

CHAPTER 1

ORIENTATION

The Research Problem: Imagination, Metaphor, and the Future of Theology

At the dawn of the century, Christian discourse is in a profoundly fragmented state. Public speech about God is a political act, but similar fragmentation is also internal to the guild of Christian theology. Theologies embracing polysemy, deconstruction, and pluralism clash with attempts to retain historical identity and a coherent message. Such fragmentation is likely to leave its mark on those Christians it encounters. As Garrett Green remarks, “the line that separates religious language from secular... runs not around the perimeter of the Christian community but right through the middle of the church itself.”¹ Despite rigorous self-examination, theologians seem more stymied than ever by the prospect of speaking about God. Since *systematic* theology smacks of stasis and inflexibility, many describe their task in terms of *imagination* or *language*.²

Any apologetic appeal to imagination, however, is an ambiguous venture. Not

¹ Garrett Green, *Theology, Hermeneutics, and Imagination: The Crisis of Interpretation at the End of Modernity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 2.

² Representative works on ‘imagination’ include Gordon Kaufman, *The Theological Imagination: Constructing the Concept of God* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1981); David Tracy, *The Analogical Imagination: Christian Theology and the Culture of Pluralism* (New York: Crossroad, 1981); John McIntyre, *Faith Theology and Imagination* (Edinburgh: Handsel Press, 1987); L. Gregory Jones and James J. Buckley, eds., *Theology and Scriptural Imagination* (Malden, MA: Basil Blackwell, 1998). Appeals to language, most typically in its symbolic, analogical, mythical, poetical, or narrative character are found in such works as George W. Stroup, *The Promise of Narrative Theology: Recovering the Gospel in the Church* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1981); Kathryn Tanner, *God and Creation in Christian Theology: Tyranny or Empowerment?* (New York: Basil Blackwell, 1988); Graham Ward, *Barth, Derrida and the Language of*

only is there a paucity of useful references to imagination in biblical and historical resources, but popular perceptions are ambivalent at best. As John McIntyre warns, the strategy of connecting theology to imagination “must seem either excessively optimistic or simply forgetful of the bad record which imagination has had in the history of theology.”³ Yet imagination, defined lucidly by Mary Warnock as “seeing as,” persists for exegetes and theologians who identify their task as a type of perception, an ability to view things through the perspective of commitment.⁴ As Paul Avis describes it, imagination is “the holistic faculty,” which “grasps the goal of the venture of faith as a whole, integrating all those elements that relate specifically to the thinking or feeling or willing faculties.”⁵ Others still, wary of cognitive claims for Christianity, emphasize deceptive facets of the imagination, and portray theology as a chastened *as if* enterprise.⁶

Alongside attempts to recast the theological task in imaginative terms, others take a slightly different approach and construe theology in terms of particular facets of language. Narrative theology has proven an attractive alternative to systematic theology,

Theology (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

³ John McIntyre, “New Help From Kant: Theology and Human Imagination,” James P. Mackey, ed., *Religious Imagination* (Trowbridge, U.K.: Edinburgh University Press, 1986), 102.

⁴ Mary Warnock, *Imagination* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976), 138. David J. Bryant abandons the ocular metaphor, defining imagination as “taking as.” Bryant, *Faith and the Play of Imagination: On the Role of Imagination in Religion*, Studies in American Biblical Hermeneutics 5 (Macon, GA: Macon University Press, 1989), 204-209.

⁵ Paul Avis, *God and the Creative Imagination: Metaphor, Symbol and Myth in Religion and Theology* (New York: Routledge, 1999), 79. Like Mary Warnock, however, I am wary that an appeal to “the language of faculties,” may suggest “a precise conceptual distinction” between imagination, reason, or emotion. Mary Warnock, “Religious Imagination,” *Religious Imagination*, 142.

⁶ The “as if” imagination is usually linked to Hans Vaihinger, *The Philosophy of ‘As if’: A System of the Theoretical, Practical and Religious Fictions of Mankind*, 2d ed., trans. by C. K. Ogden (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd., 1935). In this vein, Gordon Kaufman offers a radically constructive theology of the “God” concept, noting theologians “have reaffirmed in too uncritical a fashion what has been handed

not simply because narratives imply a more imaginative and personal approach, but because they unite biblical texts and popular culture. Metaphor, to use a category central to this essay, is suggestive of similar connections. Paul Ricoeur, for instance, claims metaphor is “the rhetorical process by which discourse unleashes the power that certain fictions have to *redescribe reality*.”⁷ Like Warnock, Ricoeur hints at something akin to the theological task, a potential bridge between ancient faith and present reality.

The two theologians contrasted in this thesis exemplify both the fragmentation of modern theology and an apologetic appeal to imaginative speech. Sallie McFague aptly sums up her *metaphorical theology* with the syllogism, “since all religious language is metaphorical, alternatives to traditional metaphors are possible.”⁸ On this deceptively simple claim, McFague builds a theology which she describes as “skeptical, relativistic, prophetic, and iconoclastic.”⁹ McFague’s interdisciplinary approach is suggestive of one direction for Christian theology. The theological task, as envisaged by McFague, requires “an act of imagination” to wed modern convictions with the Christian faith.¹⁰ The theology of Garrett Green, conversely, rehabilitates the *faithful imagination* as a means of connecting historic Christianity with postmodern uncertainty. Not only does Green explore the modern pathology of imagination, but critiques McFague as a representative

on to them from the past.” Kaufman, *The Theological Imagination*, 263.

⁷ My emphasis. Paul Ricoeur, *The Rule of Metaphor: Multidisciplinary Studies of the Creation and Meaning in Language*, trans. Robert Czerny (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1977), 7.

⁸ Sallie McFague, *Super, Natural Christians: How We Should Love Nature* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1997), 2.

⁹ Sallie McFague, *Metaphorical Theology: Models of God in Religious Language* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1982), x.

of the ambiguous modern imaginative legacy.

Thesis Statement

The goal of this thesis is to compare and contrast two theological approaches. Although discussing *imagination* and *metaphor* at length, the categories themselves are not the central issue. Rather, the intent is to explore how each theologian appeals to imaginative language to contextualize Christian reflection. A more helpful typology might be to consider McFague and Green as respectively proposing *constructive* and *responsive* courses. The *constructive* approach, represented by McFague, conceives of Christian theology as a tentative enterprise, broadly characterized as public, theocentric, reticent towards authority, and with an experiential, pragmatic focus. Green's *responsive* approach, on the other hand, might be described as self-consciously particular, christocentric, and focused on biblical interpretation, which in turn provides the basis of identity and ethical response.

More pointedly, McFague argues that the centrality of metaphor in all thought leads to a theological method which is skeptical, innovative, and heuristic. Using Green's analysis of the modern fissure between reality and imagination, I argue that McFague's apologetic appeal reinforces this unfortunate division. Metaphor, in McFague's theology, serves as a transcendent vista from which Christianity is critiqued and supplanted by alternative moral visions. The result is a theology often forceful in its claims, but one which severs connections to biblical and historical sources, sacrificing meaningful

¹⁰ Sallie McFague, *Models of God: Theology for an Ecological, Nuclear Age* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987), 8.

Christian identity or the ability to transcend the contemporary situation.

Metaphor and Imagination in Recent Thought

Until relatively recently, both metaphor and imagination have been disparaged as less desirable or even dispensable features of speech and thought. Metaphor, in particular, has often been understood as the domain of the poet, a whimsical and ornamental feature of speech secondary to and replaceable by more literal statements. This perspective is often dubbed the “substitution or ornamentalist” view of metaphor, and more often than not attributed to Aristotle.¹¹ In recent decades, however, numerous linguists, philosophers, and scientists have staked a claim on a more nuanced view of metaphor. For some, metaphor is nothing less than an epistemological category which extends beyond individual words.

At this point, distinctions between imagination and metaphor are easily blurred.¹² Like metaphor, imagination also occupies a dubious place in history, often relegated, for instance, to studies of the interface of literature and theology. Imagination and metaphor are united by more than a similar history; either term could be described as imagistic, conjunctive, or innovative. While semantic domains overlap, two distinguishing characteristics are assumed in this essay. The first is proximity to language. Some accounts, such as that of George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, extract metaphor from speech

¹¹ See Avis, *God and the Creative Imagination*, 18. Soskice claims that attributing ornamentalism to Aristotle “is to underestimate Aristotle... and to misrepresent the nature” of his account, for ornamental views belong more properly to later Greek critics of rhetoric. *Metaphor and Religious Language*, 8, 10-14.

¹² Paul Ricoeur, for instance, describes imagination as “rule-governed” invention and, like his account of metaphor, as a means of “re-describing reality.” Ricoeur, “The Bible and the Imagination,” in *Figuring the Sacred: Religion, Narrative, and Imagination*, trans. by David Pellauer, ed. by Mark I.

and claim that “linguistic expressions are possible precisely because there are metaphors in a person’s conceptual system.”¹³ For Lakoff and Johnson, metaphors are nothing less than “our principal vehicles for understanding,” which “play a central role in the construction of social and political reality.”¹⁴ Such descriptions may even be broader than Warnock’s definition of imagination as *seeing as*. Janet Martin Soskice, however, claims a closer connection between metaphor and the actual use of language, arguing that metaphor is not “a process of imagination, a kind of perception or an emotive response.”¹⁵ Imagination may be connected to metaphor, but is not identifiable as a trope or a figure of speech.

Not unrelated to the closer proximity of metaphor to linguistic expression is a second difference, namely the respective connections made by metaphor and imagination. Soskice’s definition of metaphor is pertinent here: metaphor is “*that figure of speech whereby we speak about one thing in terms which are seen to be suggestive of another.*”¹⁶ Soskice treads carefully, but describes a basic connection of one thing to another. Risking oversimplification, metaphor typically involves two terms and one subject. Analytical discussions of metaphor, as Soskice later suggests, indicate a spectrum of theories of

Wallace (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995), 144.

¹³ George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1980), 6.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 159.

¹⁵ Janet Martin Soskice, *Metaphor and Religious Language* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), 16.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 15. Soskice’s account will be scrutinized further in chapter four.

what may be gained by their use.¹⁷ But whether metaphor is understood as resulting in a unique cognitive gain, imagination appears to be less inhibited in the connections which may be drawn, to the point of frequently referring to an all-encompassing perception. Returning to Avis's comments, for example, imagination may be seen, in a way that metaphor simply cannot, as a *holistic faculty*, the glue which unites diverse thoughts, feelings, and desires.

The Emergence of Postliberalism

As American theologians writing at the twilight of the twentieth century, McFague and Green may be considered squatters on a shifting theological terrain. Whether or not heavily freighted terms such as modernity and postmodernity are bandied about, the dominant strategy of the recent theological past, liberalism, has been called into question on several fronts. Described in one essay as the use of “public grounds to demonstrate the plausibility and even necessity of the Christian faith for all human life,” liberalism has been challenged by such movements as the rise of postliberalism, a diverse movement of theologians who desire “to reverse the trend in modern Christianity of accommodation to culture.”¹⁸ This theological debate, in many ways, forms the context for this discussion.

Put in this light, McFague figures not only as one participant of many in the

¹⁷ In particular, see Soskice's second chapter, where she maps the various perspectives on what metaphor does and how it does it. *Ibid.*, 24-53. Avis offers a similar contrast between ornamental and incremental theories, *God and the Creative Imagination*, 98.

¹⁸ Timothy R. Phillips and Dennis L. Okholm, “The Nature of Confession: Evangelicals and Postliberals,” in *The Nature of Confession: Evangelicals and Postliberals in Conversation*, ed. Phillips and Okholm (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 1996), 10, 11.

ongoing conversation about the future of theology, but as an able proponent of the liberal theological approach.¹⁹ While her theology is classically liberal in many ways, a constellation of other concerns makes it difficult to pin her down to this one label.²⁰ McFague, in a way unlike her ancient liberal forebears, is aware of the postmodern currents of historicism and pluralism. Rosemary Ruether, therefore, is not wrong to characterize McFague as a “first generation” feminist theologian who “pioneered work in epistemological questions of theological language.”²¹ Qualifications aside, McFague retains a classical liberal tone in her attempts to articulate a relevant, explicitly Christian theology, predominantly via public criteria. The centrality of such criteria may be seen by the expansiveness of her method, whether in her early appeals to the integrity of literature, her critique of patriarchy, or mature emphasis on simplicity in a time of excess.

Garrett Green’s theology may be lesser known, but this is in part due to a shorter academic career. Following Gary Dorrien’s suggestion, Green can be classified as a “second generation” postliberal theologian, an heir to the broad theological approach

¹⁹ Sarah Coakley claims McFague’s influence on American liberal Protestantism “can scarcely be overestimated.” “Feminist Theology,” in *Modern Christian Thought*, 2 vols., ed. James C. Livingston, (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 2000), 2:428. More specifically, L. Lang Brownlee deems McFague a representative, along with Kaufman and William Dean, of an emergent theological naturalism with roots in John Dewey, William James, and the ‘Chicago school.’ *Naturalism in Contemporary Protestant Theology* (Unpublished Dissertation, Iliff School of Theology, 1992).

²⁰ For example, McFague is a “hermeneutical-political” postliberal (Terrence Reynolds, “Walking Apart, Together: Lindbeck and McFague on Theological Method,” *Journal of Religion* 77, no. 1 (1997): 60-61; a feminist (Sarah Coakley, “Feminist Theology,” 428); an advocate of “survivalist revisionism” (G. Clarke Chapman, “What God Can Help?: Trinity and Pop Religions of Crisis,” *Cross Currents* 44, no. 3 (1994): 318, 322; an ecological theologian (Thomas Finger, *Self, Earth and Society: Alienation & Trinitarian Transformation* (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 1997), 12); panentheist or process thinker (Philip Clayton, “God and World,” *The Cambridge Companion to Postmodern Theology*, ed. Kevin Vanhoozer (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 217).

²¹ Rosemary Radford Ruether, “The Emergence of Christian Feminist Theology,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Feminist Theology*, ed. Susan Frank Parsons (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 9.

linked to former Yale professors Hans Frei and George Lindbeck. This so-called ‘Yale school’ is marked by an emphasis on “the decisive significance and the integrity of the biblical narrative,” a stance which places it at odds with the more accommodating liberal tradition from which it sprung.²² As a postliberal, Green speaks reverently of Frei and Lindbeck’s call for a return to the biblical tradition: “I still believe that one can be true to the task of theology without compromising the essentials as did theological liberalism.”²³ While retaining a focus on the biblical narrative, Green is representative of the second generation of postliberals who attempt to move, albeit modestly, beyond the narrow polemical confines of the earlier generation. In Green’s case, this means the academic realm of religious studies in which he teaches, a test case for the strength of postliberal values in public conversation.

Thesis Method and Scope

While this essay compares the theological methods of Green and McFague, the predominant emphasis will be on McFague’s work. There are several reasons for this. The most obvious reason is the difference in comparable material. As the senior theologian, McFague’s corpus is comprised of seven books and several articles, whereas the bulk of Green’s constructive work is found in two monographs. As such, McFague’s work occupies a more prominent place in the ongoing theological conversation. An additional factor is the forcefulness of these respective theologies. Whereas McFague is more extravagant in her claims of the direction Christian theology should move, Green’s

²² Gary Dorrien, “Truth Claims: The Future of Postliberal Theology,” *Christian Century* 118, no. 21 (2001): 22.

work necessitates closer dialogue with historical texts, the result of which are more guarded claims. A final factor is biographical. Since Green represents an approach similar to my own, I often defer to his judgment and allow his viewpoint to stand for my own. Hence, in my discussions of Green, I respond more forcefully to criticism of his work. McFague's sense of the task and role of theology differs from my own. For this reason and due to confines in space, the bulk of this text deals more critically with McFague.

As much as possible, I treat McFague's thought as a coherent body, recognizing with Thomas Finger, however, that her comments "are difficult to synthesize."²⁴ In order to provide reasonable constraints, McFague will largely be represented by her work most directly concerned with the articulation of a *metaphorical* theology. Therefore, McFague's trilogy of books on theological method, *Speaking in Parables*, *Metaphorical Theology*, and *Models of God*, along with an additional essay, "An Epilogue: The Christian Paradigm," form the representative texts of this study.²⁵ McFague's other work will be discussed but considered secondary to our purposes.

Overview of Thesis

This essay proceeds in two sections, each of which is comprised of two chapters. The first section is largely expository, comprised of chapter-length treatments of the respective theologies of McFague and Green. In the second chapter, I explore "the

²³ Ibid., 27.

²⁴ Thomas Finger, *Self, Earth and Society*, 229.

²⁵ McFague, "An Epilogue: The Christian Paradigm," in *Christian Theology: An Introduction to Its Tradition and Tasks*, rev. enlarged ed., ed. Peter Hodgson and Robert King (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985), 377-390.

promise of parable,” my rubric for McFague’s theological work as a whole. This entails a brief overview of McFague’s movement from a literary milieu, to concern with metaphor and theological method, to her understanding of the *essence* of Christianity, and concluding with an examination of her recent theology. In the third chapter, I turn to Green’s approach, seen as testimony to the “power of pattern.” Initially looking at connections between imagination and suspicion in nineteenth-century philosophy, I explore Green’s own appraisal of the imagination. By qualifying imagination as *paradigmatic*, Green proposes a way of situating theology in the present context.

The second section of this thesis is a directed critique of McFague’s theology. In the fourth chapter, I undertake a preliminary critique of McFague’s approach with an examination of the postliberal critiques of foundationalism and ‘experiential-expressivism’. While McFague is often accused of elevating experience to the status of a pristine source, I defend her approach as more nuanced, or at least more ambiguous, than such criticisms suggest. A more substantial issue raised in chapter five is McFague’s appeal to metaphor, which I criticize as inconsistent in light of other accounts of metaphor and theology. Beyond her account of metaphor, I return to the postliberal criticism and argue that McFague’s theology, while not expressly reliant on experience in the classical liberal sense, retains the basic goal of building an expressive theology on acontextual grounds. For McFague, metaphor functions as a non-imaginative vantage point by which she claims an ability to arbitrate between imagination, or traditional Christian sources, and reality, her own beliefs. The result is a theology implicitly guided by the modern fixation with certainty, a goal which ultimately shortcircuits its coherent Christian voice and robs her of the prophetic power she desires.