

# The World as God's Body

by Sallie McFague

I spent my last sabbatical leave in England, that green and pleasant land, where in contrast to our countryside there are no billboards and little trash. I recall an early-morning bus trip to Coventry; the lovely, gently rolling hills, quaint villages and thatched-roofed cottages. There were sheep dotting the hills -- but also something else: huge, concrete towers of nuclear plants rising up through the morning mist. It seemed a strange juxtaposition: sheep and nuclear towers, life and potential death.

U.S. Cruise missiles were also a part of the countryside, though I did not see them. These towers and missiles symbolize a situation unique to our time: we are the first generation of human beings who have the responsibility of nuclear knowledge.

In perverse imitations of God the creator of life, we have become potential uncreators. We have the knowledge and the power to destroy ourselves and much of the rest of life. And we will always have this knowledge even if nuclear disarmament occurs. Jonathan Schell in *The Fate of the Earth* speaks of the "second death -- the death of life. The first death is our own individual one, and difficult as this is to face, we at least know that others will take our place. But the death of birth is the extinction of life-and that is too horrendous to contemplate, especially when we reflect that we would be responsible for it.

Our nuclear knowledge brings to the surface a fundamental fact about human existence: we are part and parcel of the web of life and exist in interdependence with all other beings, both human and nonhuman. As Pierre Teilhard de Chardin puts it, "I realized that my own poor trifling existence was one with the immensity of all that is and all that is in process of becoming." Or as the poet Wallace Stevens says, "Nothing is itself taken alone. Things are because of interrelations and interconnections." The evolutionary, ecological perspective insists that we are, in the most profound way, "not our own." We belong, from the cells of our bodies to the finest creations of our minds, to the intricate, ever changing cosmos. We both depend on the web of life for our own continued existence and in a special way we are responsible for it, for we alone know that life is interrelated and we alone know how to destroy it. It is an awesome and unsettling thought.

What does all this mean for theology? Well, what is theology? Theos/logos: talk about God. Theology has special responsibility for the symbols, images and language used for expressing the relationship between God and the world in every age. We must ask, given our unique situation which I have just described: Can we continue to talk about God and ourselves as we have in the past? Do we not need to look at the traditional language to see whether it is helpful or harmful in our time'?

The Christian faith claims, most basically, that the universe is neither indifferent nor malevolent, but that there is a power (and a personal power at that) which is on the side of life and its fulfillment -- and that we have some clues to specify and flesh out this claim in the life, death and appearances of Jesus of Nazareth. In what images and metaphors has that claim been expressed throughout Christian history? The dominant imagery has been monarchical. The classical picture employs royalist, triumphalist metaphors. depicting God as king, lord and patriarch who rules over and cares for the world and human beings.

Gordon Kaufman points out in *Theology for a Nuclear Age* that divine sovereignty is the issue with which theologians in the nuclear age must deal. In its cruder versions, God is the king who fights on the side of his chosen ones to bring their enemies down; in more refined versions, God is the father who will not let his children suffer. The first view supports militarism. the second supports escapism. As Kaufman states, two groups of American Christians currently rely on these images of God in their responses to the nuclear situation. One group claims that if a nuclear holocaust comes, it will be God's will --the Armageddon -- and America should arm itself to fight the devil's agent, communist Russia. The other passively relies on the all-powerful father to take care of the situation.

Is divine sovereignty the appropriate imagery to express salvation in our time? It may have been for some ages, but in our time, when the interdependence of all life and our special responsibility for it need to be emphasized, is it for ours?

Different imagery is needed in order to express Christian transformation in different times. There is a basic point here that needs stressing. Images of God do not describe God but express ways, experiences, of relating to God. We

must use what is familiar to talk about the unfamiliar; so we turn to events, objects, relationships from ordinary, contemporary life in order to say something about what we do not know how to talk about -- the love of God. This is what biblical language about God is as well: It was contemporary to its time, relevant and secular -- God as shepherd, vinekeeper, father, king, judge and so forth.

How should we image God and the world in an ecological, nuclear age? If not in the monarchical model -- God as king and the world as his realm -- what other possibilities are there?

Needless to say, there are many, for no metaphor or set of metaphors can exhaust the varied experiences of relating to God. But I would like to suggest very briefly an alternative to the picture of the world as the king's realm: let us consider the world as God's "body." While that notion may seem a bit shocking, it is a very old one with roots in Stoicism; it tantalized many early Christian theologians, including Tertullian and Irenaeus: it surfaces in a sacramental understanding of creation -- the world charged with the glory of God, as poet Gerard Manley Hopkins puts it. Moreover, remember that a metaphor is not a description. To say that the world is God's body is to use the same kind of language we use in saying the world is the king's realm. Both phrases are pictures, both are imaginative constructions, both offer ways of thinking about God and the world.

Christians should, given their tradition, be inclined to find sense rather than nonsense in body language, not only because of the resurrection of the body, but also because of the body and blood of Christ in the bread and wine of the Eucharist and the images of the church as the body of Christ. Christianity is a surprisingly "bodily" tradition. Nonetheless, there is a difference between these uses of body and the world seen as God's body: the latter is not limited to Christians or to human beings and it suggests, as the others do not, that embodiment in some fashion be extended to God. It is possible to speculate that if Christianity had begun in a time less dualistic and antiphysical than was first century Mediterranean culture, it might given the more holistic anthropology and theology of its Hebraic roots, have been willing to extend its body metaphors to God.

In any event, what would it be like to think of the world as the body of God? This metaphor suggests several things. (1) In this way of thinking, God is not a distant being as in the monarchical model, but being-itself, the One in whom we live and move and have our being and not just our so-called spiritual being, but our bodily being as well. It means thinking of God as somehow physical even as we are. Is it more difficult to imagine a personal agent -- one who wills and loves and so forth -- as having a body than as being bodiless? After all, the only personal agents we know (ourselves) have bodies. God's body need not be -- should not be -- thought of as like ours. To use the metaphor of body to speak of God is not to describe God, but it is a way of thinking about God on the basis of something very important to us, our bodies. To see the world as God's body brings us close to God. God is not far off in another place, a king looking down, as it were, on his realm, but here, as a visible presence. The world is the bodily presence, a sacrament of the invisible God.

(2) Were we to think this way, we would overcome a very important dualism in the Christian tradition -- the split between spirit and body, with salvation totally concerned with the former (except for the resurrected body). If God is in some sense body (and the world taken as a manifestation of that), then bodies would matter to God -- God would love bodies -- and salvation would be as concerned with such basic needs as food, clothing and shelter as with matters of the spirit. Salvation would be a social, political and economic matter and not just a matter of the spirit's eternal existence.

(3) Moreover, were we to imagine the world (the universe) as God's body, then God would be, in some sense; at risk. If we follow out the implications of the metaphor, God becomes dependent through being bodily in a way that a totally invisible, distant God would never be. The world as God's body may be poorly cared for, ravaged and, as we are becoming well aware, essentially destroyed, in spite of God's own loving attention to it, because of one creature, ourselves, who can choose or not choose to join with God in conscious care of the world. Presumably, were this body blown up, another could be formed; hence, God need not be seen as dependent on us or on any particular body as we are. But in the metaphor of the universe as the self-expression of God

-- God's incarnation -- the notions of vulnerability, shared responsibility and risk are inevitable. This is a markedly different basic understanding of the God-world relationship than in the monarch-realm metaphor, for it emphasizes God's willingness to suffer for and with the world, even to the point of personal risk.

The world as God's body, then, may be seen as a way to remythologize the suffering love of the cross of Jesus of Nazareth. In both instances, God is at risk in human hands. Once upon a time in a bygone mythology, human beings

killed their God in the body of a man. Now we once again have that power, but, in a mythology more appropriate to our time, we would kill our God in the body of the world.

Could we actually do this? No, because God is not in our power to destroy. But the incarnate God is the God at risk - we have been given central responsibility to care for God's body, our world. If we thought of the world as God's body, would we not begin to think of the world as somehow sacred ground, not as something to be used and misused but treasured and protected just as we treasure and protect the bodies we love?

What this experiment regarding 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. We do not have to go to some special place -- a church, for instance -- or to another world to find God for God is with us here and now. This view provides the basis for a revived sacramentalism -- that is, a perception of the divine as visible and palpably present. But it is a kind of sacramentalism that is painfully conscious of the world's vulnerability. The beauty of the world and its ability to sustain a vast multitude of species cannot be taken for granted. The world is a body that must be carefully tended, 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.

Needless to say, were this metaphor to enter our consciousness as thoroughly as the royal, triumphalist one has, we would live differently. We could no longer see God as worldless or the world as godless. Nor could we expect God to take care of everything, either through domination or through benevolence.

We see through pictures; we do not see directly. The picture of a king and his realm and of the world as God's body are ways of speaking, ways of imagining the God-world relationship. The one pictures a vast distance between God and the world; the other imagines them as intrinsically related. At the close of day, one must ask which distortion (assuming that all pictures are false in some respect) is better, by considering what attitudes each picture encourages. This is not the first question to ask, but it may well be the last.

The monarchical model encourages militarism, dualism and escapism; it condones control through violence and oppression; it has nothing to say about the nonhuman world. The model of the world as God's body encourages responsibility and care for the vulnerable and oppressed; it is a nonhierarchical image that acts through persuasion and attraction; it has a great deal to say about the body and nature. Both are pictures: which distortion is more true to the world in which we live and to the good news of Christianity?

I am suggesting that we must think differently about what the saving love of God means if it is to speak to our time, addressing the question of the possible end of existence raised by, ecological deterioration and nuclear escalation and that we do this by thinking in different images. The one I have, suggested is just that -- one image. Many others are needed. We must be careful, very careful, of the imagistic glasses through which we interpret God and the world. As Erich Heller, " the German philosopher and literary critic, said: "Be careful how you interpret the world. It is like that."

Some attempts to raise consciousness about the ecological, nuclear situation paint a picture of nuclear winter or the extent of death and destruction that can occur. But it is even more telling in terms of our perception of the world, of how wondrous it is and how much we do in fact care for it, to think small. Most anything will do -- those sheep on the English hillside in the morning mist, a child's first steps, the smell of crisp air on the first fall day. We should dwell upon the specialness, the distinctiveness, the value of these things until the pain of contemplating their permanent loss, not just to one individual but to all for all time, becomes unbearable. This is a form of prayer for the world as the body of God, which we, as lovers and friends of the world, are summoned to practice. This prayer, while not the only one in an ecological, nuclear age, is a necessary and permanent one. It is a form of meditation to help us think differently about the world and to work together with God to save our beleaguered planet, our beautiful, vulnerable Earth.