raised by the case of Elizabeth Johnson and the Committee on Doctrine of the US Conference of Catholic Bishops.
[43] Hauge, "Feminist Theology as Critique and Renewal of Theology.", 4; Tanner, "Shifts in Theology.", 39.
[44] Svenungsson, "Postmodern Theology.", 572.
[45] Ellen T. Charry, "Introduction," in *Inquiring After God: Classic and Contemporary Readings* (ed. Ellen T. Charry; Blackwell Readings in Modern Theology; Oxford, UK; Massachusetts, USA: Blackwell Publishers, 2000), xvi–xxx, xxvii; Kathryn Tanner, "Shifts in Theology Over the Last Quarter Century," *Modern Theology* 26, no. 1 (January, 2010), 39–44, 39-40.
[46] Kathryn Tanner, "How I Changed My Mind," in *Shaping a Theological Mind: Theological Context and Methodology* (Aldershot, England: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2002), 115–121, 115. Here Tanner maintains that "the lessons of liberation theology…effectively undercut the Enlightenment as the taken-for-granted starting point for theological work".

perhaps in response to the challenge of feminist, liberationist and ecological theologies, calls global Christianity to account in "making a life and death difference" to humanity, especially the oppressed; the focus is engendering agency and viewing the purpose of theology as inherently practical. Tanner asks, how can Christian symbols, shaped by careful theology, *functions* in people's lives to support making the world a better place?[47]

Both McFague and Johnson have devoted their careers and indeed their lives to answering such a question, exploring, with humility and commitment, how Christian symbols of God operate in the particulars of human lives – for the flourishing, not just of women, but for all.[48] Theirs is a theology that nurtures both mind and spirit in a contemporary landscape that is "spiritually and morally bleak" with new perspectives that balance both tradition and innovation.[49] Beginning as women encountering God in deeply personal ways, their experiences converge as they insightfully critique language through a shared feminist lens, creatively apply metaphor and analogy, construct new models and earnestly search for alternative sources of wisdom in Scripture and the Christian tradition. As McFague constructs and Johnson revises and retrieves, their resultant models of God help to re-conceptualise the God-world relationship, and the function of God as manifest in that relationship.[50]

Working within the reformist (or reconstructionist) tradition of feminist theology,[51] McFague and Johnson share the distinctive understanding that "both patriarchy and androcentrism conflict with faith in a God whom Christian revelation proclaims to be love itself (1 John 4:8)".[52] While each recognises that male theologians have consistently "spoken about justice and peace, love and mercy, sin and forgiveness in meaningful ways", what reforming scholarship highlights is that the "*application* of these words to women…has all too often

[47] Tanner, "Shifts in Theology.", 40 – 41.
[48] Tanner, "How I Changed My Mind.", 116.
[49] Charry, "Inquiring After God.", xxvii.
[50] Schaab, "Of Models and Metaphors.", 215.
[51] Schrein, *Quilting and Braiding,* 1; Astri Hauge, "Feminist Theology," in *Key Theological Thinkers: From Modern to Postmodern* (ed. Staale Johannes Kristiansen and Svein Rise; Surrey, England; Burlington, VT, USA: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2013), 593–606, 594. Hauge cites Mary Daly *Beyond God the Father* (1973) as the most important pioneer of feminist theology in the USA. Daly, Daphne Hampson, Carol Christ and others left the churches and became "post-Christian (revolutionary) feminists, while others remained in the churches as 'reformists' and worked on the criticism and change of a theology, a liturgy, and a preaching that bore the imprint of patriarchy", 594. See also Mary Grey, "Feminist Theology: A Critical Theology of Liberation," in *The Cambridge Companion to Liberation Theology* (ed. Christopher Rowland; Cambridge, UK; New York, USA; Melbourne, Australia: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 89–106, 92.
[52] Anne M. Clifford, *Introducing Feminist Theology* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2001), 30. My italics.

been deficient".[53] From critically appraising patriarchal structures, McFague and Johnson move to reinterpret and transform the Christian tradition *from within* as corrective to those theologies that have been developed from an exclusively male perspective.[54] Their approach is characteristically attentive to the disregard of women's *complete* inclusion into the people of God; the "prophetic naming of this truth" serves to liberate theology from a long pattern of unacknowledged myopia.[55] In a move they understand as possible and necessary, McFague and Johnson reinterpret traditional Christian symbols and concepts *within* an orthodox framework of God revealed in Jesus.[56] This perspective patently distinguishes them from revolutionary feminists, many of whom have found the structures within mainstream theology and the institutional Church so alien that they have abandoned Christianity altogether.[57]

Applying a reformist method however, McFague and Johnson enter the traditional conversation to help open out new perspectives. Their method adopts a clear Christian standpoint while bringing into greater focus theology's transformative potential. Although neither scholar identifies as a "systematic" theologian per se, each calls for a theological method which permits new questions and distinctive interrogations from many different voices, particularly those on the margins of power.[58] Simply, their method recovers women as agents and critiques doctrine and traditions to pave the way for beneficial alternatives.[59]

[53] Clifford, *Introducing Feminist Theology*, 35. My italics.
[54] Schrein, *Quilting and Braiding*, 1.
[55] Clifford, *Introducing Feminist Theology*, 29.
[56] Clifford, *Introducing Feminist Theology*, 34.
[57] Anne E. Carr, *Transforming Grace: Christian Tradition and Women's Experience* (San Francisco: Harper & Row Publishers, 1990), 13; Janet Martin Soskice, "Can a Feminist Call God 'Father'?," in *Speaking the Christian God: The Holy Trinity and the Challenge of Feminism* (ed. Alvin F. Kimel, Jr; Grand Rapids, Michigan; Leominster, England: William B Eerdmans Publishing Company; Gracewing), 81–94, 83-84. Clifford, *Introducing Feminist Theology*, 33. See footnote 51.
[58] Lisa Isherwood and Marcella Althaus-Reid, eds., *Controversies in Feminist Theology* (Controversies in Contextual Theology; London: SCM Press, 2007), 15. Isherwood and Althaus-Reid use the term "a-systematic" theology as that which "may allow new questions and different sorts of interrogations to take place among different theological subjects who are women…who are from the North Atlantic or developing world margins of theological power". ; John T. Harwood, "Theologising the World: A Reflection on the Theology of Sallie McFague," *ATR* 97, no. 1 (Winter, 2015), 111–125, 117. McFague characterises her approach as heuristic, not systematic as she says it lacks the scope of systematic theology. Unlike systematic theology, which organises all other dominant models with a key model of its own, McFague considers her metaphorical theology as a "scaffolding". McFague uses the term "a-systematic" to describe her approach. In email correspondence with me, Johnson defines herself simply as "a Theologian".
[59] Mary McClintock Fulkerson, "Feminist Theology," in *The Cambridge Companion to Postmodern Theology* (ed. Kevin J. Vanhoozer; Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 109–125, 112.

Describing her theology as contributing "one square to the quilt", McFague's method takes a constructivist approach that understands the theological task as inherently creative.[60] She seeks to enrich Christian life by providing more direct orientation toward God through "active imaginative construction".[61] Conversely, Johnson employs a revisionist methodology which she characterises as "braiding a footbridge between the religious tradition and the contemporary situation".[62] The impact of such dynamics will become evident through this exploration – while Johnson retrieves from the past, hers is a necessary and fruitful theological accompaniment to McFague's uncompromising engagement with the present.

1.2 Biography as Theology

In his ground-breaking work *Biography as Theology*, James McClendon advocates using biography as a way for theologians to "do better work".[63] The key, he argues, is to extrapolate the "dominant…images" converging within a person that form their characteristic vision.[64] These "image-bearing" lives embody the Christian way, testifying to it while simultaneously challenging and developing the theologian's own vision.[65] Asserting that Christian beliefs are not propositions but "living convictions" which shape lives and communities, McClendon suggests that by attending to other's lives, theologians reform their own work, rendering them "more true, more faithful to our ancient vision, more adequate to the age now being born".[66] Through such insight, McClendon provides a firm rationale for theological inquiry into individual Christian lives. To McFague's and Johnson's respective biographies this piece now turns.

At just seven years old, Sallie McFague 'met' God. Walking home from school one day, she became acutely aware of her own mortality, understanding for the first time that her existence was entirely dependent on 'something else'. This epiphany inspired in her a

[60] Sallie McFague, "A Square in the Quilt: One Theologian's Contribution to the Planetary Agenda," in *Spirit and Nature: Why the Environment Is a Religious Issue: An Interfaith Dialogue* (ed. Steven C. Rockefeller and John Elder; Boston: Beacon Press, 1992), 39–58, 58.
[61] Schaab, "Of Models and Metaphors.", 213.
[62] Elizabeth A. Johnson, *She Who Is: The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse* (25th Anniversary 2020 ed.; New York: Crossroads, 1992), 12.
[63] McClendon, *Biography as Theology*, 89.
[64] McClendon, *Biography as Theology*, 89-90.
[65] McClendon, *Biography as Theology*, 110.
[66] McClendon, *Biography as Theology*, 37-38.

profound gratitude for simply being alive.[67] On school break, sparked further by childish curiosity, the young McFague immersed herself in the woods surrounding the family's single-room holiday cabin. During these long, solo rambles she learned quickly the art of "paying attention" – a practice which became the foundation for a lifetime of deep theological reflection.[68] Thereafter, her heightened awareness manifested in the study of mathematics, a discipline that like theology "demanded an openness and a patience to a subject completely outside of oneself upon whose truth did not rest with one's own interpretation".[69] Galvanised by her youthful experiences, McFague soon determined she loved equally God *and* the world, and like Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, she "could not give up either one".[70]

Such reflection shaped her as a formidable theologian. Trained at Yale University in Barthian radical transcendence during the early 1960s, McFague latterly encountered feminist critiques of the "distant, transcendent, patriarchal God".[71] Armed with feminist zeal and a bachelor's degree in literature she began to scrutinise language about God – both in the academy and in the institutional church – "It sounded like description, but I began to suspect it was metaphorical".[72] She labels these years as the "deconstructive" phase of her evolution as a theologian.[73] Her ensuing investigation, *Metaphorical Theology*, argues compellingly against what she and other feminist scholars consider to be "triumphalist, imperialistic" imagery for God, highlighting her concern for its damaging social consequences and debilitating impact on Christian agency.[74] To ameliorate this, McFague asks; what if

[67] Sallie McFague, "Falling in Love with God and the World: Some Reflections on the Doctrine of God," *The Ecumenical Review* 65, no. 1 (March, 2013), 17–34, 17-18.
[68] Sallie McFague, *Blessed Are the Consumers: Climate Change and the Practice of Restraint* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2013), 55-56.
[69] McFague, *Blessed Are the Consumers*, 55.
[70] McFague, "Falling in Love with God and the World.", 17-19. McFague is significantly influenced by this aspect of Teilhard de Chardin's work.
[71] Ellen T. Armour, "Sallie McFague," in *Key Theological Thinkers: From Modern to Postmodern* (ed. Staale Johannes Kristiansen and Svein Rise; Surrey, England: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2013), 517–527, 518. Armour writes that McFague earned her B.D., M.A., and Ph.D. degrees from Yale University, awarded in 1959, 1960, and 1964 respectively; McFague, "Falling in Love with God and the World.", 17-18. McFague says, "For me and my cohort seventy years ago, it was the transcendent dimension that dominated our view of God and did so in a comfortably personal and often individualistic way, with a picture of God as a supernatural father who both judged and forgave his wayward children. My "theology" and the implicit theology of this era, the forties and fifties in the Western Christian world, was unapologetically anthropocentric and anthropomorphic".
[72] McFague, "Falling in Love with God and the World.", 19.
[73] Sallie McFague, "An Earthly Theological Agenda," in *Ecofeminism and the Sacred* (ed. Carol J. Adams; New York: Continuum, 1993), 84–98, 86.
[74] Sallie McFague, *Metaphorical Theology: Models of God in Religious Language* (London: SCM Press, 1983), 1-10.

Christianity were to think within *different* models for God?[75] Her next monograph signalled a "constructive phase".[76] *Models of God*, promptly takes up a "thought experiment" to address issues of "idolatrous and irrelevant" language that may "work against the continuation of life on our planet".[77] Asking such a keenly orienting question marked the genesis of McFague's transition into a heightened eco-theological pursuit.

The world, including ecology, was always close to McFague's heart; "The closer I come to leaving the world, the more I love it".[78] In what was to be her final monograph, published just six years before her death, McFague expresses the sheer, simple joy of finding God *in the world* – not apart from it. Her enduring gratitude for the gift of life, her receptiveness to the wonders of the natural world and her love of God was profoundly reflected in her ability to "pay attention".[79] At almost eighty years old, McFague resolved to "stay awake" to the world claiming that with theology's help, its salvation was not beyond possibility.[80]

Like McFague, Johnson also experienced an early turning toward the world. After a vocational crisis as a novitiate nun in which she felt instructed to distance herself from the "outside", she perceptively asked, "if God created and loved this world then shouldn't those of us radically seeking God in religious life be at the forefront of engagement with the world?".[81] In 1965, while reading the Vatican II conciliar document *Gaudium et Spes* (joy and hope) under her favourite pine tree, Johnson was riveted by its perceptive analysis of the current world situation, its focus on human dignity and its clarion call for Christians "to serve the world not run from it".[82] Most poignantly for her however, was the document's radical

[75] Armour, "Key Theological Thinkers", 521; Sallie McFague, *Metaphorical Theology: Models of God in Religious Language* (London: SCM Press, 1983), 164-176.
[76] McFague, "An Earthly Theological Agenda.", 86. Johnson, *She Who Is*, 294n.4. Johnson cites McFague's monograph "an outstanding example of constructive theology, to which I'm indebted for inspiration and ideas".
[77] Sallie McFague, *Models of God: Theology for an Ecological, Nuclear Age* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987), ix.
[78] McFague, *Blessed Are the Consumers*, 184.
[79] McFague, *Blessed Are the Consumers*, 185-86.
[80] McFague, "Falling in Love with God and the World.", 34.
[81] Elizabeth A. Johnson, "Worth a Life - A Vatican II Story," in *Vatican II: Forty Personal Stories* (ed. William Madges and Michael J. Daley; Mystic, CT: Twenty-Third Publications, 2003), 202–204, 203. Schlumpf writes, "She struggled with the discipline around seemingly minor rule infractions. If a novice broke a rule – for example not making one's bed correctly – as penance she was required to kneel in the dining room with her arms extended and to request prayers from the other sisters as they came in to eat. 'An awful lot of that I found kind of meaningless and not for the love of God', Johnson remembers", 29.
[82] Rakoczy, "Theological Vision of Elizabeth A. Johnson.", 138.

theological vision of "humanity created in the image of God, defaced by the evil of sin but redeemed by Christ and now led in history by the Spirit through the witness of the church".[83] To the young Beth this was a revelation, a concept she had never before encountered in more than two decades of Catholicism. It struck her as "so beautiful".[84]

After taking her vows, Johnson was a "woman religious" determined to immerse herself in a church "ready for reform".[85] Caught up in the broader zeitgeist, she quickly engaged with the social justice movements of 1960s North America. Attending public rallies against war and for civil rights, Johnson became truly "fascinated by this world".[86] Protest marching in her habit against strict instructions, Johnson was promptly labelled "obstreperous and independent-minded" by her superiors.[87] Her continued quest for God *in the world* drove her to abandon plans to undertake a Masters in science requesting instead to complete her Masters in theology as her way of contributing to wider societal issues as a Roman Catholic.[88] She was particularly motivated by the question of suffering in the context of God's relationship to the world.[89]

Growing up Catholic, Johnson was neither permitted to enter a Protestant church nor to read Protestant theologians. However, following unprecedented Vatican II reforms when other Christians became "brethren" rather than "heretics", Johnson was permitted to study Barth, Bonhoeffer and Moltmann.[90] Piqued by curiosity, she read voraciously with an openness that she found deeply satisfying, yet raised significant questions and doubts. Having eagerly anticipated "a theology that had kept pace with scientific advance", she was disappointed to learn that Protestant thinking had maintained a resolute focus on humanity – one that "heightened our own (Catholic) absorption with anthropology".[91] Furthermore, frustratingly

[83] Johnson, "Worth a Life.", 203.
[84] Johnson, "Worth a Life.", 203.
[85] Heidi Schlumpf, *Elizabeth Johnson: Questing for God* (Collegeville, Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 2016), 35.
[86] Schlumpf, *Elizabeth Johnson*, 36.
[87] Schlumpf, *Elizabeth Johnson*, 34.
[88] Schlumpf, *Elizabeth Johnson*, 36.
[89] Johnson, "Forging Theology.", 121.
[90] Schlumpf, *Elizabeth Johnson*, 37.
[91] Elizabeth A. Johnson, "Turn to the Heavens and the Earth: Retrieval of the Cosmos in Theology," in *Vision and Values: Ethical Viewpoints in the Catholic Tradition* (ed. Judith A. Dwyer; Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 1999), 53–69, 56.

for Johnson who was seeking a more "circular" theology, Protestant biblical interpretation seemed to be undertaken via a *linear history* as the locus of God's action.[92]

Completing her studies in 1970, Johnson observed that against both a Roman Catholic and a Protestant backdrop, "Nature had come to be treated as simply a stage on which salvation history played out".[93] To counter this understanding, Johnson began working to retrieve from both the classical tradition and Scripture in search of new interpretations of the God-world relationship. Parallel to McFague, Johnson employed feminist methodology to scrutinise how traditional language and imagery for God had impacted humanity's relationship to the earth. Searching for theology's positive intersection with the world, both McFague and Johnson soon discovered that an androcentric doctrine of God had not served the earth as best it could.

1.3 Questions and Critiques

In Johnson's view, transformative theologies engage fully with the world, dialogue critically with human knowing, bring wisdom to bear on faith, and deepen understanding of the God-world relationship. Together these elements harvest fresh possibilities for the Christian understanding of God's revelation at a particular time.[94] McFague further argues for a theology that interprets Scripture and tradition for *a certain historical time* claiming that text and context must dialogue.[95] Theology in context creates not a singular "propositional" theology but different theologies, each grounded in different conceptions of the one God.[96] However, because doctrine of God has consequences for those who seek to live out the doctrine, theological enquiry done *in media res*, "in the midst of things" must be undertaken with great wisdom and care.[97]

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[92] Johnson, "Turn to the Heavens and the Earth.", 56-57. Elizabeth A. Johnson, *Creation and the Cross: The Mercy of God for a Planet in Peril* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2018), 203-208. Here Johnson articulates her quest for a theology that is not hierarchical i.e. pyramid shaped, but circular and inclusive.
[93] Johnson, "Turn to the Heavens and the Earth.", 56-57.
[94] Elizabeth A. Johnson, "To Speak Rightly of the Living God," (6 June, 2011), http://chiesa.espresso.repubblica.it/articolo/1348635.html (accessed 24/07/20), 4.
[95]Sallie McFague, *A New Climate for Theology: God, the World and Global Warming* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2008), 38.; Dorothee Sölle, *Thinking About God: An Introduction to Theology* (London: SCM Press, 1990), 4, 7.
[96] Sölle, *Thinking About God*, 7-8. Sölle cautions that responding to context is only one component of a careful theology – her example of different responses by Christians to the Vietnam war demonstrates how particular theological conceptions can produce very different positions in the same contextual circumstances.
[97] Charry, "Inquiring After God.", xxiv.

For Johnson, "theological research does not simply reiterate received…formulas but probes and interprets them in order to deepen understanding".[98] Acknowledging that theology throughout history has employed a plethora of thought forms, images and linguistic expressions, Johnson sees enormous value in theologians making critical judgements about past ways of doing theology, advocating that one learns from their strengths and weaknesses.[99] She expects future theologians will similarly review, critique and gain from current theology; how else, she asks, "can theology move forward?".[100] "We have an infinite number of questions in us to ask, and each one is implicitly orienting us to the truth, the beautiful and the good that is God".[101] Here Johnson, drawing on "her beloved" Rahner, names *questioning* as the core theological task.[102]

Johnson's quest for a richer theology begins with the question, "what is the right way to speak about God?".[103] Exploring language for God is vital to a faith where God functions as the primary symbol because it shapes the life orientation of the Church and its members.[104] It is theology's task therefore, to carefully craft and articulate foundational language for God. As Johnson keenly notes, many of the controversies in the early church dealt with theological questions of how to speak about God, and such discussion should continue in current theological pursuit.[105] She unapologetically credits today's heightened interest in right speech about God as invigorated by "new and exceptional" feminist theologies.[106] Both Johnson and McFague understand it is the theologian's particular responsibility to develop the doctrine of God.

Research undertaken among Christians in the United States revealed that behind a general belief in God lay four "perceptions", ranging from a God who was active in personal and social lives to one who was personally distant but determined the collective social order.[107]

[98] Schlumpf, *Elizabeth Johnson*, 101.
[99] Johnson, "To Speak Rightly of the Living God.", 12.
[100] Johnson, "To Speak Rightly of the Living God.", 19.
[101] Schlumpf, *Elizabeth Johnson*, 10.
[102] Schlumpf, *Elizabeth Johnson*, 10. My italics.
[103] Elizabeth A. Johnson, *She Who Is: The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse* (New York: Crossroads, 1994), 4.
[104] Johnson, *She Who Is,* 3-4.
[105] Johnson, *She Who Is*, 6-13.
[106] Johnson, *She Who Is*, 4-5.
[107] Thomas Piazza and Charles Y. Glock, "Images of God and Their Social Meanings," in *The Religious Dimension: New Directions in Quantitative Research* (ed. Robert Wuthnow; New York San Francisco London:

Attempting to understand the effect of images of God on Christian behaviour the researchers concluded that "the type of God in which people believe may be one of the most important things to study".[108] For McFague, "the God question" must be given particular attention during a time of environmental and economic instability.[109] She further cautions that if theologians, as "keepers and interpreters of deep knowledge, allow false, inappropriate, unhelpful, and dangerous" conceptions of God to continue informing Christian beliefs, "then we are not doing our job".[110] Right thinking begins with right language. Hauerwas confirms that "…to be a theologian is to be in the business of word care".[111] He seeks language to create theological connections that are simultaneously strong yet "fragile".[112] Ellen T. Charry comments that theology is needed to correct erroneous assumptions about God and the world, "for Christians are as likely to misunderstand their own faith as are others".[113] Returning to Johnson's animating question, McFague claims that the essential theological task therefore, is to protect and promote right thinking and speaking about God in relation to the world, in the particular hope that characteristically Christian action follows.[114]

In accord with Johnson and other feminist thinkers, McFague's main concern is that a singular model of God has dominated for centuries – the one that assumes the metaphor "Father" as *literally* God's name.[115] Responding to the impact of this naming in our time, McFague critiques the term "Father" as a form of idolatry which occludes the term's metaphorical roots, while Johnson develops a robust trinitarian formula through methods of retrieval.[116] Both conclude, what is essentially one way to relate to God has become the *only* way.[117] According to Williams, feminist critiques have "considerable importance in alerting us

Academic Press, 1979), 69–91, 91. Despite the age of the study its conclusions remain relevant for McFague's and Johnson's argument that God image impacts behaviour.

[108] Piazza and Glock, "Images of God and Their Social Meanings.", 91.

[109] McFague, "Falling in Love with God and the World.", 21.

[110] McFague, "Falling in Love with God and the World.", 20.

[111] Hauerwas, *The Work of Theology*, 115.

[112] Hauerwas, *The Work of Theology*, 258. Hauerwas uses the metaphor of a spider's web.

[113] Charry, "Inquiring After God.", xxvi.

[114] McFague, *Life Abundant*, 25-26.

[115] McFague, *Metaphorical Theology,* 9; Armour, "Key Theological Thinkers", 520; Johnson, *She Who Is*, 38-39.

[116] Alister E. McGrath, *Christian Theology: An Introduction* (Sixth ed.; Chichester, West Sussex, U.K: Wiley Blackwell, 2017), 76; Harwood, "Theologising the World.", 118.

[117] Sallie McFague, *Metaphorical Theology: Models of God in Religious Language* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1982), 9.

to the distortions to which the classical doctrine has fallen victim – God as monarch…God as supremely successful manipulator of a cosmic environment".[118] What Williams refers to here is not specifically the term "Father" but the traditional model of the relationship between God and the world – the model which Lynn White controversially criticised in the 1960s.[119] In its simplest form, this model views God as an "absolute, all-powerful, all-transcendent, 'Father' God who created the universe from nothing for…God's glory" and then removed "himself" from the action.[120] McFague seeks an alternative understanding to more faithfully represent the God-world relationship. Searching for an *interpretation* of God, not a *description*, that can positively impact behaviour, McFague reaches for a doctrine of God using language that affirms the idea that "loving the world *is* loving God".[121]

Scholars agree that theology's focus has indeed shifted to searching for, identifying and understanding the role God plays in the world.[122] Johnson is at the centre of this theological sea-change. In a mantra-like rhythm throughout her work, Johnson repeats "the symbol of God functions".[123] She claims it functions to either oppress or liberate, to restrict or facilitate the full flourishing of both women and men in the created image of God.[124] Speaking as a Roman Catholic, Johnson notes that scholarship from a female perspective has exposed the all-pervasive exclusion of women in the long list of: "ecclesial creeds, doctrines, prayers, theological systems, liturgy, church order and leadership".[125] Thus the symbol of God "functions", in these highly visible cases, to effectively preclude women.[126] While it is widely understood by theologians that God is beyond gender, Johnson argues that common language in the abovementioned realms, and in all forms of preaching and worship, consistently implies that God is male, "or at least more like a man than a woman, or at least more fittingly addressed as male than as female".[127] Johnson argues convincingly that "the

[118] Williams, *On Christian Theology*, 77-78. Williams cites both Sallie McFague and Rosemary Radford Ruether.
[119] Lynn White Jr, "The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis," *Science* 155, no. 3767 (10 March, 1967), 1203–1207, 1207. "We shall continue to have a worsening ecological crisis until we reject the Christian axiom that nature has no reason for existence save to serve man (sic)".
[120] McFague, "Falling in Love with God and the World.", 23.
[121] McFague, "Falling in Love with God and the World.", 22. My brackets.
[122] Tanner, "Shifts in Theology", 39; Venter, "God Images.", 146.
[123] Johnson, *She Who Is*, 4-6, 39, 48, 246.
[124] Johnson, *She Who Is*, 4. Johnson introduces this term in this particular monograph but uses it consistently throughout her extensive body of work.
[125] Johnson, *She Who Is*, 4-5.
[126] Johnson, *She Who Is*, 5.
[127] Johnson, *She Who Is*, 5.

mystery of the triune God can and should be spoken of in female terms both for the sake of the truth about God…and well-being for all".[128]

If the symbol of God functions to shape Christian imagination, styling God using masculine-only language narrows the vision to perceive only a partial image of God. Feminist theologians including Johnson and McFague highlight this imbalance guiding reflection toward less limiting insights. They assume responsibility for addressing these tensions by reinterpreting doctrine so that new models and language can enter the broader conversation to help reflect the truth of God better than previously.[129]

[128] Johnson, "Forging Theology.", 93.
[129] Charry, "Inquiring After God.", xxvi. Charry gives the following example; if God is both just and merciful Christians must be both loved and chastised by God simultaneously. Understanding how God "balances" these two seeming contradictions is part of the theologian's role.

Be careful how you interpret the world. It is like that.[130]

2 Theological Models

Once McFague and Johnson highlight the way certain images of God limit understanding, they imagine, retrieve and develop additional models, metaphors and language. McFague cautions however, that "we live within our models and make decisions on the basis of them" and once models for God are in place it is easy to forget they are human constructions.[131] Careful, meticulous theology is therefore necessary – the kind that pays close attention to the model's impact in the Church and in Christian life. McFague's core enterprise is to reimagine the God-world relationship as a corrective to those beliefs that have commonly functioned to ill effect in the past – yet persist today.[132]

Discussed earlier, McFague and Johnson hold the common feminist conviction that standard metaphors and models for God are rooted in triumphalist, monarchical and patriarchal imagery. Although much contemporary theology has attempted to interpret for the times, such interpretation has remained largely within the confines of a largely partisan paradigm.[133] If McFague's overarching vision is to revitalise understanding of the God-world relationship, what models can help draw God and the world together? She investigates metaphorical theology because it "remythologises, combats literalism and is heuristic" which assumes there is something more to be found out.[134] This is an important point. As Soskice keenly notes, "the interesting thing about metaphors is that they are not used to *re*describe but to disclose *for the first time*".[135] Unlike analogy, metaphor is not about comparison – it has to be adopted because something brand new is being conceived or discussed.[136] Acknowledging theology as characteristically constructive becomes important when the

[130] McFague, *Life Abundant*, 39. McFague cites German philosopher, Erich Heller, here from his essays *The Disinherited Mind* (1961).
[131] McFague, *Blessed Are the Consumers*, 112.
[132] Kathryn Tanner, "Christian Claims: How My Mind Has Changed," *Christian Century* 127, no. 4 (2010), 40–45, 40.
[133] Sallie McFague, *Models of God: Theology for an Ecological, Nuclear Age* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987), xi.
[134] McFague, *Models of God*, 35. McFague works in the context of broader scholarship around metaphorical language. A seminal text here is *Metaphors We Live By*, George Lakoff and Mark Johnson (1980) in which the authors argue that metaphor is not merely poetic or rhetorical but part of everyday speech that affects the ways in which humans perceive, think, and act.
[135] Janet Martin Soskice, *Metaphor and Religious Language* (Oxford: Clarendon Press), 89.
[136] Soskice, *Metaphor and Religious Language*, 89; McGrath, *Christian Theology*, 76.

world we inhabit today is markedly different from the one in which many of the traditional metaphors and concepts "gained currency".[137]

Therefore, McFague argues theologians must think experimentally and "risk novel constructions" to theologise for their time.[138] This is not to say that theology is about "making Christianity up".[139] Hauerwas views Christianity as having "lost the story" in which Christian concepts and symbols function.[140] Remaining faithful to Christian orthodoxy, Johnson and McFague embed their work in the Christian narrative of which Hauerwas speaks. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza reminds us it is imperative to regard models and heuristic proposals neither as factual descriptions nor literal images but rather as "imaginative theoretical constructs" designed to better understand the God-world relationship as told through the uniquely Christian story. [141] Schüssler Fiorenza further emphasises that heuristic devices alongside metaphors function to *correlate* observations and symbols to aid the interpretation of this story.[142]

For McFague, scriptural texts are themselves models – not dictums – for undertaking the interpretive task.[143] She uses the examples of Paul's letters and the Gospel of John. Both, she explains, use different and imaginative metaphorical means to express the salvific love of God. In his missionary context Paul must proselytise while John conceptualises in a way that resonates within a "sectarian and otherworldly" environment.[144] Both men choose appropriately for their situation. Assuming all concepts, metaphors and imagery for God are incomplete, McFague provocatively, yet honestly, asks which "*distortion*" is truer to the present context *and* to the good news of Christianity?[145] She further stimulates reflection with the challenge, "What should we be doing for our time that would be comparable to what John and Paul did for theirs?".[146]

[137] McFague, *Models of God*, 6.
[138] McFague, *Models of God*, 6.
[139] Hauerwas, *The Work of Theology*, 119.
[140] Hauerwas, *The Work of Theology*, 116.
[141] Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins* (London: SCM Press, 1983), 3-4.
[142] Schüssler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her*, 4.
[143] McFague, *Life Abundant*, 66.
[144] McFague, *Models of God*, 30.
[145] McFague, *Models of God*, 78.
[146] McFague, *Models of God*, 30.

2.1 Mother Lover Friend

Maintaining primary focus on the God-world relationship, McFague begins by experimenting with neglected images in the Judeo-Christian tradition that represent basic but formative human relationships.[147] In seeking a model that projects an alternate view of power relations, McFague sees promise in the fertile ground of "Mother Lover Friend".[148] Her construction is inspired by Gordon Kaufman whose work contends that the concept of divine sovereignty is the primary issue which contemporary theologians must address.[149] By her own definition, McFague's proposal is a "modest" thought experiment but one which must be "bold and constructive" in order to trace the associations and implications of the metaphor for contemporary times.[150] She does not assert her chosen metaphors as new yet in construing them *together* she goes further than other feminist theologians have travelled.[151]

McFague's model of God as Mother suggests the divine love *agape*. As Johnson also purports, since *imago Dei* encompasses all humanity, both mother and father metaphors are appropriate language about God.[152] Alongside God as Father, who creates through word or craft, God as Mother "bodies forth" the universe, making creation fully dependent on "divine nurturance, feeding and protection".[153] Actively creating, Mother God attends to every form of life and promotes an awareness of the preciousness and vulnerability of all existence. McFague's model presents a profound image of interdependence and interrelatedness for all life with the Source of creation and with each other. Thus, in *agapeic* love for the world, Mother-God is not only active in creating the cosmos but also in fiercely defending and

[147] McFague, *Models of God*, 84.
[148] McFague, *Models of God*, 85.
[149] Johnson, *She Who Is*, 315n.22; Sallie McFague, *The Body of God: An Ecological Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), 75,76; McFague, *Models of God*, 17. McFague cites Kaufman's work as concerned with images of God that reflect power as domination which in 1980s United States was fuelling militarism. Gordon Kaufman, *Theology for a Nuclear Age* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1985). McFague further cites this monograph as a "fine study…almost alone (to date) in attempting a serious revision of theology, especially the image-concept of God, for a nuclear age", *Models*, 191n.28.
[150] McFague, *Models of God*, 31.
[151] Harwood, "Theologising the World.", 120.
[152] McFague, *Models of God*, 98. McFague notes that "God as mother does not mean that God is mother (or father)…these metaphors are to express the creative love of God…in a language that is familiar and dear to us".; Johnson, *She Who Is*, 9; McGrath, *Christian Theology*, 176. McGrath cites McFague as an "excellent example" of "recognising that speaking of "God as father" does not mean that God is male". Johnson, *She Who Is*., 319n.14. Johnson cites *Models* as "the best systematic development of God as mother yet to appear".
[153] McFague, *Models of God*, 106-107. McFague refers to Moses usage of the term "bodies forth".

investing in its unfolding.[154] Likewise, God the Mother inspires an ethic of justice that is inclusive and non-hierarchical, oriented toward "the ordering of the cosmic household in a fashion beneficial to all".[155] McFague suggests that the Father symbol is most fruitful when used in context with the Mother model; together these symbols signify concerned, caring parent rather than dominating patriarch.[156]

God as Lover suggests an ethic of embodied healing that "makes whole … the ruptured body" toward restoring right relationship within the parts of the body.[157] Practising this ethic, "the one who loves" identifies with sufferers in their pain.[158] Gloria Schaab argues that, McFague offers God as Lover to illuminate Jesus' passion and death as emanating from God's solidarity with the suffering, in a prophetic message of inclusive love and liberative activity for the oppressed.[159] Framed this way, McFague suggests that Jesus' death can be understood as the catalyst for the ongoing reunification of a shattered world rather than as atonement, ransom, or reconciliation with a distant God.[160] This presupposes that the salvation of the world must be accomplished over and over again in history, continually reflecting the life and death of Jesus to reveal God's *eros*.[161]

McFague's third construction, God as Friend and its associated quality of love – *philia* – speaks of a mutual delight in reciprocal relationship. This love works side-by-side for the well-being of the world.[162] The community formed in the image of Jesus incarnate is epitomised in the sharing of a meal at which the stranger is welcomed, needs are met and joy is shared. Thus, through God as Friend one encounters the divine, not in isolation, but in a community of justice, healing, and companionship that continually mothers, loves and befriends the world.[163] Johnson cites McFague's Friend model as characterising mutual trust and responsibility that clearly extends to the stranger.[164]

[154] Schaab, "Of Models and Metaphors.", 223.
[155] McFague, *Models of God*, 116-118.
[156] McFague, *Models of God*, 91-123; Johnson, *She Who Is*, 299n.57.
[157] Schaab, "Of Models and Metaphors.", 224.
[158] McFague, *Models of God*, 146.
[159] Schaab, "Of Models and Metaphors.", 224.
[160] McFague, *Models of God*., 148-149.
[161] Schaab, "Of Models and Metaphors.", 224. Although McFague is not a systematic theologian, it is evident her revised doctrine of God has implications for other doctrines, for example, soteriology.
[162] McFague, *Models of God*, 159-167.
[163] Schaab, "Of Models and Metaphors.", 224.
[164] Johnson, *She Who Is*, 153.

In concert with others, McFague concludes her exposition with a reminder that God has many names and that her Mother Lover Friend construction simply offers a new metaphor to emphasise the all-embracing, inclusive character of God's presence to all human beings and all life.[165] Contra to Jenson's assumption, in praying to God as Mother, Lover, Friend, and also Father, Healer, McFague does not propose descriptive or replacement language for God nor the Trinity.[166] Neither does she wish to fall prey to the "tyranny of absolutizing imagination" by promoting another form of exclusive imagery.[167] Instead she aims for disorientation – introducing other models – and reorientation – working within orthodox Christian parameters to see God anew. To unseat monarchical and traditional trinitarian language, McFague offers both reasoned and orthodox new models to help illuminate ways to think fruitfully about the God-world relationship.[168]

A number of important indications emerge from McFague's construction.[169] First, her metaphorical model implies that God knows the world in an immediate, empathetic and intimate manner, emphasising closeness over distance, feeling over rationality. Second, that God "loves bodies" as those which are at one with the Spirit, not opposed to it. Finally, this model draws focus toward the ways God acts as "interior and caring, not external and periodic"; replacing a more traditional "disembodied picture of God with an embodied one".[170] Furthermore, it stresses relationship rather than hierarchy, radically altering the image of God and God's relationship with humanity. Reorienting thus, McFague achieves her goal of a model that reimagines the concept of divine power and beholds the mystery of God's wholly incomprehensible transcendence and immanence; bringing theology one step closer to reimagining the God-world relationship in a more productive way.

[165] McFague, *Models of God*, 180.Soskice, "Can a Feminist Call God 'Father'?", 81; Johnson, *She Who Is*, 122-125.
[166] McFague, *Models of God*, 181.
[167] McFague, *Models of God*, 182.
[168] McFague, *Models of God*, 182.
[169] Jacob Waschenfelder, "Re-Thinking God for the Sake of a Planet in Peril: Reflections on the Socially Transformative Potential of Sallie McFague's Progressive Theology," *Feminist Theology* 19, no. 1 (2010), 86–106, 93.
[170] McFague, *The Body of God*., 157. McFague, *Models of God*, 73, 74.

2.2 She Who Is

Alongside McFague, Johnson firstly reconstructs an image of God according to women's experiences. She argues that in their pursuit of equal human dignity, women have "glimpsed that the living God, who created women in the divine image and likeness, not only desires their flourishing but can also be reflected in their female ways".[171] In an idea first explored by Rahner, this fresh awareness of female dignity, in essence, constitutes a new experience of God.[172] If women are genuinely "in God's image" then female images provide suitable "even excellent" metaphors for the divine.[173] She aptly concludes, beliefs that *limit* women's theological identity limit God as they are not derived from egalitarian scriptural expressions of *imago Dei* and are therefore contrary to God's intent.[174] Congruent with McFague, Johnson observes that in and through women's conversion experiences both new metaphors and new language about God can arise; a kind that takes female reality in all its absoluteness as a legitimate source for acknowledging God's mystery.[175]

Here Johnson makes two crucial observations: that "ideal" language for God is both male *and* female, and female images *are* present in Scripture.[176] Female imagery however, is either peripheral or underdeveloped so she assiduously retrieves it from both Scripture and the classical tradition.[177] This is where Johnson most significantly departs from McFague in terms of method. She emphasises however, that the retrieval process is not intended as an end in itself but as a means to undertake a necessary counterbalance to exclusive, literal, patriarchal speech about God.[178] She subsequently moves to reconstruct an image of God through a deep exploration of female language and imagery in Scripture.

Consistent with broader feminist observation, Johnson highlights that it is "most often the world of patriarchy that provides chief metaphors for discourse about the divine for example;

[171] Elizabeth A. Johnson, *Quest for the Living God: Mapping Frontiers in the Theology of God* (New York: London: Continuum, 2007), 90.
[172] Johnson, *She Who Is*, 63.
[173] Johnson, *She Who Is*, 71.
[174] Elizabeth A. Johnson, *Abounding in Kindness: Writings for the People of God* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2015), 62.
[175] Johnson, *She Who Is*, 75.
[176] Johnson, *She Who Is*, 44-57. McGrath, *Christian Theology*, 77. McGrath cites Johnson as "suggesting appropriate correctives" in this context.
[177] Johnson, *She Who Is*, 76-117.
[178] Johnson, *She Who Is*, 34-35.

King, Ruler, Lord, Master".[179] She observes, as does Avery Dulles, that when Scripture is reduced to a series of propositional statements, biblical interpretation is diminished to literal repetition.[180] Such statements, says Dulles, become "divine affirmation, valid always and everywhere".[181] The current dominant propositional model is authoritarian, requiring adherence to concepts and statements born in a radically different situation.[182] Within this restrictive framework, the Church has no option but to perpetuate terminology and repeat rigid linguistic patterns using the metaphor of ruling men.[183] Again for Johnson, the symbol of God *functions*, in this case, to manifest and reinforce deficient, fragmentary imagery in naming toward God.

To illustrate this point, Johnson returns to the example of Jesus calling God "Father". Critical biblical scholarship points out that Jesus' usage makes the paternal metaphor so normative that other names for God are excluded.[184] In terms of frequency however, Johnson observes that Jesus' use of the word Father appears four times in Mark increasing to 109 times in John.[185] She suggests this provides evidence of a theological development in the early church manifesting in a growing *tradition of exclusivity* rather than abundant use of the term by Jesus himself.[186] While there are many motifs for God, only a limited range continue to be used. Johnson points out that exclusivity and frequency are the issue, not the motif itself.[187] Viewed holistically, the gospel tradition patently demonstrates "variety and plurality in Jesus' speech about God rather than exclusive centrality of speech about God as Father".[188]

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[179] Johnson, *She Who Is*, 76.
[180] Johnson, *She Who Is*, 80.
[181] Avery Dulles S.J, *Models of Revelation* (Goldenbridge, Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1983), 39.
[182] Dulles, *Models of Revelation*, 50.
[183] Johnson, *She Who Is*, 77.
[184] Johnson, *She Who Is*, 84, 288n. Johnson finds evidence of this critical biblical scholarship in James Dunn's work, *Christology in the Making* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1980), 30. She cites Dunn's work here; "More precisely, the frequency with which Jesus calls God Father breaks down even more dramatically: Mark 1, Q 1, special Luke 2, special Matthew 1, John 73. As James Dunn concludes, it is scarcely possible to dispute that 'here we see straightforward evidence of a burgeoning tradition, of a manner of speaking about Jesus in his relation with God which became very popular in the last decades of the first century'."
[185] Johnson, *She Who Is*, 84, 288n. Johnson cites word count by Samuel Terrien, *Till the Heart Sings: A Biblical Theology of Manhood and Womanhood* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985), 139. She notes a slightly different count in Robert Hamerton-Kelly, *God the Father*, 71-72.
[186] Johnson, *She Who Is*, 84.
[187] Johnson, *She Who Is*, 79.
[188] Johnson, *She Who Is*, 82, 299n.57. Contra to the fears of Kimel regarding use of the term father, Johnson comments that "the father-child datum is too important to dispense with altogether as a metaphor for God". She continues, "If it can be deconstructed as an idol and buttress of oppression, and (instead) spoken in a community of the discipleship of equals, it may yet serve as an icon of divine creativity, protection, delight and care" (my parenthesis).

Therefore, mining scriptural texts for female symbols of spirit, wisdom and mother, Johnson specifically retrieves them from an androcentric framework to recast and recover them within an egalitarian framework.[189]

Simultaneously undertaking extensive work in pneumatology, Johnson begins with the spirit/*shekinah*, translated as *ruah* in Hebrew and *Sophia* in Greek, which, she points out, are both feminine derivations.[190] She moves then to demonstrate the breadth and depth of God's spirit in the world, drawing on the creative energy of natural phenomena including fire, wind and water to expand the notion of the divine beyond basic analogy with a human person (e.g.: father).[191] Furthermore, she brings into play scriptural images of birth, breastfeeding, midwifery and motherhood citing latent maternal imagery as more numerous than the number of explicit maternal images first suggest.[192] When the clearly personified figure of Wisdom/Sophia is linked with *shekinah* alongside the powerful mother image, an alternative to patriarchal language becomes strikingly clear. Considered in concert, each symbol is liberated from a *supplementary* position to one of mutuality, creating new building blocks for emancipatory discourse about the mystery of God.[193] Johnson's work in sensitively retrieving and carefully applying these biblical allusions to the Spirit's creative presence frees the religious imagination, providing richer vocabulary to guide speech toward fuller imagery for God.[194]

Following the twentieth century Roman Catholic trend of neo-Scholasticism, Johnson returns to classical theology as part of the retrieval process.[195] As a Thomist, Johnson finds three of Aquinas' insights to be particularly "dynamic, fresh and helpful"[196]: the doctrine of God's hiddenness and incomprehensibility; the importance of analogy's role in speech about God

[189] Johnson, *She Who Is*, 82–84.
[190] Johnson, *She Who Is*, 82–86.
[191] Elizabeth A. Johnson, *Ask the Beasts: Darwin and the God of Love* (London; New Dehli; New York; Sydney: Bloomsbury, 2014), 134 – 137. Wind imagery has a long biblical history – from the *ruach Elohim* blowing over the face of the waters in Genesis to the valley of the dry bones in Ezekiel. Further God's own *ruach* has a powerful rebirthing effect on the human person in the Pentecost event. Biblical use of water as a metaphor for the presence of God's own spirit suggests the action of outpouring; wherever divine water flows, life is abundant and unceasingly refreshed. In the New Testament, fire as a symbol for spirit is necessary for warmth and light as it sets hearts aflame with courage and conviction.
[192] Johnson, *Ask the Beasts*, 139 – 140.
[193] Johnson, *She Who Is*, 103.
[194] Johnson, *She Who Is*, 104 – 111.
[195] Johnson, *She Who Is*, 116.
[196] Johnson, "Forging Theology.", 100.

and the necessity for many names about God due to language limitations.[197] In a substantial retrieval of Aquinas, Johnson reminds us that even in the richness of "pluriform, subversive and subtle" language, the "poverty of our vocabulary" perdures.[198]

Highlighting God's incomprehensibility, Johnson acknowledges the long tradition of studying the limits of human knowing.[199] While McFague finds value in metaphor, Johnson explores analogy's role in speech about God. She maintains its power must not be underestimated as no expression for God can be taken literally. In quoting Augustine, *Si comprehendis, non est Deus* (Sermon 52), "If you have understood, then what you have understood is not God",[200] Johnson argues that the human need to fully comprehend God's self-revelation has led to a "dangerous situation" in preaching and teaching whereby words become too prescriptive and ideas too distinct.[201] In this way she concludes, God has been "opened up for inspection, caught within human narratives and metaphysical concepts".[202] In retrieving Thomist themes of God's incomprehensibility, the analogical nature of religious language and the requirement for many names for God, Johnson broadens the scope of theological reflection. While remaining faithful to orthodoxy, Johnson effectively widens the lens from a narrow focus on limited symbols and language to help shape a more prophetic and revelatory landscape in which theology may dwell.[203] However, despite all such efforts, a definitive understanding of God remains elusive. Therefore, equipped with insight from women's experience, Scripture and classical tradition, Johnson returns to God's mystery. This above all, she claims, is what should be kept at the forefront of theological reflection.[204]

To speak rightly of God, the language and imagery used must serve – faithfully and consistently – to remind Christians of the absolute reality that God is mystery beyond human

[197] Johnson, *She Who Is*, 104 – 111.
[198] Johnson, *She Who Is*, 125.
[199] Johnson, *She Who Is*, 104.
[200] Johnson, *Abounding in Kindness*, 6.
[201] Johnson, *She Who Is*, 109 – 117.
[202] Elizabeth A. Johnson, "The Incomprehensibility of God and the Image of God Male and Female," *Theological Studies*, no. 45 (1984), 441–465, 442. Johnson, *She Who Is*, 122 – 125. Here Johnson cites the "many names" used for God in the rich African tradition which includes Creator, Great Mother, Supreme One, Fashioner, Designer, Architect of the World.
[203] Johnson, *She Who Is*, 125. The notion of many names for God is not 'invented' by feminist theologians, it is attested throughout the history of Christian thought.
[204] Veeneman, *Introducing Theological Method*, 153.

imagining.[205] Emphasising this, alongside women as truly *imago Dei*, Johnson makes a very bold but entirely logical move. Mining Thomist themes and ideas to explore a feminist theology of God, Johnson argues that language about God need not be restricted to language found in the biblical text.[206] If additional linguistic terms remain consistent with the overall scriptural imagery for God then, as Aquinas claimed, new language is indeed appropriate. In light of this, perhaps Kimel's insistence that language for God remain static is possibly less orthodox than he might contend.

Johnson's most significant retrieval begins with the gender-transcendent YHWH. She notes that Aquinas interprets the burning bush scene metaphysically to conclude that "HE WHO IS" may serve as *the* most appropriate name for God.[207] Johnson further notes that while Aquinas' use of the masculine pronoun refers to the grammatically male *Deus*, it can equally be translated as "the one who is".[208] Given Johnson's methodological lens, she offers a "feminist gloss" on the influential text to propose "SHE WHO IS" – claiming it to be "linguistically possible, theologically legitimate, existentially and religiously necessary" as a "naming toward God" that can justly "light the road to genuine community".[209] Johnson's is an encompassing theology that faithfully recovers women as agents and critiques doctrine and traditions to help pave the way for beneficial alternatives.[210]

When Johnson draws on Aquinas' themes and ideas to inform her feminist doctrine of God, she makes clear that she does not do so to replicate the past or adhere to discourse that totalises. Instead, she retrieves to stimulate her own theological reflection. This is the case in her development of the Trinity in which she explores multiple models because she believes that emphasising only one model "inevitably leads to a regrettable univocity in speech about the divine".[211] What one critic refers to as a lapse into logical incoherence in her trinitarian construction, Johnson defends as a decisive strategy to pursue multiple models. This

[205] Johnson, *She Who Is*, 6-8. Here Johnson gives a helpful survey of God's mystery as mediated through shifting historical discourse.
[206] Johnson, *She Who Is*, 254; Johnson, "Forging Theology.", 100. The centrality of Aquinas in Johnson's work grounds her in orthodoxy.
[207] Johnson, *She Who Is*, 255.
[208] Johnson, *She Who Is*, 255.
[209] Johnson, *She Who Is*, 242, 243, 256.
[210] Mary McClintock Fulkerson, "Feminist Theology," in *The Cambridge Companion to Postmodern Theology* (ed. Kevin J. Vanhoozer; Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 109–125, 112.
[211] Johnson, "Forging Theology.", 101.

highlights that no influential model can be interpreted literally, and that feminist images can more than adequately express both patterns of a single-subject model and a communion model, and should be allowed to do so.[212]

Alongside a call for more expansive language, models of "Mother Lover Friend" and "She Who Is" are attempts by McFague and Johnson to provide theologically credible models of God and the God-world relationship that are inclusive, creative and liberating.[213] Together, McFague and Johnson demonstrate the significance of female religious experience, confirm the limits of human language and highlight the value of theological critique in moving toward a richer, fuller doctrine of God. This new understanding challenges traditional assumptions about God which perceive God as transcendent, supernatural and only periodically interested in human affairs. In doing so, they offer contemporary theology a pathway to reclaim its unique voice and empower the Christian faith as a God-seeking, life-promoting movement in the world.

[212] Johnson, "Forging Theology", 101. Johnson uses Rahner's and Barth's single-subject model and the communion model of Moltmann.; Joseph A. Bracken, S.J., "The Theology of God of Elizabeth A. Johnson," in *Things Old and New: Essays on the Theology of Elizabeth A. Johnson* (New York, NY: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 1999), 21–38. Bracken provides the critique of Johnson's trinitarian construction.
[213] Schaab, "Of Models and Metaphors.", 234.

We've done theology looking in the mirror at ourselves. Now it is time to look out the window to see that we are part of a bigger world.[214]

3 Eco-theological Sensibilities

Johnson and McFague consider an enriched doctrine of God will help garner deep spiritual engagement to move belief to action, denial and inertia to transformative change – both personally and publicly. Each warns that effective Christian response to today's climate issues is unlikely if the conventional doctrine of God remains static.[215] As demonstrated, while McFague sees responsible theology as a creative, imaginative construction to reorient human life toward God and nature, Johnson again employs a revisionist methodology to create a bridge between theological tradition and today's world.[216]

3.1 First Steps

Written against the "clear and stark" threat of nuclear war, McFague's *Models of God* is her first monograph to confront the mounting ecological crisis, pairing the two issues as twin sins "quick kill" and "slow death".[217] Although by comparison "subtle and gradual", the ecological crisis more alarmingly, involves "the daily, seemingly innocuous, activities of *every single person on the planet*".[218] Published in 1993, *The Body of God: An Ecological Theology* moves into McFague's theological lament for the earth. Here she painfully chronicles first-world humanity's trajectory away from nature toward a mechanistic, technological lifestyle devoid of flora and fauna. She observes that being so distant from the earth and its rhythms, many city-dwelling Christians either deny the ecological crisis or naively hope it will evaporate "with a few minor life-style changes like recycling and car-pooling".[219] The gravity of the situation compelled her to study both science and economics. Her subsequent monographs argued that profound changes were immediately required, especially in halting

[214] Schlumpf, *Elizabeth Johnson*, 85
[215] McFague, "Falling in Love with God and the World.", 22. Johnson, *Ask the Beasts*, 266-267.
[216] Schaab, "Of Models and Metaphors.", 213.
[217] McFague, "An Earthly Theological Agenda.", 86.
[218] McFague, *The Body of God*, 2. My italics.
[219] McFague, *The Body of God*, 3.

the excesses of first-world consumption.[220] In her personal life, McFague continued to "pay attention" to the cycle of mutual dependence between the living and dying forest trees, experiencing the transcendent and immanent presence of God therein.[221]

A year after publication of the ground-breaking *She Who Is*, Johnson delivered an indicting lecture that made explicit the connections between Christianity and the earth's destruction; "For anyone who believes in a God who creates and sustains the world and who even pronounces it 'very good' (Gen.1: 31), wasting the world is an ethical, religious, and theological issue of critical importance".[222] Most notably here, Johnson connects doctrine of God with an appropriate Christian response to the planetary crisis in seeking "a new vision of the 'Creator Spirit' enfolding and unfolding a reconciled human community and a healed, living earth, to practical and critical effect".[223]

According to McFague, amidst the growth of contextual theologies throughout the 1970s, the most neglected context was the earthly one.[224] In 1983 Kaufman addressed theologians calling them to deconstruct and reconstruct the basic symbols of their faith in light of the looming nuclear crisis.[225] Arguing for a paradigm shift away from central symbols of God as patriarchal, militaristic and hierarchical, Kaufman urged his audience to "side with life".[226] Inspired and motivated by such reasoning, McFague set about answering Kaufman's call.

3.2 Dangerous Dualisms

Perceiving the environmental crisis as inherently theological, McFague begins to scrutinise traditional imagery *in light of the earthly context* and develop a further alternate construction.[227] Johnson similarly critiques "anti-body" dualisms as perpetuating the exploitation of the natural environment – a situation, which she maintains, mirrors women's experience in the hands of narrow approaches to theology.[228] The crux of feminist objections

[220] McFague, *The Body of God*, 3-5.
[221] McFague, *The Body of God*, 210.
[222] Elizabeth A. Johnson, *Women, Earth and Creator Spirit* (1993 Madeleva Lecture in Spirituality; New York/Mahwah: Paulist Press, 1993), 2.
[223] Johnson, *Women, Earth and Creator Spirit*, 68.
[224] McFague, "An Earthly Theological Agenda.", 84.
[225] McFague, "An Earthly Theological Agenda.", 86. Kaufman's address to the American Academy of Religion was a call given to both Christian and Jewish theologians.
[226] McFague, "An Earthly Theological Agenda.", 86.
[227] McFague, "Falling in Love with God and the World.", 20.
[228] Johnson, *Women, Earth and Creator Spirit*, 14.

to patriarchal rhetoric however, is not simply that it subordinates women but that it also seemingly gives divine justification to a hierarchal interpretation of world order which in turn has consequences for human behaviour.[229] Returning to Johnson's idea that the symbol of God "functions", the way humans speak about God impacts not only what they believe about God-human relationships but the human relationship with the planet.[230] Acutely aware of the impact of language, McFague and Johnson scrutinise two hierarchical models that they believe have deleterious ecological consequences - God as Lord over humanity and humanity as "lords" over creation.[231]

Despite robust feminist theological critique, the image of God as King, Lord and patriarch who rules over a hierarchically ordered kingdom, is commonly used today. As previously identified by Williams, God, imaged as monarch, is distanced from the world, relates only to humanity and controls the world through either domination or seemingly indifferent benevolence.[232] This is problematic for a number of reasons. First, royalty is "untouchable" and necessarily removed from subjects. Second, as a political model focussed on governance of humanity, this model omits the rest of creation. And finally, according to this model *God rules*, thereby absolving humans of their own responsibility to care for the earth.[233] Traditional language and imagery emphasising God's transcendence and Lordship may also foster infantilism that abdicates humans from their responsibility to care for creation; if God is "Father", humanity is "child", if God is "king", humanity is "subject".[234] Assuming such postures, Christians risk believing God will "clean up" the environmental mess created by humans;[235] a presumption that threatens the future of the earth.[236]

Emphasising human superiority results in a similar misunderstanding. Taken literally, Genesis (1:28) "have dominion" becomes a mandate for Adam and Eve to exercise "command and control".[237] Through an anthropocentric lens, this verse seemingly justifies humanity as

[229] Soskice, "Can a Feminist Call God 'Father'?", 86. Soskice cites the dichotomies - powerful/powerless, superior/inferior, active/passive, male/female.
[230] Johnson, *She Who Is*, 3-4.
[231] McFague, "Falling in Love with God and the World.", 21.
[232] McFague, "An Earthly Theological Agenda.", 91.
[233] McFague, "An Earthly Theological Agenda.", 91.
[234] McFague, "Falling in Love with God and the World.", 24-25.
[235] Armour, "Key Theological Thinkers.", 520.
[236] McRandal, *Christian Doctrine and the Grammar of Difference*, 26.
[237] Johnson, *Ask the Beasts*, 261.

superior to all other creatures and life forms.[238] While many contemporary theologians now view this interpretation as a *mis*interpretation, the message is seemingly slow to filter beyond theological circles. For McFague, it is impossible to overstate the kingship model's role in perpetuating humanity's sense of superiority, a position that she and others believe has contributed to centuries of human exploitation of creation.[239]

Johnson considers the commonly held stewardship model as likewise inadequate for two reasons. First, it downplays the crucial aspect of complete human dependence on that which is stewarded. Second, it emphasises the hierarchy found in the kingship model by perpetuating a top-down relationship in which the natural world is subordinated to the human world.[240] As science now patently demonstrates, humanity resides in mutual-interconnection with creation; it is neither its "royal apex nor its dutiful steward".[241]

Serious issues arise when Greek philosophical dualisms, including spirit over matter, are brought to bear on theology as they lead to reflection that risks devaluing the earth as a decaying present reality only worthy in terms of its usefulness to human beings.[242] For Deborah Guess the continued separation of humanity and nature "is environmentally problematic" because it frames humanity as valuable "subject" and the material world as less valuable "object"; "This…understanding, at its worst, has claimed that we are entitled to use, over use and abuse the natural world".[243]

Science now evidences that all flourishes or dies *together*.[244] Yet what McFague and Johnson argue more strongly is not increased scientific knowledge, but a more nuanced and considered *theological* knowledge to effect the kind of spiritual changes needed to halt the climate crisis. McFague and Johnson maintain that continuing to uphold a doctrine of God

[238] Johnson, *Ask the Beasts*, 261.
[239] McFague, "Falling in Love with God and the World.", 32. Richard Bauckham, *Bible and Ecology: Rediscovering the Community of Creation* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 2010),32. Larry L. Rasmussen, *Earth Community, Earth Ethics* (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1996), 228.
[240] Johnson, *Ask the Beasts*, 268.
[241] Johnson, *Women, Earth and Creator Spirit*, 30.
[242] Johnson, *Ask the Beasts*, 125-26.
[243] Deborah Guess, "The Theistic Naturalism of Arthur Peacocke as a Framework for Ecological Theology," *Phronema* 31, no. 2 (2016), 63–84, 82.
[244] Johnson, *Women, Earth and Creator Spirit*, 30.

which emphasises kingship and stewardship is concerning as it fails to fully articulate the value of interrelationship – a concept that must lie at the heart of deep spiritual change.[245]

Clearly, countering dualistic and hierarchical thinking is core to both McFague and Johnson's enterprise. Each concludes that unless theology effectively communicates an alternate vision of God, ecological destruction will continue. These scholars are in good company. Concerned about the propensity for Western Christians to devalue the earth, Norman Habel offers new ways to interpret biblical texts through the development of the Earth Bible project.[246] Conceived in response to pervasive attitudes of "divinely sanctioned dominion" over the Earth, Habel's project published five volumes which have had world-wide influence.[247] McFague and Johnson challenge all contemporary theologians to consider theology's possible complicity in the exploitation of the earth and encourage the "rescue" of curative theological resources to nurture a more wholesome relationship with the living planet.[248] McFague understands theology as unique in that it is the "deepest possible kind of relational knowledge, for it tells us who we are in connection to God".[249] Only *this type* of knowledge can effect a complete change of heart. Therefore, far from risking irrelevance, theology has unique capabilities to address the most pressing issues of the day. Extending their established models and orientating them specifically toward the planet offers a more robust theological response to the earth's current predicament; McFague concentrates on body while Johnson draws more heavily on spirit.

3.3 Eco-theological Models and Retrievals

Mark I. Wallace asks, "Could it be then that the most compelling theological response to the threat of ecocide lies in a rediscovery of God's Spirit presence within and love for all things earthly and bodily?"[250] Meticulously tracing the twentieth century movement toward an alternative doctrine of God that radically expresses both divine immanence and divine

[245] Johnson, *Women, Earth and Creator Spirit*, 29-30. McFague, "An Earthly Theological Agenda.", 90-91.
[246] Norman Habel, "Introducing the Earth Bible," in *Readings from the Perspective of Earth* (ed. Norman Habel; Sheffield, England: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000), One:24–37, 24.
[247] Norman Habel and Vicky Balabanski, eds., *The Earth Story in the New Testament* (The Earth Bible; Sheffield, England: Sheffield Academic Press, 2002), vii-xii.
[248] Johnson, *Women, Earth and Creator Spirit*, 2.
[249] McFague, "Falling in Love with God and the World.", 22.
[250] Mark I. Wallace, "Earth God: Cultivating the Spirit in an Ecocidal Culture," in *The Blackwell Companion to Postmodern Theology* (ed. Graham Ward; Oxford, UK; Massachusetts, USA: Blackwell Publishers, 2001), 209–228, 211.

transcendence, McFague believes that yes, this *is* the only interpretation of God with capacity to transform Christians to love both God *and* the world with equal intensity.[251] Working deliberately to develop a new model from this starting point, McFague again asserts that if models fail to include nature in the God-world relationship, then nature will continue to be ignored.[252]

3.3.1 The World as God's Body

Accordingly, McFague introduces a model that she develops in continuity with the exploration of Mother Lover Friend. Building on these principal insights, McFague construes "the world as God's body" with the goal of helping Christians love God and the natural world *together*.[253] Aware of both its limitations and its potential, McFague offers the construction as expressly appropriate at a time of planetary degradation and species loss as it centres theological focus on "the neighbourhood" and crucially emphasises the human interconnection with and interdependence on nature.[254] Clearly, McFague's 1993 move leads the charge in a growing twenty-first century shift toward spirit-body. Dubbed by Wallace as the "age of the Spirit", it is obvious there is renewed theological interest in the significance of the deep interrelationship between God and the spirit-Earth.[255]

McFague offers a four-fold criterion for developing her model of "the world as God's body": embodied experience, interpretive communities, full understanding of the current reality and usefulness.[256] Principally, the model reframes the doctrine of God in two ways; "agentially", by preserving God's transcendence and "organically" by underscoring God's immanence.[257] As discussed, it is imperative for McFague to preserve the value of both immanence *and* transcendence in developing an enriched doctrine of God.[258] Furthermore, in keeping with

[251] McFague, "Falling in Love with God and the World.", 22.
[252] McFague, "Falling in Love with God and the World.", 25.
[253] McFague, *Models of God*., xii, 70, 69-78. "this sort of theology 'says much' but it 'means little'". "That is, metaphorical theology is a post-modern, highly sceptical, heuristic enterprise, which claims that in order to be faithful to the God of its tradition – the God on the side of life and its fulfilment – we must try out new pictures that will bring the reality of God's love into the imaginations of the women and men of today"; McFague, *The Body of God*, 136-141. McFague again recalls that like any model her proposal is not descriptive and should be considered in relation to other major models of the God-world relationship.
[254] McFague, "Falling in Love with God and the World.", 25-27.
[255] Wallace, "Earth God.", 210-211.
[256] McFague, *The Body of God*, 90.
[257] McFague, *The Body of God*, 90.
[258] McFague, *The Body of God*, 141. McFague undertakes this task "with a profound debt to the organic and agential models of Teilhard and process theology". McFague notes here that taken separately the agential

the Gospels, McFague's "body model" images God as present "in the garden; in the everyday, nitty gritty of life".[259] Crucially for ecological concerns, this model allows McFague to extend God's "body" beyond the human world to encompass all that exists – all life-forms, all matter on the planet and in the universe.[260] It is significant to note, argues Tanner, that McFague starts with the common creation story through a distinctly Christian perspective.[261] For Rosemary Radford Ruether, all Christian theology "*rests* on the basic proposition that the presence of God in Jesus Christ is the same Word and Spirit that underlies the whole creation. Cosmic Christology, the Church as Body of Christ, rests on this claim that the one who heals the cosmos is the same one who created and sustains it".[262] McFague intentionally develops her metaphor according to this understanding.

McFague proposes her model to help focus theological reflection on an ecological crisis that requires "immediate and undivided attention" from twenty-first century Christians.[263] She proffers that the model poses urgent questions and makes vital connections in the face of well-documented environmental instability. Though she acknowledges her model as partial, contributing just one square to the quilt, McFague offers it to inspire human imaginations toward God's embodied, transcendent and immanent reality.[264] Most crucially, she perceives it as "a view of the God-world relationship in which all things have their origins in God and nothing exists outside of God".[265] Developing a model of the "world as God's body" involves an "essential and neglected" kind of creative *theological* reflection which McFague insists offers a life-line for an ailing planet.[266] While some commentators have labelled this articulation pantheistic, McFague insists it is in fact panenthestic.[267] Via this model, God is understood as incarnate in creation but God is not *limited* by God's creation. And although, God is immanent in God's Body, God is *more than* the body. Absolute distinction between

model risks overemphasising transcendence at the expense of the world while the organic model may conflate God and the world.

[259] McFague, "Falling in Love with God and the World.", 27. "I/Emmanuel, God with us", Matthew 1:22-23.
[260] Waschenfelder, "Rethinking God.", 93.
[261] Kathryn Tanner, "The Body of God: An Ecological Theology," *Modern Theology* 10, no. 4 (October, 1994), 417–419, 417-418.
[262] Rosemary Radford Ruether, "The Body of God: An Ecological Theology (Review)," *Interpretation* 48, no. 3 (1994), 314–316, 314. My italics.
[263] McFague, *The Body of God*, 157.
[264] Waschenfelder, "Rethinking God", 93; McFague, *The Body of God*, 157.
[265] McFague, *Models of God*, 72
[266] McFague, *The Body of God*, 205.
[267] McFague, *Models of God*, 71-72.

God and God's creation is clearly maintained. According to McFague's panentheism, God is not reduced to the world, the limit rests squarely on the world's side as it "does not exist outside or apart from God".[268]

McFague beautifully recaptures her childhood epiphany when she articulates, "The body model is ideal for emphasising what the Christian tradition has often overlooked and underplayed: how wonderful it is simply to be alive on our precious planet earth and how difficult it is…for many species to flourish. Or as Irenaeus puts it 'for every creature to be fully alive'".[269] As McFague experimented with and explored this model over decades, she continued to affirm her initial instinct – that "loving the world *is* loving God".[270] This conclusion, reached via a unique constructivist trajectory, has enormous potential to transform the way Christians view the relationships between God, humanity and the earth.[271] The crucial role that theology plays in restoring this "vital three-way paradigm" is helpfully articulated by Guess who affirms theology's particular aptness for the integrative task given its central focus is "meaning and purpose".[272] McFague's "world as God's body" construction offers a means to re-establish this essential three-way relationship, while emphasising interconnectedness in a way that the monarchical understanding of God is unable to.[273]

3.3.2 Wisdom, Spirit, Kinship

In contrast, Johnson's method is revisionist. She finds value in further retrieving ancient wisdom to bring a new sense of justice to bear on eco-theological reflection.[274] Her retrieval in this context encompasses three broad elements: Wisdom/Sophia, pneumatology and the model of kinship.[275] In her first retrieval, Johnson employs "the most highly developed poetic symbol of divine immanence in the Old Testament" – the Jewish figure of the personified *Wisdom* in the *Book of Wisdom* from the Apocrypha.[276] According to wisdom tradition, Johnson credits the character of Wisdom's divine creative power as that which unifies all creation as "the Spirit who fills the world" (Wis 1:7). Johnson notes that this inclusive vision

[268] McFague, *Models of God*, 72.
[269] McFague, *Blessed Are the Consumers*, 198.
[270] McFague, "Falling in Love with God and the World.", 34.
[271] Waschenfelder, "Rethinking God.", 87.
[272] Guess, "The Theistic Naturalism of Arthur Peacocke.", 64.
[273] McRandal, *Christian Doctrine and the Grammar of Difference*, 28. McFague, *Models of God*., 71.
[274] Johnson, *She Who Is*, 287.
[275] Schaab, "Of Models and Metaphors.", 213.
[276] Johnson, *She Who Is,* 90-97. Catholics recognise this book as canonical while Protestants do not.

destroys dualism's power to separate God from humanity; instead, Wisdom's activity unifies so that all are "woven into the cosmic community".[277] Johnson maintains that holy Wisdom, as taught by the early disciples, had come to dwell on earth as Jesus. Gender was not an issue as the *role* Wisdom played in creating, redeeming and guiding the world was most important.[278] Johnson comprehensively demonstrates that exemplary texts are abundant in affirming Wisdom's offer of generous guidelines for how best to live harmoniously with nature.[279] Further, the *Book of Wisdom* identifies Wisdom not just as creation's craftsperson but as the "mother" and "fashioner of all things".[280] Existing with the Creator as an agent in creation, Johnson retrieves Wisdom as key in a discussion of ecological concerns.[281]

Some scholars, including Jürgen Moltmann, observe that recently there has been an upsurge of interest in the Spirit-discourse which has led many theologians to deep awareness of the profound interconnectedness between God and the earth.[282] In keeping with this thinking, Johnson's second retrieval is of pneumatology which she interprets through the lens "Spirit-Sophia".[283] This model encompasses a "symbolic and literal affinity with the life giving Creator Spirit" who has been similarly ignored as a result of restricting the sacred to a transcendent, monarchical deity out with nature.[284] For Johnson, naming the Holy Spirit "Spirit-Sophia" functions in three important ways for ecology: first Spirit-Sophia works cooperatively to ground and sustain the cosmos as it continues to grow; second, Spirit-Sophia's divine compassion vivifies both humanity and all that suffer including earthly

[277] Johnson, *Women, Earth and Creator Spirit*, 56.
[278] Elizabeth A. Johnson, *Creation and the Cross: The Mercy of God for a Planet in Peril* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2018), 172.
[279] Johnson, *Creation and the Cross*, 172. Johnson further cites Proverbs 8:15, 8:23 and 9: 5-6.
[280] Johnson, *Creation and the Cross*, 173 -74. "…who knows the secrets of the seasons, the motion of the constellations, the tempers of wild animals and the virtues of the healing roots because she made them all." Proverbs 7: 22. Johnson asks whether Jewish monotheism fragments at this point and the writer of Wisdom was actually referring to another god or goddess. While she acknowledges this has been contested historically, ensuing debates about the meaning of Wisdom have concluded that Jewish monotheism *was* intact and that these texts were actually referring to the one God of Israel but in female rather than male language. She concludes this section "God, of course, is beyond gender, and creates both male and female in the divine image, so this kind of God-talk can be theologically justified though it is not common".
[281] Johnson, *Creation and the Cross*, 172. Johnson cites Proverbs 8:23 and 3:19.
[282] Wallace, "Earth God.", 210. Jürgen Moltmann, *God in Creation: An Ecological Doctrine of Creation* (The Gifford Lectures 1984-1985; London: SCM Press Ltd, 1985), xi-xv.
[283] Johnson, *She Who Is*, Chapter 7, 131-158. Spirit-Sophia forms one third of Johnson's trinitarian formula which also includes Jesus-Sophia and Mother-Sophia. As doctrine of God is the focus of this project, Johnson's reformulation of the doctrine of the Trinity sits beyond its scope. Particularly in terms of Mother-Sophia, Johnson is expressly indebted to McFague's exposition of God as mother.
[284] Johnson, *Women, Earth and Creator Spirit*, 3.

creatures, and, third, Spirit-Sophia dismantles theological dualism that separates humans and the cosmos to teach that all creation is sacred.[285] Here she falls in line with McFague, but also Moltmann who in developing a doctrine of creation for today calls for perceiving and teaching God's immanence in the world.[286] Moltmann seeks a return to the biblical revelation that through God's spirit, God the creator is present in every creature and embedded within creations' shared fellowship.[287] Johnson's Spirit-Sophia likewise affords equal prominence to God as Creator of the world and Spirit of the universe.[288]

The third element of Johnson's revisionist eco-theology is the notion of kinship; that all living beings on this planet are related "by common descent".[289] Drawing heavily on scientific insights, Johnson argues that only the profoundly relational kinship model of existence can provide the theological basis for care of the earth, one that proclaims the "mutual interrelatedness inscribed at the heart of all reality".[290] For Johnson, thorough understanding of kinship will form Christians who cherish biodiversity as a manifestation of God's goodness and who will work to actively preserve it.[291] Conceived in terms of kinship, human attitudes toward the created earth can shift from superiority and stewardship to a new understanding of relationship – one that reframes power as love, not domination.[292] McFague observes that, most valuably, Johnson's kinship model emphasises the natural world as intrinsically worthy, not simply as servant to humanity, but having value in its own right – significantly as "the other".[293] According to this profoundly theocentric view, humans live in kinship with *all others* as part of an interdependent reality fundamentally orientated toward God.[294] This reimagining frames all creation as existing in reciprocal relationship, part of the circle of life

[285] Johnson, *Women, Earth and Creator Spirit*, 57-60; Johnson, *She Who Is*, 138.
[286] Moltmann, *God in Creation*, 13-16.
[287] Moltmann, *God in Creation*, 15.
[288] Moltmann, *God in Creation*, 14.
[289] Johnson, *Ask the Beasts*, 101.
[290] Johnson, *Women, Earth and Creator Spirit*, 32.
[291] Johnson, *Women, Earth and Creator Spirit*, 39. For Johnson, "The religious kinship attitude cherishes and seeks intelligently to preserve biodiversity, for when a species goes extinct, we have lost a manifestation of the goodness of God".
[292] McFague, "Falling in Love with God and the World.", 32.
[293] Johnson, *Ask the Beasts*, 261. See footnote 243.
[294] Johnson, *Ask the Beasts*, 268.

with God at the heart.[295] For Christians, the true heart of God's reality is Jesus, and this is where both Johnson and McFague firmly ground subsequent proposals.[296]

[295] Johnson, *Ask the Beasts*, 269.
[296] Schaab, "Of Models and Metaphors.", 229.

Theology itself has to be liberated and humanised if it is to serve people and not oppress them. Only when theology is on the side of the outcast and the oppressed, as was Jesus, can it become incarnational and Christian.[297]

4 Emerging Theologies

Johnson makes clear that the historical reality of Jesus' maleness is not an issue for feminist Christology. Through Johnson's feminist lens, Jesus is viewed as Liberator of women, restoring them to full dignity before God.[298] McFague and Johnson develop new theologies from this firmly Christological standpoint.

4.1 Theology of *Kenosis*

In line with orthodox Christian thinking, McFague affirms "Christians do not speak of God 'in general' but always in relationship to the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ – the incarnate".[299] Moving from a revised doctrine of God, McFague's work takes a clear Christological trajectory in the development of the "body" model, highlighting the incarnate God as embodying a radical relationality in which all life interlocks within God who reveals self-giving love.[300] Recalling that the Christian tradition names such love "kenotic", McFague's theology of *kenosis* centres on Jesus' other-orientated, servant love.[301] She cites

[297] Schüssler Fiorenza, "Feminist Theology.", 612, 616.
[298] Elizabeth A. Johnson, *Consider Jesus: Waves of Renewal in Christology* (New York, NY: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 1990), 112. This monograph is Johnson's finest on feminist Christology.
[299] McFague, "Falling in Love with God and the World.", 27. A further statement evidences even more strongly that her work remains firmly within standard theology, "Jesus' whole life was a lead up of total giving to others, culminating in the cross where he sacrificed his life, not for the atonement of humanity's sins, but as a witness to the totally unexpected and overwhelming gift of God's own self as the answer to our questions about who we are and how we should live", 29.
[300] McFague, "Falling in Love with God and the World.", 29. McFague says of "love", "Here we have the one word that we use to talk about God that is not a metaphor; that is, every other word we use to express the divine reality is something drawn from our world and used – stretched – to function somehow for God…We do not know how to talk about God, so we use metaphors from ordinary life. But with this one word – love – we make a statement that is open, blank, unfilled: we need God to define what love means".
[301] McFague, "Falling in Love with God and the World", 29; Thomas Jay Oord, *The Uncontrolling Love of God: An Open and Relational Account of Providence* (Downers Grove, Illinois: IVP Academic, 2015), 156. Oord comments, "*Kenosis* sits in the midst of what biblical scholars believe to be a poem or hymn, and this genre allows for a wide range of interpretations…variously as "self-emptying", "self-withdrawing", "self-limiting" or "self-giving"".

Philippians 2: 5-11 as demonstrating a "kenotic" God "who relates to the world in a new and astounding way".[302]

McFague's starting point makes for an orthodox theology. Even though she revisions the doctrine of God, this is not an abstracted engagement from the life, death and resurrection of Christ; together doctrine of God and Christology form the foundations of her reflection. Rather than starting theological enquiry with an external story "about" humanity that is both individualistic and anthropocentric, McFague begins intimately with the central figure of Jesus who gives all – so that all else may flourish.[303] She further defines her theology of *kenosis* as unequivocally "of the body" and humble because it begins with a declaration of need – for the continuous and total exchange of "kenotic" love.[304] Her articulation reinforces her primary stance that Christians are not called to love God *instead* of the world but *in* the world.[305]

Framing a "kenotic" theology, McFague proposes a "life-sustaining" ecological theological anthropology that emanates from deep relationality. Believing that a spiritual crisis demands a spiritual cure, her proposal paves the way for heightened theological relevance and resonance by returning Christianity to its founding claim – that only in self-emptying lies an abundant life (Matthew 10:39). Having extended her model of the world as God's body through an ecological perspective, McFague's proposed theology of *kenosis* considers human and planetary well-being as utterly dependent on God's self-giving. Using this powerful image to move theological reflection into action, McFague brings into focus her practice of restraint as evidenced in the lives of three modern-day saints.

4.2 Theology of Accompaniment

Like McFague, Johnson's focus remains on how altering belief stimulates real change in behaviour.[306] She asks, how can "love in dreams" shift to sustained action?[307] Corresponding

[302] McFague, "Falling in Love with God and the World.", 29.
[303] McFague, *Blessed Are the Consumers*, 173.
[304] McFague, *Blessed Are the Consumers*, 171-73.
[305] McFague, *Blessed Are the Consumers*, 22.
[306] Johnson, *Creation and the Cross*, 197.
[307] Johnson, *Creation and the Cross*, 196. Johnson quotes from Fyodor Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov*.

with McFague, that care for the earth remains low on the priority list for affluent Christians, Johnson cites the root of the problem as an erroneous Christian perception of redemption.[308]

In her most recent publication, *Creation and the Cross*, Johnson undertakes an ambitious theological project. Alongside others who also seek a new interpretation of redemption,[309] she begins with a call to re-evaluate Anselm's salvation theory of atonement.[310] Through an ecological lens, she investigates Scripture and the classical tradition for the theological significance of the saving cross for *all creation*.[311] Throughout, she finds verses that testify to God's love of planetary and creaturely creation and its reciprocal response to God. These passages clearly evidence God's abundant mercy for all creation which places the natural world squarely within Jesus' redemptive work. Mining this treasure trove of biblical insight, she conceives of a "narrative theology of God's accompaniment that brings salvation".[312] According to a theology of accompaniment the environmental problem is not ignored or imagined as God's issue to repair, instead human beings come alongside God – who first accompanies creation – in a unique form of partnership because they begin to understand redemption differently.

As such, Johnson "retires" Anselm's satisfaction theory of atonement in favour of a theology of accompaniment that traces and emphasises God's liberating mercy across time.[313] Note that Johnson draws on science to make clear that the complex web of relationality runs through the whole cosmos.[314] Influenced strongly by Darwinism and the ensuing science-faith dialogue, Johnson is particularly interested in a theology that brings evolutionary

[308] Elizabeth A. Johnson, "Let All Creation Sing," *U.S. Catholic*, no. December (2018), 28–32, 28.
[309] J. Denny Weaver, "The Nonviolent Atonement: Human Violence, Discipleship and God," (ed. Brad Jersak and Michael Hardin; Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2007), 316–355, 320. Weaver offers an alternative reading of sacrifice without a scapegoating mechanism. Drawing on the work of Rene Girard, these scholars argue that shedding innocent blood does not reconcile humans with God. Furthermore, Weaver opposes the violence in the satisfaction theory of atonement as incongruous. Christians cannot proclaim a theology of Christ's peace whilst simultaneously advocating an ethic that defends the sword Jesus wholeheartedly rejects.
[310] Johnson, *Creation and the Cross*, 156; Johnson, "Let All Creation Sing.", 29. Briefly, Johnson traces Anslem's theory – that God demanded repayment for human sin via the death of Jesus on the cross as "payback" – to the feudal system in which Anslem lived. If a person broke a law that disturbed order, they were required to pay back the lord, called a 'satisfaction' to restore peace and order. Anselm took that political arrangement and made it cosmic. Johnson claims we are living with the consequences of this thinking. Challenging this thinking is part of a broader movement that currently critiques satisfaction theory of atonement.
[311] Johnson, *Creation and the Cross*, 158-194.
[312] Johnson, *Creation and the Cross,* 158; Johnson, *Abounding in Kindness*, 18.
[313] Johnson, *Creation and the Cross*, 158-59.
[314] Johnson, *Creation and the Cross*, 159; Johnson, *Ask the Beasts*, 7-10.

processes into understanding God's relation to the world; if humanity is genetically linked to all other creatures on the planet, then humanity exists symbiotically.[315] Relocating anthropology within this broader context allows Johnson to rethink the scope and significance of the incarnation in an ecological direction.[316] While a centuries-long understanding of "the flesh" is that which connects the living God with all human beings, Johnson goes one step further. Taking the meaning of the flesh at its most inclusive, Johnson conceives the creating God as the one who saves *all* biological life and the universe; thus, in John 1:1-3 nothing is excluded.[317]

Here Johnson builds firmly on Niels Gregersen's theology of "deep incarnation" whereby the Word/Wisdom of God joins the material world to "share its fleshly condition and create a new union between Creator and creature".[318] Initially animated by questions around God's purposes for natural selection, Gregersen first asks, "how can the Christian belief in the mercy of God be consonant with the ruthlessness of evolutionary processes?".[319] He concludes that God, in redemptive grace through Jesus, is the one who suffers and bears the cost of evolution's suffering.[320] Drawing on Gregersen's insights, Johnson suggests that if God is with the afflicted in such an intimate, intrinsic way then so will God be with the world in the face of ecological disaster; a disaster that may be averted by a different theological understanding of redemption and humanity's relationship with the earth.[321] She sees Jesus' suffering and death as God's participation in pain and death from *within* the world of flesh.[322]

Johnson connects a theology of creation with her central focus on the incarnation of Christ. Alongside Denis Edwards, she argues that what is needed is an extended understanding of

[315] Johnson, *Creation and the Cross*, 159; Johnson, *Ask the Beasts*, xv.
[316] Johnson, *Creation and the Cross*, 184.
[317] Johnson, *Creation and the Cross*, 185.
[318] Johnson, *Ask the Beasts*, 195-96.
[319] Niels Henrik Gregersen, "The Cross of Christ in an Evolutionary World," *Dialog: A Journal of Theology* 40, no. 3 (Fall, 2001), 192–207, 192. Gregersen asks in particular; "how can we develop a contemporary theology of the cross which is sensitive to the fact that evolutionary pain is not a consequence of human sin, but the simple result of natural selection?".
[320] Gregersen, "The Cross of Christ in an Evolutionary World.", 207; Denis Edwards, *Deep Incarnation: God's Redemptive Suffering with Creatures* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2019) , 1. Edwards notes that Gregersen's thinking since this original article on deep incarnation has developed in later publications.
[321] Johnson, *Creation and the Cross*, 110-111.
[322] Edwards, *Deep Incarnation*, 7; Johnson, *Ask the Beasts*, 196-199. Here Johnson provides a brief but helpful exposition of Gregersen's concept of deep incarnation, particularly in reference to John 1: 14 and the religious tradition.

the incarnation so that salvation can involve the whole of creation.[323] Gregersen introduced the language of "deep incarnation" to reflect not just Jesus' birth but the whole event of his life, ministry, death and resurrection.[324] Johnson's theology of accompaniment moves a step further to interpret the cross as a particular event; one of divine solidarity with the suffering and death of all creatures. Theologically it means the self-giving love of God is intimately connected with every death.[325]

It becomes clear that despite contrasting constructivist and revisionist approaches, each scholar works to advocate an alternative God-world relationship characterised by inclusivity and mutuality rather than dominance and submission; theologies of *kenosis* and accompaniment rest on regarding humanity as part of a greater whole. As the early Christians understood John's gospel to be saying that the Word of God became flesh, so contemporary theologians, using an interdisciplinary approach with science, can enhance this thinking to join the incarnate Jesus to the whole evolving biological world.[326] McFague reminds us, just as the early Christians used their best understandings in their culture to talk of Jesus, so should today's theologians employ the best understandings of this culture to articulate Jesus' significance.[327] Proclaiming God's love as so palpably present amidst creaturely suffering is "one of the most significant things theology can say".[328]

4.3 "Universal Self"

A "theology of *kenosis*" is further embodied in what McFague terms the "universal self" i.e. the self, able to stand in the place of the "other" empathetically entering the experience of another creature, whether human or non-human.[329] She emphasises that being made in the image of God, human beings may embody God's "kenotic" love by putting their own selves on the line; as Jesus gave his body for life "so we must give ours".[330] Moving from God incarnate to "kenotic" love expressed in the "universal self", McFague turns from imaginative

[323] McFague, "Falling in Love with God and the World", 33; Johnson, *Creation and the Cross*, 183-194; Edwards, *Deep Incarnation*, 123.
[324] Edwards, *Deep Incarnation*, xvii.
[325] Johnson, *Creation and the Cross*, 222-223.
[326] Johnson, *Creation and the Cross*, 186.
[327] Johnson, *Creation and the Cross*, 187.
[328] Johnson, *Ask the Beasts*, 196.
[329] McFague, *Blessed Are the Consumers*, xiii.
[330] McFague, *Blessed Are the Consumers*, 200-203.

constructs to the lived lives of the saints – who don't tell Christians how to be Christian, rather show them.[331]

Hauerwas observes that by recognising saints and studying their lives, theologians become "agents of memory" whose responsibility it is to remind Christians how the saints embody what God has done and continues to do.[332] Johnson likewise expresses a narrative understanding of the communion of saints as "companions in memory" who link Christians across space and time in the kinship of faith.[333] As a "cloud of witnesses", saints' lives testify to and empower both personal and social transformation.[334] Moreover, McFague concurs with McClendon that theological reflection is always embodied thinking – that which cannot be abstracted from the thinker.[335] Like parables, theology as biography asks, "…who are you? How is your action and belief integrated with your style of life, your action in the real world?".[336] Buttressed by the saints' religious autobiographies, McFague's theology moves toward the practice of restraint.[337]

In the same way that entering "wild-space" as a child left an indelible mark on McFague's theology, so too have the lives of three particular individuals whom McFague labels "modern-day saints".[338] Conducting in-depth studies of Simone Weil, Dorothy Day and John Woolman, McFague illustrates the way each truly embodies a "kenotic" way to live by profoundly "dying to self in order to live for others".[339] In *Blessed Are the Consumers*, McFague carefully narrates the saints' lives as patently emulating Christ's self-giving on the cross.[340]

Undertaking a fifty-year study, McFague observes how Weil, Day and Woolman moved from acknowledging the world's suffering to acting in ways that would alleviate it. She analyses

[331] McFague, *Blessed Are the Consumers*, 37.
[332] Hauerwas, *The Work of Theology*, 106-107.
[333] Elizabeth A. Johnson, *Friends of God and Prophets: A Feminist Theological Reading of the Communion of Saints* (London: SCM Press, 1998), 163.
[334] Johnson, *Friends of God and Prophets*, 180.
[335] McFague, *Speaking in Parables*, 176.
[336] McFague, *Speaking in Parables*, 176.
[337] McFague, *Blessed Are the Consumers*, 34.
[338] McFague, *Blessed Are the Consumers*, 39-80.
[339] McFague, *Blessed Are the Consumers*, 81. John Woolman was an 18th Century Quaker who lived simply and opposed slavery; Simone Weil lived in solidarity among the poor during the Nazi occupation of Paris and died of malnutrition; Dorothy Day founded the Catholic Worker Movement in the US during the Great Depression.
[340] McFague, *Blessed Are the Consumers*, 178-179.

how the three became extraordinary "universal selves" by being closely attentive to the world.[341] Entering the "wild space" of poverty, each saint experienced disorientation from the bonds of self-centredness which allowed them to pay full attention to something other than themselves.[342] Returning again to her formative theological roots, McFague recovers the art of "paying attention". According to Weil, "paying attention" is a rare and pure form of generosity, characterised by a non-controlling openness that is willing to receive the other whether that "other" be God, the human neighbour or creation.[343]

Developing an eco-model of the "universal self", McFague grounds her work in the synoptic Gospels.[344] Starting with the command, "love your neighbour as yourself", McFague uses Weil's theological reflection to demonstrate the way the cosmos works – in utter, albeit mechanical, obedience to God, to the way humanity should also function – in utter, though conscious, obedience to God by loving the neighbour.[345] Weil encapsulates it perfectly, "By loving our neighbour we indeed imitate the divine love which created us and all our fellows. Through loving the order of the world, we imitate the divine love which created this universe of which we are a part".[346]

For McFague, the saints' lives embody those human lives learning to "live into the relationality of God's own life".[347] Loving God by loving the neighbour – all neighbours – in their most basic material needs represents true participation with God who desires the flourishing of all life.[348] According to this "kenotic" paradigm, every human is called to relate to all others "as God would and does".[349] Maintaining sharp focus on the lives of the saints is another form of "wild space" for McFague that opens the door of possibility to live differently; these saints move us from simply knowing the good to actually doing good.[350] There is an urgency in McFague's call for humanity to love the neighbour – she quotes Edith

[341] McFague, *Blessed Are the Consumers*, 111.
[342] McFague, *Blessed Are the Consumers*, 111. Chapter 5 provides a comprehensive exposition of the Universal Self.
[343] McFague, *Blessed Are the Consumers,* 55.
[344] McFague, *Blessed Are the Consumers*, 115. The gospel references she cites are Matt. 22:39; Mark 12:31; Luke 10.27.
[345] McFague, *Blessed Are the Consumers*, 53.
[346] Weil, *Waiting on God*, 82-97.
[347] McFague, "Falling in Love with God and the World.", 33. McFague emphasises again here that such theology is not pantheistic but panentheistic.
[348] McFague, "Falling in Love with God and the World.", 33.
[349] McFague, "Falling in Love with God and the World.", 33.
[350] McFague, *Blessed Are the Consumers*, 53.

Wyschogrod who claims, "saintly time" is that which is left "to alleviate suffering, before it's too late".[351] However, only transformed lives can save the world; Christians call it "conversion'" but as McFague starkly highlights, it is a road less travelled, a challenging route that demands thinking and living in a radically different way to the rest of the world.[352]

4.4 "Conversion"

In concert with McFague, Johnson frames "conversion" as a distinctly Christian way to exist. According to her revised understanding of redemption, she suggests a further step – "conversion to the earth" involving a twofold turn. First, it expands Christian understanding of God as the Creator who redeems the whole of creation with saving compassion. Second, it expands the concept of the "neighbour" Christians are called to love.[353] Understanding "neighbour" as including all ecosystems and creatures, Johnson issues a "conversion call" to theologians, to Christians and all humanity. In doing so, she urges a monumental shift from a limited, dualistic and damaging anthropocentric perception of creation to one that encompasses compassionate solidarity with all created life. Like McFague, Johnson suggests "conversion" rests on the radical new vision of the interdependence of all creation, together with a commitment to change patterns of human behaviour that manifest in ecological selfishness.[354]

As Larry Rasmussen terms it, "assault rather than communion" now characterises the human relationship with the earth.[355] From the onset of the twentieth century, exploding human populations and their commensurate consumption habits have seen humanity's relationship with the earth change dramatically. Observers including McFague and Johnson recognise that the current level of consumption is now unsustainable; the earth's resources are finite and close to total depletion. The environmental crisis is a symptom however, not of the earth's inability to provide but of a cultural failure.[356] The solution, as McFague and Johnson identify here, requires a complete change of human heart to garner a truly seismic shift in addressing the threats to the planet.

[351] McFague, *Blessed Are the Consumers*, 136.
[352] McFague, *Blessed Are the Consumers*, xii.
[353] Johnson, *Creation and the Cross*, 195-196.
[354] Rakoczy, "Theological Vision of Elizabeth A. Johnson.", 153.
[355] Larry L. Rasmussen, *Earth Community, Earth Ethics* (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1996), 4-5.
[356] Rasmussen, *Earth Community*, 7.

As Johnson observes, in *Laudato Si'*, Pope Francis states clearly how faith convictions can offer Christians ample motivation to care for the earth.[357] Signs that humanity is showing a "conversion to the earth" include embracing creation with a sense of awe, wonder and appreciation for its beauty, refusal to use the earth as an object, rather reclaiming it as subject, alongside a sense of intimate human communion with the natural world.[358] Johnson notes, if love is stunted, exploitation will continue. But if love is nurtured in the ways of spiritual practice, beneficial actions will flow out of faith convictions.[359]

Both scholars assert that specific actions are required to stem the tide of consumerism that fuels profit-making, serving the interests of only the very few. In the face of such destructive behaviour, band-aid solutions will not suffice. A spiritual conversion is required. The newly articulated scientific reality of interdependence challenges the Western Christian tradition regarding its deeply embedded individualism and helps to reconceptualise a new understanding of "neighbour". McFague observes that during much of the twentieth century, Protestant theology implied that concept of "the neighbour" was focussed on individual human beings, whom God also cared for "in their personal and public woes and joys".[360] She notes that loving the neighbour predominantly involved practising "charity and the social gospel".[361] How much of this limited understanding of "neighbour" still permeates and influences Christian worship, music, hymns, liturgy, prayer, sermonising and theology today? Reflecting earnestly on the answer and providing workable solutions to address the problem is essential if theology is to reclaim its voice as the lifeblood of a global faith community that holds conversion to "kenotic" relationships at its core.

In outlining a patently ecological theology, neither Johnson nor McFague aim to sentimentalise a love of nature. For both, what is at stake is far more acute; human existence in the face of a crumbling planet. It is clear that both scholars' work has the political edge of ethical and practical urgency.[362]

[357] Pope Francis, *Encyclical on Climate Change & Inequality: On Care for Our Common Home* (Brooklyn & London: Melville House, 2015). No page numbers available on e-copy.
[358] Pope Francis, *Encyclical on Climate Change & Inequality: On Care for Our Common Home*, LS 11.
[359] Johnson, *Creation and the Cross*, 197.
[360] McFague, "Falling in Love with God and the World.", 18.
[361] McFague, "Falling in Love with God and the World.", 18.
[362] Harwood, "Theologising the World.", 118.

Christian theology works through a set of beliefs and practices that carry with them an interpretation of self and reality that commends a way of life based on them.[363]

5 Theology in Action

Theology is tested in practice. Perhaps, in an eco-theological context, it can be best evaluated by asking, to what extent does it call for and encourage a nurturing attitude toward the whole earth community?[364] Examining McFague and Johnson's powerful critiques alongside their imaginative responses, this piece has thus far traced the way each theologian has moved toward a sustained engagement with the reality of the ecological crisis; the overarching idea of being Christian *in the world* remains their ultimate vision.[365] It becomes clear that the stakes for McFague and Johnson are not simply "right interpretation" but personal and global faith transformation – so that all life may flourish.[366] How then do their theological understandings translate into Christian agency? This section explores the practical ideas generated by McFague's and Johnson's respective theologies to help humanity convert its heart to God, each other and the earth.

5.1 *Kenosis* in Practice

Proceeding from her own demographic locus, McFague coaxes Western Christians away from "first-person individualist" theology toward a communitarian understanding of the planet's plight.[367] She achieves this with a sobering account of the science behind claims of global climate change.[368] In *A New Climate for Theology* McFague confronts her readers with the scientific reality of overconsumption's devastating effects on the planet and then reinforces her enduring anthropological entreaty: "we are not our own: we belong to the

[363] Charry, "Inquiring After God.", xxi.
[364] Ruether, "Review.", 315.
[365] Rakoczy, "Theological Vision of Elizabeth A. Johnson.", 138.
[366] Harwood, "Theologising the World.", 122.
[367] McFague, *Life Abundant*, 15-16. McFague writes from her own context and as such addresses "North American" Christians. However, I believe it applies equally to Australians. McFague cites twelfth-century Anselm here: faith must seek understanding. When McFague truly experienced that "'God is love' I did not create that insight, nor was it revealed to me alone. It is the central belief of the religious tradition to which I belong; all that has happened is that it has become a reality in my life". All the while McFague is mindful that what she proposes must also be "Christian", "not just relevant to pressing public issues of one's day. Personal beliefs are not simply the result of private revelation but must be in the Christian tradition, to shown to be consonant with it".
[368] McFague, *A New Climate for Theology*, 9-26.

earth".[369] She notes however, such calls for just and sustainable living are drowned out by the shouts of a consumerist culture that "exalts the comfort and superiority of elite human beings".[370] Curiously, more scientific information has not lead to spiritual transformation. *Blessed are the Consumers* frames most clearly what McFague's diagnoses as the *growing* spiritual crisis in the West – individualism leading to gross overconsumption. Here McFague moves from deep reflection on religious language to making an increasingly vital theological contribution by offering a set of proposals for practical action.

Breaking new ground in a feminist retrieval of *kenosis*, McFague develops a workable "kenotic" theology that invites Christians to *reprioritise*. Building on her entire corpus, *Blessed Are the Consumers* directly addresses the so-called first world when she describes a four-fold process from belief to action. First, and perhaps most crucially, she invites "comfortable" Christians to "experience voluntary poverty". Second, she suggests "paying attention" to the needs of others. Third, she proposes the gradual "development of a 'universal self'". Finally, she outlines how a "universal self" can operate on both personal and public levels by adopting three simple house rules.[371] In essence, McFague's proposal is cruciform – advocating sacrifice.[372]

McFague counts herself among the North American "elite" who, because they inhabit the world's major economic power, oppress others and the natural world by indulging in unbridled consumerism. She suggests a "liberation theology peculiarly suited to us" as the means to enact change.[373] Focusing not on personal salvation but lifestyle limitations, McFague proposes a "customised" theology of restraint or "enoughness" – one that embodies the cruciform way of Christ calling Western Christians to make sacrifices so that others may be liberated and flourish.[374] She terms this "voluntary poverty" – a state whereby

[369] Sallie McFague, "Global Warming: A Theological Problem and Paradigm," in *Shaping a Global Theological Mind* (ed. Darren C. Marks; Aldershot, England; Burlington, USA: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2008), 109–112, 111.
[370] McFague, "Global Warming: A Theological Problem and Paradigm.", 110.
[371] McFague, *Blessed Are the Consumers*, xii-xiii.
[372] Laura M. Hartman, *The Christian Consumer: Living Faithfully in a Fragile World* (Oxford, U.K.: Oxford University Press, 2011), 113
[373] McFague, *Life Abundant*, 33.
[374] McFague, *Life Abundant*, 33.

one moves from seeking self-fulfilment through accumulating individual possessions and status, to self-emptying for the other. Christ's love prompts such vision.[375]

Franciscan writer Richard Rohr says disorientation is necessary for such conversion; "The bubble of order has to be broken by deliberately walking in the opposite direction. Not eat instead of eat…Silence instead of talking, emptiness instead of fullness".[376] This similarly marks the countercultural mission of the Church more widely.[377] *Kenosis* as a practice of restraint becomes not simply a call for self-giving but a demonstration of how to live sustainably through practices of self-denial and self-control.[378] Formulating from within the Christian tradition, McFague asserts that living differently in this way is not novel. Christian discipleship, she reminds us, *is* living differently, in solidarity with and in sacrifice for others. This, she affirms, is the heart of Christianity, articulated not only in the New Testament but illustrated through the literature and lives of the early Christians. Moreover, it has been significant in most protest and reform movements in the Church over the centuries – "from the medieval mystics and the founding of monasteries to contemporary Latin American base communities".[379] Taking her cues from the saints, McFague's "voluntary poverty" calls those with (even modest) power and influence to use it – to reduce all consumption, live more simply, work for personal and systemic change from practicing personal restraint to lobbying for legislative change.[380] This seemingly paradoxical (from a Western consumerist perspective), self-limiting, self-offering is creative, abundant Love *in action*.[381]

Converting to "voluntary poverty", Western Christians are well positioned to further embody three other elements of a kenotic way of being. "Paying attention" to the other first alters one's focus from self to seeing others not as objects but as valued subjects in their own right, deserving of an abundant life.[382] Moving from tight ego boundaries to dismantled boundaries builds what McFague terms the "universal self", one who gradually increases in authenticity by helping others flourish. She cites again Matthew 10:39 wherein to lose

[375] Hartman, *The Christian Consumer*, 126.
[376] McFague, *Blessed Are the Consumers*, 34.
[377] Hartman, *The Christian Consumer*, 126.
[378] McFague, *Blessed Are the Consumers*, 32.
[379] McFague, *Life Abundant*, 35.
[380] McFague, *Blessed Are the Consumers*, 76-77.
[381] Johnson, *Ask the Beasts*, 202.
[382] McFague, *Blessed Are the Consumers*, xiii. See footnote 243.

oneself in Christ is to find oneself. She concludes by suggesting three house rules for life on the planet: "take only your share; clean up after yourself; keep the house in good repair for others after you".[383] Together these practices epitomise the "universal self" whose personal boundaries have diminished to the extent that they are capable of considering all the world's needs, not simply their own.[384] Finally, McFague uses Jesus' parable of the good Samaritan as the perfect illustration of what characterises Woolman, Weil and Day's actions: extending empathy beyond the familiar; loving in a way that remains anonymous and impartial; offering material comfort first; and acting as an embodiment of their own love of God.[385] Such "others-empowering"[386] love, the epitome of God's divine action in creation, incarnation and crucifixion, patently opposes self-seeking individualism that has led to extreme consumption.

Critiquing the consequences of an excessive Western lifestyle, McFague makes a convincing case as to why reimagined and reprioritised theology matters as a precursor to effecting crucial change.[387] Liberating others from the domination of first-world lifestyles is clearly dependent on the truly counter-cultural stance privileged Christians, including theologians, are urgently called to take.[388] Existing at the top of the consumer food chain, the privileged are not only in the best position to enact this change but have absolute responsibility to do so. McFague confidently reclaims theology's roots in early Christian radical discipleship to shape contemporary Christians who can imagine, construct and ultimately live "abundant" lives in a strikingly different way; one that contradicts oppression and leads to liberation.[389] Christianity offers this new vision of what it means to be human.[390] In practicing saint-like *kenosis*, Christians can live out and exemplify an *alternative* good life.[391] McFague concludes, "an ecological liberation theology, a theology that is cosmocentric, countercultural and cruciform is, I believe, a profoundly and uniquely Christian theology".[392] McFague marks one

[383] McFague, *Blessed Are the Consumers*, xiii.
[384] McFague, *Blessed Are the Consumers*, 202.
[385] McFague, *Blessed Are the Consumers*, 116. Luke 10: 25-37.
[386] Oord, *The Uncontrolling Love of God*, 159.
[387] McFague, *Life Abundant*, 36.
[388] McFague, *Life Abundant*, 34.
[389] McFague, *Life Abundant*, 35.
[390] Hartman, *The Christian Consumer*, 192.
[391] McFague, *Life Abundant,* 35. My italics.
[392] McFague, *Life Abundant*, 35.

clear way forward for the practice of theology today. Johnson provides a corresponding path.

5.2 The "Art" of Conversion

Converting human minds and hearts to an earth ethic which claims as its neighbour the *entire* community of life, requires three responses that Johnson summarises as contemplative, ascetic and prophetic.[393] Enabling humanity to effectively partner with God in preserving rather than destroying creation begins with the "contemplative" response which, Johnson notes, taps into the broader spiritual practice of contemplating nature. Like McFague, Johnson believes cultivating wonder, delight and awe moves Christians to engage in the created world with a religious imagination and heart that seeks God's revelation therein. The "ascetic" response calls Christians to live more simply. Again, like McFague, Johnson urges restraint from consumerism's self-indulgence calling disciples to observe the Sabbath, fast from shopping and "green" their households and faith communities. Johnson's "prophetic" response takes political action on behalf of the voiceless to protest planetary destruction.[394] If "nature is the new poor", as McFague insists, then action to see justice for the poor and oppressed must now include all life systems, in particular species under threat.[395] Here Johnson offers a preliminary framework for moving Christians toward the ethical goal of ensuring vibrant life in community for all.[396]

A decade after these conclusions were drawn, Johnson builds upon her previous work with five imaginative thought experiments which read almost as a summary of her work to date. These proposals more explicitly orientate Christian faith convictions toward practical ecological commitments.[397] Having created a framework where all of creation is redeemed in Christ, Johnson's ultimate goal is Christian conversion akin to the spirit of the burning bush; "to see, hear and 'know' the world in a godly sense, and thereby be moved to action".[398] Her first thought experiment emanates from the belief that the whole world is created by God in love as the "community of creation". Grounding all creaturely existence in God the Source,

[393] Johnson, *Abounding in Kindness*, 94-95.
[394] Johnson, *Abounding in Kindness*, 94-95.
[395] McFague, *The Body of God*, 200-202. Johnson, *Abounding in Kindness*, 95.
[396] Johnson, *Abounding in Kindness*, 95.
[397] Johnson, *Creation and the Cross*, 198-226.
[398] Johnson, "Let All Creation Sing", 32; Johnson, *Creation and the Cross*, 198.

"nature" is termed "creation" employing Christian terminology that foremost connotates intimate relationship.[399]

Moving from an image of the hierarchical pyramid to an inclusive circle, Johnson's second and third thought experiments employ science to dispense with the idea of dominion as the primary model for the relationship between humans and the natural world. In doing so, she recovers and applies the previously discussed idea of intrinsic worth.[400] She notes here that misinterpreting the word "dominion" for "domination", means Christian hierarchy effectively erased the community of creation from consciousness, leading to "unbridled exploitation of nature *without ecclesial protest*".[401] Reimagining humanity's place as part of the circle of life on an evolving planet restores the long-forgotten notion of kinship which goes a long way toward addressing this issue within the Church.[402] Johnson references again *Laudato Si'* to emphasise humanity's responsibility to live in mutual relationship with nature – "Because all creatures are connected, each must be cherished with love and respect" (42).[403]

The fourth thought experiment helps shift predominant focus on the exclusive relationship between God and humans to "You save Humans and animals alike".[404] Mining the Scriptures once again, Johnson finds the Psalms, Isaiah and Hosea replete with verses in which the Creator addresses, blesses and calls creatures by name. In gratitude, they rejoice in and praise God.[405] Johnson keenly notes that Ps 148: 7-10, which patently testify to creation's response to God's glory, are routinely omitted from the Catholic mass. She believes this omission reflects how the God-world relationship has been rendered almost invisible by the "reductionism of church theology and liturgy".[406] An immediate retrieval and inclusion of these verses would mark an important step in restoring right human relationship with God and the natural world.

[399] Johnson, *Creation and the Cross*, 202.
[400] Johnson, *Creation and the Cross*, 203. See footnotes 243, 383.
[401] Johnson, *Creation and the Cross*, 206. Johnson credits the misinterpretation back to the 15th and 16th centuries European colonisation of the world and its resources. My italics.
[402] Johnson, *Creation and the Cross*, 208.
[403] Pope Francis, *Encyclical on Climate Change & Inequality: On Care for Our Common Home*. No page numbers available on e-copy.
[404] Johnson, *Creation and the Cross*, 211.
[405] Johnson, *Creation and the Cross*, 211-216. Johnson cites many verses in these pages.
[406] Johnson, *Creation and the Cross*, 215.

"Expanding the heart: us" is Johnson's final thought experiment. Here she concludes that if the previous thought experiments have succeeded, the concept of "us" should credit all creatures with having a particular relationship with God".[407] This reimagined kinship highlights God's redemptive love poured out - without merit - on any creature's part. Who then is humanity to withhold loving kindness to any such "neighbour" in need?

Essentially, Johnson proposes a conversion experience that has intellectual, emotional, spiritual and ethical dimensions.[408] Hers is a vast undertaking. Johnson's "best takeaway" for the development of future theological reflection is the renewed sense of God's presence to all creatures on planet earth.[409] Through such theology, the earth and all its creatures *enter the human narrative*, thereby converting humans to act ethically toward it.[410] Johnson calls priests and ministers to preach on issues of devastation that cause "the neighbour" to suffer, "disfiguring the whole body of Christ".[411] How much further would this kind of theology take Christians into seeing all neighbours through God's eyes and love accordingly?

Placing current crises firmly within a theological context, each scholar revisions the concept of "neighbour" to help Christians recognise the theological significance of fundamental human interconnectedness with each other and the world. In doing so, McFague's and Johnson's work alerts Christians to injustice, both environmental and economic, and challenges the destructive cult of consumerism in the West. Their subsequent reflection offers an antidote to the crises in the form of Christian conversion, calling all to attend to the oppressed through practices of restraint including "voluntary poverty" embodied in the ascetic response of the "universal self". Together this points to a theology of transformation; one that generates the type of conviction that may motivate Western Christians to ethically and practically love the natural world, the poor and the marginalised.[412] What a hope-filled theology this is.

[407] Johnson, *Creation and the Cross*, 220.
[408] Johnson, *Creation and the Cross*, 197.
[409] Johnson, *Creation and the Cross*, 222.
[410] Johnson, "Let All Creation Sing.", 28.
[411] Johnson, *Creation and the Cross*, 211.
[412] Johnson, *Creation and the Cross*, 226.

A flourishing humanity on a thriving planet rich in species in an evolving universe, all together filled with the glory of God: such is the vision that must guide us at this critical time...[413]

6 The Promise of Theology

Having analysed significant and revelatory aspects of McFague's and Johnson's life and work, this study now identifies how these thinkers model a way forward for contemporary theology. Both exemplify a fruitful approach to the theological task, defined here as characteristically open-ended and tentative, conversational and collaborative, iconoclastic and tensive.[414] Together, these hallmarks of theological practice have led McFague and Johnson to generate valuable insights for invigorated praxis theology. This final section proposes that applying these particular modalities holds significant promise for theology as a transformative spiritual practice – both personally and publicly. It concludes with two thought experiments.

6.1 Open-ended and Tentative

McFague and Johnson first approach the theological task in an open-ended and tentative manner. This allows for additions and revisions, resulting in provisional rather than fixed proposals. Expectantly, each thinker mines the vast reserve of theological meaning for new insights and established wisdom to help theology make a difference in the world. Both enter the task openly, in a spirit of curiosity that starts by asking orienting questions; each then proceeds to pay close attention to all forms of "neighbour" in search of the answers. "Paying attention", in particular to suffering, galvanises both scholars to seek ways of "speaking rightly" about God as meaningful in the contemporary context.

Each scholar's open-ended approach generates the kind of theology that helps make sense of God in the world while making sense to the people *in* the world. Working intentionally as theologians *within the world*, their trajectories demonstrate both continuity and change.

[413] Johnson, *Ask the Beasts*, 286.
[414] McFague, *Metaphorical Theology: Models of God in Religious Language*, 1-29. Harwood, "Theologising the World.", 115. Harwood notes that McFague argues that her approach to metaphor and parable leads to a theology that is "open-ended, tentative…tensive and iconoclastic".

McFague's and Johnson's core theological tasks – to identify and understand the impact of traditional models and symbols, to critique those that have become literalised and exclusive, to search for and map relationships between metaphors, models and concepts as corrective – have led each to investigate possibilities for transformative and revolutionary reconstructions, most notably, Mother Lover Friend, the world as God's body and She Who Is.[415] These relational models formed the bedrock for future constructions and thought experiments.

It has become clear that neither scholar subscribes to the notion of theological reflection as propositional, abstracted from context. Rather the goal is clear – deeper understanding of the God-world relationship. McFague's metaphorical models point to a theology that scaffolds rather than erects an immovable edifice of belief.[416] This counteracts the idea of theology as primarily an intellectual pursuit in which the participants work towards achieving deeper *cognitive* knowledge of God. One commentator argues the purpose of (Roman Catholic) theology is to bring "the Church to greater *cognitive* intimacy with the Lord".[417] He further asserts that, "only with bracingly severe formal constraints in place can effective intellectual work be done".[418] The idea of a model that rigidly defines ultimate truths is not shared by either McFague or Johnson who suggest that the out-workings of such a tight system of control domesticates God and leads to oppressive social structures.

Johnson is influenced by Wolfhart Pannenberg who asserts that the Christian tradition is burdened by "dogmatic finitisations" and "false ultimacies" which lose sight of the provisional and mutable character of Christian thinking throughout history.[419] Instead, pursuing new models, both scholars are motivated by a distinctive concern for how religious language continues to reflect and shape belief. Each therefore maintains an openness in their

[415] McFague, *Metaphorical Theology: Models of God in Religious Language*, 28.
[416] McFague, *Models of God*, xi.
[417] Paul J Griffiths, "Theological Disagreement: What It Is, and How to Do It" (paper presented at the Catholic Theological Society of America, Australia: ABC Religion and Ethics, 26 August 2014), https://www.abc.net.au/religion/. My parenthesis.
[418] Griffiths, "Theological Disagreement." No page numbers available on e-copy.
[419] Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Basic Questions in Theology: Collected Essays* (trans. George H. Kehm; Philadelphia, Pensylvania: The Westminster Press, 1971), 114.

methodology, an approach that understands, as Hauerwas makes clear, that Christian theology must remain "unfinished".[420]

Seeking a theology that explores, enquires and probes rather than one which concretely defines, characterises both thinkers' approach. The result is a more expansive and versatile doctrine of God that lays the ground work for more robust engagement with ethical challenges. McFague's and Johnson's work in broadening language for God underscores the idea that limited symbolism can be renewed and revitalised using both traditional resources and creative new constructs to serve contemporary contexts. Theirs is an open-ended and tentative theology that aims to make a difference in the world.

6.2 Conversational and Collaborative

Engaging with the past and present, McFague and Johnson consider the theological enterprise to be a dynamic, living conversation; one that takes place in dialogue with a plurality of voices – some are fragile and traumatised, while others are confident and dogmatic.[421] Johnson and McFague interact along this spectrum, considering all as sources for new insights about God. This is in keeping with broader feminist theology in which multiple voices and perspectives, alongside the reality of human difference, has emerged as a key theme.[422]

Integral to their conversational approach is listening. Early on, McFague and Johnson listened to God's call in their lives. Latterly, they listened to fellow theologians including their critics, responding accordingly by revising and building upon past proposals. Listening to the Christian tradition they heard the voices of past and modern-day saints. For both scholars however, the voices requiring most "tending and encouraging", are those of women, the poor, and the earth. These remain each scholars' first priority.[423] Both consider listening, especially to those on the margins as, not only fundamentally *Christian*, but as a pathway to increase theology's vigour, insight and relevance. Williams agrees that listening to marginal

[420] Hauerwas, *The Work of Theology*, 259.
[421] Elizabeth A. Johnson, "Horizons of Theology: New Voices in a Living Tradition," in *New Horizons in Theology* (ed. Terrence W. Tilley; Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2005), 3–15, 13.
[422] Muers, "Feminism, Gender and Theology.", 432.
[423] McFague and Johnson acknowledge the voices of other liberation theologies including black, First Nation, Asian and Hispanic theologies. But each makes clear they speak only from their particular demographic standpoint.

voices is an essential theological task, claiming that the Church does not do this well.[424] Listening to McFague's and Johnson's voices could well mark a productive start in addressing this issue. Exemplifying a conversational mindset which seeks communion and community rather than control and combat, these scholars' style of irenic theology desires most of all to serve the common good by first seeking Christian solidarity above arbitrary consensus on every issue.[425]

McFague and Johnson maintain that economic and environmental injustice urgently calls for collaborative theology; one that assumes these crises as the common agenda for current theological reflection. A collective response means collegiality. Most recently each has engaged with the science-theology dialogue as influenced by Darwin, working alongside others who are similarly bringing evolution into reflecting on God's relation to the world. Illustrated in their quilting and braiding approaches, each anticipates inclusion in a broader theological community that works cooperatively to extend and enhance understanding of God in the current context. Such scholarly practice embodies Aquinas' principle that "Whatever is received, is received according to the mode of the recipient".[426] If theologians can work in their own way, according to their own nature, yet are freed to share insights, the collective theological imagination grows, feeding the community of faith along with it, creating further opportunity for new revelations. In this framework there is no room for marginalisation.

Typifying an inclusive approach, McFague and Johnson undertake their vocation with humility, qualifying their work as one small part of a global quest to understand God more fully. The idea that theology cannot "ensure its own subject matter, frustrates many" [427] – not McFague and Johnson. Instead, their approach epitomises a willingness to listen and collaborate in order to reflect, experiment, learn and revise as part of the ongoing process that characterises the living conversation of theology.

[424] Williams, *On Christian Theology*, 289.
[425] McIntosh, "Issues in Feminist Public Theology.", 72-73.
[426] Johnson, *Creation and the Cross*, 219.
[427] Hauerwas, *The Work of Theology*, 258.

6.3 Iconoclastic and Tensive

McFague's and Johnson's theology is inherently iconoclastic. Like all feminist theology, it critiques and challenges the status quo. In doing so, it is tensive, causing strain, stretching that which is comfortable and familiar. This plunges theology into unchartered waters. McFague and Johnson each work within the apophatic understanding of a mysterious God who is different and unutterable. Both scholars lean into this incomprehensibility, reminding theologians everywhere that God remains unknowable in human terms. This highlights two things: first, the importance of apophatic theology and second, the validity of having many names for God as theologically credible. Keeping God's mystery at the forefront of theological endeavour frees theology from the responsibility to explain everything. Each adopts a mode of practice that embraces the concept of "unnaming" some aspects of what past theology has sought to reign in and control.[428]

Clearly, it was through a feminist lens that McFague and Johnson first imagined more expansive language for God, each scholar concluding that female symbols are not only theologically legitimate but enhance and enrich thinking about God. Johnson controversially challenges her readers to consider referring to God as "She", while McFague's model of "the world as God's body" has led to accusations of pantheism. Yet these scholars offer their models neither to substitute nor reverse but to investigate unexplored realms that initiate the design of a new whole. If female language about God is critiqued as inadequate or inaccurate, then so too must male language be relativised and subjected to similar critique. Failure to do so results in "scotosis" wherein theological "blind spots" remain unchallenged.[429] In applying feminist methodology, both scholars alert all practitioners to the importance of critique and construction in the process of theological reflection. Tensive theology not only moves theology out of its comfort zone to release fruitful but otherwise dormant insights, it exposes the consequences of constructions that oppress.

Stimulating such tensions has raised the ire of those who consider feminist critique as merely serving the interests of women. However, as demonstrated, McFague and Johnson, and other likeminded scholars, attempt to address not only what women want but what

[428] McFague, "Falling in Love with God and the World.", 33.
[429] Johnson, *She Who Is*, 14-15.

humanity and the planet needs. Theologians who dismiss feminist scholarship as unorthodox miss an opportunity to engage fully and respectfully with colleagues whose vision has the capacity to help empower the practice of theology in transforming the faith to better serve the world. Scholars referenced earlier in this project suggest that God's revelation is *limited to a past* contained only in the literal truths of Scripture, creeds and liturgies. This perception ignores the fact that Christians follow a living God who continues to speak into the present age. McFague's and Johnson's theology remains attentive to God's self-disclosure in the world, all the while acknowledging that such disclosure is characteristically surprising, paradoxical and invariably unsettling.

6.4 Reimagined Theology as Praxis

For both thinkers, moving seamlessly between theory and practice forms the heart of theological endeavour. Their goal is not simply to improve the quality of religious discourse but to change the world. Like the Patristic fathers,[430] McFague and Johnson do not distinguish between theology and practice; instead, their work illustrates the continuity between the theological and ethical dimensions of Christian living. While other contemporary theologians have responded to the earthly challenge by arguing for an environmental ethic, these particular scholars reach their conclusions from an alternative standpoint resulting in the fresh theologies of *kenosis* and accompaniment.

While theology is regarded as an important mode of critical analysis, with the capacity to radically transform culture, both scholars acknowledge that Western theology remains firmly rooted in its "capitalistised" and "Americanised" context.[431] Inhabiting many of society's dreams and aspirations, theological discourse risks a stultifying enculturation.[432] As we have seen however, McFague's and Johnson's kenotic and accompaniment theologies challenge the Western cult of consumerism and offer ways to counter it in a series of practical ways to be *alternately Christian* in the world. Motivated by their shared conviction that theological work makes a vital contribution to reimagining and enacting a liveable, just and sustainable

[430] Stanley Hauerwas, "On Keeping Theological Ethics Theological," in *The Hauerwas Reader: Stanley Hauerwas* (ed. John Berkman and Michael Cartwright; Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2001), 51–74, 55.
[431] Graham Ward, "Introduction: 'Where We Stand,'" in *The Blackwell Companion to Postmodern Theology* (ed. Graham Ward; Blackwell Publishers, 2001), xii–xxvii.
[432] Ward, "Introduction.", xxiv.

social order, McFague and Johnson demonstrate that a shift in perspective necessitates a complementary shift in Christian living.

Johnson's practical thought experiments and McFague's "universal self" are proposals specifically conceived to take theology along a new path – one that does not emanate from philosophical ethics. Instead, their proposals are borne out of experience, Christian tradition and the Scriptures, to be embodied, nurtured and enacted by the community of faith. Offering an alternate suite of metaphors, models, imagery and language, each reframes the traditional notion of redemption to include all creatures. In doing so, both invite fellow theologians and today's Christians to reimagine the vital three-way paradigm discussed earlier. Theologies of *kenosis* and accompaniment direct Christians toward a deeper comprehension of inclusive love – that which underpins this relational paradigm. This "conversion" holds promise for a communal spirituality defined by Johnson's notion of kinship – a thought experiment that patently rejects an individual consumerist mindset.

Studying the history of communal religious practice, Pannenberg was struck by the number of past religions that have disappeared. Johnson references his famous axiom, *Religions die when their lights fail, that is, when they lose their power to convince*.[433] Theology therefore, must illuminate the reality of religious existence experienced in the past *as if* it presents itself in contemporary experience; only by doing so can theology strengthen its claim to facilitate "access to the divine mystery".[434] If the concept of God cannot unlock a meaningful life in a new context then people look elsewhere for meaning.[435] As Hauerwas observes, "The task of theology is to show that the world we experience can *only* make sense in the light of what has been done through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus".[436] Moving from doctrine of God to the incarnate Christ, McFague's and Johnson's transformed and transformative reimagining of the God-world relationship reclaims Christology in a fresh and accessible way.

Johnson first imagines the "community of creation" in the context of the cross, while McFague seeks to articulate the self-emptying love of God in Christ as exemplifying that

[433] Pannenberg, *Basic Questions in Theology*, vol. II, p. 65-118; Johnson, *She Who Is*, 16; Elizabeth A. Johnson, "Horizons of Theology: New Voices in a Living Tradition," in *New Horizons in Theology* (ed. Terrence W. Tilley; Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2005), 3–15, 14.
[434] Pannenberg, *Basic Questions in Theology*, vol. II, 118.
[435] Johnson, "New Voices in a Living Tradition.", 14.
[436] Hauerwas, *The Work of Theology*, 259. My italics.

loving God *is* loving the world. Her kenotic theology helps Christians reframe their understanding of divine power by starting with the incarnate, self-emptying love of Jesus epitomised in the cross. For both scholars, the incarnation grounds Christian ethics. Hauerwas maintains that Christian ethics has lost its "Christianness" through a dilution of the Christian story. By seeking dialogue with the broader academy regarding ethics, Christianity risks being stripped of its distinctiveness – the faith is thus devalued when people assume ethics is all it has to offer.[437]

Yet what McFague and Johnson suggest is not simply a guidebook for reawakening a long-lost sense of Christian social responsibility, but an opportunity for Christians to be truly and utterly transformed by the work of Christ. Transformed theology creates distinctive, transformative communities. Theologians are thus called by vocation to clearly articulate the difference uniquely Christian commitments make.[438] Both McFague and Johnson undertake what Hauerwas considers the true task of theologians, namely "to exploit the considerable resources embodied in particular Christian convictions". [439] Maximising a plethora of Christian resources, McFague and Johnson reignite the Christian theological imagination by telling the story in a new way. Their method and resultant proposals seek to dissolve the separation between Christian theology and practical ethics by reclaiming a uniquely Christian ethic – one that can authentically empower and sustain faithful communities. Designed to engage the Christian imagination by reawakening human hearts and minds to the true reality of the God-world relationship, these proposals, if taken seriously and adopted, have enormous potential to reshape Christian discipleship in serving God, humanity and the planet.

6.5 A Promising Theology

David Ford suggests that the most important task for contemporary theology is to identify *those forms* that can respond wisely and creatively to the realities of the world while being true to the Christian faith.[440] Johnson's and McFague's work holds great promise to fulfil such

[437] Hauerwas, "On Keeping Theological Ethics Theological.", 52.
[438] Hauerwas, "On Keeping Theological Ethics Theological.", 73.
[439] Hauerwas, "On Keeping Theological Ethics Theological.", 73-74.
[440] Ford, *The Future of Christian Theology*, 17.

a task. Their characteristically innovative yet orthodox theology seeks wisdom through what Ford terms, "the discernment of cries".[441]

Both McFague and Johnson have discerned particular "cries" - first, on a deeply personal level, they have heard the cry of God in their own lives. Second, they have heard the cries of their own kind, women. Third, they have heard the cries of the poor amongst creation and the voiceless, and finally they have discerned a hopeful cry for the future of Christian theology. Together they exemplify an "all-round formation" as theologians by embodying a theological discipleship which typifies the "here I am" posture of accepting the Christian vocation.[442] Discerning cries through an approach which is open-ended and tentative, conversational and collaborative, iconoclastic and tensive is a way of being and a mode of doing theology that brims with opportunity.

Although a proper exploration is beyond the scope of this project, this section concludes with two thought experiments. The first is based on McFague's house rules while the second returns to several of the hallmarks outlined above. Consider McFague's house rules: "take only your share; clean up after yourself; keep the house in good repair for those who will use it after you".[443] These principles are directed toward individuals and communities of faith. But imagine if they were applied to the practice of theology itself. In this context, "take only your share" might mean: acknowledging individual scholarly limitations; ensuring equitable distribution of the academy's resources; considering one's task as undertaken in conversation with a multiplicity of voices in order to yield most fruit. "Clean up after yourself" may be read as: treat colleagues with respect; be peaceable in disagreement; and refuse to be divisive. "Keep the house in good repair for those who come after you" may refer to considering the consequences of today's practice for future endeavour; ensuring strong foundations are laid for the next generation to build upon; exemplifying best methodological practice by undertaking the task with openness, inclusivity and humility, and maintaining a balance between innovation and tradition so that a distinctively Christian theology is the foundation for transformative future practice.

[441] Ford, *The Future of Christian Theology*, 22.
[442] Ford, *The Future of Christian Theology*, 169.
[443] McFague, *Blessed Are the Consumers*, xiii.

The second thought experiment returns to the hallmarks of conversation and collegiality to consider how mainstream theology may respond to the following contemporary "cries". Contentious issues that remain challenging for theologians and the Church to navigate may benefit from treatment via the example McFague and Johnson offer. Imagine if theologians of all denominations were open to conversing with same-sex attracted people about their understanding of God. Imagine if more theologians collaborated on writing, teaching and speaking projects. Imagine if, increasingly, theologians *really* listened to First Nations people tell their stories about God. Perhaps such imagining is the true promise of a purposeful theology? Pursuing either of these thought experiments may form the basis of further investigation into the relationship between theological method and praxis in the suggested contexts.

7 Conclusion

During a time of global flux, making Christianity understood in the world and the world understood in a Christian frame of reference is the priority for Sallie McFague and Elizabeth A. Johnson. Contrary to a growing disconnect between theological reflection and practice, these thinkers' approaches exemplify how Christian action can be the natural out-working of a theology that desires engagement with life. Through an orthodox Christian lens, both scholars focus squarely on today's issues to pursue a theology that promotes flourishing for all. The strong ethical imperative that motivates their work implores theologians everywhere to better equip Christians for the mighty task of being Christian in the world.

Identified at the start of this study, the practice of contemporary theology is hampered by a number of issues, including the marginalisation of certain voices. This predicament chokes theological potential at a time when Western Christianity is on the decline and theological insight is most needed to engender deep discipleship in an unstable world. Listening to a diversity of scholars, including McFague and Johnson, may herald a promising start to revitalise mainstream theology, both in the academy and more widely.

This paper has argued that McFague's and Johnson's theological praxis refuses to marginalise. Instead, each scholar wisely seeks to create useful theology at a time when a plethora of resources is required to tackle global challenges. Having discerned the cries, McFague and Johnson step up to provide valuable tools for the task.

Early in their lives McFague and Johnson responded to a vocational call to serve the world and not run from it. Overhauling the Christian understanding of the God-world relationship became a major impetus for their work. Sparked by the question of how to speak rightly of God in the current time, their three-phase methodology dialogued with past and present theological voices to produce creative models and viable thought experiments. Having opened their hearts and minds to the world, in particular the poor and oppressed, their most recent work calls comfortable Western Christians to wake up, pay attention and develop their "universal selves" to "accompany" suffering "neighbours".

McFague's and Johnson's life-long journeys of transformational personal experience, scholarship, teaching and writing, bear witness to a spiritual practice that takes time and

dedication. The fruits of their labours manifest in a dynamic, responsive theology that has capacity to engender change. It is possible, in this current Western consumerist context, such theology has the potential to liberate Western Christians from their oppressive and oppressing lifestyles, and to transform them from consumers into saints – by God's grace.

Engagement with McFague's and Johnson's distinctive theological voices is highly commended, as are the methods by which each scholar arrives at her respective proposals. Methodology is a crucial aspect of their overall contribution to theology and is exemplary for theologians working today. According to the late Sallie McFague, the task is actually quite simple, "The purpose of theology is to glorify God by reflecting on how we might live better on the earth".[444] May the discipline of theology embrace such a worthy call.

[444] McFague, *Life Abundant*, 25.

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