

Blessed Are the Consumers: Climate Change and the Practice of Restraint. By Sallie McFague. Minneapolis, Minn.: Fortress Press, 2013. 225 pp. \$24.00 (paper).

This volume by Sallie McFague brings her life's work reflecting on models of God—increasingly around the crisis of climate change—into further focus through the metaphor of *kenosis* or, as in the subtitle, “the practice of restraint.” The book centers on the pivotal role of the world's religions in helping animate the moral and spiritual conversion to reality needed if contemporary societies are to avoid ecological catastrophe. In fact, she asserts, the shape of the change needed—from consumerist gratification toward communal orientation to the needs of the most vulnerable—represents an invitation back to the wellsprings of Christian (and other religious) tradition. What distinguishes McFague's book is her focus on spiritual autobiography: the power of narrative in opening windows of what such conversion and simplicity might actually look like. The central chapters of the book explore the witness of three “saints” fitting her criteria of performative witness to the exemplary life: John Woolman, Simone Weil, and Dorothy Day. Drawing on fifty years of studying and teaching the writings of these figures, she develops four key strategies their lives manifest. All four are means of practicing the radical “self-emptying” at the heart of her vision: (1) entering the “wild space” of voluntary poverty; (2) learning to be attentive to the needs of others, especially material needs; (3) developing a “universal self” able to encompass all life on earth, a self that has “no limits”; and (4) learning to practice *kenosis* both personally and publicly/politically in the world. Bracketing these central chapters on the saints and her four key practices of *kenosis* are introductory chapters on contemporary consumerism, as well as the role of religion and change of worldview in a time of eco-systemic crisis (chapters 1 and 2), and final chapters on the theology of *kenosis* more broadly and her personal-theological appropriation of these themes (chapters 7 and 8).

I find much to appreciate in McFague's decision to center this study of *kenosis* in spiritual autobiography, a powerful lens for exploring questions of conversion. Her three saints show diverse facets of resistance to the seduction of affluence: from Woolman's refusal to participate in any aspect of a slavery-driven economy, to Weil's orientation to the beauty of the world and the suffering of her time, to Day's practice of the "little way" of face-to-face hospitality joined to social action. These chapters on the saints and the four strategies McFague sees them offering, however, are also the most frustrating in a book too often marred by unclear writing, repetition, imprecise distinctions, and a tendency toward dualism and generalization. The most pervasive imprecision is her uncritical use of "the self" as a cipher for all that is narcissistic, alienated, and in need of emptying. The repeated all-or-nothing language whereby "the self" is to be given with "no limits" to every "other" (see, for example, pp. 111, 116, 118, and 172) seems to efface questions of relative power or social location: the complexity of real selves learning to navigate both limit and voice. Thus, despite mentioning, for example, Woolman's daily immersion in the practice of discernment, chapters 3 through 6 themselves exhibit a surprising absence of attention to its practice in reality. The idea that one might ever be called to say "No" to a particular other or demand, so as to say "Yes" to God in some other way, is unthinkable when "self-emptying" is an absolute good, demanding "limitless" availability to all. Thus these chapters begin to feel like a caricature, not a serious proposal for a way of life.

In contrast, the final chapters—where McFague returns from this experiment in case study to her own theological voice—return also to a level of clarity absent from much of the book's center. The key to this change in tone is found, I believe, in McFague's admission in chapter 7 that she herself has never been able to live in a way remotely like what she is developing from Woolman, Weil, or Day. Thus those chapters' lack of nuance is surely related to the fact that the author has little or no lived basis—no on-the-ground discernment—from which to write about how a life of radical-prophetic solidarity with the oppressed *works in real life*. When at last, then, she begins to write about her own spirituality of openness to God in all that is, a contemplative theological/activist life with strong echoes of nature mysticism, the writing shines. Not coincidentally, her language of the self opens up also to include not only the forms of privileged alienation that block many of her affluent readers from reality but the mystery and miracle and biological dependency of our lives on the countless creatures and forces of creation that sustain us. And her suggestions toward scientifically-based language for God through metaphors of *kenosis* will, I hope, contribute to a theological imagination adequate to ecological conversion as well.

Taken with the caveat to glean from her case studies the wisdom of the saints on their own terms—and to draw on McFague's own analysis primarily in chapters 1, 2, 7, and 8—the book is an important Christian voice in

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religious mobilization toward spiritual and economic change: blessed are *not* the consumers, but those who can let go and live.

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