

Blessed are the Consumers: Climate Change and the Practice of Restraint

Sallie McFague. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2013. Pp. 215.

Eco-feminist author and Distinguished Theologian in Residence at Vancouver School of Theology, Sallie McFague investigates the connections of religion with economics and ecology. Given the twin planetary crises of climate change and unjust financial distribution, she believes that the religions must be major players if the collapse of civilization is to be avoided in the decades ahead. As a Christian she bases her theological/ethical approach in *kenosis* ("self-emptying," cf. Phil. 2.5-11). What is required, if humanity and life on the planet is to survive, is a "conversion" away from the culture of consumerism to a widespread ethic of restraint. The world's religions (though she is mainly addressing Christians) must present a "radical alternative to the good life for people and planet" (xi).

Alarmed by mainstream climate science, she celebrates the natural world, in which everything is mutually dependent, and living beings live off each other in a symbiosis of restraint, sharing and sacrifice. In view of the present unprecedented challenge, she is doubtful whether humanity will survive, since what is needed is not minor adjustment, but a major paradigm shift of humanity away from words like limitless, expansion, and growth, and toward restraint, sharing, and limits. She knows that human beings do not change easily.

About half the book is dedicated to the stories of three Christian "saints," as exemplars of the kenotic life. John Woolman (1720-1772), American Quaker, grocer and itinerant minister, envisaging a society of universal love, singlemindedly opposed slavery. He lived in radical self-denial, "under the cross," in solidarity with slaves, but also Aborigines and working people, pointing to the inter-dependence of all creatures: one should love God "in all his visible manifestations," including "all animal sensible creatures" (43). Preaching against slavery, he walked great distances rather than use horses cared for by slave boys, wore only white clothing to oppose the delivery of dyes using slave labour, and rejected every form of luxury, since he believed that luxury always has

some connection with evil and violence.

Simone Weil (1909-1943) was a French, Jewish-born Christian Platonist philosopher. She was a teacher and trade union activist and participant in the French resistance. Though highly educated, she chose a life of manual labour in an auto factory and on farms. She regarded self-emptying love as the centre of all God's acts: creation, incarnation and crucifixion. Valuing friendship as the highest form of love, she believed that in friendship we image the original, perfect friendship of the Trinity. Following Jesus, she insisted, implies a kenosis of ego, and deep personal attention, to God, and to the affliction of others. Her understanding of the self-emptying of God in Christ led to solidarity with undernourished workers in occupied Europe: she refused to eat more than was available to workers. Seriously malnourished, she died of tuberculosis. Though devoted to Christ, she protested Catholic exclusivism, saying "the love of those things outside Christianity keeps me outside of the church."

Dorothy Day (1897-1980) lived and worked in Chicago and New York before, during and after the Great Depression. A journalist, she travelled widely, enjoyed several love affairs, embraced all the joys of bodily life, mothered a child and was politically active for the labour movement. Converted to Catholicism at 30, she became a devotee of St. Francis of Assisi. Founder of the Catholic Worker movement, campaigner on behalf of the working class and the very poor, she embraced voluntary poverty, sharing crowded sleeping quarters in her own hospitality houses. Devoted to prayer and daily mass, Day patterned her life on God's kenosis in the cross of Christ: "We must see the face of Christ in a sick, unwashed, lice-ridden old woman . . . We are not told to love up to the limit of reason, prudence or personal safety, but to love unreasonably, foolishly, profligately, unto the Cross, unto death . . ." (71).

These accounts of McFague's "saints" are awe-inspiring. One may doubt, though, whether such extraordinary individuals are helpful models for ordinary Christian saints, who must raise families, maintain employment, compete in business, and who naturally seek a measure of pleasure and happiness. McFague knows that such uncompromising devotion "is not in the cards for most of us" (106), but believes that we all must move in these directions, practising kenotic self-restraint if our unsustainable consumerism is to be reversed. Her reflections highlight the

need for Christian ethicists to offer guidance on how a kenotic life can be lived practicably in the present time of troubles.

In her final chapter, McFague carries forward her earlier incarnational theology (*The Body of God, 1993*). In her panentheistic vision, God in Christ discloses God's incarnation in the whole cosmos. One may question, though, whether this semi-divinization of the physical universe, and tendency to idealize the natural world, is truly radical. We find here no feminist ethic of legitimate self-care; we find no resurrection, and no eschatological hope. She also wishes to draw upon the theology of the social Trinity, of which she writes eloquently; but it is questionable whether she provides the requisite christology to undergird such a trinitarian doctrine.

This is a richly provocative, challenging volume, and an excellent educational tool.

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