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AN ALTERNATIVE ORTHODOXY

The Universal Christ and Climate Change

By Sallie McFague

SIMONE WEIL (1909–1943) says that human beings are naturally “cannibalistic”: they eat instead of looking, they devour rather than paying attention, they consume other people and the planet in their search for self-fulfillment. Augustine of Hippo (354–430) claimed something similar in his understanding of sin: voracious, lustful desire to have it all for oneself. From the twenty-first-century ecological perspective, sin is refusing to share, refusing to live in such a way that others—other people and other life-forms—can also live. For us in our time, sin is refusing to live justly and sustainably with all others on our planet.

This is not a new understanding of sin; rather, it is built upon the traditional view that, as Augustine puts it, sin is “being curved in upon oneself”¹ rather than being open to God. In our ecological age, we now see that “being open to God” means being open to the other creatures upon whom we depend and who depend upon us. We cannot love God unless we love God’s world. We do not meet God only in Jesus of Nazareth, because God is also incarnate *in our world*

as the universal Christ. Christians have always known this because an incarnate God is a world-loving God, but now it takes on new meaning and depth as we realize the radical interrelationship and interdependence of all forms of life.

To love God by loving God's world has meant different things to different people in different times. For us, I suggest, it is epitomized by climate change. Climate change is not just another social and political issue facing us; rather, it sums up the central crisis of the twenty-first century. Put simply, climate change is the result of too many human beings using too much energy and taking up too much space on the planet. Through excessive energy use and its accompanying greenhouse-gas emissions, we are changing the planet's climate in ways that will make it uninhabitable for ourselves and many other species. This excessive use is from both population and lifestyle; that is, at close to seven billion human beings, the planet cannot sustain the high-energy lifestyle that about twenty percent of us now enjoy and most of the rest of the world wants to enjoy. "Environmentalism" is not simply about maintaining green spaces in cities or national parks; rather, it is the more basic issue of energy use on a finite planet.

Thus, space and energy, the basic physical needs of all creatures—a place to live and grow and the energy to sustain life, day by day, is the issue. The universal or cosmic Christ is with us as we deal with these mundane issues of space and energy. Just as an earlier generation faced the Second World War as the quintessential issue of their day, so climate change is ours. During that war, people all over the world mobilized, sacrificing their comfort and often their very lives in order to avoid what they believed was a threat of disastrous proportions. We are faced with another such threat—one, perhaps, even more dangerous in terms of the long-term health of the planet, for it involves the very basis of physical existence—space and energy, habitation and food, clean air and arable land, a viable climate for the flourishing of life. But we do not face this threat alone—the universal Christ is with us.

In other words, the crisis facing us is one of geography, one of space and place and habitability. It is not about time and history and human meaning; rather, it is physical, earthly, worldly, fleshly—the basics of existence. Christianity has often focused on time, history, and human meaning; for example, salvation has been understood to be eternal existence in another world for individual human beings. But, an *incarnational* Christianity, a Christianity that believes in an

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incarnate God—a universal Christ, who loves and inhabits the world—is radically mundane. In my paraphrase of the wonderful words of Irenaeus (140–202): “The glory of God is every creature fully alive.”²

It is not possible to imagine “every creature fully alive” on planet earth in the twenty-first century. If we continue living as we have been living—and if more people join the high-energy lifestyle of us privileged ones—we are headed for disaster. Climate change is telling us, loud and clear, that the size of our population and its increasingly excessive energy use is raising the temperature of the planet to the point where disastrous effects will occur: excruciating heat, the melting of glaciers and the rise of the oceans, violent storms, the loss of arable land and clean water, the decline of biodiversity, the intensification of diseases, the increase of wars fought over food and water, etc.

This is a strange “crisis” to face: It does not have the immediacy of a war or plague or tsunami. Rather, it has to do with *how we live* on a daily basis—the food we eat, the transportation we use, the size of the house in which we live, the consumer goods we buy, the luxuries we allow ourselves, the amount of long-distance air travel we permit ourselves, and so forth. We are not being called to take up arms and fight an enemy; rather, the enemy is the very ordinary life we ourselves are leading as well-off North Americans. Yet, for all its presumed innocence, this way of life, multiplied by billions of people, is both unjust to those who cannot attain this lifestyle and destructive of the very planet that supports us all.

WHAT, THEN, WOULD be a personal, professional, and public ethic for twenty-first-century people and especially for well-off, religious people? One of the distinguishing characteristics of many, perhaps most, religions is some form of self-emptying. Often it takes the form of ego-lessness, the attempt to open the self so that God can enter, or desire is diminished.

Whether in Buddhism, with the self's release from desire by non-attachment, or the Christian admonition that to find one's life one must lose it, religions are often countercultural in their various ethics of self-denial in order that genuine fulfillment might occur. While, in some religious traditions, such self-denial moves into asceticism and life-denial, this is not usually the underlying assumption.

For example, in the Christian tradition, *kenosis* or self-emptying is seen as constitutive of God's being in creation, the incarnation, and the cross. In creation, God limits the divine self, pulling in, so to speak, to allow space for others to exist. God, who is the one in whom we live and move and have our being, does not take all the space, but gives space and life to others. In the incarnation, as Paul writes in Philippians 2:7, God "emptied the divine self, taking the form of a slave," and in the cross God gives of the divine self without limit, to side with the poor and the oppressed. Likewise, one understanding of Christian discipleship is a "cruciform" life, imitating the self-giving of Christ for others.

In some notable saints of the Christian tradition, this form of discipleship is clearly illustrated. Simone Weil, acutely conscious of her starving French compatriots during the Second World War, spoke of "de-creation," a radical form of self-emptying that involved both body and soul. John Woolman (1720–1772) had a dream in which he heard the words "John Woolman is dead"³ in order that he might live a life of total self-limitation as a protest against the excesses of his society made possible by slavery. Dorothy Day (1897–1980), identifying totally with the abject poverty of people in the ghettos of New York City during the Great Depression, lived an ethic of joyful sharing, a form of the abundant life totally contrary to our consumer understanding.

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The kenotic paradigm in these folks is not for the sake of asceticism or self-flagellation. It is not a negative statement about the earth and life; rather, it is the recognition that life's flourishing on earth demands certain limitations and sacrifices at physical and emotional levels. The ego that demands everything for itself—honor, power, money—is the same cannibalistic self that devours all the food and land. As St. Francis (1181/1182–1226) well knew, “possessionlessness” is a matter of the spirit and the body: one cannot, he insisted, hold on to one's sense of superiority while giving away all one's clothes to the poor. While the self-emptying pattern might have been seen in other times as a peculiarly religious way of being in the world, I think we can now see how it might be the germ of a personal, professional, and public ethic for the twenty-first century.

Two things characterize our time: first, an awareness of our radical interdependence on all other lifeforms as well as on the vital climatic system of our planet and, second, an increasing appreciation of the planet's finitude and vulnerability. These realities of our time mean that the whole vocabulary and sensibility of self-limitation, ego-lessness, sharing, giving space to others, and limiting our energy use, no longer sound like a special language for the saints, but, rather, an ethic for all of us.

The religions may be the greatest “realists,” with their intuitive appreciation for self-emptying and self-limitation as ways, not only to personal fulfillment, but also to sane planetary practice. Could it be that the religions can take the lead in exploring and illustrating how an ethic of space, energy, and *kenosis* might function in light of the twenty-first-century crisis of climate change? Could it be that the universal, cosmic Christ can lead Christians to respond to climate change by living in a self-emptying way, conscious that radical sharing, limitation, and sacrifice are necessary in our time of limited space and energy?

Could we live and move and have our being in the universal Christ, participating in the insight and power of God incarnate in the world as we deal with these mundane issues of the basics of existence—space and energy—so we can live in radical interdependence with all other creatures? We are not alone as we face this challenge—the universal Christ is in, with, and for the world as we struggle to deal with climate change.

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NOTES

- 1 Augustine of Hippo, *City of God*, Book XIV.
- 2 Irenaeus of Lyons, *Against Heresies*, Book 4, Chapter 20.
- 3 *The Journal of John Woolman* (Boston: James R. Osgood, 1871), 264.