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The Body of God, Sexually Violated: A Trauma-Informed Reading of the Climate Crisis

Danielle Elizabeth Tumminio Hansen 

Candler School of Theology, Emory University, 201 Dowman Drive, Atlanta, GA 30322, USA;
detummi@emory.edu

Abstract: This article employs the body of God metaphor, developed by Sallie McFague, in order to propose that the environmental crisis can be understood as a crisis in which the earth is being subjected to repeated sexual violations. The first section develops what is at stake, theologically, for the climate crisis when utilizing this metaphor. The next considers how applying this metaphor shifts the story of Christianity in ways that illuminate historic hierarchies of creation, as well as shift the way we frame the ecological crisis to one in which sexual harm has occurred. The third section uses trauma theory to understand the earth's response to the climate crisis and proposes a trauma-informed ethic for a revised practice.

Keywords: Sallie McFague; ecotheology; sexual violations; rape; environment



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1. Introduction

In August of 2020, the Trump administration authorized oil drilling in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge, allowing approximately 1.6 million acres, in the coastal plain region of the refuge, to be made available to companies who could extract natural resources from it. While the governor of Alaska hailed the move as an opportunity to create jobs, environmentalists and indigenous activists railed against the decision, arguing that it would devastate a delicate ecosystem and do irreversible damage to a number of species that call the region home.

This is but one anecdote of many in which governments and industries have assumed they have a right to control the earth's body; to understand the earth not as a living, breathing subject, but as an object designed primarily for human use and consumption. Christianity at large has been complicit in the anthropocentrism that permits the objectification and ecological destruction of the earth, thereby also becoming complicit in a seemingly endless climate crisis.¹ As Catherine Keller writes, "One upon a time we had . . . time . . . And now we seem to have lost it" (Keller 2018, p. 1).

Eco-feminists have recognized parallels between the subjugation experienced by the earth and the subjugation experienced by women in ways that mutually enable the perpetuation of patriarchal authority (Warren 2000; Dunayer 1995). These scholars observe that the feminized language used to describe the earth (i.e., Mother Earth/Mother Nature) and the pejorative terms that liken women to animals mutually support epistemic frameworks, as well as practices that allow for the control and manipulation of each (Adams 1990).² Both possess, in other words, identities constructed by patriarchal epistemologies that enable their violation. Meanwhile, feminist theologians have been attentive to a number of systemic forms of harm, including traumatic sexual violations inflicted upon human bodies, and while theologians at large are increasingly recognizing the need for theological analysis of the ecological crisis,³ more work needs to be done, especially by theologians like feminists who are attentive to matters of power. As Rosemary Radford Ruether recognizes, there are "interconnections between the domination of women and the domination of

nature” (Ruether 2012), and an awareness of these interconnections not only changes how we think about these relationships but how we inhabit them (Ruether 2012).

This article, therefore, builds upon these interconnections by providing a theological analysis of the climate crisis that emerges when using Sallie McFague’s metaphor of the world as the body of God. I propose that this metaphor functions as an important hermeneutic—as well as a deeply challenging one—for theologically framing both the climate crisis, as well as God’s identity and relationship to creation. In particular, I elucidate and develop McFague’s metaphor to suggest that there are parallels that can be drawn between the sexual violations that the earth experiences and the sexual violations that women’s bodies experience. I unpack these challenges and then use this conceptualization as a way to reframe both the dominant denial that characterizes the human response to the climate crisis, and to propose a trauma-informed ethic for moving forward in humans’ relationship to creation at large. Such an analysis develops a practical theology of the climate crisis insofar as it both encourages readers to think differently about their relationships to the earth, and to live out that relationship in a way that transforms the earth from object to subject.

Before proceeding further, however, a note of limitation: It is worth naming, at the outset, that women’s bodies are not the only human bodies that are subjected to sexual violations. I will be limiting my analysis to women’s bodies for the purposes of this article, in part because they constitute the majority of cases of sexual violations, and also because one of the goals of the article is to draw parallels between gender-based sexual violations and the violations inflicted by humans upon the earth.⁴ In addition, the role that the systemic oppression of women’s bodies plays in the normalization of sexual violations can be paralleled with the systemic oppression the planet faces, resulting in the vulnerability of each to continued harm. Indeed, one might argue that a rise in the awareness concerning the vulnerability of both occurred concurrently in the United States, as the height of the #MeToo movement collided with what might be named as a heightened call to climate action, initiated by Greta Thunberg’s school strike. Parallels between the constructed vulnerability of women’s bodies, the earth, and the trauma caused to each will be elucidated in what follows.

2. The Body of God, Sexually Violated

Sallie McFague is well-known for the development of metaphorical theology, which is a way of doing theology that considers how words and concepts have come to function as linguistic and conceptual idols, rather than metaphors for the Divine. She proposes in *Metaphorical Theology* that masculine language for God has come to function as such an idol, leading many who employ it to conclude God is essentially male, rather than the recognition that masculine terminology is only a partial and metaphorical representation of the “root-metaphor” of Christianity, the metaphor from which all other Christian metaphorical language ought to emerge (McFague 1982, pp. 28, 194).⁵ McFague proposes that the God–human relationship, specifically as represented in the vision of the kingdom of God, ought to ground the root-metaphor (Ibid., pp. 26–28).⁶ However, McFague also postulates that the root-metaphor is, essentially, beyond language, which cannot in and of itself encapsulate the divine, because the divine is ontologically more expansive than language, and because language is subject to human influence, including the influence of sin, which distorts it. Language can, therefore, partially represent the root-metaphor but it cannot directly or fully encapsulate it.

McFague proposes linguistic multiplicity as a possible antidote to language’s limitations and fallibility, which is why multiple metaphors are important to her. If one metaphor cannot fully represent the Divine, then perhaps many, when used together, can more closely do this linguistic work. Thus, rather than discarding the metaphor of God as a father or the biblical texts that support it, McFague asks readers to consider the extent to which the metaphor—and the biblical texts that name it—may be incomplete or not intended for literal interpretation, even as she simultaneously encourages readers to consider other

metaphors that could illuminate previously undeveloped aspects of Christianity's root-metaphor, thereby opening the possibility for humans to deepen their knowledge of, and relationship with, the Divine (TeSelle [McFague] 1975, p. 29). McFague, therefore, suggests that the issue with using masculine language to name the divine is not its existence, but its dominance. In other words, the exclusivity of its use reinforces the power of the linguistic idol, and so the solution is to disrupt the power of that idol by creating more linguistic frameworks which, together, might do a more comprehensive job of representing God.

McFague proposes various metaphors in the corpus of her work, including the metaphor of "friend" (McFague 1989, p. 160; McFague 1982, pp. 178–94)⁷ but here I would like to focus particularly on the metaphor of the world as God's body, a metaphor she develops at length in *The Body of God*. McFague argues that the metaphor of the world as God's body is an important supplement to the dominant human male metaphor, because it draws upon the inherent embodiment present in the incarnation itself, such that bodies of all sorts—including the earth's body—matter because God chose to incarnate Jesus into a body. As McFague explains,

"We will suggest that the primary belief of the Christian community, its doctrine of the incarnation (the belief that God is with us here on earth), be radicalized beyond Jesus of Nazareth to include all matter . . . As long as we refuse to imagine God as embodied, we imply . . . that the body is inferior" (McFague 1993, p. xi).

The incarnation, therefore, justifies the overall theological import of the body, including the embodiment of the earth upon which Jesus lived and through which he procured sustenance, clothing, and shelter. This does not mean that the earth and its contents can be equated with God, but it does mean that we can know God through the world, the locus where God chooses to self-mediate. As McFague writes:

"The world, creation, is not identified or confused with God. Yet it is the place where God is present to us. Christianity's most distinctive belief is that divine reality is always mediated through the world, a belief traditionally expressed in the Chalcedonian formula that Christ was "fully God, fully man" . . . In both instances, the Word is made flesh, God is available to us only through the mediation of embodiment . . . Incarnationalism, radicalized, means that we do not, ever, at least in this life, see God face to face, but only through the mediation of the bodies we pay attention to, listen to, and learn to love and care for" (ibid., pp. 135, 134).

As a result of this fundamental tenet, McFague makes the provocative argument that in destroying the earth, we are participating in the destruction of God, because, while "a panentheistic model does not reduce God to the world . . . God is in the young woman killed in the accident and in the baby with birth defects as well as in those who suffer the loss or diminishment of their loved ones" (ibid., p. 176). To that end, God participates in our losses, in suffering, in an embodied, intimate way that not only affects us but also affects God. In turn, the embodied world—creation—becomes not only the site of divine–human suffering, but also of redemption, because if God is in creation, then salvation must take place within it (ibid., pp. 179–80).

McFague's metaphor of the world as God's body has significant implications for both constructing the body theologically and relationally (ibid., p. 101). Because God is part of creation, and because God is, in essence, good, so too are bodies good. To that end, privileging the body's goodness becomes a fundamental priority for McFague, for in the metaphor of the world as God's body, each of our bodies—indeed, the bodies of all creation—are part of God. However, this awareness also means that bodies are connected through their relationship to God, who inheres in each one. As she writes, when one accepts as axiomatic the metaphor of the world as God's body, then it becomes evident that,

The "God-part" will take care of itself if we can love and value the bodies. That is what an incarnational theology assures us: it is right to have a nature spirituality. In fact, we should have one . . . All of us, living and nonliving, are

one phenomenon, a phenomenon stretching over billions of years and containing untold numbers of strange, diverse, and marvelous forms of matter—including our own . . . [Therefore] I belong not only to my immediate family or country or even my species, but to the earth and all its life-forms. I know this now. The question is, can I, will I, *live* as if I did? Will I accept my proper place in the scheme of things? Will *we*, the human beings of the planet, do so? (ibid., pp. 97, 113, 211).

The theology that McFague proposes, therefore, maps the body of God metaphor for the purpose of developing a distinctly practical theology. The goal is not just to think about our relationship to the earth differently, but to act differently, because our awareness of that relationship causes us to regard the earth as subject instead of object. Hence, the reader observes how McFague's process of transforming the vocabulary that expresses the divine-human relationship has a broadly performative effect, because it calls us both to experience the ontology of the earth differently and, symbiotically, to act differently.

How, then, might this metaphor of the world as God's body cause us to see ourselves and our relationship to the earth differently, in light of the climate crisis?

3. Assessing the Metaphor

The world as God's body metaphor provokes a number of difficult questions about divine power, the relationship between members of the Trinity, and the dynamics of the God-human relationship. For instance, can humans harm God? Is the first person of the Trinity capable of being harmed? Yet, readers must recall the importance of the word "metaphor" here, before they either raise their hands in despair or abandon McFague entirely because her beliefs seem too radical. Recall that McFague holds that language is imperfect and that God is so vast and beyond linguistic comprehension. I agree with that assertion. Therefore, neither McFague nor I intend for any one metaphor to be a comprehensive representation of the divine, but rather a partial and imperfect reflection that, at best, reveals something of true value that might otherwise go unsaid about the divine-human relationship. The particular metaphor of the world as God's body, then, was never intended to replace or supersede all other representations or beliefs about God, but rather it was meant to supplement those representations that align with the root-metaphor with a vision that adds something new and previously unexpressed.

What is gained theologically by such a metaphor? First, the metaphor of the world as God's body allows McFague to argue that bodies of all kinds matter to God and that any act of violence, injustice, or ecological destruction done to the earth is an act against God. McFague's intention here is not only to draw attention to the theological significance of the harm done to the earth's body, but also to draw attention to the harm done to other objectified bodies, including human ones. In other words, McFague recognizes that while "a panentheistic model does not reduce God to the world . . . God is in the young woman killed in the accident and in the baby with birth defects as well as in those who suffer the loss or diminishment of their loved ones" (ibid., p. 176).

To that end, in suggesting that the world is God's body, McFague not only argues that bodies matter, but that any act of violence, injustice, or ecological destruction done to the earth becomes an act against God, and that such harms echo others inflicted upon human beings whose bodies have been constructed as vulnerable in ways that cause them to become disenfranchised and neglected by those with power in society (ibid., pp. 16–22, 165). Ethical and pastoral implications for ecological theology, and the care of bodies, thus evidence themselves through this metaphor (ibid., p. 186). Insofar as one conceives ecological destruction as a form of sexual violation, then, it becomes possible to argue that McFague's metaphor represents the possibility of divine solidarity with human victims of sexual violations, while simultaneously condemning both the enactment of human and ecological sexual harm on the grounds that both violate the creation in which God embeds. It, therefore, gives a theological warrant for both naming and condemning the sexual violation of the earth, as well as the sexual violation of human bodies.

Second, theologians including Cone, Williams, and Moltmann have convincingly argued that there is value in understanding Jesus' life and death as illuminating the presence of divine solidarity with humans. From an intersectional feminist perspective, solidarity is likewise important, because it calls us to acknowledge the subjectivity of another, such that a relationship between parties is possible. Divine-human solidarity matters, therefore, because it helps humans see that they are not alone in their suffering and that their personhood matters to God. What McFague's metaphor of the world as God's body adds is an additional dimension to divine solidarity, such that solidarity is not just shared with humans, but also shared with the earth. While solidarity alone is not a sufficient telos for the theological project of salvation because it is limited in its ability to actively defeat the given sin or evil at hand, it nonetheless responds to the reality that suffering alone renders a victim more vulnerable and isolated than suffering in a community does.

Relatedly, other theologians have done important work in parsing out how it is possible for Jesus to simultaneously be capable of experiencing embodied vulnerability, while not compromising the divine essence.⁸ These conceptions allow for the recognition that Jesus' embodied vulnerability has value, while nonetheless asserting that it is possible for Jesus to have suffered and died on the cross without the simultaneous destruction of the divine essence. Perhaps, then, it is possible to make a similar argument for the first person of the Trinity; to assert that it is possible for the Creator to experience suffering in a way that reconceptualizes and heightens the gravity of the earth's suffering, while also not sacrificing a divine essence that remains inviolable.

Finally, expanding on how and where God engages in solidarity with all of creation has important gendered implications for the environmental crisis as a form of sexual harm, when one considers it in conjunction with the common metaphor that English speakers use to speak of the earth in feminine terms, as "Mother Nature" or "Mother Earth". Ecofeminist philosophers, such as Carol Adams, suggest that the likening of the earth to a woman's body becomes a convenient way to essentialize the earth as an entity that needs to be subdued and controlled, just as women's bodies need to be subdued and controlled (Adams 1990). This gendered metaphorical language itself emerges from the assumption that women's bodies create life, just as the earth creates life, but it also relates to the assumptions about the extent to which either is essentially nurturing, life-giving, and, because of each capacity, mysterious at best, and inferior at worst, to the independent rationality associated with the male mind, as constructed by Enlightenment thought. Language, in other words, frames how we understand the world around such, such that to gender the earth in ways that mirror the subjugation common in women's lives enables the continued subjugation of each, while simultaneously perpetuating patriarchal ways of knowing (Saidero 2017; Gudmarsdottir 2010).

Now, while this language embeds flawed assumptions about gender essentialism and pastoral implications for women whose reproductive organs cannot effect the creation of new life, it also allows theologians to frame the climate crisis in terms of gender-based violence and to query whether the crisis is only a violation of the earth or a violation of women's bodies more generally.⁹

Such a conceptualization also allows theologians to differently frame the earth's response to human actions. At the risk of anthropomorphizing, it allows us to see climate change in terms of sexual violations that can be conceptualized through the lens of trauma.¹⁰ This trauma-informed lens can inform how humans not only see the climate crisis, but also how they respond to it.

4. Applying the Metaphor

First, the application of this metaphor encourages us to consider the role that stories play in how we construct our role in climate change. The metaphor of the world as God's body is but one way to image God's relation to humans, and far from the dominant one. But, by applying the metaphor, we become more attuned to how it causes us to read the climate crisis differently from the way that the dominant metaphor does. Returning again

to McFague, she writes in *A New Climate for Christology* that there is indeed a dominant story, a dominant narrative or metaphor about Christianity. She refers to this dominant story as a “model” and explains that much of what we consider undebatable Christian theology is, in fact, “the Western story, anchored by a monarchical, all-powerful God” (McFague 2021, p. 2). McFague goes on to suggest that, truthfulness aside, the usefulness of this particular story has worn thin,¹¹ and, in turn, it suggests that the Western interpretive story of Christianity is an essentially patriarchal story, one that pits male humans against a male God in a sort of cosmic battle rooted in individualism, Enlightenment ways of knowing, and capitalism (ibid., p. 3).

In terms of inter-human relationships, a consequence of this dominant story is that it allows some bodies to be privileged above other bodies. Humans collectively privilege their own bodies over animal bodies and the body of the earth. More specifically, humans also collectively privilege bodies with lighter skin over bodies with darker skin, as well as the bodies of those who identify as men over the bodies of those who identify as women (ibid., p. 6). Those who find themselves beneath the pinnacle of the most privileged body type therefore find themselves inhabiting a place of vulnerability. This vulnerability, moreover, is socially constructed in such a way that it becomes appropriate to exploit it.¹²

At the same time, it is also a story that allows for the earth’s violation. The earth, in this story, is not a body at all, but rather an object and, as such, is designed to be subdued and dominated, in the spirit of a literal reading of Genesis 1:28. There is, in other words, a hierarchy in this story in which God is at the top, humans are directly underneath, and the rest of creation exists to be used at the convenience of these humans. We see the application of this story on a daily basis, in such subtle and insidious ways that we barely notice: Humans choose to drive cars that raise the planet’s temperature and destroy its ecosystems. They manufacture and dispose of plastic, to the extent that islands of it have coalesced in the Pacific Ocean. They raise, kill, and consume large numbers of animals, most of whom spend their lives in cramped, contained, and unnatural habitats.

This kind of objectification is precisely the kind seen in inter-human sexual violations in which one human being sees another as an object to be used, rather than a subject with agency that deserves respect. In other words, while the physical forms of harm are not the same, the meaning of them and the goals of them are strikingly similar—to subdue, to dominate, to control. Moreover, that both of these forms of harm exist—and exist in a way that is so normalized—is a symbol of how powerful the dominant story of Christianity is. Applying the metaphor of the body of God becomes one way to disrupt the power of that dominant story, because it brings to light assumptions about the story that may have gone unquestioned by too many for too long.

It also provides a new story of the relationships between God, humans, and the earth that can guide our ethics going forward. In this case, the metaphor of the world as God’s body makes it unthinkable to harm the earth, because to harm the earth would be to harm the most generative parts of God’s self. To do that would be the very definition of sin, and therefore, the application of this metaphor requires that humans find ways to see the earth as a subject and to treat it with the reverence that we give to God.

5. Ecological Sin as Sexual Selfishness

The second consequence of this metaphor’s application is that it allows us to strike a parallel between ecological sin and sexual selfishness. Throughout her corpus, Sallie McFague adheres to the belief that solidarity and relationships are grounding principles of the Christian life, such that the violation of relationships become the basis for her understanding of sin. Phrased differently, if the relationship between God and humans, as modeled in the life of Jesus and the New Testament parables that comprise the root-metaphor of Christianity (the fundamental metaphor through which others derive), then acts that betray the principles of that relationship constitute sin, such that sin becomes the act of ranking oneself above or apart from others, thereby eschewing relationships. Sin, therefore, manifests when individuals refuse to acknowledge that they are in a relationship

or refuse to value the other with whom they are in relationship, resulting in their objectification. As McFague summarizes, “Our sin is plain old selfishness—wanting to have everything for ourselves . . . Sin is limitless greed” (McFague 1993, pp. 114–15).

McFague describes sin in different ways, depending on the metaphor she is working with, though the priority of selfishness remains consistent between each. When working with her metaphor of God as a friend, she explains sin through the language of betrayal—because loyalty to the friend and the free choice to be in such relationships ground friendships, sin becomes the act of turning away from the relational loyalty to which one is committed (McFague 1989, p. 162). In contrast, when dealing with the metaphor of the world as God’s body, McFague suggests that sin involves denying relationships not just with humans, but also with the earth. Indeed, a relationship with the earth is a precondition of human survival, because humans cannot live without certain fundamentals that the earth provides, including food from its soil, heat from its wood, and shelter from its stone. Hence, humans sin when they fail to acknowledge that they are in a relationship with other humans and with nature through virtue of their embodiment. This orientation is also known as speciesism.¹³ To that end, McFague writes that:

“It is obvious, then, what sin is in this metaphor of the world as God’s body: it is refusal to be part of the body, the special part we are as *imago dei*. In contrast to the king–realm model, where sin is against God, here, it is against the world. To sin is not to refuse loyalty to the Liege Lord but to refuse to take responsibility for nurturing, loving, and befriending the body and all its parts. Sin is the refusal to realize one’s radical interdependence with all that lives: it is the desire to set oneself apart from all others as not needing them or being needed by them. Sin is the refusal to be the eyes, the consciousness, of the cosmos . . . If Christian discipleship is shaped by solidarity with the needy, including nature as the new poor, then natural evil is not limited to what happens to me and mine, and sin becomes the limitation of one’s horizon to the self” (McFague 1993, pp. 77, 174).¹⁴

McFague, therefore, concludes that humans make idols of their own identities by limiting their horizon of the self, and by privileging their own subjectivity above the subjectivity of other bodies, or, phrased differently, privileging their own power in a way that constructs the vulnerability of other bodies (McFague 2008, p. 15). Sin, thus, manifests because this form of idolatry refuses to acknowledge the reality that one is in a relationship with others who may have different needs, identities, and values from themselves. This can occur both intra- and inter-species. In cases of misogyny, for instance, men become capable of idolizing their own embodied identity and privileging their own subjectivity above the embodied identity of women, thereby allowing themselves to objectify women, construct women as vulnerable, and enact harm upon them. The corollary in the environmental crisis is that humans, at large, function as men do in misogyny—able to privilege their own subjectivity, to construct the earth as vulnerable by rendering it an object that exists for human use, and to exploit its body without a second thought because we believe that the earth’s body belongs to us (McFague 1993, p. 115).

I’d like to build on McFague’s conception of sin as selfishness to suggest that the dominant discursive beliefs and practices that humans exercise in their relationship with the earth can be categorized as sin, because they allow humans to objectify and desire the earth in a fundamentally selfish way. The Trump administration’s authorization of oil drilling in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge provides just one of many examples that support this assertion. Lawmakers and other powerful figures in governments and businesses make decisions that are driven by the short-term interests of humans, not of the earth. As a result, a decision like the one to drill in the Arctic is justified by the need for oil to fuel energy-inefficient vehicles that transport humans, as well as arguing that humans need their jobs in the oil and auto industries. Such an argument is, therefore, selfish insofar as it is driven entirely by the needs of human beings—as well as a failure of imagination—without regard for the earth and the damage done to it.

Relatedly, the ecological crisis can be understood not only as a sin but also as an act of sexual violation, because this objectifying orientation allows humans to presume that it is appropriate to penetrate generative parts of the earth's body without the earth's consent.¹⁵ We frack the earth's crust, seizing gas from its innermost parts. We rip trees from soil intended to generate life. We litter the atmosphere with carbon dioxide and methane emissions that pollutes the very air needed for the creation and continuation of life. Humans do this without asking the earth, assuming that it is our right to use the earth's body, including its generative and reproductive capacities, as we please. Indeed, one may go so far as to say that humans have been raping the earth's body.

Now, I recognize that this assertion is, *prima facie*, problematic in its own right because of the way it anthropomorphizes the earth, constructing it in terms of a subset of human bodies. However, what might be beneficial about attempting, however clumsily, to identify the way in which both women's and the earth's bodies frequently experience a form of sexual violation is that it recognizes that the bodies of each have been constructed as vulnerable in such a way that that the vulnerability can be exploited in ways that become normalized, instead of being identified and responded to as real forms of wrongdoing. Put differently, I am following in McFague's footsteps by proposing a linguistic metaphor that hopefully will not function as an idol, but rather as an important addition that allows us to give speech to forms of harm in new ways. In turn, it also allows us to think about and speak about the relationship between women's bodies and the body of the earth in a new way.

Framing these human acts as rape or as a sexual violation has provocative implications for McFague's metaphor: If we are raping the earth, then are we raping God? What would be at stake were God—and not just the earth—vulnerable to this kind of trauma? This framework challenges us to think afresh about what role vulnerability plays in God's identity, and it also challenges us to consider the possibility that we have become perpetrators who take advantage of that vulnerability.

6. The Dialectic of Trauma and a Proposed Ethic

Sexual violations are, more often than not, traumatic for those humans who experience them. We know this from the numerous studies done on inter-human sexual violations—when one person sexually violates another, it often results in trauma, where the victimized party experiences symptoms of posttraumatic stress, including flashbacks and emotional numbing. These alternating symptoms of hyper-awareness and numbing are known as the dialectic of trauma, meaning symptoms that appear to be antithetical to each other but are, in fact, intimately linked. In the case of trauma, the dialectic symbolizes the desire to both remember the trauma, so it doesn't happen again (as exhibited by symptoms, such as flashbacks and hypervigilance) while also desiring to forget it because of how terrible it was (as symbolized by symptoms, such as numbing or forgetting aspects of the event).

If we apply the metaphor of the world as God's body to the climate crisis and understand the harm we are doing to the earth is a sexual one, in which the agency and generative parts of the earth are being violated by humans, then perhaps there is a traumatic dimension to the earth's violation. Indeed, framing the ecological crisis in terms of a series of sexual traumas undertaken by humans on the earth's body changes how we understand the earth's response, because it causes us to consider the ways in which the earth is a subject and, as a subject, is exerting agency in response to the horror humans are inflicting upon it.

It also calls us to recognize the ways in which trauma—which we often assume is only a human phenomenon—is actually a response that humans share with other parts of creation. Scientists are discovering that animals of all sorts experience traumas in ways that alter brain chemistry and induce posttraumatic stress symptoms, symptoms that include, what trauma theorist Judith Herman calls, a "dialectic" of intrusive and avoidance symptoms (Herman 1997, pp. 47–51). In the Canadian Yukon, for example, the snowshoe hare population rises and falls based not just on how many predators successfully kill the

hares, but also based upon the trauma of living among the predators. Ecologists studying the phenomenon have found that snowshoe hare mothers experience such profound stress from living amongst the predators that it causes changes in the brain, including a rise in cortisol levels, that resembles those found present in the brains of humans with PTSD (Sheriff et al. 2010). Interestingly, the researchers also found a generational component to the trauma, as the changes in the brains of the snowshoe hares passed from mother to daughter; both populations produce fewer young as a result of the changes in brain chemistry.¹⁶

Researchers have hypothesized that trauma works in the wild across species ranging from elephants, to rats, in ways that reminisce the human posttraumatic stress reaction (Zanette and Clinchy 2020). In other words, it appears to be the case that the animal world at large may experience intrusion symptoms—which include recurring memories and dreams about the trauma, flashbacks, emotional distress or flooding when one is reminded of the trauma, and flashbacks—as well as avoidance symptoms, such as attempts avoid locations or people associated with the trauma, as well as dissociation, emotional numbness, attempts to avoid thinking of the trauma, and difficulty remembering the trauma. In addition to those symptoms that are emblematic of the dialectic, posttraumatic stress is also marked by symptoms including guilt, shame, difficulty sleeping, difficulty concentrating, outbursts of anger, and a heightened startle response.

Perhaps most valuably, using a trauma-informed lens to understand climate change as a form of trauma inflicted upon the earth's body allows humans to reframe the events we are seeing in terms of concrete harm: The overall warming of the globe that appears in tandem with periods of striking cold can be understood as a dialectic, an earthquake as an earthly startle response, a hurricane as an outburst of anger. The earth is speaking in its own language, a language of wind, heat, water, and magma. Insofar as we see the world as God's body, this response can also be understood as God speaking through the earth's suffering in order to signal that the violation that humans inflict on the earth breaches the root-metaphor of Christianity and needs to change.

Recognizing earth's speech is essential to responding to the climate crisis for the same reason that it is essential to respond to the speech of other members of creation who experience forms of trauma. It affords them a form of epistemic credibility. By way of an example, research on human traumas shows that affording epistemic credibility to victims is both paramount for their healing and is also countercultural.¹⁷ When victims tell others about traumatic events in their lives, it is not uncommon for witnesses to respond with denial because, as trauma theorists like Judith Herman postulate, it is easier to live in a world where one assumes the victim is lying than to accept the pervasiveness of violence and the reality that we may be complicit in it to some degree (Herman 1997, pp. 7–33). This denial is not helpful to either victims or witnesses. Victims are unable to recover without the ability to speak, to craft a narrative, and to integrate trauma into the reality of their lives. They need witnesses who will listen and respond to isolation with community, to harm with safety (ibid., pp. 155–213). Meanwhile, witnesses who adopt a stance of denial are avoiding both painful truths and the opportunity to serve as supporters and advocates.

If we think about the climate crisis as a form of trauma inflicted upon God's body, then human propensity to deny earth's speech makes more sense. Human denial of the earth's trauma mirrors their denial of the trauma inflicted upon human bodies; in both cases, it remains more convenient to blame the victim than to acknowledge the reality that one lives in a world in which such horrors can occur.¹⁸ Yet, the earth persists in her efforts to be heard, just as human survivors of traumas refuse to be silenced. Melting glaciers, hurricanes, fires, and earthquakes can be read as acts of divine speech that perhaps mirror the words of Jesus on the cross, "Eli, Eli, lama sabachani?" or "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Matt. 27:36; Psalm 22:1, NRSV). Ethically, then, we must listen to the testimony of trauma and consider what needs to be done to make things right, because to continue to ignore what is being said is to continue being complicit in the trauma itself.

Lastly, the earth's traumatized speech can be read as an act of resistance undertaken by the earth to draw our attention to the reality of its traumatization, calling humans out of denial to be witnesses. Humans are uniquely responsible for the climate crisis, or, put differently, they are uniquely the perpetrators of the earth's trauma. It is, therefore, imperative that humans find ways to move from a stance of denial to undertake the work of active witnessing and active solidarity. Only by actively witnessing, recognizing, and naming the harm being done can we grow in awareness of it, and awareness is the first step to change, because it allows us to recognize our individual complicity as well as a systemic need for accountability.¹⁹ In other words, if McFague is right in that sin is a form of selfishness, then one way to counteract its power is through a radical practice of empathy that extends beyond our own species and to creation at large, even including the God who made it. Only through that empathy can we begin to comprehend the enormity of the wrong we have done, as well as starting to take concrete steps to listen to what the earth is demanding needs to be done in order to make things right. Such steps would return agency to the earth, and while experiencing the return of agency is a necessary step in healing for any trauma survivor, it takes on a new dimension when we consider its meaning in light of the guiding metaphor of this paper. If, indeed, the world is God's body, then returning agency to the earth is an active step that humans would take to not only make things right for the earth, but also to make things right between themselves and God. It comes as an act of recompense, a form of confession, and a way of atoning for sin.

7. Conclusions

Catherine Keller writes that the earth is "not yielding submissively to the religio-politico-economic schematisms of what we may call anthropic exceptionalism. Earth names do not matter beneath us, not space lying static beneath time, but the teeming sphere of our collectivity" (Keller 2018, p. 6). Humans are, as Keller acknowledges, profoundly dependent on, and connected to, the life of the earth. That recognition of our interdependence is perhaps what led McFague to develop the metaphor of the world as the body of God, a metaphor that supplements the dominant masculine metaphor of the Christian tradition, while raising both relevant and provocative questions about God's identity within the ecological crisis and within the sexual crises facing human bodies. This article sought to parse out some of what might be theologically at stake in this metaphor, suggesting that it has the potential to add theological value and ethical relevance to the current ecological and human crises of our day. The metaphor also parsed out a trauma-informed response that might emerge from reframing the climate crisis as a series of traumatic sexual violations.

McFague, as stated earlier, never intended any of the metaphors she developed to be comprehensive. In this way, she adopted a hermeneutic of humility in her work. This hermeneutic helps readers understand both the significance of her theological contributions, while also orienting them towards a way of living in relation to God that is, in and of itself, humble at its roots. That humility may serve us well as we seek to understand the nature of God and our relationship to the Divine. It may also orient us as we step out of our denial and begin to address the trauma we have inflicted upon the earth.

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Notes

- ¹ Pamela McCarroll writes that theology has been complicit in an anthropocentric focus in its work. Indeed, one could argue that this form of anthropocentrism elevates the status of women's bodies and other minoritized human bodies by denigrating the earth's body, which raises intriguing questions about extending the notion of intersectionality to include systems of power that involve players beyond the human species (McCarroll 2020).
- ² For a helpful primer on the philosophical intersections of feminism and environmental studies, see Warren (2015).
- ³ For a particularly comprehensive overview, see the *Routledge Handbook of Religion and Ecology* (Jenkins et al. 2016).

- 4 For an extended discussion of how the limits of language enable false or limited assumptions about sexual violations, see [Tumminio Hansen \(2020\)](#); for more on the term “sexual violations” as a preferable alternative to more commonly used terms, including “rape” or “sexual assault” or “gender-based violence”, see [Alcoff \(2018\)](#), pp. 12–14.
- 5 McFague inherits the term “root-metaphor” from Stephen Pepper, who opposes logical positivism, arguing that all data is necessarily subject to interpretation by the interpreter, thereby pressing against the assumption that objectivity exists. In turn, he coins the term “root-metaphor” to mean the guiding principle or the grounding for any interpretation ([Pepper 1972](#)).
- 6 McFague, here, harkens to Earl MacCormac, who defines a root-metaphor as, “the most basic assumption about the nature of the world or experience that we can make when we try to give a description of it” ([MacCormac 1976](#), p. 93).
- 7 For more of a contrast between McFague’s model of a friend and her model of a lover, see [McFague \(1989\)](#), p. 168: “To be friends with God is the most astounding possible, for whereas a mother desires your existence and a lover finds you valuable, a friend likes you”. For more on the model of God as a friend, specifically in relation to climate change, see [McFague \(2021\)](#), pp. 69–89.
- 8 For a book-length consideration of this topic, see [Adams \(2006\)](#).
- 9 Candida Moss and Joel Baden raise an important biblical challenge to the assumption that women’s bodies are essentially reproductive bodies and that their identities ought to be essentially rooted in their reproductive capacities. Relatedly, Danielle Tumminio Hansen develops a practical theology of how the dominant discourse of the biological family functions as something like an idol in the reproductive culture of the United States, to the detriment of those who cannot reproduce via heterosexual intercourse, including those who suffer from infertility or reproductive loss, who are single, or who are in same-sex or transgender relationships. See [Moss and Baden \(2015\)](#) and [Tumminio Hansen \(2019\)](#).
- 10 I do not mean here to assume that all sexual violations are traumatizing, but rather to say that sexual violations have the potential to be. Indeed, Nicola Gavay has made important contributions from a psychological perspective about how trauma theory has come to be a dominant discourse in evaluating the authenticity of sexual violations, even though it is possible to experience a sexual violation without being traumatized in the aftermath ([Gavay 2018](#), pp. 159–81).
- 11 As McFague explains, one of the issues with the current interpretation of the Christian story by those in power is that the story does not allow for constructive action in the secular world. As she writes, “A story is most effective when it aligns the religious dimension with the secular: when they are mutually reciprocal and supportive. When the distance between the two interpretations becomes too great, the link between them breaks, and people are left adhering to just one or to none at all. The latter stance is scarcely credible, and folks will fight to hold on to their story, even an “incredible” or mediocre one, rather than be bereft of any story” ([McFague 2021](#), p. 2).
- 12 McFague writes of vulnerability differently in *A New Climate for Theology*, where she proposes that humans must internalize their own vulnerability to climate change in order to recognize their role in it, their interlocking relationship to the earth, and their responsibility to respond to the harm being done ([McFague 2008](#), pp. 15–20).
- 13 The term “speciesism” means the privileging of the human species over other forms of creation. The term was popularized by philosopher Peter Singer in the 1970’s.
- 14 The limitation of one’s horizon is, likewise, central to McFague’s definition of natural evil. Distinguishing between natural evil and sin, McFague explains how they overlap insofar as each roots itself in a kind of selfishness, as defined by being unable to see beyond one’s personal horizon. She writes that, “Natural evil and sin join at this one point for both are concerned with a limited horizon, the inability to identify with others outside of the self, the refusal to acknowledge that one is not the center of things. Natural evil is narrowly interpreted as bad things happening to me and sin is the desire to have everything for oneself” ([McFague 1993](#), p. 175).
- 15 Feminist philosophers and psychologists have raised important questions about the validity of consent as a criterion for evaluating whether a sexual violation has occurred. However, it may still be fair to say that while these scholars express concerns about how it is possible to coerce consent, such that consent can be given when desire is not truly present, they express fewer concerns about instances where consent is explicitly withheld. For a selection of readings that discusses the problems with consent, see [Alcoff \(2018\)](#), [Gavay \(2018\)](#) and [Cahill \(2014\)](#).
- 16 The authors of the study suggest that there is an adaptive use to the steps taken by the snowshoe hares during this period, as the stress required to survive necessitates that they hide more and eat less in order to survive. Though this causes a reduction in births—as well as in the size of young—it also ensures that the population will continue in the long-term, because the snowshoe hares are taking measures to avoid predators in the short-term ([Sheriff et al. 2010](#)).
- 17 Susan Brison writes at length about how misogyny, a denial of trauma, and our propensity to side with perpetrators affect the epistemic credibility of sexual trauma survivors ([Brison 2003](#)).
- 18 McCarroll suggests that ecoanxiety underlies human denial about the climate crisis, and that this anxiety is grounded emotions like guilt and shame, as well as a sense of psychological paralysis. As she writes, “Perhaps we are so overwhelmed by the enormity of the challenge before us—both as a field rethinking its foundational priorities and as a species in the face of extreme environmental changes—that we would rather close our eyes, close our ears, and carry on as we always have, something like Nietzsche’s “last men” seeking to be distracted by trivialities” ([McCarroll 2020](#), p. 44).

- ¹⁹ It is worth naming here that not all humans are equally complicit in the climate crisis and that some have been concrete victims of it. Humans who occupy places of power (as well as the institutions they support) bear a disproportionate amount of responsibility, while the most vulnerable (who are often minoritized bodies) have suffered the greatest impact. As McCarroll summarizes, “While creation is groaning, burdened under the consuming habits of the richest among us, the poorest of the world suffer the extremes of the environmental crisis” (McCarroll 2020, pp. 30–31). For a book-length exploration of this topic from a womanist perspective, see Baker-Fletcher (1998).

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