

## **The World as the Body of God Ecofeminist Theological Discourse with special reference to Tribal Women in India**

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### **Introduction**

We believe in contextual theology. Violence against women is on the rise everyday and globalization has contributed a great deal towards violence. Tensions arise every corners of India based on religion, caste, class and sex. It is an emerging issue for the Indian Christians to address our theologies based on the contextual reality, such as SEZ issues in Nandigram, farmers suicide, 340 kms walk on March for Justice by Tribals,<sup>1</sup> Noida serial killings of innocent girls, 2002 Gujarat killings and Human trafficking in all forms in India.

With humility and acknowledging the seriousness of the death dealing issues in our context, however, I want to mention that this paper is an attempt to address one area of life threatening that is the ecological crisis in India with a special focus on Mizo tribal women's reality. It aims to uplift the contributions of tribal women in the search of guardianship to ecological concerns.

This paper is an attempt to highlight the hypothesis of the pre-Christian and pre-colonial cultural heritage of the Mizos had deep ecological content and therefore, it has relevance in today's situation of ecological crisis in Mizoram and beyond. In this work an attempt is made to recover and interpret this worldview from a feminist perspective.

Mizo social system was the male-centered, patriarchal structure of village administration in Mizo society which bonded not only with the missionary culture (which was also male-centered and patriarchal), but also with the colonial and later the Indian State which introduced a male-centered, destructive Western economic developmental concept. This led to rampant corruption and destruction of forest wealth. A feminist perspective, however, comes close to the roots of Mizo culture as preserved by women. However, as

women have been prominent in trade, in promotion of monetary economy, their cooperation with the capitalist economy needs to be looked at critically.

The feminist recovery of ecological elements in Mizo culture therefore needs to grapple with two obstacles: The **first** hurdle is the strong devaluation of Mizo culture by the missionaries, which led to severe cultural colonization. While at the level of the social structure community life remained relatively intact, it was gradually taken over by the Church. Cultural colonization took place by means of literacy enterprises and higher education. Social control took place through Church discipline. The **second** hurdle is due to changes in the land holding system in agriculture and especially in lifestyle. The material base for the ecological Mizo worldview, which was the land, has thus been destroyed to a large extent.

Keeping these obstacles in mind, the feminist recovery of Mizo ecological contents will have to provide a major critique of the missionary endeavor, as well as a critique of present day development policies, promoted by the State and lifestyles of the people. Alternatives need to be developed both theologically and materially, based on the present day interaction with what can be retrieved from Mizo pre-colonial heritage. The latter is a task which implies a very comprehensive reorganization of society and therefore lies way beyond the scope of this thesis. But some valid attempts made in that direction will be discussed. The theological task can only be indicated in outline and will need to be implemented through a transformative feminist paradigm within the churches. This transformative task can hopefully be helped by the limited insights of this paper.

The Mizos once lived in a subsistence economy based on forest and jhum agriculture. They went through several changes in the socio-religious, economic, political life, which is particularly evident in the ecological changes that have taken place. Because these tremendous changes occurred in a short period of time, the Mizo subsistence economy has been shaken. The economy of the state has become totally dependent on outside forces. Socio-politically, development of social divisions and corruption has both taken root.

The main ecological problems are deforestation, erosion of soil, land becoming barren, scarcity of water, change of weather, loss of wildlife and plant species. Other problems connected with globalization and urbanization are pollution, congestion and loss of survival skills. The result is emigration and loss of livelihoods. Due to the unique functioning of Mizo social structure, women were deeply rooted in the forest economy and jhum cultivation, but were not politically represented in the village councils. Thus, the decisions regarding conversion to Christianity, changes in land holding and the type of agriculture practiced were introduced without consulting women. Men fell in line due to existing social controls even though women had access to education. However, women could not become ministers of the Church. Their influence in social life remained under control. While women suffered severe losses due to destruction of forest and jhum, they remained nevertheless resourceful due to a certain continuity of knowledge. Those who were educated became more 'empowered' according to standards of modernity, but lost their continuity with regard to the traditional knowledge systems.

This article is also an attempt of educated and non-educated women to reconnect with the traditional knowledge system by recovering it from written and oral sources and reinterpreting the same in the light of recent ecofeminist theological debates. In discussing the contributions of ecofeminists to the ecological debate on *the World as the Body of God*, the choice of Sallie McFague among many other ecofeminist thinkers in the West, is grounded on the one hand on her metaphoric theology, which creates openings to the metaphor of God in Mizo culture before the missionaries came. On the other hand, she has also addressed extremes of ecological devastation implicit in nuclear technology, which, in a way made her an exponent of a radical critique of destructive technocratic options in Western development.

### **Land as a metaphor for the 'Body of God'**

Sallie McFague uses language as a 'model' to make connections between God and creation. In developing 'models of God' she uses a metaphorical language to emphasize relationality in creation in terms of God's body. Any credible theology today should take into account the nuclear threat and should respond to it in a manner that enhances the value of life and creation. In order to arrive at this 'credible theology'<sup>2</sup> McFague suggests 'credible

theology' as new metaphors for understanding God and creation, which is the metaphor of 'God's body.' This metaphor of God's body not only builds up relationality, inclusiveness and mutuality between the values of life and creation, but also an interdependence of all life which helps to remember the nuclear threat as that which 'breaks' this interdependence and threatens the world with total annihilation.

McFague treats theology as metaphorical and conceptualizes creation as God's body. For her the metaphor of God's body is in relation to God as mother, lover and friend. A metaphor for God's body implies intimate relationship between God and the world, which is appropriate to bring about an ecological balance in creation in terms of interdependence. McFague's argument draws on Teilhardian and process theologies, but with an ecofeminist emphasis and direction. She argues that the Western model of development or welfare is based on "treating the world and the earth as object to exploit it,"<sup>3</sup> thus, curtailing its resources for growth and welfare. It is notable how the Western idea of development caught on to the nations around, encompassing the world and creation.

The use of Sallie McFague for a center of dialogue between Western ecofeminist and tribal ecofeminist have been chosen for two reasons: **Firstly**, the work on theological metaphors is relevant for a dialogue with the pre-Christian tradition in Mizoram and its flexible concepts of divinity, which include female, male and neuter metaphors. McFague's work on metaphors helps to loosen up the fixed patriarchal concepts prevalent in the Mizo churches and to open up to the cultural traditions which have been rendered invisible by the missionaries. **Secondly**, her writings on re-thinking theological language in the nuclear age are giving insights into how Western feminist theology has dealt with the extremes of a destructive development concept, which contributes to the danger of wiping out all life on earth. The Mizo tribal position presents another extreme of people depending for their livelihood on a forest economy which is now in danger of being wiped out by ecological deterioration. While it is not possible to go back to a readymade positive past of a more balanced ecosystem, a balance between nature and human needs is to be found, which does not have a blue print in the traditional tribal culture, but which also cannot be found in the agricultural and cultural practices imported by the missionaries and by government policies.

## **The World as the Body of God**

The interpretation of scripture, language, and metaphors to relate God and the world has been challenged by liberation theologians, particularly the feminist liberation theologians. Many Feminist theologians value and affirm a model of God that includes an emphasis on empowerment and life-giving. In response to the current issues of ecological disturbance and the threat of nuclear strikes. Kathryn Guthrie quotes McFague:

The evolutionary, ecological perspective, the holistic vision that is basic to a new sensibility, renders untenable any understanding of the God-world relationship in which God is viewed as a being externally related to the world as the power that totally controls it.<sup>4</sup>

Kathryn Guthrie shares the experience of God as the inclusive and wide spectrum and especially the experience of God as 'externally related' to the world. Therefore, Guthrie suggests the appropriateness of the metaphorical models of God in terms of the Earth as God's body, God as mother, friend and lover. This model of God in metaphors clearly offers the inclusive nature of God's work in our lives, a source of love and compassion for a person in distress. Such a God as a friend can offer empowerment towards hope for a future radically altering the past. This also offers an intimacy that was not stressed in the past.<sup>5</sup>

McFague urges us to identify our experiences of mothering, loving and befriending to be specially cognizant of our physical bodily base, to strip these of their particularities, and try and test them by asking: what does each say about God's love, God's activity and God's ethic? In McFague's work on God's body, the link between the world as God's body and the three metaphors of God as Mother, Friend and Lover are clearly spelled out.

### **God as Mother**

The physical acts of gestation, giving birth, and nurturing constitute the basis of the model of **God as Mother**. God as mother reflects God's relationship with human beings in terms of *agapaic* love which constitutes for McFague the motherly relationship that exists in the universe. God's activity is seen as that of a creator, and is concern for creation and its nurture. Theological categories such as judgment are to be understood in terms of mother-

creator's love for the universe and so justice as the ethic of God. Sin is termed as the inequitable distribution of goods and lack of generative concern for the future with insensitivity to ecological concerns.<sup>6</sup>

The metaphor of God as mother may not find its true acceptance theologically, as one has to contend with the problem of how God now is the mother of her own body. The emphasis on relationality undercuts the threatening aspect of the mother, who, in the experience of the dependent child, has power over life and death. This threatening aspect, which is well documented for the history of religions, is avoided in McFague's metaphor.

### **God as Lover**

The metaphor of God as lover is based on the experience of sexual activity expressed in erotic love, the drive for union with God. God's love for the universe is an expression of the value with which God invests it. God's activity as erotic love is seen as saving from sin and evil. Human beings are called to resist evil and identify with the world as God's body, our beloved. Refusal to do so is sin according to McFague. In McFague's words, ultimately evil is a relative concept in terms of a monistic interpretation, since as humans we are incapable of completely understanding the inter-relatedness of all creation and since God assumes primary responsibility for all evil. 'Overcoming' evil and attaining salvation is a continuous involvement, a process, accomplished by Jesus who remains paradigmatic of salvation as the one who heals the Body by resisting evil and identifying with the universe as lover.<sup>7</sup>

*God as Lover* conveys to us the values of affirming an universal God who relates Godself to the world, eliciting creaturely participation in the divine work of making the universe well in the light of nuclear threat. And yet, while the metaphors of mother or friend deal basically with two persons or individuals, at least here in that of God as lover, the participation of the creation is presupposed.

### **God as Friend**

According to McFague, the metaphor of God as Friend has no physical basis. It is only a bonding of two people, voluntary and for reciprocal relationship. Friends are those who have a common vision. Thus, God's love is understood as *philia* – His activity as sustaining and his companionship ethical. Although this is unlike the traditional model for God (which was based on spirit), the present one incorporates not only humans but also non-human reality in its ambit. Therefore, this model invites us to experience a reciprocal relationship with God characterized by a common concern for the world. Sin, in this context is that which denies sustenance to creation by its exclusion from companionship of our table.

As metaphors go, they speak indirectly of God, but metaphors cannot be expected to correspond or refer directly to the divine being itself. Thus, belief in the *imago dei* tells us something about the very nature of God as revealed to us in God-related creatureliness, as McFague advocates. Truth claims, based firmly on the experiential of the *imago dei*, are indispensable to theology in any context. According to McFague, any unmediated access to undescribed reality is not possible, therefore any claim for direct correspondence between our metaphors and reality in itself is also not possible. Thus her theological efforts through metaphors are humble efforts to speak suitably of God for our time, and thus her metaphors are not sacrosanct nor are they absolute. They are tentative and open to revision. McFague, therefore in essence makes truth claims as a theological factor as one who is justified in holding to certain well-entrenched religious beliefs and building on them. These beliefs are made up of epistemic tradition of the Christian faith of *imago dei* and its implications for creation and humanity. Along with these she is strengthened in her efforts by other experiences from other religious traditions with the human social understanding and the relationship of knowing and experiencing each other in terms of mother, friend or lover.<sup>8</sup>

The model of God as friend in her effort is to break the stranglehold of the traditional understanding of God as Father which according to her is idolatrous and irrelevant. That is the reason why McFague rejects any metaphors which speak of God in patriarchal and imperialistic and triumphalistic terms, and the language used thus smack of breaking the relationship between God and the world, which engenders the notion of destroying the earth with nuclear power and thus life on earth.<sup>9</sup> Her metaphorical evolution thus demythologizes the relationship between God and the earth as Godself is 'known' in terms of the images or

metaphors of mother, friend and lover as those who care for the other and thus God taking care of the earth. Her efforts in this view restate the absolute mystery and the unknowability of God in terms of relationality and interdependence between creation and the creator. Further, in this vein, to destroy the earth amounts to the violation of the very *nature* of God.<sup>10</sup>

Thus, God as Friend counters both the notions of isolated independence and symbiotic dependence, replacing it with the vision of mutuality and suggests that God's call to humanity is to share the work of affirming existence and nurturing the universal bond of inter-connection.<sup>11</sup>

### **Khuanu: the Metaphor of Mother**

McFague talks about creation as God's body in a metaphorical language. The function of *Khuanu*, the mother God of the Mizos may be drawn from similar models she took in relation to the feminine imagery that has been used to depict other characteristics of the Supreme Being. For instance, the image of the loving, caring, nurturing mother has often been used to symbolize the loving and protecting concern of the Supreme Being for her creatures. *Khuanu*, the 'Mother of nature' gives blessings, and her name is invoked for blessing as food is taken in the same way as grace is said before meals. Our ancestors, whenever they were in trouble or were sick believed that there were higher beings who could provide healing and blessing, they often appealed to *Khuanu* for help and blessing. Our ancestors did their best to gain access to the three divine beings and to understand them better. *Khuanu* is omnipresent. There is no single aspect of life apart from *Khuanu*. She influences every aspect of Mizo life. In marriage for example, *Khuanu* decides the choice of the couple. The Mizos believed that *Khuanu* looked after the people. *Khuanu* related to people in the world below (this world) and *Pathian*, father God related to people in the world above (after life).<sup>12</sup>

In McFague's metaphor of motherhood, the emphasis is on mothering, caring and distributive justice. *Khuanu* is the creator of the universe who represents the earth and is therefore known as the *Mother Earth*. Even elements in nature are sometimes referred to in feminine terms, as when some people address the moon and stars as mother. Rokunga, a Mizo

songwriter, affirms that *Khuanu* is the queen of the universe. In order to acknowledge the glory of *Khuanu*, Rokunga invites people to look at the stars in the sky.

Han thlir ila siar thangvan eng khi  
Mahni lamtluang chhui zelin  
Hlim takin an leng van zawlah  
Kan tana ruat reng em lo ni le,  
Chung *Khuanu* lengin?<sup>13</sup>

Translation:

When I observe the stars shining in the sky  
Going in their own direction  
Happily at the top of heaven  
Our heavenly *Khuanu* arranges their way for us.

As each star goes its own way quietly exuding happiness, the sight confirms *Khuanu's* presence and power.

The reason we continue to believe in *Khuanu* is because of the nature of her work as a mother who nurtures and takes care of the people. Brig. Ngurliana Sailo, has said, "We remember *Khuanu* very well."<sup>14</sup> *Khuanu* is believed to live in the village, and that means she is near, active, available, and accessible to human beings. It is evident to me that if I am to rediscover the forgotten and neglected *Khuanu*, it must be through the experience of people like Darzakili. From my interviews, it became clear that in the Mizo religious tradition, *Khuanu* exemplifies compassion, knowledge, harmony, power, and ultimate spiritual strength. Mizo women and men could come to her whenever necessary for their own well-being and for special needs as well as for the needs of the community because *Khuanu* protects and blesses people. *Khuanu* is the nurturing divine feminine being who brings a prosperity to the people, healing them from their pain and suffering, and protecting them from the fear of evil spirits who could harm them or cause them illness. *Khuanu* was thus known to be a protector in tradition, and the Mizo signify *Khuanu* with the feminine gender.<sup>15</sup>

*Khuanu* was very important in the traditional belief system of the Mizo. With the introduction of Christianity, *Khuanu* was suppressed and she became invisible and silent. Her remnants are found mostly in songs, sayings and poems. *Khuanu*, however, is never

addressed in formal or institutionalized worship and adoration. In order to understand, to accept, and to draw upon the liberating aspects of *Khuanu*, we are compelled to review our traditional religion. It can be asked whether the fact that *Khuanu* was not addressed openly in worship but remembered in poems and songs, can also be transformed into strength. A questioning of the rigid patriarchal metaphor of *Pathian* can thus come from the poetic role of the folk culture. However, a question arises which can be posed to McFague's "Models of God" as well: What is the "Sitz im Leben" of these metaphors, how can they be located in the life of the community? In a way, Mizo culture is in a better position to explore this question, as song, poetry and dancing, are central to Mizo social life, which has however been suppressed by the missionaries. The cultural revival of these traits, which was described above, could be an instrument to change dominant metaphors as well, provided the challenge is consciously taken up.

Most Mizo theologians cannot understand the function of the feminine divine 'being' because their minds are fixed on the Christian understanding of God as the Father whose gender is male. This is so since they have internalized a patriarchal culture where a woman's role is not appreciated; hence they have a hard time understanding women's importance. If they would only widen their perspective and imagination, they would understand more easily how and why the way the idea of the feminine aspect of the divine was developed in Mizo religious belief.

In the metaphor of motherhood, the emphasis is on mothering, caring and distributive justice. In the metaphor of *Khuanu*, there is on the one hand the element of a cosmic creative power, which is in a way the force which holds the universe together. This is in some ways not unlike the concept of *Shakti* as creative power as it is found in mainstream Hinduism. However, *Khuanu* lacks the fierce, destructive element of *shakti*.<sup>16</sup> On the other hand, the quality of nurturing is deeply connected with the forest and with agriculture and also with the social forces which sustain the kinship system. She not only 'arranges' the marriage but sustains also the relationships of the extended family, clan and tribe. Her blessings are directly related to daily survival and to the mending of relationships. Her motherhood is social in a wider, collective sense.

The very fact that *Khuanu* has been pushed into oblivion by the missionaries and the concept of God has been entirely usurped by *Pathian*, is one of the chief reasons for the peculiar shift in Mizo Christianity towards a very otherworldly orientation, which cares more about salvation and life after death than about creation, ecology, agriculture, daily sustenance and community life. Nevertheless, *Khuanu* is remembered in poems and songs.

### **Lasi: the metaphor of Lover**

It is important to discover the relationship between humans, animals, the forest and the divine feminine in ancient Mizo tradition. As explained in great detail earlier on in Mizo folktales, there appears a divine young woman, named *Lasi*. *Lasi* is the queen of the animals. *Lasi* is a beautiful and virtuous woman. She protects and controls animals, especially wild animals. That power is divine. Therefore, *Lasi* is termed to be a divine feminine being.

The figure of *Lasi* cannot be directly connected to the metaphor of God as Lover which McFague proposes, as it is rather removed from an individualistic love relationship. However, it can be said that the erotic quality of *Lasi* tempers and mellows the permission to kill animals. In a way, the love relationship distracts from the act of killing. It introduces a different type of relationality with animals and with the forest.

*Lasi* is not a goddess of hunting which puts a prize on virility, boldness and heroism. She is an erotic figure who introduces an element of romance in the life of the hunter, which at the same time ties him to an ecological balance which prohibits any overkill. It is more difficult to recover the figure of *Lasi* in the present cultural situation, as hunting is no longer a daily pursuit. But the prohibition to avoid overkill and greed remains relevant also in the context of the wider forest economy, where only that which is necessary for the survival of the community can be taken, while random felling of forest for gain is not permissible. The figure of *Lasi* symbolizes eroticism, spontaneity, bonding, a balanced relationship with nature and a curb on violence.

In this, she incorporates *eros* and the activity of being a Saviour. She protects the hunter himself, but also the animals. In this sense, she also takes part in the ethic of healing on which McFague elaborates. This ethos of hunting is far removed from the ethos of warfare. The present warfare on nature which has been expressed in tree felling, privatization of land and commercialization of agriculture, is in contradiction to what the figure of *Lasi* stands for. It is good to remember here that people's relationship with the forest and with the jhumming was most painfully disrupted during the war-like period of insurgency and counter-insurgency.

Unlike *Khuanu*, *Lasi* is hardly alive in popular memory, except as some kind of a folk tale. However, what she incorporated has a touching message even today. As hunting, eroticism and close interaction with animals are difficult to integrate with the biblical message especially of the Gospels, it appears as if *Lasi* cannot be retrieved in the present situation in Mizoram. It is therefore, extremely helpful to be able to use Sallie McFague's "Models of God" as a metaphoric learning aid, which makes a connection visible between "God as Lover" in the face of nuclear destruction and a long-lost hunting goddess, which stands for food security and fulfillment of need, against greed. It is highly doubtful whether the church in its fossilized Christianity can envisage such a connection. However, it is likely that ordinary people in the interior parts of the country, who still rely on the forest and the jhum as the mainstay of their life, could resonate with this rediscovery of their traditions.

### **God as Friend**

There is no direct equivalent to the remaining two metaphors of Sallie McFague in the Mizo tradition. However, it is worth reflecting on them in our context. The metaphor of God as Friend does not apply, because the concept of friendship is the personalized Western sense does not exist. However, reading the metaphor of God as Friend may help to evolve a critical perspective of Mizo community life. As McFague points out, friendship is the least 'necessary' of her metaphorical relationships. The world without erotic relationship, childbearing and mothering would soon be extinct. Friendship comparatively seems to be much less 'necessary.'

Mizos are proud to assert that they have a strong sense of community, which practically speaking, borders on clannishness. However, this sense of community, which can be seen as an ethnic characteristic, is virtually based on the perception of an extended kinship system. Other communities, like e.g. the *Brus* and *Chakma* communities in the south, are looked down upon. It is such distinction between the 'in-group' and the 'other' which also has been at the root of head-hunting and warfare, which created an immense sense of insecurity and fear. It is this sense of insecurity and fear which greatly facilitated conversion to Christianity. As shown above in Part I, it was this sense of fear and insecurity, which also led Mizos to be frightened of evil spirits and which ultimately alienated us from understanding that every thing in creation is animated and interconnected. It is therefore, crucial to read the metaphor of God as friend as a critique on an exclusivist sense of community which externalizes and looks down upon 'the other.' The metaphor of the friend presupposes freedom to relate outside kinship systems and beyond boundaries. The activity, which comes out of friendship, is sustenance and the ethic is one of companionship. The importance of the freedom of friendship and the sustenance which comes out of it becomes more revealing if one contrasts it with the culture of nepotism and corruption, which has taken hold of Mizo political life more and more after statehood was attained. Corruption is closely enmeshed in extended kinship systems, while freedom to relate and companionship without dependency are extremely difficult to achieve.

While we often pride ourselves of our community life, which has been fully taken over by the church, we have not attained the freedom to transcend the limitations of our community. However, such transcendence is vital in order to share the scarce resources in the North East and to avoid competition and warfare. The metaphor of friendship opens up a challenge to transcend identity politics. The metaphor of the World as the Body of God has no equivalent in the Mizo tradition. However, even this metaphor is helpful in encouraging us to rethink our ancient traditions. Surely the whole world as the body of God enables us to see every detail of it as inhabited by God's spirit. In this way, the metaphor brings us closer to our original perception that all matter is animated and connected with each other. This helps us to retain a more powerful picture of the tradition of animism which was maligned as inferior and was therefore denigrated. This metaphor also helps to overcome the dichotomy between good

and evil spirits and thus fearful and magic-related quality of many of the ancient practices. This can be very helpful to free us to relate to our culture in more creative ways.

McFague's work is an interesting and important examination of the understanding of theology and of how we comprehend it. Her explorations in to theology begin with a wedge between the traditional sacramental mode of understanding- God in terms of patriarchal, imperialistic and patronizing attitude and the more modern view of understanding reality in terms of relevance, humane and down-to-earth attitude of dependency and relationality. This unitive dimension of reality is expressed in symbols as they highlight the connection between or among the distinct realities emphasizing similarity and union. Thus for McFague, God as the Father can serve as a meaningful example of the divine-human relationship, as for many it is including Jesus. But she also alludes to the fact that patriarchalism is a perversion and abuse of the father metaphor. So for her, insofar as patriarchalism is a system that fosters male superiority at all levels of personal and public life, then it is fundamentally opposed to gospel criticism of all worldly hierarchies. This criterion has restricted images used to convey God's relationship with the creation.

Images of God in the scriptures themselves are numerous and diverse. God as liberator, comrade, creator, friend, mother, father, rock, lover, brother, teacher etc. are common. These images do not describe God but suggest the quality of relationship that is possible with God. These are images of relationships, not pictures of God. Thus the metaphor of friendship is expressive of a mature relationship with God. However, as with all metaphors they have their own limitations and cannot be stretched too far.<sup>17</sup>

McFague defines models as systematic and relatively permanent metaphors. While theories dominate more than models in science, the reverse is true in theology. As science is more interested in new inventions and not thus in history, theology unlike science is interested in history and in tradition and the cumulative authority of doctrine. Science disputes the role of models in terms of their function as heuristic and illustrative or ontological and essential. But in theology where there are no empirical tests of verifiability or falsifiability, models cannot be dispensed with at all. Theological models affect feelings and actions in ways scientific models do not.

As we do not live any more in a sacramental world, where ordinary events are permeated with a sense of divine power and love, our religious language apart from a religious context becomes both idolatrous and irrelevant in a secular world and outlook. Here, text is interpreted relative to its context. This can lead to viewing reality in a disconnected pluralism. So, in order to avoid idolatry of literalism, one needs to use language metaphorically. In order to avoid irrelevance one needs to use language that is inclusive. Therefore, one needs to find metaphors, which refer not to objects but to relationships. Paradoxical though these metaphors could be in effect, they point to reality in a new light – inclusive and in relationships. Of course, metaphors as well as models, are limited in their view and function, in spite of them being channels of understanding as mere pointers to reality. Thus, Jesus is the way to the Kingdom, but he is not the Kingdom.

On criticism of McFague metaphors has been that she does not seem to find a sense of compassion, nurture and care in the male. She calls these traits as maternal, as though men as fathers are monarchic and hegemonic and as if mothers are not. McFague seems to find maternal metaphors as an easy way to solve the problem. However, the concept of God as father does not preclude maternal attributes.

Finally, as history records, Jews and Christians attempted to incorporate feminine imagery to depict reality. But they seem to have failed in their attempts at projecting creation or redemption using female models. Robert Paul Roth also commented-

One reason for the appropriateness of God as father in biblical metaphor is the aggressive surprise of time as against the repetition of nature. Creation does not arise out of matrix; redemption does not naturally emerge from a womb. Grace is given and the creature is receptive to the action of the giver. The amazing thing about grace is that it comes from above, not from within, and therefore, it brings freedom from fate.<sup>18</sup>

The strategy of metaphorical theology as in McFague, is in confronting the problem of God-talk with the notion that religious and theological language are problematic since people view the world as secular and they no longer view it as symbolic of the divine. As a consequence of this view, people are inclined to the language about God literally with idolatrous consequences and are inclined to find language about God irrelevant.

McFague doubts whether a return to the traditional sacramental universe is possible or necessary at all. Instead she argues that metaphor and models rather provide the most adequate basis for understanding theological language and for responding to idolatry and irrelevance. She finds however, metaphors and models, unlike symbols or sacraments, as those not identifying with their referent. Metaphorical statements are open-ended and always contain the possibility of 'it is and it is not', paradoxical and tentative. Thus, her metaphorical theology, "by drawing attention to its 'is not' intends to emphasize the open-ended, tentative, indirect, intensive iconoclastic and transformative character of God-talk."<sup>19</sup>

McFague bases her reconstructive theology on a persuasive rationale, that all religious language is basically metaphorical. Her strength lies in her being selective in following tradition and breaking off where it becomes rigid precluding towards open-ended assertions. Being metaphorical, theologies are models and not mere literal descriptions. From here, she moves further on to be open to different models that speak to the present. Her contention is that the traditional models with all their strengths are counterproductive. The nuclear threats compounded with ecological crises have fomented a near fatal destruction of life on the earth. In order to speak to this world hell-bent on destruction, a theology that should be evolved should speak with images and models that integrate life on earth towards a holism, interconnectedness and interdependence. Her approach is termed heuristic (unlike the traditional, hermeneutic, constructive yet deconstructive) paving a way for a tentative, open-ended and experiential dimension in theology.

Her approach being thus focused on the theology with images that speak to the present, she explores the area for suitable models or metaphors that speak to the situation. She finds the models and the metaphors of the world as God's body and God as mother, friend and lover suitable enough for experimentation for their viability however, with a caution that these models could be limited in their own way to exhaust the reality around us.

The metaphor of the world as God's body is in tension with the other three as it can be taken to express determinism and lack of independence. These are qualities from which she tried to move away. However, the metaphor of the world as the Body of God on the other hand has strength in its finiteness. It expresses that as humans, we only have this one

earth to sustain life, as we know it. All our theology, however much it may tend to be otherworldly, eschatological, cosmic, is ultimately tied up with this utterly fragile, finite and perishable/destructible world. Writing from a situation of an agricultural society of very vulnerable ecosystems, this metaphor, far from appearing deterministic, expresses a challenge eliciting a healing response.

In this sense, the models she employs though critiqued for a lack of the eschatological dimension and pre-occupation with the present, actually span a bow from creation to final redemption. The redemption takes place in the caring interaction of lover and friend and mothering it compassionately heals the violated body of God. The key aspect for McFague is sustainability of the present for the future, and this seems to capture her imagination in finding these models suitable. It is important to understand that the models of God as mother, friend and lover also point towards eschatology, however with a care to avoid the tendencies of eschatology to become merely “individualistic, non-historical and non-cosmological.”<sup>20</sup> She hopes to dampen the fires of destruction caused by nuclear threats and ecological imbalance in resorting to these models that engender theological exploration in to life and death of all in creation.

McFague argues thus for a new vision of reality, which is holistic, ecological, and evolutionary in perspective. God the mother creates the world with *agape* and demands justice for all. God the lover saves the world with *eros* by healing divisions and overcomes separation of nature from people and creatures. God the friend sustains the world with *philia* and offers companionship and fulfillment for all. McFague develops the metaphor through the major topics of Christian theology. Theology is tested in practice. Does it mandate and inspire a new responsibility and caring relation to the whole earth community? McFague also defines her differences with both natural theology and creation theology. The first remains abstract, while the second is celebratory without sufficient seriousness about the dark face of nature.<sup>21</sup>

Unresolved tensions however exist in the center of Christian theology: How can the same God who creates the world in which so much cruelty exists also be the one who loves it and calls us to side with the most vulnerable? Not only sin but also the survival of the fittest through natural selection is in tension with divine inclusive love. The unity of creation and

redemption remains an affirmation of faith not easily recorded with experience. McFague does not fully resolve this tension either, but more than other ecological theologies, she clarifies the issues. Rosemary Radford Ruether remarks that, “This is McFague’s best book so far and a significant contribution to developing the problematic of a Christian ecological theology.”<sup>22</sup> However, no metaphor can be sufficient to depict the relationship or dependence between God and the world. The metaphor of the world as the body of God leaves room for ecological responsibility. This could be the one closest to heart according to McFague. Finally, are these metaphors adequate enough to interpret God’s concern for relationship and dependency of the creation?

## **Reflection**

This paper reflects the intrinsic relationship of religion-culture-land and the Mizos before and after the advent of Christianity. The changes in the relationship and the affect of the Mizo social, political and religious life were rediscovered. Land as the source of subsistence economy and the centre of community are reflected as well. This critical reflection helps us to compare the traditional land system of both the past and the present, and the impact of the changes in the land system to the people’s life in Mizoram. The study on the world as the body of God discuss the jhumming system of cultivation and the dependency on the forest economy are now facing an ecological crisis due to mismanagement of land and its resources.

Mizo indigenous religion is worth exploring further, one discovers the goddess traditions which have survived in patriarchal religious ethos. It is also important to acknowledge the vital roles played by the shaman in Mizo religious and social life. Further, we rediscover the folk stories of the tribal communities, particularly those which relate to women such as Khuanu and Lasi. These folktales reveal the relationship between human being, animals and other living beings. It is necessary to critically analyze the folktales from Mizo women’s perspectives. This will also reflect critically on how some sayings are reinforced in society and Church in a patriarchal atmosphere, to the detriment of women.

Finally, the position and status of women in religion and culture in Mizo history are explored. It shows the ecological changes that are taking place and their impact on women over a period of time. While studying the status of women in society, the emphasis will be on those areas where women are degraded and oppressed by the practices in society.

The study reflects on the wisdom of the ancient Mizo tradition and the role that it has since played in Mizo life. In traditional Mizo society, there were wise women and their power was used to meet people's need.

### **Theological Approach**

A theological approach to **the land as the body of God** is important because tribal people claim the land as the source of life and survival. According to the Mizo, therefore, the land belongs to the divine and the divine dwells in the land. To renew their commitment to the divine means to protect and safeguard the land.

This approach is more related to creation theology than to the concept of the 'promised land' which is part of the Exodus narratives. It can be connected with the perception of the Psalmist that 'The Earth is the Lord's' and therefore has to be shared by people.

Ironically, with the coming of Christianity, the state has increasingly made claims on the land and private ownership, resulting in buying and selling of land, which has taken its toll. With the coming of World Bank projects for road construction, displacement of people has been accepted as "necessary for development," and commercialization of land, mineral and forest wealth has become a distinct possibility. This concept has not yet been grasped by vast sections of the people.

Such incomprehension has to do with the fact that the missionary theological approach has implicitly taken colonial "development" for granted, while emphasizing the "saving of souls." This accounts for the "other worldly" approach of the Church which at

the same time depicts capitalist gain as a blessing of God much along the lines of what Max Weber has analyzed in ‘The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism.’<sup>23</sup>

The study tries to break away from this colonial Christianity. It attempts to re-establish continuity between the Mizo cultural rootedness in land and agriculture and the liberationist and the redemptionist understandings of the Christian faith, in light of present day challenges and the ecological crises.

Sallie McFague’s realization of the world as “the body of God” in the face of nuclear threats seems to be a metaphor to renew conservationist moves in the context of women’s survival struggles. These have become life and death struggles due to destruction of the resource base, on which the immediate preservation of life and livelihood depends. Subordination of nature, women, and society at large imposes deep crises on both micro-society and on the survival of life on earth. Therefore, a focus on life and livelihood as the centre of creation theology is crucial.

This raises the question of what are the adequate theological metaphors which can encourage human beings to assume responsibility to preserve the earth which is given to us as a gift. Vandana Shiva explores the concept of feminine principle as *shakti*.<sup>24</sup> This paper tries to add the Mizo tribal heritage to the theological debate and also the resourcefulness of Mizo women which transcends victimhood.

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## Interview

- Lianzika, Mualpheng village, August 15, 1991.
- Ngurliana on April 1999.

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<sup>1</sup> The Hindu, October 28, 2007

<sup>2</sup> Sallie McFague, *Models of God: Theology for an Ecological, Nuclear Age* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987), 32.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Kathryn Guthrie, "Models of God: Empowerment, Intimacy, Hope," *JPC*, 7/1, 1993, 32.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Sallie McFague, *Models of God, Op.cit.*, p. 32.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Terrence Reynolds, "Two McFagues: Meaning, Truth, and Justification in Models of God" in *Modern Theology*, 11/3, July 1995, 302.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Catherine Mowry Lagunga, "Models of God: Theology for an Ecological, Nuclear Age in *Horizons*, 15 Fall, 1988, 401.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Interview with Lianzika, August 15, 1991, Mualpheng.

<sup>13</sup> Mr. Rokunga. *Thalaite Hlabu* (Song Book for the Youth) Aizawl: Gosen Press, 1989, No.36

<sup>14</sup> Interview with Ngurliana on April 1999.

<sup>15</sup> Thangkuma & Zadala Hrahnel, *A Study of Selected Hlado, Bawhhla and Thufing*. Saiha: Hani Printing Press, 1983, 25.

<sup>16</sup> Vandana Shiva, *Staying Alive: Women, Ecology and Development*. London: Zed Books, 1989, p. xix.

<sup>17</sup> June O'Connor, "Metaphorical Theology: Models of God in Religious Language" in *Religious Studies Review*, Vol. 12, ¾ July/ October 1986, 204.

<sup>18</sup> Robert Paul Roth, "The Problems of How to Speak to God" in *Interpretation*, 38, Jan 1984, 78.

<sup>19</sup> Sallie McFague, *Models of God: Theology for an Ecological, Nuclear Age* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987), 35.

<sup>20</sup> Danny Stiver, "Models of God: Theology for an Ecological, Nuclear Age" in *Review and Expositor* 85, 1988, 359.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, Third Edition, 1950), 40-42.

<sup>24</sup> Vandana. *Staying Alive: Women, Ecology and Development*. London: Zed Books, 1989, p. .