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ECOFEMINIST  
CHRISTOLOGY,  
INCARNATION, AND THE  
SPIRITUALITY AND ETHICS  
OF EATING

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*“The way we eat represents our most profound engagement with the natural world.  
Daily, our eating turns nature into culture,  
transforming the body of the world into our bodies and minds.”<sup>1</sup>*

*“There is nothing to eat,  
seek it where you will,  
but the body of the Lord.”<sup>2</sup>*

The past five years in the United States have seen increased attention to problems in the industrial food system. While Vandana Shiva and Slow Food international have long advocated local control over farming and food production,<sup>3</sup> in the United States it was the 2008 documentary film “Food, Inc.” that caught the attention for the first time of a wide popular audience. The writings of Michael Pollan, Marc Bittman, and Barbara Kingsolver have increased awareness of the high environmental and health costs of the so-called American or Western Diet and the benefits of eating “real food” instead of the processed, industrial, or fast food consumed by the majority of Americans. Today, it is possible to identify the emergence of a broad and inclusive “food movement,” which encompasses topics ranging from ending factory farming; supporting organic, sustainable, and urban agriculture; protecting the food security rights of the developing world; advocating vegetarian, vegan,

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<sup>1</sup> M. Pollan, *The Omnivore’s Dilemma*. New York, Penguin Books, 2006, p. 10.

<sup>2</sup> William Carlos Williams, quoted in Wendell Berry, “The Pleasures of Eating” in: *Bringing it to the Table: On Farming and Food*, Berkeley, CA, Counterpoint 2009, p. 234.

<sup>3</sup> See V. Shiva, C. Petrini, and J. Lionette, *Manifestos on the Future of Food and Seed*. South End Press, Cambridge, Mass 2007.

and locavore diets; increasing the number of urban farmers markets, Community Supported Agriculture (CSAs), and community gardens; as well as addressing childhood obesity, instituting farm to school lunch programs, and eliminating food deserts so that all people have access to fresh, local, nutritious food.

As the food movement grows and we become increasingly aware of the need to transform the standard American diet, the question arises of how American Christianity fits into this movement. Christians have long been committed to feeding the hungry, following Biblical command, and food charity is an essential ministry of many churches that supplements government benefits for those who suffer from hunger and “food insecurity,” that is, a lack of consistent access to nutritious foods. While the food movement, to be sure, includes the need to feed the hungry and eliminate food insecurity, it also aims far beyond charity to advocate a complete transformation of the food system, away from industrial agriculture and processed foods and toward local food systems. This aim may seem beyond the scope of traditional Christian ministry and mission but it is tied to the fundamental Christian values of social justice and love of neighbor. At the same time, while the food movement has broad and ambitious goals, what it often lacks is a language with which to speak about the sacramental nature of food and the act of eating itself. For food is primarily a relationship, not a commodity, and yet it is easy to forget that relationship—with plants and animals, with the land, and with other people—while living in the midst of the industrialized food system. Here Christian language can help to articulate the symbolic meaning of the food movement, for the central Christian ritual is a shared meal in which our relationship to food, and food itself, is transformed. The Eucharist, and the doctrine of the incarnation in which it is rooted, offers an incipient vision of a transformed relationship to food, in which its sacramental nature is affirmed. This vision, however, must be carefully articulated and expanded in order to avoid reinforcing oppressive aspects of the Christian tradition that have been harmful to the bodies of women, animals, and the land itself.

In what follows, I explore a theological framework that can support the food movement from a specifically Christian perspective. I am particularly interested in how ecofeminist Christology, reflection on the

person of Christ from a feminist and ecological perspective, might contribute to a theology of sustainable and ethical eating practices. The doctrine of the incarnation, that is, the Christian belief that God became enfleshed in the person of Jesus Christ, provides a powerful Christian paradigm for the food movement, one that also creates an avenue for Christian churches to enter and engage fully with this movement. In turn, this doctrine, and the ritual of the Eucharist that it supports, can contribute a sacramental language that affirms the relationship of human bodies to the more-than-human world through the act of eating. But this doctrine has often been oppressive to women and the natural world, and so it must be carefully critiqued and reconstructed in light of contemporary concerns. Engaging the ecofeminist theologies of Sallie McFague and Rosemary Radford Ruether, I suggest that although the doctrine of the incarnation has at times been problematic for Christian views of women and nature, it is richly suggestive for rethinking Christian attitudes toward food and eating, particularly through the ritual of Eucharist. The language of incarnation, thus refined, can help to express the transformed relationship to food advocated by the food movement. At the same time, the incarnation provides Christian churches an avenue into that movement that takes their mission beyond food charity and towards a vision of food justice. I conclude my discussion with a brief consideration of how these theological themes can be put into practice through the pedagogy of service learning at select non-profit organizations working for food justice in Memphis, Tennessee.

### Traditional Views of the Incarnation

The incarnation of Christ has been traditionally conceived in both androcentric and anthropocentric terms. The incarnation has been described by Athanasius, Augustine, and Anselm as God's solution to the problem of human sin. This traditional narrative blames a woman, Eve, for the loss of human freedom; her fault introduced death and the struggle for food into the world.<sup>4</sup> Right relations between humans and animals and God, in a garden setting where food was freely available, were

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<sup>4</sup> See Gen 3:17–18.

disrupted by sin. For the church fathers, this fault lived on in every woman, as Tertullian preached to the women in his community: “And do you not know that you are (each) an Eve? The sentence of God on this sex of yours lives in this age: the guilt must of necessity live too. *You* are the devil’s gateway... On account of *your* desert—that is, death—even the Son of God had to die.”<sup>5</sup> In this view, the incarnation was a one-time event necessary to reverse the fault of Eve: Christ became the “new Adam” to renew the image of God in humanity by overcoming sin and death. An androcentric social context in which men were thought to be the ideal form of humanity assumed the necessity of Christ’s maleness. Although Jesus was a man, the Church fathers reasoned, women were included in salvation because Jesus, as a perfect human male, included women in his humanity.<sup>6</sup>

This traditional narrative of the incarnation is also anthropocentric, however, in that the primary concern is with human sin and salvation. Although Genesis describes the disordering of right relations between human beings and the natural world, that concern was rarely translated into Christian theological interpretations of sin. Instead, the logic of domination—of human beings over nature, of men over women—was taken to be the natural order of creation, ordained by God, as a result of Gen 1:28: “God blessed them and God said to them, ‘Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth.’” One result of this logic has been a world-denying asceticism, especially evident in the first centuries of Christianity, that sees the world as fallen and subject to human dominion. Consequently, Christians have frequently denied the pleasures of the body and the temptations of the world in order to await the return of Christ, or they have pointed to the opening chapters of Genesis to justify the exploitation and subjection of women and nature. In the denial and domination of the world, the goodness of creation and the human body have often been forgotten.

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<sup>5</sup> Tertullian (c.160–c.225), *On the Apparel of Women*, I.1

<sup>6</sup> See R. R. Ruether, *Introducing Redemption in Christian Feminism*. Sheffield Academic Press, Sheffield, England 1998, p. 82.

## Ecofeminist Theology: Sallie McFague

Feminist theologians over the past thirty years have raised a variety of critiques of this traditional narrative of the incarnation. Sallie McFague, for instance, challenges the idea of Christ as the unique savior in a multireligious and modern scientific world: “In its traditional form the claim [of the uniqueness of Christ] is not only offensive to the integrity and value of other religions, but incredible, indeed, absurd, in light of postmodern cosmology. It is not remotely compatible with our current picture of the universe.”<sup>7</sup> She also points to the surprisingly negative effect that the doctrine of the incarnation has had on actual human and natural bodies. While focusing all its attention on the uniquely salvific male body of Christ, “Christianity has denied, subjugated, and at times despised the body, especially female human bodies and bodies in the natural world.”<sup>8</sup>

In contrast she proposes shifting Christian attention away from the effects of Genesis 1–3 and towards the words of the gospel of John—“The Word became flesh and lived among us”<sup>9</sup>—to interpret the incarnation as the embodiment of God.<sup>10</sup> For her, the incarnation is not just the divine response to human sin, but instead provides a new model of the God-universe relationship in creation. Rather than a king who is sovereign over his creation, God is immanent in the universe, making the natural world itself “the body of God.” McFague further specifies this model through what she calls “the Christic paradigm,” that is, the body of Christ. The Christic paradigm makes the story of Jesus paradigmatic for understanding God’s relationship to creation through two related Christological moves.<sup>11</sup> On the one hand, she preserves the particularity of the historical Jesus by making his life and death paradigmatic for Christian understanding of God’s love and ethical practice.

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<sup>7</sup> S. McFague, *The Body of God: An Ecological Theology*. Fortress Press, Minneapolis 1993, p. 159.

<sup>8</sup> McFague, *The Body of God*, p. 163.

<sup>9</sup> John 1:14 (NRSV).

<sup>10</sup> McFague, *The Body of God*, p. 160.

<sup>11</sup> As McFague rejects the traditional narrative of the incarnation, she proposes a constructive theological view that both “relativize[s] the incarnation in relation to Jesus... and maximize[s] it in relation to the cosmos.” (McFague, *The Body of God*, p. 162)

On the other hand, she extends the incarnation to include the cosmos as sacrament or body of God. Let us briefly consider these theological gestures separately.

The story of Jesus is paradigmatic for a Christian understanding of how God is present in creation.<sup>12</sup> Just as Jesus practiced inclusive love for all, but in particular for the “oppressed, the outcast, the vulnerable,”<sup>13</sup> God’s love for creation extends beyond humanity to nature in all its rich diversity, which McFague calls “the new poor”<sup>14</sup>—poor due to human exploitation, domination, and neglect. In this way, McFague extends feminist liberation theology in the direction of ecological concern. The story of Jesus is also paradigmatic, however, in his parables, which overturn oppressive, dualistic hierarchies; in his ministry, in which bodies are healed and fed; and in his table fellowship, eating with others across social classes, all of which demonstrate care for bodily needs.<sup>15</sup> McFague draws attention here, first, to the way in which food, the basic support of life, is always shared by Jesus and his disciples, and second, the way food functions as a metaphor to signify the satisfaction of deepest spiritual hunger.<sup>16</sup>

Her second Christological gesture is to extend the incarnation from the historical body of Jesus to the entire cosmos. As McFague writes, “The resurrected Christ is the cosmic Christ, the Christ freed from the body of Jesus of Nazareth, to be present in and to all bodies.”<sup>17</sup> In oth-

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<sup>12</sup> Although I do not have the space to discuss it here, an important aspect of McFague’s discussion is the place of the cross and God’s response to suffering—both human and non-human—in creation. Her Christic paradigm for the world as God’s body demands the way of cross, that is, suffering in solidarity with those who suffer, and advocating for their liberation, as signified by the resurrection. She writes, “In both forms of Christian solidarity with the oppressed, the active and the passive, liberation and suffering, the cross and resurrection of the Christic paradigm are central to an embodiment theology.” *The Body of God*, 173. In McFague’s pantheistic model of world as God’s body, God feels the pain and suffering of all those who “live and move and have our being in God,” including the suffering of the natural world, because “God, though asymmetrically, lives in us as well.” (McFague, *The Body of God*, p. 176).

<sup>13</sup> McFague, *The Body of God*, p. 160.

<sup>14</sup> Op. cit., p. 165.

<sup>15</sup> Op. cit., p. 169.

<sup>16</sup> Op. cit., p. 169–70.

<sup>17</sup> “The New Testament appearance stories attest to the continuing empowerment of the Christic paradigm in the world: the liberating, inclusive love of God for all is alive in and through the entire cosmos.” (McFague, *The Body of God*, p. 179).

er words, “the power of God is incarnate throughout the world.”<sup>18</sup> The image of the Cosmic Christ means that salvation is not separated temporally or sequentially from creation as an otherworldly remedy for a fallen world; rather salvation takes place *in* creation, and creation always tends *toward* salvation. Incarnation was always the means of God’s revelation of divine love, both in the historical Jesus and in all of creation.<sup>19</sup>

Another way of talking about the presence of the incarnation in creation is through the notion of sacrament. The idea of the world as sacrament, mediating God’s grace through the order and beauty of nature, has long been a part of the Christian tradition, and Christian sacramentalism is rooted in the incarnation.<sup>20</sup> McFague worries that a sacramental view of nature has often viewed the world in instrumental terms, however, as a path to spiritual insight with primarily symbolic value for human beings instead of intrinsic value.<sup>21</sup> In response, she suggests that we focus “not on the use of all earthly bodies but on our care of them.”<sup>22</sup>

But simply advocating care for earthly bodies rather than their use seems a weak suggestion after McFague’s powerful discussion of the Christic paradigm and the Cosmic Christ. Viewing the world as sacrament is hardly a crass instrumentalism, nor is care for earthly bodies of plants, animals, and humans an *alternative* to sacramentalism.<sup>23</sup> Rather,

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<sup>18</sup> McFague, *The Body of God*, p. 179.

<sup>19</sup> McFague, *The Body of God*, p. 180.

<sup>20</sup> McFague, *The Body of God*, p. 183.

<sup>21</sup> McFague, *The Body of God*, p. 183–85.

<sup>22</sup> McFague, *The Body of God*, p. 186.

<sup>23</sup> For instance, in her reflections on food, she rhetorically opposes its literal and sacramental significance, advocating for more emphasis on the former in our time. Food, she writes, is “an appropriate and powerful symbol of both bare existence as well as the abundant life. In the Christian tradition food has always served these dual functions, though the emphasis has often been on the latter meaning, especially in the eucharist as a foretaste of the eschatological banquet. But in our time, the value of food is precisely its literal meaning: sustainability for bodies, especially the many bodies on our planet that Christians as well as others in our society think of as superfluous. In a telling reversal of the need of all bodies for food, many people assume that other creatures not only do not deserve food but are themselves only food—food for us.” McFague, *The Body of God*, p. 189. To my view, however, these dual functions are not opposed (and that dualistic thinking is the legacy of the logic of domination); instead, the symbolic and sacramental significance derives directly from the role of food in sustaining our bodies and in linking us to the larger ecosystem of which we are a part. Our practices—our sacraments and rituals—need to help us remember our food with gratitude, without losing its symbolic significance. See also Wendell Berry’s poem, “Prayer after Eating,” in which food is at once sacramental

it follows directly from Christian belief in the incarnation and in Jesus' own practices. If the world, as McFague argues, is in fact God's body, revealed through the incarnation in the historical Jesus, and extended through the cosmos through resurrection and sacrament, then it should be treated as such, with reverence and care.<sup>24</sup>

In sum, Sallie McFague interprets the incarnation of God in Jesus Christ to indicate 1) the importance of the body; an embodied feminist theology insists on the value and needs of bodies; 2) God is with us in the flesh because God takes on a body in the incarnation; 3) Jesus' historical practices of teaching, healing, and eating are paradigmatic for the way God cares for creation; and 4) the incarnation extends from the body of Jesus through the resurrection to the entire cosmos, which can be seen as sacrament with both symbolic and intrinsic value. I now turn to a second prominent Christian ecofeminist theologian, Rosemary Radford Ruether.

### Ecofeminist Theology: Rosemary Radford Ruether

One of the earliest feminist critics of traditional Christology for its androcentric bias, Rosemary Radford Ruether offers a sophisticated and historically nuanced critique, while recovering submerged strands of Christology in light of contemporary concerns. Like Elizabeth Johnson's writings on Christ as the embodiment of Wisdom-Sophia,<sup>25</sup> Ruether's Christology draws on the Biblical figure of divine Wisdom in the Hebrew Bible, which functions theologically in identical ways to the Logos or Son of God in the Christian Testament. This female symbol for the divine figure that became incarnate in Jesus is found in the writings of the church fathers, although it was ultimately neglected in favor of Logos or Son Christologies. For that reason, "the unwarranted idea develops that there is a necessary ontological connection between

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and literal, in *The Selected Poems of Wendell Berry*, Berkeley, CA. Counterpoint, Berkeley, CA 1999, p. 83.

<sup>24</sup> Although, it should be noted, McFague does not discuss concrete practices in detail that might help us transform the way Christians view the world.

<sup>25</sup> See Elizabeth A. Johnson, *She Who Is: The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse*. Crossroad, New York 1997.



the maleness of Jesus' historical person and the maleness of Logos as the male offspring and disclosure of a male God."<sup>26</sup>

Ruether is highly critical of classical forms of Christology that emphasize Jesus' generic humanity. Indeed, she rejects any Christology that identifies "the maleness of the historical Jesus with normative humanity and with the maleness of the divine Logos" for excluding women as representatives of Christ.<sup>27</sup> Like McFague, she turns to the Jesus of the synoptic gospels and his prophetic message and inclusive praxis. Here she finds Jesus as a liberator and iconoclast who overturns relationships based on domination.<sup>28</sup> "What is paradigmatic about Jesus," she writes, is not his maleness, "but rather his person as lived message and practice. Jesus becomes paradigmatic by embodying a certain message. That message is good news to the poor, a confrontation with systems of religion and society that incarnate oppressive privilege, and affirmation of the despised as loved and liberated by God."<sup>29</sup>

Jesus' maleness has no ultimate significance theologically;<sup>30</sup> it is his message of liberation that matters and that makes him a paradigm for humanity. Ruether expands this paradigm by turning to the divine figure who exceeds the historical Jesus, that is, *the Christ*, the figure of redemptive, liberated humanity. The resurrected Christ, "as redemptive

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<sup>26</sup> Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Sexism and God-Talk: Toward a Feminist Theology* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1983), 117. See also p. 126: "The male alone is the normative or generic sex of the human species; only the male represents the fullness of human nature, whereas woman is defective physically, morally, and mentally. It follows that the incarnation of the Logos of God into a male is not a historical accident but an ontological necessity. Just as Christ has to be incarnated in a male, so only can the male represent Christ." See further Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, pt. 1, q. 92, art. 1, 2; q. 99, art. 2; pt. 3, supp. q. 39.1 (and pt. 3, q. 31, art. 4).

<sup>27</sup> As well as for its soteriological exclusivism in a multireligious world. (Ruether, *Sexism and God-Talk*, pp. 134–35).

<sup>28</sup> "His ability to speak as liberator does not reside in his maleness but in the fact that he has renounced this system of domination and seeks to embody in his person the new humanity of service and mutual empowerment." (Ruether, *Sexism and God-Talk*, p. 137).

<sup>29</sup> Ruether, *Introducing Redemption*, p. 93.

<sup>30</sup> Although it does have "social symbolic significance" in patriarchal societies precisely because of his rejection, as a male, of systems of domination and privilege. "In this sense Jesus as the Christ, the representative of liberated humanity and the liberating Word of God, manifests the kenosis of patriarchy, the announcement of the new humanity through a lifestyle that discards hierarchical caste privilege and speaks on behalf of the lowly." (Ruether, *Sexism and God-Talk*, p. 137).

person and Word of God, is not to be encapsulated 'once-for-all' in the historical Jesus. The Christian community continues Christ's identity [and] redemptive humanity goes ahead of us, calling us to yet incompleting dimensions of human liberation."<sup>31</sup> In this inclusive vision, human beings have the potential to embody Christ by embodying his message of liberating social praxis.

In Ruether's later, more explicitly ecofeminist work, she considers, like McFague, the figure of the Cosmic Christ in the context of the sacramental tradition. Christian sacramentalism sees Christ as "both creator and redeemer of the cosmos, and not just of human beings."<sup>32</sup> In this tradition, Christ as the Logos is the principle through which the world was created as well as the power of new creation, renewing and reconciling the entire cosmos with God.<sup>33</sup> For the second-century church father Irenaeus, in his battles with world-disparaging Gnostic Christians, "creation is itself an incarnation of the Word and Spirit of God, as the ontological Christ is the renewal of this divine power underlying creation. In the incarnation divine power permeates bodily nature in a yet deeper way, so that the bodily becomes the sacramental bearer of the divine, and the divine deifies the bodily."<sup>34</sup> This notion of the cosmic Christ is taken up by several more recent thinkers such as Teilhard de Chardin and Matthew Fox, who also see Christ as the direction or fulfillment of creation, although this notion is not without its problems. Ruether herself critiques aspects of the cosmic Christ for its seeming denial of mortality, in its ancient form, and of materiality and equality, in

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<sup>31</sup> Ruether, *Sexism and God-Talk*, p. 138. She expands more fully on this point in a later essay: "While Jesus is the foundational representative of this way of the cross and liberation, he is not its exclusive possibility. Each Christian must also take up this same way and, in so doing become 'other Christs' to one another. The church becomes redemptive community, not by passively receiving redemption 'won' by Christ alone, but rather by collectively embodying this path of liberation in a way that transforms people and social systems." (Ruether, *Introducing Redemption*, p. 93). In addition, the way of Christ is not exclusive of other ways.

<sup>32</sup> Christ appears "as the cosmic manifestation of God, appearing both as the immanent divine source and ground of creation and its ultimate redemptive healing." R. Radford Ruether, *Gaia and God: An Ecofeminist Theology of Earth Healing*. Harper Collins, San Francisco 1992, p. 229.

<sup>33</sup> In this sacramental view of the cosmic Christ, salvation is not at all otherworldly. Rather, the "culmination of this process of...reconciliation of the cosmos with God, is, as Paul puts it in 1 Corinthians 12:25, 'So that God may be all in all.'" (Ruether, *Gaia and God*, p. 233).

<sup>34</sup> Ruether, *Gaia and God*, p. 235.

its modern form. In contrast, her Christology emphasizes the prophetic message and praxis of the Jesus of the gospels and the on-going liberation of humanity through the resurrected Christ, who is met wherever the struggle for liberation takes place.

Ruether's ecological theology at times seems disconnected from her Christology.<sup>35</sup> *Gaia and God*, for instance, focuses largely on the doctrine of creation, with surprisingly little reference to Christ. While creation is the logical starting place for ecofeminist theology, it seems to me that Ruether misses some of the radical potential of the incarnation. McFague does a somewhat better job of incorporating the incarnation, and Christology generally, into her ecofeminist theology because Christ provides the paradigm for her description of the cosmos as "the Body of God." However, in maximalizing the incarnation to include the entire cosmos, McFague risks glossing over the significance of Jesus' particular, historical body too quickly and, in the process, eliding the negative effect his masculinity has had on the position of women in Christianity. That is, while she draws attention to his inclusive practices, I wonder if she is too quick to invoke a cosmic incarnation without addressing the particularities of his body and especially how female bodies might also be seen as incarnations of the divine.<sup>36</sup>

### From the Body of Christ to Christian Bodies

These brief criticisms aside, what do these thinkers identify in the incarnation that can support and inspire Christians in the food movement working toward food justice and ethical practices of eating? As I see it, there are at least three implications in eco-feminist theology for Christian attitudes toward food and eating. First, the doctrine of the incarnation as articulated in ecofeminist perspective draws our attention

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<sup>35</sup> Her eco-theology outlines three important premises, none of which relates directly to Christ or the incarnation: "An ecological spirituality needs to be built on three premises: the transcendence of selves, the living interdependency of all things, and the value of the personal in communion." (Ruether, *Gaia and God*, p. 251).

<sup>36</sup> See E. A. Holmes, *Flesh Made Word: Medieval Women Mystics, Writing, and the Incarnation*. Baylor University Press, Waco, TX (available November 2013).

to Jesus' historical body<sup>37</sup> and his embodied practices of healing, feeding, and table fellowship with those on the margins of society. Tax collectors and prostitutes, Pharisees and Roman centurions: Jesus ate with everyone, overturning the social rules of commensality. Sallie McFague takes these practices to indicate concern and respect for human bodies that hunger. In the New Testament, food is not just a metaphor for the fullness of life; it is a basic need that Jesus addressed by feeding and eating with others. These practices make Jesus' historical body paradigmatic for understanding how God relates to the world and all the bodies in it. God wants bodies to be nourished.

Second, Ruether identifies Christ as the incarnation of divine Wisdom, who orders all of nature (not just the human part of it) and desires the flourishing of all creatures. In McFague's panentheist terms, the incarnation is paradigmatic of the model of the universe as "the body of God" in which redemption is not separated from creation nor limited to human beings. When we look to the cosmic Christ, the presence of divine Wisdom or Logos incarnate in the cosmos, we begin to see the world as sacrament: everything that is, reveals God's presence; everything that is, is part of God's Body. What this means in practical terms is that everything we eat is potentially Eucharist. The body and blood of Christ are given to us in the gift of the food we eat. In the American industrialized and processed food system, however, it is difficult if not impossible to recognize the sacramental nature of food. Essayist Fred Bahnson speculates that "we have impoverished food lives precisely because we have impoverished sacramental lives."<sup>38</sup> But a sacramental worldview, rooted in the incarnation of the cosmic Christ, can help renew an appreciation of the gift of food as the body of Christ. A sacramental worldview has the additional benefit of attributing both rela-

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<sup>37</sup> I find the Trikaya doctrine of Buddhism helpful for understanding the different "bodies" of Christ. Like the Buddha, Christ has multiple bodies: a historical body, which was born of Mary, suffered, died on the cross; a mysterious resurrected or spiritual body, which was able to pass through walls, retained the scars of his suffering, and ate fish and bread; and a cosmic body, the Wisdom/Sophia or the Word/Logos that is incarnate in the cosmos. In addition, we find the body of Christ in the Eucharist and in the church. Making distinctions among these different "bodies" allows us to understand nuances within the doctrine of the incarnation.

<sup>38</sup> F. Bahnson, "Monks, Mushrooms and the Sacramental Nature of Everyday Eating," *Church Health Reader* (Summer 2011), p. 8.

tional and intrinsic value to creation: it is both the source of food given “for us” *and* the incarnation of Christ in itself.<sup>39</sup>

The third implication of the doctrine of the incarnation is the value it places on all bodies as sites of divine revelation. In contrast to the Gnostic denigration of bodies and matter as well as the dualistic logic of domination that too frequently appears in Christian thought (spirit over matter, soul over body, male over female, God over creation, grace over nature, etc.), the incarnation reveals these oppositions to be both artificial and pathological. The incarnation overturns any opposition between Word and flesh, between the divinity and humanity of Christ. These are both essential for the Christian view of salvation: flesh is where God is revealed, making all bodies potentially divine.<sup>40</sup>

Like Ruether, many feminist theologians extend the incarnation to other bodies who become Christ by embodying liberation within Christian redemptive community.<sup>41</sup> The effect is an inclusive understanding of the incarnation, which means “that Christ can take on the face of every person and group and their diverse liberation struggles. We must be able to encounter Christ as black, as Asian, as Aboriginal, as woman,”<sup>42</sup> and, I would add, as plant and animal, too. Christ is incarnate wherever liberation is practiced just as Christ is hidden in the face of those who hunger and thirst.<sup>43</sup> The incarnation extends to the bodies of others—both those who suffer and those who come to their aid—through practices of care. As McFague notes, the distinctively Christian view of the world as God’s body emphasizes God’s solidarity with the oppressed, revealed

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<sup>39</sup> One way to address this disconnection is to supplement sacramentalism with a theory of intrinsic value, so that plants, animals, and ecosystems are not reducible to “food for us.” See McFague, *The Body of God*, p. 189, as well as her critique of sacramentalism, pp. 183–185.

<sup>40</sup> See Laurel Schneider, “Promiscuous Incarnation,” in M. D. Kamitsuka (ed): *The Embrace of Eros: Bodies, Desires, and Sexuality in Christianity*, Fortress Press, Minneapolis 2010.

<sup>41</sup> See Ruether, *Introducing Redemption*, p. 93, along with D. Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness: The Challenge of Womanist God-Talk*, Orbis, Maryknoll, NY 1993; R. Nakashima Brock, *Journeys By Heart: A Christology of Erotic Power*, Crossroad, New York 1988; Wendy Farley, *Gathering Those Driven Away: A Theology of Incarnation*, Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville, KY 2011; and M. Shawn Copeland, *Enfleshing Freedom: Body, Race, and Being*, Fortress Press, Minneapolis 2010.

<sup>42</sup> Ruether, *Introducing Redemption*, p. 94.

<sup>43</sup> Matt 25:31–46.

in the suffering body of Christ.<sup>44</sup> Human beings are invited to live into the incarnation through ethical and spiritual practices that attend to the beauty and vulnerability of bodies that suffer.

Principal among these are practices surrounding food and its environmental impact through production, distribution, consumption, and disposal. Ecofeminist Christologies and the doctrine of the incarnation invite a reconsideration of Christian eating practices through the paradigm of the body of Christ extended to other bodies and the body of the world. In light of the incarnation, food appears as sustenance, relationship, and metaphor all at once, paradigmatically present in the central Christian ritual of the Eucharistic meal in which Christ's body is distributed and consumed.

### Christian Eating Practices

At the most basic level, food meets the body's need for nourishment: along with air, water, clothing, and shelter, food is basic to life's needs. But food is always so much more than satisfying hunger. As Michael Pollan notes in the epigraph above, the "way we eat represents our most profound engagement with the natural world. Daily, our eating turns nature into culture, transforming the body of the world into our bodies and minds."<sup>45</sup> Although the industrial food system treats food primarily as a commodity exchanged for profit, it is more accurately viewed as a relationship. Like Jesus' radical practice of table fellowship, food crosses boundaries: between dirt, plants, animals, people, and God. Food as relationship sustains the weblike connections of an ecosystem, moving nutrients up and down the food chain.<sup>46</sup> Like Jesus' table fellowship, it

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<sup>44</sup> McFague, *The Body of God*, p. 173.

<sup>45</sup> M. Pollan, *The Omnivore's Dilemma*. Penguin Books, New York 2006, p. 10.

<sup>46</sup> Cf. Vandana Shiva, who writes, "In India we deeply believe that this amazing universe, this amazing planet, this amazing earth is connected through the web of food, the web of life. Food—everything is food, everything that eats that food is someone else's food. That's what connects us, we are food: we eat food, we are made of food, and our first identity, our first wealth, our first health, comes from the making, creating, giving of good food. In India we have an Upanishad that says, 'If you give bad food you sin.' The highest karma is the production of food in abundance and the giving of good food in generosity." Shiva, "For the Freedom of Food," in *Manifestos*, pp. 35–36.

reveals the artificiality of our social boundaries and systems of domination, instead disclosing our profound interdependence.

From this basic level of meaning as both nourishment and relationship, food emerges as a powerful metaphor. In Christian teaching, food is a metaphor of salvation in the form of abundant life, signaled time and again in the life of Jesus the Christ who became food. The infant Jesus is placed in a manger—a place for feeding animals.<sup>47</sup> Jesus describes himself as the “bread of life” (John 6). He dies, according to the rule of ancient Temple sacrifice, so that we can eat him.<sup>48</sup> He appears to his disciples after the resurrection and proves he is not a ghost by asking for and consuming food (Luke 24:41–43). Food is also the metaphor of the redemption of the world in the form of the eschatological banquet, in which all are gathered to feast together, including different species who set aside their predatory nature to eat food that can be shared by all.<sup>49</sup> These earthly images for heavenly life mean that food always functions for Christians as more than basic sustenance: it is the promise of life abundant.<sup>50</sup>

These metaphorical aspects of food are intimately connected to the Eucharistic meal, the central Christian ritual of consuming the body of Christ in the form of bread and wine. Through participation in the Eucharist, Christians implicitly recognize the sacramental power of food to transform the bodies who consume it. But the challenge is extending this recognition to all meals and to all bodies: to find Christ in a meal, in the land that produces, and in the face of those who hunger. This sacramental worldview requires training our senses to perceive the world in a new way, as nothing “but the body of the Lord,” in the words of the poet in the epigraph above. Christian ethical and spiritual practices can assist in the discipline of training our awareness to attend to the

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<sup>47</sup> See Farley, *Gathering*, pp. 189–190.

<sup>48</sup> See K. Tanner, “Incarnation, Cross, and Sacrifice: A Feminist-inspired Reappraisal”, *Anglican Theological Review*, 86, 1, Winter 2004, pp. 35–56.

<sup>49</sup> See McFague, *The Body of God*, p. 189; and Isaiah 11.

<sup>50</sup> See S. McFague, *Life Abundant: Rethinking Theology and Economy for a Planet in Peril*, Fortress, Minneapolis, MN 2000. See also Matt 25, in which the Son of Man appears in those who hunger and thirst.

sacramental significance of the food we eat.<sup>51</sup> But these practices must be taught and embodied in order to transform our awareness of food. I now turn to ways of putting the theology of incarnation into practice in the classroom through a pedagogy of service learning.

### Teaching Sustainable Food Practices

Over the past few years, I have developed a course on “The Spirituality and Ethics of Eating” in which I try to connect the issues addressed by the food movement with the Christian language of incarnation and Eucharist. The aim is for students to explore the symbolic meaning of food in conjunction with difficult ethical issues of hunger, health, agriculture, and social justice. The students and I attempt to put the theories of the course into practice both in our personal eating habits and in our service to others. While students read authors such as Wendell Berry, Michael Pollan, and Barbara Kingsolver, the heart of the course is highly local as we examine the way the food movement is developing in our local environment of Memphis, Tennessee. To that end, a central pedagogical aspect of the course is service learning, an embodied and practical form of education in which students learn and reflect on the material of the course through their service to others. Students are asked to volunteer at non-profit organizations (NGOs) in and around Memphis that are connected to the food movement, at places such as soup kitchens, community gardens, food pantries, urban farms, and farmer’s markets. This hands-on, practical, and embodied form of education—growing, preparing, eating, and serving food to others—teaches students directly the value of sustainable farming practices, eating real food, and ending hunger and food insecurity. Connected to these practices is the theological and more theoretical side of the course: the presence of the body of Christ in the bodies of the hungry, in the food we eat, and in the land on which it is grown. All bodies desire and deserve locally and sustain-

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<sup>51</sup> Simone Weil’s notion of “attention” is helpful here; see “Reflections on the Right Use of School Studies with a View to the Love of God”, in: G. A. Panichas (ed): *The Simone Weil Reader*, David McKay Company, New York 1977.



ably grown real food, and the aim of the course is to connect that thesis with both theological theory and concrete ethical and spiritual practice.

Memphis suffers from an extraordinarily high poverty rate. Nineteen percent of the population lives in poverty, making Memphis the poorest city in America.<sup>52</sup> It is also the “hunger capital of the country, with 26 percent of people ... reporting an inability to afford food for their families in the last 12 months.”<sup>53</sup> Many of the poor in Memphis live in “food deserts,” that is, areas with limited access to nutritious food. A number of organizations in Memphis are working hard to overcome these problems, and many of them are religiously motivated, although their incarnational theology is frequently implicit rather than an explicit part of their mission.

One such organization is the Church Health Center, founded by physician and Methodist minister Dr. Scott Morris in 1987 “to provide quality, affordable healthcare for working, uninsured people and their families.”<sup>54</sup> Their ministry includes a robust wellness program, with a fitness facility, nutrition education, and cooking classes, as well as a weekly farmer’s market in the parking lot, making real food easily accessible to the working poor. The Church Health Center puts into practice an expansive vision of salvation in which the care of bodies is just as important as the care of souls.<sup>55</sup> Students who are particularly interested in the medical professions can volunteer or intern with health, wellness, and nutrition programs offered by the Center.

Farmers’ markets have proliferated around Memphis in the last five years, with fourteen different markets now open.<sup>56</sup> Two of these are located in food deserts, low-income neighborhoods that lack access to a

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<sup>52</sup> “Census calls Memphis poorest in nation,” *Commercial Appeal*, September 23, 2011, <http://www.commercialappeal.com/news/2011/sep/23/census-calls-city-poorest-in-nation/> (accessed December 3, 2012).

<sup>53</sup> “South Memphis section hungers for food store,” *Commercial Appeal*, December 11, 2010, <http://www.commercialappeal.com/news/2010/dec/11/s-memphis-section-hungers-for-food-store/> (accessed December 3, 2012).

<sup>54</sup> Church Health Center, “Mission,” <http://www.churchhealthcenter.org/mission> (accessed October 3, 2011).

<sup>55</sup> See K. Hotz and M. Mathews, *Dust and Breath: Faith, Health, and Why the Church Should Care about Both*. Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, MI 2012.

<sup>56</sup> A list of Memphis area Farmers Markets as of 2011: <http://ilovememphisblog.com/2011/05/i-love-memphis-2011-farmers-market-guide/> (accessed October 3, 2011).

grocery store within a one-mile radius.<sup>57</sup> One of the markets operates in a church parking lot because the mission of First Congregational Church is to care for bodies as well as spirits. This church also runs a program called “Food for Families,” distributing donated and purchased items from the Memphis Food Bank as well as produce from the market and day-old baked goods to families in need once per month. This ministry is a form of the ancient practice of gleaning, avoiding food waste by redistributing food to the needy that would otherwise be discarded. What makes Food for Families different from traditional soup kitchens is that guests choose what they want from a wide selection of donated food, preserving both dignity and agency. Students can volunteer or intern with this ministry by receiving, gleaning, organizing, and distributing food directly to those in need.

Two further organizations with which students frequently volunteer both focus on developing sustainable urban agriculture: GrowMemphis, formerly operated by the Midsouth Peace and Justice Center but now an independent organization,<sup>58</sup> and Urban Farms, originally a project of Christ United Methodist Church and the Binghampton Development Corporation.<sup>59</sup> GrowMemphis “fosters the creation of robust community food systems that eliminate hunger, promote health, and further social justice” and has founded twenty-four community gardens in neighborhoods, schools, and places of worship. In addition, GrowMemphis advocates for better food policy and revision of local and state laws to increase access to local, nutritious foods in economically disadvantaged neighborhoods. Urban Farms aims to “improve access to healthy food” sustainably through “local, natural food sourcing and accessible food distribution” by means of a three-acre farm in the heart of the city and a community market at which locally sourced food and food grown on the farm can be sold. Both organizations practice sustainable, organic agriculture.

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<sup>57</sup> The Urban Farms Market and The South Memphis Farmers Market (<http://somefm.org/> accessed December 3, 2012).

<sup>58</sup> GrowMemphis: <http://www.growmemphis.org/> (accessed December 3, 2012).

<sup>59</sup> Binghampton Development Corporation, Urban Farms: [http://bdcmemphis.org/home/urban\\_farms.html](http://bdcmemphis.org/home/urban_farms.html) (accessed December 3, 2012).

My students serve at all of these institutions and more, including traditional soup kitchens, food pantries, and in the community garden on our university campus, founded by the student social justice committee four years ago.<sup>60</sup> For many students, getting their hands dirty is a transformative experience, like the student who wrote, “The garden allowed me to gain practical knowledge related to the issues studied in this course and showed me that even a small group of young adults can make a difference.... Working in the garden was difficult... I’m not a nature person by any means; but I loved every minute of the itchy grass and dirt under my nails because it allowed me to become one with God’s creation,”<sup>61</sup> or the one who reflected on her experience at a soup kitchen, “It was amazing to see God’s grace at work. I do not believe I have ever experienced so many extraordinary emotions while helping others. I felt love for everyone that came through the door, and I felt the presence of God in everything I did.”<sup>62</sup> As their teacher, I see service learning, an embodied form of practical education, as a way of directly teaching what the incarnation is all about: the beauty and vulnerability of the human body and our relationship to local ecosystems, plants, animals, and people through the just growth, distribution, and consumption of real food. Participation in this form of education emulates Jesus’ own practices of feeding and eating with others, and thereby connects students to the body of Christ. A pedagogy of service learning with respect to food additionally allows Christians a spiritual avenue into the ethical issues addressed by the food movement because it recognizes that food carries meaning far beyond nutrition: in the words of Michael Pollan in support of commensality, “Food isn’t just fuel; it’s about communion.”<sup>63</sup> An incarnational perspective, informed by ecofeminist theology, has the power to translate the ethical concerns of the food movement into the sacramental language of the church, which, if it looks hard enough, can

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<sup>60</sup> Christopher Peterson, “A Semester in Food Life,” *Belltower* (Spring 2011), 31–33.

<sup>61</sup> Deidra Brooks, “Final Paper: Food and Faith,” unpublished manuscript, used by permission.

<sup>62</sup> Kaylea Brewer, “Service Learning at St. Vincent DePaul’s Mission,” unpublished manuscript, used by permission.

<sup>63</sup> Michael Pollan, “Edible Futures,” quoted in Rachel Barenblat, “Michael Pollan’s Gospel of Sustainable Food,” October 24, 2009. [http://poptech.org/blog/michael\\_pollans\\_gospel\\_of\\_sustainable\\_food](http://poptech.org/blog/michael_pollans_gospel_of_sustainable_food) (accessed December 3, 2012).

find Christ present in the land, in the food, in the bodies of the hungry, and in the gestures of those who serve them.

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