

liquid modernity and the need for transcendent encounter

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Much has been written on the socio-cultural phenomena of 'post', 'fluid', 'reflexive'¹ or 'liquid'² modernity. Its affects have been significant upon people who were born and grew up in the late 1960's to 1980's in the post-industrial western social context. Some have identified this group as 'Generation X'.³ Drawing on sociological research Bauman⁴ ⁵ identified that individuals of this grouping were: highly vulnerable⁶, lived in and with a constant state of anxiety⁷, with a lack of self-identity and self-direction.⁸ Bauman suggests that the main focus of fluid modernity is consumption, where individual identity and freedom are constructed through the ability to purchase.⁹ ¹⁰ Individuals shape their identity by 'life-style' choices, by what they wear, what they have in their homes, and the cars they buy.¹¹ Here identity becomes flexible and in a constant state of change which necessitates an absence of commitments that could prevent such fluidity.¹² Such a life strategy has many connections to life as a 'tourist':

*"The point of tourist life is to be on the move, not to arrive..there is no goal beckoning at the end of life's travel's... impulse and spontaneity become the new control..."*¹³

Therefore, identity is a social construct that rejects any sense of cultural inheritance.¹⁴ The pursuit of happiness and meaning has shifted from a sense of building a better tomorrow to constructing a different today.¹⁵ So individual identity and freedom has become the opportunity to pick and shed one's true self, to be on the move keeping options open and avoiding commitments as a way of life.

Bauman and Lyon identify that this cultural phenomena has resulted from technological change and universal economic deregulation as the fulfilment of modernity.¹⁶ ¹⁷ Advances in

¹ Z. Bauman, *Postmodernity and its discontents*, (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1997), 19, 91.

² M. Lacy, *Liquid Modernity*. Retrieved 6 January, 2003, from the World Wide Web: <http://www.theglobalsite.ac.uk/review/102lacy.htm>

³ D. Coupland, *Generation X, Tales for an Accelerated Culture*, (London: Abacus, 1992), 104.

⁴ Z. Bauman, *Intimations of Postmodernity*. (London: Routledge Press, 1992).

⁵ Z. Bauman, *Postmodernity and its discontents*. (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1997).

⁶ Bauman, *Intimations*, xix.

⁷ *ibid.*, 101-2.

⁸ Bauman, *Postmodernity*, 20-5.

⁹ Bauman, *Intimations*, 51.

¹⁰ Bauman, *Postmodernity*, 134-40, 178-85.

¹¹ D. Lyon, *Postmodernity 2nd Edition*. (Buckingham: Open University Press, 1999), 1-18.

¹² Bauman, *Postmodernity*, 89-90.

¹³ *ibid.*, 90-94.

¹⁴ Lyon, *Postmodernity*, 36-9.

¹⁵ Bauman, *Postmodernity*, 20-25.

¹⁶ *ibid.*, 22-24.

¹⁷ Lyon, *Postmodernity*, 1-4, 13-18.

transport and travel alongside technical innovations such as the creation of the internet and immediate communications media have induced a sense of speed. This has created a reality of 'flows' of people, data, and images.¹⁸ This speed has led to the disembedding of people from social contexts.¹⁹ A world in constant flow and change, hence the concept of fluid modernity. In such a world people have a:

*"constant need to re-embed - as life doesn't fit circumstances. The image of the world daily generated by present day life concerns is devoid of genuine or assumed solidity and continuity...Life is under a condition of uncertainty which is permanent and irreducible."*²³

In turn this has created a sense of shared nihilism, blurred reality and uncertainty in most things.²⁰ There are few, if any reference points left which reasonably could be hoped to lend a deeper and longer-lasting significance to life.²¹ Unsurprisingly, there is a cost to this new process of identity formation. There have been significant increases in the incidence of mental health problems, addiction, suicide and homelessness in this social grouping. As Bauman has intimated, the post-modern social context creates a sense of 'schizoid' identity. A culture that feels at home only in its homelessness and dreams of belonging yet fears closeness.²²

Regarding Christianity and attitudes towards God, a post-modern consciousness has emphasised the relativity and particularity of everything, so that there is no meta-truth or meta-narrative. Such truth-claims are judged to be potentially oppressive. This includes a mistrust of institutions and authority of all kinds including the Church.²³ ²⁴ However, paradoxically there is a new openness to spirituality in this angst-ridden context where individual faith formation as "this is my truth, tell me yours" has become widely accepted. God and faith have become a personal choice.²⁶ ²⁵ Attitudes towards community have also shifted. Emphasis in post-modernity focuses on a new network society, a society of intimacy through friendship networks with little geographical reference. This has led to the local looking increasingly like a society of strangers,²⁶ and has implications on concepts of being church.

¹⁸ Lyon, *Postmodernity*, 1-4.

¹⁹ Bauman, *Postmodernity*, 20-25.

²⁰ Lyon, *Postmodernity*, 8-10.

²¹ Bauman, *Postmodernity*, 24-29.

²² *ibid.*, 77-8.

²³ M. McCarthy, *Spirituality in a Post modern Era*, in J.Woodward, S. Pattison (eds.), *A Blackwell Reader in Pastoral and Practical*. (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2000), 193-6.

²⁴ J.R. Middleton, B.J. Walsh, *truth is stranger than it used to be, Biblical Faith in a Postmodern Age*, (London: SPCK, 1995), 28-79.

²⁵ Middleton, *truth*, 143-95.

²⁶ Lyon, *Postmodernity*, 23, 36, 39.

Psychological Life Stages

Erikson proposed that personal identity development was a life-long process. He identified that there were eight main life stages to resolve psycho-social issues which determined a positive or negative outcome for self-identity.^{27 28} At each of these life stages, individuals attempt to construct or build their own world-view synthesised from parents, school peers, and other influences. This world-view enables a sense of individual identity. Where there are many opposing voices and views, then this synthesis becomes a much harder task. At the key age of eleven to seventeen years, individuals attempt to find answers to such questions as 'Who am I' and 'Where am I going?' Accordingly this stage was named 'identity verses confusion'. A negative outcome at this stage leads to self-diffusion, alienation, anxiety and depression. Burns, reflecting on Erikson's findings, comments on how the modern western social context - as a depersonalised, alienating and complex world makes a positive outcome at this stage, increasingly difficult to achieve.³¹

Again relating to life stages, Fowler identified seven stages of faith formation.²⁹ There are many connections between Erikson's life stages and Fowler's faith development theory. Like Erikson, Fowler identifies a key development stage at the age of twelve to seventeen years, (stage four) which identifies progression from a 'black and white' inherited faith from parents or conversion, to the development of a personal worldview which becomes individualised and able to question without threatening personal faith. However, Fowler differs from Erikson by drawing stronger links to the effect of cultural epochs on religious self-identity. He relates stage four to an enlightenment type faith, stage five, 'individualistic and reflective faith' as relating to a modern contextual faith, and stage six, 'Conjunction faith' as a post-modern contextual faith. A Synthesis of these theories of personal and faith development suggests that social context is a considerable influence to an individual's faith and personal development. Interestingly, Fowler noted that many Christians get stuck at stage four and fail to progress unless they face a personal crisis or are forced to change in their social context. He suggests that many Christians build a faith or religious world-view that is inherently fragile, and relies on a close relationship between the individual, God and the social context.

²⁷ Erikson, *Life Stages Identity formation*, as recorded in R.L. Atkinson, R.C. Atkinson, E.E. Smith, D.J. Bem, E.R. Hilgard, *Introduction to Psychology 10th Edition*, (London: HBJ, 1990), 108.

²⁸ Erikson, *Life Stages*, as recorded in R.B. Burns, *Essential Psychology*, 52-8.

²⁹ Fowler, *Stages of Faith* as recorded in D. Lyall, *Integrity of Pastoral Care*. (London: SPCK, 2001), 110-1.

Watts et al identified five psychological components of religion that individuals use to build or maintain a Christian world-view.

- Intellectual - what the individual knows and wants.
- Experiential - where someone has religious experience.
- Ideological - beliefs.
- Ritualistic - religious practices that have meaning.
- Consequences - how religion guides individual behaviour.³⁰

Where individuals experience or encounter religion, then such factors will influence in their self-development.

Theological Analysis

Individual Personal Identity and God

Brueggemann draws on the concept of the 'covenanted self' to explore personal development from a biblical perspective.³¹ He draws on the Psalms and Amos³² to see how the Israelites covenanted to God's 'otherness'.³³ Brueggemann defined covenant as '*a theological commitment...to be enacted as a mode of shared life*' and '*a covenant commitment between God, individuals and groups of people*'.³⁴ By implication personal identity is drawn from an understanding of self in God. Brueggemann interprets this to be a radical alternative to our contextual post-modern 'consumption-informed-identity' formation that he perceived as debilitating Christians and the Church.³⁵ He challenges the key assumption of individualistic independence in psychology, in that the 'human-self' from a Judaeo-Christian perspective is never an isolated or autonomous being, but always and necessarily proceeded by God's 'thou'.³⁶ Therefore the Christian assumption is that God has evoked, summoned, authorised, and 'faithed' us into existence as person's. Brueggemann concurs with the psychological concept of life stage development as a sense of the whole of life as a journey of personal-identity formation, where we are less about 'human beings' and more accurately 'human becomings'.³⁷ Therefore, building a self-concept and world-view is less a matter of consumer choice, and more about engaging with God's otherness - the 'thou', which constantly inspires and undermines who we may chose to be.³⁷ Spiritually understood, personal development is more of an enterprise of coming to terms with this 'other' or 'thou' in a way that is neither excessively submissive or resistant. As with the Psalms, this presence of the other

³⁰ F. Watts, R. Nye, S.Savage, *Psychology for Christian Ministry*, (London: Routledge, 2002), 41-2.

³¹ W. Bruggemann, *The Covenanted Self, Explorations in law and covenant*. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1999).

³² See Psalm 139:7-12, Amos 9:2-4.

³³ Bruggemann, *Covenanted*, 2.

³⁴ *ibid.*, 1, 37-9.

³⁵ *ibid.*, 1.

³⁶ *ibid.*, 1-2.

³⁷ *ibid.*, 3-6.

always reminds us that we are addressed, unsettled, unfinished, underway, and not fully whom we intend or pretend to be.³⁷

Brueggemann explored Winnicott's theory of emotional development addressing the consequences of maternal parenting on the child's life stage development.^{38 39} Brueggemann interprets the outcomes at various life stages to and with a covenanted solution. For example, in early life, the development of a healthy relationship between mother and child enables a dual capacity to assert and to yield to a mother-child relationship. A healthy outcome will be a covenanting with intimacy.³⁹ Covenanting is therefore a process, with God, with others, and with the self.⁴⁰

⁴¹ This process of the 'othering' of the self enables a covenanted self-identity to be formed that resources health.⁴² However, life remains an experience of ups and downs. Brueggemann draws on the Psalms to see how the Israelites coped with the struggle of survival in a chaotic and threatening world. His analysis of the Psalms included a pattern of orientation-disorientation-reorientation in response to various changes and crises.⁴³ In such a constant process of change, individual identity relates to a process of the 'gathered-self' working through ever circling experiences of orientation, disorientation to reorientation. Or as Bauman would say, a process of disembedding to re-embedding. Lament Psalms express an appeal to God to make things right in a crisis. This is a full assertion of self over God, "Where are you God?", followed sometimes by a faith that God "will remain with us" even though times are difficult.⁴³ Lament occurs in times of disorientation. The process works through to reorientation and Praise Psalms, where Praise is the full abandonment of self to God.⁴³ Taking Brueggemann's interpretations here of the 'gathered self', connections can be made with the five components of religion addressed in the psychological analysis. These experiences of God's action in times of orientation, disorientation to reorientation coupled with experience of God through prayer, worship and teaching all assist in the formation of self and religious identity. An identity we have affirmed as covenanted-self to God's otherness. This experience and encounter with God's otherness must concern the transcendent, as Brueggemann states, a transcendent mystery that will not go away.⁴⁴ As a process, Brueggemann sees the covenanted process as deeply embedding for individuals living in a threatening world. Such a process of identity formation is a radical alternative to the disembedding reality of our social context.

³⁸ D. W. Winnicott, 1971, *The Maturation Processes and the Facilitating Environment: Studies in the Theory of Emotional Development*. London: Tavistock Press, as recorded in W. Brueggemann, *Covenanted*, 3-6.

³⁹ This life-stage theory is very similar to Erikson's theory.

⁴⁰ As Brueggemann details, With God – complaint and hymn, assertion of self and abandonment of self, With Neighbours – joy and sorrow, truth in love, up-building in the midst of freedom, With the Self – readiness to receive scattering and the freedom for gathering a self that is unlike the old one, a process of conversion and transformation.

⁴¹ Brueggemann, *Covenanted*, 16.

⁴² Brueggemann draws on Psalm 103 to make this connection.

⁴³ Brueggemann, *Covenanted*, 14-19.

⁴⁴ *ibid.*, 3.

We are left with many questions about how such a transcendent, covenant informed identity can be re-contextualised today? How do we enable individuals to experience or know God? How can culturally accessible words and worship enable people to encounter God to form healthy, covenanted, self-understandings and identity? To answer such questions we turn to an exploration of contextual theology, transcendence, worship as world-making, models of God and the metaphorical tradition.

A Contextual Theology

Enabling a theological understanding in a post-modern context is a key task of contextual theology. It takes culture and cultural change seriously and attempts to understand the Christian faith in context,⁴⁵ where the language of biblical theology often does not resonate with contemporary experience.⁴⁶ Contextual theology has been defined as:

"A way of doing theology in which one takes into account: the spirit and message of the gospel; the tradition of the Christian people; the culture in which one is theologising; and social change in that culture."⁴⁷

Barbour and Bevans propose that there are various models of contextual theology that attempt to create a symbolic system or framework to enable theologising in context.^{48 49} Models are understood to be logical theological positions that allow for some insights and connections.⁴⁹ These models differ in how they approach balancing incarnational and redemptive theologies. Bevans proposes that there is a continuum between a purely redemptive theology and a purely incarnational focused model. Most models are a balance between these two theologies.⁵⁰ Earlier we identified transcendence as a key-element to encountering God, faith and individual identity formation. To further explore this we will use the transcendent model of contextual theology to reflect the pastoral situation. Such a model should assist the task of finding new ways of expressing and understanding God in order to help Mr N understand himself and God in ways that are real and contextual for him. Bevans considers the transcendent model to be more focused on incarnational theology, (social change and culture), but influenced by redemptive theology, (gospel message & tradition) as a starting place.⁵⁰ The model assumes that the development of a truly contextualised theology takes place as an individual or people wrestle with their own faith and share that faith with others with the same cultural parameters. It assumes a process of questing and questioning for 'what is'.⁵¹ It starts with

⁴⁵ S.B. Bevans, *Models of Contextual Theology*. (New York: Orbis, 2002), 1-2, 7.

⁴⁶ Bevans, *Models*, 5.

⁴⁷ *ibid.*, 1.

⁴⁸ Barbour as recorded in Bevans, *Models*, 24.

⁴⁹ Bevans, *Models*, 24-5.

⁵⁰ Bevans, *Models*, 26-29.

⁵¹ *ibid.*, 97-104.

one's own religious experience and experience of oneself. Exploration and encounter with God brings to speech who 'I am' and who 'God is' as a product of subjective experience tied into a particular historical, geographical, social and cultural context. God's revelation is transcendent but revealed in human experience.⁵¹ For this to work, such models assume that humankind operates in identical ways in all cultures and in all periods of history, and that the self-transcending subject processes effective and cognitive operations.⁵¹ Revelation then relates to a change of mind, or thinking, literally a conversion from experience leading to a radical shift in perspective. Such a contextual theology 'will not appear primarily in books, but in people's minds'⁵⁵. In this model all Christian believers can be context theologians. The process of interpretation evaluates cultural experience against Christian experience of God.⁵¹

Bevans outlines several advantages to this model.⁵² It is firstly a new way of doing theology as activity. The historical and the cultural are genuine sources and loci of revelation. The universal structure of human knowing and consciousness provides a common ground for mutual conversation and interaction. There are however a number of criticisms.⁵³ Some have criticised the process as too abstract and difficult to grasp. The assumption of universality of human knowing has been questioned. It may be that such a view is a western male assumption. The greatest danger of a subjective focus, is that experience-led revelation may degenerate into relativity and end up exposing utilitarian individualism, the very process that we are trying to find an alternative to.⁵³ Noting these criticisms we will now proceed with caution to explore three important theological perspectives that add further content to the pastoral situation using a transcendent contextual theological model.

Praise and Worship as World-Forming

Brueggemann drew on the work of Mowinkel to explore how the Majestic or Royal Psalms⁵⁴ may have enabled Israel to complete an annual cultic worship service providing the means for Israel to worship God through transcendence and maintain a shared and covenanted world-view.⁵⁵ Mowinkel hypothesised that the King was enthroned on behalf of Yahweh in a worship service in the temple as a recommitment to covenant between Israel and Yahweh.⁵⁶ Although Mowinkel was maligned by historical critics of his day, Brueggemann asserts that by utilising a narrative critical approach, the power of worship for world building and forming in the Psalms can be explored in the text.⁵⁷ Drawing on sociological and theological analysis, Brueggemann argues the case that transcendent praise and worship as collective

⁵² *ibid.*, 100-4.

⁵³ *ibid.*, 102.

⁵⁴ W. Brueggemann, *Israel's Praise Doxology against Idolatry and Ideology*, (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1988), ix-x, 3-4.

⁵⁵ *ibid.*, 3-11.

⁵⁶ *ibid.*, 51-3.

⁵⁷ *ibid.*, 5-6.

encounter between Israel and God had constructive power.⁵⁸ Again the process of orientation-disorientation-reorientation is made reference to as a reality of life. In a threatening world, the cultic service has a key role to play as maintaining hope - a hope that Yahweh will continue to be faithful to Israel. This establishment of an eschatological hope is profoundly world-maintaining and enabled Israel to express praise of God and receive God's world-making blessing through worship.⁵⁹ This shared reality, by a process of assimilation, becomes reality to individuals, giving identity and hope for the future. Brueggemann calls this a constitutive reality for Israel.⁶⁰ By application, Brueggemann makes connections with the importance of liturgy and symbols in Christian worship, which are inherently world-forming.⁶¹ He further identified the role of priests and ministers in enabling worship to be world-forming by exploring culturally accessible language and symbols in worship. Brueggemann asserts that such transcendent, creative and transformative worship is key in a world where there are many rival truth claims from secular, popular culture, and the humanities.⁶²

Naming God from experience using metaphor

We must now turn to the power of language to give identity and world construction, and in particular, naming God. Brueggemann, in an in-depth study of the theology of the Old Testament establishes a clear process of the development in naming God as Israel encountered God.⁶³ Brueggemann argues that naming God began with verbs as they experienced Yahweh's transformative action,⁶⁴ e.g. 'God saves'. Where this transformative action is re-experienced then naming God moves to more certainty, and adjectives are used, e.g. 'God is Saviour'.⁶⁵ ⁶⁶ In so doing, Israel is acknowledging an aspect of God's character. Where there is enduring experience of this aspect of God's character, then the noun may be used, e.g. 'Saviour'.⁶⁷ So a process based on the experience of Yahweh moves language for God from verb to adjective to noun. However, Brueggemann acknowledges that Israel grudgingly affirmed occasional nouns in their theological discourse. Brueggemann surmised that nouns can be problematic because they create constancy and therefore a potential idolatry.⁶⁸ Nouns created an absolute meaning, which did not correlate with Israel's experience of God who was elusive and changing. Therefore, most of Israel's naming for God was completed through metaphorical language.⁶⁹ Metaphor as an

⁵⁸ *ibid.*, 12-22.

⁵⁹ *ibid.*, 51-3.

⁶⁰ *ibid.*, 6-8.

⁶¹ *ibid.*, x-xi.

⁶² *ibid.*, 12-28.

⁶³ W. Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament*, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997).

⁶⁴ Brueggemann, *Theology*, 213.

⁶⁵ Brueggemann, *Theology*, 215, 225, 230.

⁶⁶ A good example is Exodus 34:6-7, which is a credo of adjectives.

⁶⁷ Brueggemann, *Theology*, 229-30.

⁶⁸ *ibid.*, 229-33.

⁶⁹ *ibid.*, 230-4.

incomplete description, does not fully match the elusive subject but gives specific access to Yahweh. In this way metaphor guards against idolatry and closure towards the character of God and therefore avoids monotheism.⁷³ Israel developed many metaphors for God, some based on governance such as Judge, Lord, King, Warrior⁷⁰, and through God's nurturing and creative character, Yahweh as artist, healer, gardener, mother, father, and shepherd.⁷¹ In this way Israel continuously applied a metaphorical process through which new naming metaphors for Yahweh were born directly out of shared experience of God interacting with God's people.

McFague⁷² has completed several in-depth studies addressing the development of metaphor as a particular transcendent model of theology, drawing on old and new testament biblical texts. It has proved to be a new way of doing theology that directly relates to a post-modern context.⁷³ McFague promotes the need for new metaphors and models for God today.^{74 75} She surmises that most commonly used Christian metaphors for God do not relate to our post-modern culture. The dominance of patriarchal and imperialistic language creates an image of God that is triumphalist, controlling, and opposed to life.^{78 79} Governance terms such as King, Judge, Lord and Warrior create images of oppression and domination. Such metaphors have ceased to give specific access to God as culture has changed, and at such times, these metaphors can be distancing, unhelpful and harmful.⁷⁶

McFague concurs with Ricoeur that in recent times, there has been much Christian deconstruction of traditional imagery, and that reconstruction is vital to enable people to encounter God.⁷⁷ McFague states that she believes that very little reconstruction has occurred in our times which is largely due to a conservative theological retreat that has refused to deal with the constructive task, preferring abstract language and names for God.⁷⁸ The Church therefore continues to attempt to use names for God from a bygone time which are outmoded and anachronistic.^{79 80} McFague believes that a Christian theology that is done on the basis of anachronistic naming undermines our ability to accept the new sensibilities of our time.⁷⁸ Such a theology and lack of creative construction first 'ghettoizes' Christianity and then renders it sterile.⁸² Christianity becomes outdated, inaccessible and irrelevant.

⁷⁰ *ibid.*, 233-4.

⁷¹ *ibid.*, 250-60.

⁷² Sallie McFague is also named as Sallie Teselle. To ease confusion, Sallie McFague will be used throughout this essay.

⁷³ Bevens, *Models*, 101-2.

⁷⁴ S. McFague, *Models of God, Theology for an Ecological, Nuclear Age*. (London: SCM Press, 1987), ix-xii, 19.

⁷⁵ S. TeSelle, *Speaking in Parables, A Study in Metaphor and Theology*. (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1975), 23.

⁷⁶ McFague, *Models*, x.

⁷⁷ P. Ricoeur, *Symbolism of Evil*, as recorded in Teselle, *Speaking*, 56-7.

⁷⁸ Again this relates to the Bevens continuum between Incarnational and redemptive theologies of contextual theology. McFague is drawing predominantly on an Incarnational starting point here.

Positively, McFague proposes an urgent new constructive and creative theological task that is sensitive to our new post-modern context. She identifies key sensitivities to assist in this task:⁷⁹

- *A greater appreciation of nature and ecology (holism and responsibility).*
- *Recognition of the importance of language (interpretation and construction) in human existence and identity.*
- *Acceptance of the challenge that other religions, the humanities and secular options present to the Judeo-Christian tradition.*
- *Recognition of the sense of displacement of the white, western male.*
- *Apocalyptic sensibility (inclusion and technological threat of extinction).*
- *A radical interdependence of life.*

Such a task is focused on remythologising the relationship between God, us and the world.⁸⁰ This process McFague and Bevans identify as a new metaphorical theological method, which attempts to elaborate metaphors and models of God in the pursuit of expressing the claims of Christianity in a powerful, comprehensive and contemporary way.^{84 81} As remythologisation, such theology acknowledges that it is painting a picture to give access to God and world-making. Articulating metaphors as a model is an attempt to talk about what we do not know about God and the world from a Christian perspective in our time.⁸⁵ It claims that in order to be faithful to the God of our tradition, the God on the side of life and its fulfilment, we must try out new pictures that will bring the reality of God's love into the imaginations of men and women of today.⁸⁵ To understand how metaphor enables such picture making, McFague has explored the power of biblical metaphor. Within the New Testament, there are many discrete metaphors within the passion story, parables, images and anecdotes.⁸² To explore the power of metaphor we will consider its use in the Parables of Jesus.

In the 'Prodigal Son'⁸³, the total meaning is within the story.⁸⁴ There is an existential, worldly and sensuous narrative of human life told through the use of metaphor. Metaphors work by bringing a shock, a revelatory aspect, a new insight, in an ordinary and familiar setting, which brings transcendent meaning and experience.⁸⁴ In this parable, the insight into fatherly love is carried by the extravagance of the imagery and action. The comparisons are extreme; what is contrasted however, is not this world verses another world, but the radicalness of love, faith and hope within this world. The setting is worldly and familiar but the frame of the story is radical.⁸⁴ This provides the context which disrupts the ordinary dimension and allows us to

⁷⁹ McFague, *Models*, x, 3.

⁸⁰ *ibid.*, X-Xii.

⁸¹ Bevans, *Models*, 26-9.

⁸² TeSelle, *Speaking*, 1-11,33.

⁸³ Luke 15:11-32.

⁸⁴ TeSelle, *Speaking*, 13-17.

see it a-new, as reformed by God's love. What is seen is not super-spiritual, but a homely and familiar context for radical unmerited love⁸⁴, communicated through contrasts - The father's willingness to divide his property without question and the son's decision to take 'all he had' and go to a 'far country' and squander 'his property in base living'. The power of the metaphor, is that love and God himself are no where directly mentioned in the story.⁸⁴ The perception of the divine love is achieved through stretching the surface of the story with extreme contrasting imagery; hunger and feasting, rejection and acceptance, lost and found, death and life.⁸⁴

All of Jesus' parables carry this same structure and method.⁸⁵ The shock is new understanding and experience of God, a transcendent experience. It is therefore unsurprising that the crowds listening to Jesus were continually shocked by his teaching. They were profoundly challenged by Jesus' world-making and therefore experiencing God doing a transformative task. By implication, metaphor is key in naming God and having some understanding of his character through encounter with God in story telling in a particular social context. Such metaphorical language has the peculiar quality of both expressing and communicating at the same time.⁸⁶ In this way parables as metaphor make ontological as well as existential assertions. They tell us something about us, God and life, where assertions about God are made lightly and indirectly.⁸⁷ McFague states that biblical metaphor enables us to move from here to there, transformed through the imagination constructed through the story, to find transcendent meaning. Similarly she asserts that Jesus is the par excellence metaphor of God. A familiar character in a familiar story becoming the way, the indirect, constantly shocking and necessary way from here to there, the good news.⁸⁸

Metaphors and metaphorical parables therefore offer a method to enable people to experience and explore the nature of God in our post-modern times, which has re-engaged with the value of the narrative. This metaphorical method enables people to transcend socio-cultural divides to encounter and experience the good news. Such a task uses biblical metaphor as a story house of the imagination. The challenge for us is to use McFague's cultural sensitivities and reuse some of Jesus' parables as story telling, preaching, worship and mission, to enable people to know God, as well as exploring new metaphors arising out of our culture, to name God. These new metaphors must counter the continued use of outdated metaphors by the Church, which at times appear to be little more than tired clichés.

⁸⁵ TeSelle, *Speaking*, 32-33.

⁸⁶ *ibid.*, 16.

⁸⁷ *ibid.*, 17.

⁸⁸ *ibid.*, 32-3.

McFague offers some models or metaphors for naming God. She suggests metaphors such as mother, lover and friend.⁸⁹ In her critique of these terms, McFague is aware that there are difficulties with each of these terms, but affirms that they are more helpful than most traditional terms in today's context.⁸⁹ ⁹⁰ The concept of God as 'mother' has some biblical basis and is supported by Brueggemann.⁹¹ McFague is aware of the danger of changing gender as this sexualises God, and can be unhelpful. The concept of God as 'lover' has the same difficulties. The concept of God as 'friend' again has problems when people hit difficult times and may perceive that God has stopped being a friend. Draper et al add that even the term 'father' has become increasingly difficult.⁹² Some see fathers as unreliable, absent and neglectful. However Tomlinson reaffirms McFague's view for the need for new metaphors.

*Metaphors are an essential part of the way we grasp reality... they yield real information, which cannot necessarily be gained or understood in any other way.*⁹³

McFague is aware of the dangers of using a metaphorical theological method in producing open-ended and overly subjective, relativist concepts⁹⁴, but Bevans affirms such a method as a return to a method used by Jesus.⁹⁵ However, the task of finding new metaphors to express the relationship between God, us and the earth remains a very difficult one.

It is my belief that we are charged with a new constructive quest, faithful to the tradition, but prepared to take risks to enable people of this fluid modern society to experience the transforming power of God. The future and shape of the church depends upon it.

⁸⁹ McFague, *Models*, 78-159.

⁹⁰ *ibid.*, xiii.

⁹¹ Brueggemann, *Theology*, 244-5.

⁹² B. Draper, K. Draper, *Refreshing Worship*. (Oxford: Bible Reading Fellowship, 2000), 79-80.

⁹³ D. Tomlinson, *Post Evangelical* as recorded in Draper et al, *Refreshing*, 79.

⁹⁴ TeSelle, *Speaking*, 30.

⁹⁵ Bevans, *Models*, 104.

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