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“2015 REA Annual Meeting, Nov. 6-8”

Reimagining Ecological Models for Religious Education

Sallie McFague’s metaphorical theology challenges religious educators to live into the question: How can we reimagine ecological models for religious education? In this paper I will explore a range of responses, comparing the educational implications of the theological work of Sallie McFague and Norman Wirzba, and considering Sharon Parks’ metaphorical and ecological re-imagining of James Fowler’s faith development theory. I will conclude by proposing “Sabbath friendship” as a healing metaphor for re-imagining an ecological model for religious education.

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What will it take to awaken us to a planet in crisis? Even the Weather Channel risks political controversy to sound cries of alarm. *Climate 25* is an online video production of the Weather Channel in which twenty-five leaders in diverse fields warn about the impact of climate disruption on health, security, energy, and peace (Weather Channel 2015).

Every field of human endeavor has a healing role to play in responding to this crisis. A needed response by the field of religious education is to reimagine ecological models of religious education. This reimagining project has much to contribute to a larger conversation about the reinvention of education with “earth in mind” (Orr 2004).

In this paper I draw upon Sallie McFague’s metaphorical theology (1975, 1976, 1982, 1987, 2008, 2013) to identify possible paths for reimagining both our theology and our pedagogy, both our models of the God-world relationship and our related models of education, in light of emerging ecological sensibilities. Beyond this paper further concretization is needed to flesh out these pathways.

Metaphoric Process and Responsible Imagining

Sallie McFague’s “metaphorical theology” has much to teach us about the role of imagination in shaping life on this planet. She largely affirms the postmodern claim that we humans collectively construct our lived reality through imagination’s vehicles of metaphor and story. However, she argues that listening to the voice of pain, especially the voice of the poor and of the earth, helps us discern boundaries to limit the play of the imagination (1987, 20).

The exercise of a responsible imagination, urges McFague, involves a call to critical awareness of metaphors that harm and to creative re-imagining of metaphors that heal, a creative “metaphoric process” I propose pulses at the heart of learning process (Johnston 1997). McFague urges us to see that theology deeply matters because in our search for knowledge and meaning we each hold metaphorically constructed images of ultimate reality -- the God-World relationship -- that implicitly shape our values, attitudes and actions (McFague 2008, 5).

As a theologian responding to the environmental crisis and to the present-day ecological and evolutionary sciences and sensibilities, McFague sets about re-imagining metaphorically rooted models for the God-World relationship that are in keeping with her Christian tradition but appropriate for our times. Her project is to replace “patriarchal, imperialistic, and triumphalist metaphors” that promote harmful modes of hierarchical relationships. Her quest is to offer ecological metaphors that potentially restore more interdependent, organic relationships (1987).

McFague’s search for ecological metaphors grows not only from her commitment to speak relevantly in an ecological age but also from her theological roots in a covenantal biblical tradition. Her mentor H. Richard Niebuhr’s (1954, 1978) responsibility metaphor for moral agency is rooted in that covenantal tradition, a tradition that emphasizes relationality and

interdependence much like the emerging ecological understanding of existence. Niebuhr's responsibility model of the moral agent as caring friend emphasizes the fundamental value of "presence" – the I-Thou relationship in every encounter with the other – that enables one to respond with respect and care for the other who is distinct from yet related to ourselves (1989, 46-62).

In keeping with the biblical covenantal tradition and Niebuhr's responsibility model of moral agency, McFague asks us to consider the healing possibilities in imagining the world as God's body instead of seeing the world as God's kingdom. She writes:

What this experiment with the world as God's body comes to, finally, is an awareness, both chilling and breathtaking, that we as worldly, bodily beings are in God's presence. It is the basis of a revived sacramentalism, that is, a perception of the divine as visible, as present, palpably present in our world... The world is a (vulnerable) body that must be carefully tended, that must be nurtured, protected, guided, loved and befriended both as valuable in itself -- for like us, it is an expression of God – and as necessary to the continuation of life. (1987, 77)

Her vision expands Niebuhr's covenantal view of human responsibility for "the other" to include our sacred relationship with the earth itself. Her goal is to do her part as a theologian to awaken hearts to see the sacramental depths of the natural world that our covenant-keeping God steadfastly loves and inhabits.

The Call to Educate with Earth in Mind

In her most recent book on the practice of restraint, McFague (2013) responds to the lead article in the 2010 edition of *The State of the World: Transforming Cultures from Consumerism to Sustainability*. This annual environmental report opens by calling upon the religions of the world to play a more radical role in responding to the environmental crisis. Religious instruction, the article asserts, is failing to address the intrinsic connection between ecology and economy. Religions are called to offer alternatives to the "culture of consumerism" by providing leadership in "a wholesale transformation of dominant cultural patterns" (McFague 2013, X).

The Pope's encyclical on the environment, *On Care for Our Common Home* (2015), also takes up the call to link ecology and economy, arguing that justice for the poor is intrinsically related to care of the earth. The Pope concludes his encyclical with a chapter titled, "Ecological Education and Spirituality." He acknowledges that the environmental crisis is a spiritual crisis at heart and that religious education must play a key role in changing hearts and minds.

I propose that in order to play a role in "transforming a culture of consumerism" and to respond to the spiritual heart of our economic/ecological crisis, we must reimagine our models for both education and theology in light of emerging ecological sensibilities. Developing an ecological model for religious education becomes an extension of McFague's theological project of imagining what it might mean to see the world as God's body.

Critical awareness of earth-destroying metaphors for education is needed. Orr's (2004) work in rethinking higher education through an ecological lens offers insight. He argues in *Earth in Mind*

that education in Western cultures has been shaped by the “industrial mind.” Education envisioned through this Newtonian mechanization lens is “education that alienates us from life in the name of human domination, fragments instead of unifies, overemphasizes success and careers, separates feeling from intellect and the practical from the theoretical, and unleashes on the world minds ignorant of their own ignorance” (2004, 17).

Orr calls for critical awareness of the way the prevailing cultural lens can disorder imagination, values, and thought. Responding to our planetary crisis requires freeing the imagination from the industrial mind in order to “educate citizens of the biotic community” (16). This requires a thorough ecological redesign of education by all institutions of learning (2-3).

I believe reimagining ecological models for religious education can help recover the fundamentally religious character of the entire educational enterprise. For ultimately the educational process is rooted in an ongoing conversation between myth and science, between our mythic/metaphoric pictures of reality and our human quest to learn from experience. Engaging this conversation intentionally and doing it well involves what I claim McFague’s project illustrates as “metaphoric process” as well as what Brelsford suggests with his notion of a “mythical realist” goal of religious education (Brelsford 2007). As such, religious educators’ faithful imagining has much to contribute to redesigning twenty-first century education with “earth in mind.”

Metaphoric Imagination and the Learning Process

McFague’s metaphorical theology is rooted in an appreciation of metaphor that emerged in the last half of the twentieth century (Black 1962; Ricouer 1966; Kuhn 1970; Barbour 1974; Lakoff and Johnson 1980). Widespread attention to the pervasiveness of metaphor in language challenged the logical positivist view of language. The insight emerged that metaphors not only convey meaning that cannot be reduced to literal, verifiable truth but also that metaphors create and recreate experience.

McFague’s technical definition of metaphor is this:

A metaphor is an assertion or judgment of similarity and difference between two thoughts in permanent tension with one another, which redescribes reality in an open-ended way but has structural as well as affective power. (1982, 42)

Here we especially notice Ricouer’s influence on McFague’s understanding of metaphor. He emphasizes the tentative, open-ended way metaphor redefines reality due to the simultaneously true and false claim of similarity between two fields of meaning within a metaphor (Ricouer 1966, 1981).

The tentativeness of metaphorical assertions of truth, in the interactive view of metaphor, suggests a more open-ended view of truth and reality than the literal-truth paradigm of positivism. Metaphoric truth includes both the truth and the lie, both what we can know and what remains mystery. Metaphor, thus, is language and thought that is able to respect the presence of mystery within every claim of truth (Johnston 1994, 207).

Ricoeur also helps McFague attend to the affective power of metaphor. He theorizes that imagination, always active in the metaphoric leap of creating similarity between two dissimilar subjects, is deeply linked to bodily affections (1966, 257-258). In a metaphor, we think, in an imaginative way, through the vehicle of images. Images, unlike concepts, evoke memories of concrete embodied experiences. Images trigger responses of the very muscles of the body and the rush of attendant feelings associated with embodied memories of the concrete experience captured within the image. Therefore the work of images and imagination in metaphorical thinking creates the affective power of metaphor. As Ricoeur says, the feelings evoked by the image of the metaphor serve to make the meaning of the metaphor “ours,” interiorizing thought as a “felt participation” that is part of the complete meaning of the metaphor (1981, 243-244).

Thus McFague invites us to recognize that metaphoric truth claims help us create new possibilities for seeing, feeling, valuing, and doing. To begin to see the world as God’s body, for example, is to create the possibility of a new experience of the world and new ways of relating to the earth and each other. Wonder, delight, awe, and reverence flow as we see the cosmos, planet, and every creature alive with sacred presence. Consequently we are drawn to new ways of living, including new ways of educating, that are profoundly religious and whole.

McFague’s notion of metaphor leads her to observe the role of imagination and metaphor in human learning. McFague argues, “from the time we are infants we construct our world through metaphor” (1982, 15). She summarizes postmodern insights from a broad range of human inquiry (philosophy, sciences, religion, art, social sciences) that insist on the primacy of metaphor: “It is being asserted that metaphor is indigenous to all human learning from the simplest to the most complex” (1982, 32).

McFague connects metaphorical thinking with Piaget’s notion of accommodation. She writes: “What we discover is an anomaly; the old framework no longer can encompass our experience and only metaphor – which connects both with what we already know and with what we are groping to know – provides the movement that is the distinctive mark of learning” (1982, 199). I comment elsewhere that:

Much like Piaget’s genetic epistemology, which emphasizes the continuity between human learning and adaptive biological processes in other living organisms, McFague emphasizes the role of the body in human learning. For both Piaget and McFague, this kind of adaptive, body informed learning is a natural process that usually proceeds unconsciously, joining body and mind through the creative and adaptive work of the imagination. (Johnston 1994, 237)

Though she sees metaphorical learning as an almost biological process, McFague’s project of metaphorical theology invites us to return to this natural way of learning in a more critically conscious way. For McFague believes that this natural way of metaphorical learning has not been welcomed or respected by our educational institutions – in places like the church and the school. Here education typically reinforces established metaphoric truth and provides little room for heuristic learning in response to learner’s own religious quest for wholeness and meaning in the face of mystery (McFague 1976). And so this natural, whole-person and communal way of learning, this underground process of human becoming, is not welcomed in most classrooms.

Metaphoric Process as an Ecological Metaphor for Learning Process

I have proposed in my dissertation, *Metaphoric Process and the Agency of Embodied Learners*, that McFague's metaphorical theology involves a method of inquiry we might label "metaphoric process" and that we can fruitfully reimagine learning process as a creative, healing process of metaphoric critique and reconstruction. I argue in my dissertation that my proposal to reimagine learning process as metaphoric process is in keeping with McFague's own insights about the educational implications of metaphorical theology.

Seeing learning process as metaphoric process becomes one candidate, based on McFague's metaphorical theology, for reimagining ecological models for religious education. Fleshing out the implications of this model for learning go beyond the scope of this paper. I have proposed elsewhere that creating educational environments to host learning process as metaphoric process would at least require: 1) nurturing covenantal, learning-community ecologies for education that are place-based; 2) using body-inclusive teaching-learning strategies; 3) designing embodied curriculum that integrates content and form by matching subject matter with curriculum design; 4) grounding learning in mystery focused through questions essential to the learners; 5) welcoming open-ended and emergent learning outcomes rather than seeking efficient control of imposed outcomes (Johnston 1994, 298-311).

Engaging in metaphoric process as learning process charts a pathway for the field of Religious Education to pursue a transformative role in addressing our planetary crisis. This pathway helps us respond faithfully to the ecology of embodied learners, whole persons within whole communities, who listen to and think with the earth in the communal, healing process of learning.

Paths for Re-Imagining Ecological Models of Religious Education

While imagining learning process as metaphoric process offers a basic path for reimagining ecological models of religious education, other theological paths add to that picture. Norman Wirzba's (2006) construct of "Sabbath Creation" offers a metaphor for the God-world relationship that complements McFague's metaphor of the world as God's body.

While his explicit theological method differs from McFague's, Wirzba's implicit method reveals similarities. Explicitly he revisits Christian scriptures using an ecological lens to mine biblical resources needed in our times. This illumines for him the ontological centrality of Sabbath and covenant for understanding human identity and vocation. These biblical metaphors convey a very ecological perspective on human relationships of interdependency with the created order, relationships reflecting unity through distinctiveness within the life of God. Implicitly Wirzba uses an ecological lens to imagine anew the significance of seeing the world as God's Sabbath Creation, his central metaphor for the God-world relationship.

Wirzba's conviction is that our rapid paced culture of earth-exhausting consumers direly needs a recovery of Sabbath teaching. For him the way of Sabbath living offers a "rich potential to

transform a complete life” (15). He argues that: “The key to Sabbath observance is that we participate regularly in the delight that marked God’s own response to a creation wonderfully made” (15). In *Living the Sabbath* he explores practical implications of a Sabbath Creation for imagining Sabbath Economics, Sabbath Education, Sabbath Environmentalism, etc. In all areas of life we are invited to engage in practices that imitate God’s own practices as a covenantal God who immerses within and restfully delights in a Sabbath Creation.

For Wirzba Sabbath Education (129-141) has to do with the education of desire, education for wholeness, and education in relationship to particular local communities and habitats. About Sabbath Education he writes:

Our most important educational task is to discover and take our fitting place within God’s continuing life, so that our joy together can be made complete. Only then will we recognize the marks of well-educated persons to be not how many degrees they have or how much wealth and status they have acquired, but rather how well they contribute to the health and conviviality of our social and biological neighborhoods.” (132)

Wirzba’s attention to Sabbath practices of delight echoes the sensibility McFague seeks in imagining the world as God’s body. McFague writes: “An aesthetic sensibility toward the cosmos is one that values what is unselfishly, with a sense of delight in others for their own sakes. Such appreciation and delight are a necessary step in turning from an anthropocentric to an ecological sensibility” (McFague 1987, 11).

Wirzba’s concern to transform our 24/7 consumer culture through Sabbath practices also echoes Sharon Parks’ (2003) focus on practices in her ecological reimagining of human development. Correcting Fowler’s (1991) developmental paradigm that has been dominated by the imagination of “venturing” through stages of growth, Parks proposes a more complete picture of “the tidal rhythm of our becoming” that includes practices of “abiding.” For Parks human becoming can be imagined as movement between the developmental praxis of venturing and the centering practices of abiding.

Park’s metaphor of “abiding” involves a spiritual centeredness found by recovering the power of place that can be pursued through “practices” such as walking and learning, eating and meeting, and resting and dreaming as we engage fully in particular landscapes and recover a sense of place. She explains: “Practices are ways of life, things we do with and for one another to make and keep life human” (72). And further: “a consciousness of place, most profoundly understood, is the gift of a relationship between the human and the more-than-human world” (63).

I offer a glimpse of one additional pathway for reimagining education that draws together insights of McFague, Wirzba, and Parks. “Sabbath friendship” holds rich potential as a metaphor to reimagine an ecological model of education. This is way of learning and living I have been exploring experientially for decades in covenant with a friend and colleague (Johnston and Sutherland 2015).

According to this model, a covenant community of Sabbath Friends can hold in tension both the venturing and abiding, the exploratory praxis and the grounding practices, that teachers and learners engage together as they seek to imagine and live their way into a world of flourishing,

peace, and abundance that God imagines for all creation. A Sabbath friends model brings together learners and teachers as a community of learning partners. These learners covenant with each other to study the Sabbath and to support each other's sacred journey to wholeness in relationship with each other, local habitats, and the biosphere. This journey of learning involves growing not only a fuller *understanding* but also a fuller *practice* of both Sabbath and friendship, learning what it means to live and learn in covenant with others and the earth.

Sabbath and friendship are first of all God's practices into which we are invited to live and grow and flourish. Therefore the ecological educational model of Sabbath Friendship is a path that protects space and time for creative, sacramental living in today's world in imitation of God. The pathway of Sabbath friendship is a way of resistance to our earth-destroying consumer culture that leads to spiritual and practical resilience. It is the journey of yoking our lives with the One who leads us to life. Practicing Sabbath friendship, in partnership with God's Sabbath friendship towards all creation, patiently teaches us a liberating way of life and vocation that runs counter to today's 24/7 culture.

I introduce Sabbath friendship as a covenantal and ecological pathway for imagining education. I believe this path for imagining new possibilities can help religious educators break out of Western models for education that participate in established triumphalist and industrial paradigms harming the earth. Only in covenants of mutuality with others, in both formal and informal education, can people of faith respond to the spiritual heart of the environmental crisis, drawing upon our rich religious heritage to reimagine and recreate life on God's beloved earth.

Conclusion

In this article I have explored different theological pathways to introduce the specific metaphors of "metaphoric process" and "Sabbath Friendship" as potentially fruitful metaphors for reimagining ecological models for religious education. Models are "metaphors with staying power" (McFague 1987, 34). This means that these proposed metaphors will require much more experimentation and elaboration before they become practical models. But imagining learning process as "metaphoric process" and ecological education as "Sabbath friendship" can help us begin to respond educationally and religiously to our planetary crisis. I offer these metaphors as an appeal to religious educators to take up our call to reimagine education with earth in mind.

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