

## Chapter 1

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### ***Creation: Rosemary Radford Ruether and Feminist Theology***

**What does it mean to be human in God's image?**

↳ *Looking Ahead:*

Rosemary Radford Ruether (1936–) is a Catholic theologian whose feminist theology seeks to uncover, understand, and undo the many forms of oppression—especially sexism—seen in our world. In her theology, Ruether questions the patriarchal nature of traditional theology—that is, theology primarily written by men for men. Notice in her work how this theme is explained and how it informs her strong claims for a theology written by women for women.

The opening chapters of the Bible introduce us to the narrative world that we will explore throughout our present investigation. The theologian Karl Barth once asked, “What sort of house is it to which the Bible is the door? What sort of country is spread before our eyes when we throw the Bible open?”<sup>1</sup> Barth’s own reply was that we enter a “strange new world.”

The opening chapters of Genesis seem to confirm Barth’s suggestion. The Bible opens with a pair of creation stories (1:1–2:4, 2:4–25). In the first, a majestic God creates the world by command alone (“Then God said, ‘Let there be light’; and there was light.”) in an orderly six-day progression from chaos to order, concluding with a seventh day of rest. In the

second story, God is portrayed in a more anthropomorphic fashion. God forms a man from the clay of the earth and plants a garden in Eden. In this garden stand various trees, among them the tree of knowledge of good and evil and, at the center of the garden, the tree of life. God forms the various wild animals, birds, and cattle and completes the creation by forming a woman from the man's rib.

In Genesis 3, the second creation story takes an even stranger turn. A talking serpent tempts the woman to eat the forbidden fruit from the tree of knowledge, and she shares the fruit with the man. In the course of an afternoon stroll through the garden, the Lord learns of the couple's disobedience. After punishing the serpent, the woman, and the man, the Lord banishes them from the garden, denying them access to the tree of life. Cast east of Eden, the man and woman enter an uncertain world of hostility, toil, and death.

In these opening chapters of the Bible, we confront some of the most fundamental questions of human existence: Who is God? Who are we? What is this world in which we live? For nearly two millennia, Christian thinkers have drawn on the available religious, philosophical, scientific, and literary traditions to articulate their understanding of God, humans, and the world. It is fitting, then, that we pair the opening chapters of Genesis with a theologian who has dedicated her professional career to challenging many of the deeply held traditional Christian beliefs about the nature of God, the identity of humans, and the structure of society. Rosemary Radford Ruether's work has generated vigorous debate and passionate responses of both support and opposition. Our study of Ruether's *Sexism and God-Talk* focuses on the question, What does it mean to be human in God's image?

## **Biography of Rosemary Radford Ruether**

Ruether deliberately allows her own academic training and research, personal life experience, and participation in various social causes to direct the course and content of her

writings. She was born in 1936. Her father was an Anglican and her mother a Catholic.<sup>2</sup> She attended Scripps College in Claremont, California. Reflecting on her undergraduate experience, Ruether writes, "Those years of education also laid a solid base of historical consciousness, of awareness of the whole Western historical experience and a methodology for expanding that awareness that continues to undergird the way I ask and answer questions."<sup>3</sup>

As Ruether completed her graduate work and began to raise a family with her husband, Herbert, the United States was becoming more deeply involved in the war in Vietnam, and at home the civil rights movement was making strides. The bishops at the Second Vatican Council were updating the beliefs and practices of the Roman Catholic Church, but the controversy concerning the use of artificial contraception continued to spark dissent among church members. The civil rights movement and the process of renewal within the Roman Catholic Church, "the one questioning American society and the other questioning the Catholic church," writes Ruether, "were the matrix in which my theology developed. From my first writings I became concerned with the interconnection between theological ideas and social practice."<sup>4</sup>

In 1965, Ruether joined the faculty of the School of Religion of Howard University in Washington, DC, and "in the late sixties . . . began formal research on attitudes toward women in the Christian tradition."<sup>5</sup> In 1976, Ruether moved to Garrett-Evangelical Seminary near Chicago, where she spent the bulk of her career. She is currently teaching at the Graduate Theological Union in Berkeley, California. Over the course of her career, she has tackled questions of "racism, religious bigotry, especially anti-semitism, sexism, class hierarchy, colonialism, militarism, and ecological damage," but she has earned the reputation of being "the most widely-read and influential articulator of the . . . feminist movement in theology."<sup>6</sup>

### **Ruether's Sexism and God-Talk**

The first creation story in Genesis (1:1–2:4) contains one of the most important elements of a Christian *theological anthropology* (a Christian understanding of what it means to be a human person): Humans are created in the image of God. The question, What does it mean to be human created in God's image? serves as the lens through which we examine Ruether's contribution to contemporary theology.

Ruether begins by affirming the traditional Christian view of humanity: Humans are created in the image of God, yet are fallen, sinful creatures.

Christian theological anthropology recognizes a dual structure in its understanding of humanity. . . . Historically human nature is fallen, distorted, and sinful. Its original and authentic nature and potential have become obscured. The *imago dei*, or image of God, represents this authentic humanity united with God. It is remanifest as Christ to reconnect us with our original humanity. The question for feminist theology is how this theological dualism of *imago dei*/fallen Adam connects with sexual duality, or humanity as male and female.<sup>7</sup>

The nontraditional dimension of Ruether's theology is that the sinful, fallen world is one characterized by patriarchy, by which she "means not only the subordination of females to males, but the whole structure of Father-ruled society: aristocracy over serfs, masters over slaves, kings over subjects, radical overlords over colonized people."<sup>8</sup>

Ruether asserts that the traditional teachings on theological anthropology have perpetuated a distorted, patriarchal vision of human nature. The tendency has been "to correlate femaleness with the lower part of the human nature in a hierarchical scheme of mind over body, reason over passions."<sup>9</sup> Coupled with this is the persistent claim

that Eve caused the Fall and that, consequently, women must now bear the punishment for her offense. "Within history," Ruether writes, "woman's subjugation is both the reflection of her inferior nature and the punishment for her responsibility for sin."<sup>10</sup> As a consequence, patriarchy is believed to be "the natural order" or "the will of God."

While the dominant tradition in Christianity has preserved and promoted the patriarchal view of humanity, Ruether sees three marginalized traditions as offering an egalitarian view. First, the *eschatological feminism* of early Christianity, found also in the theology of the Shakers and the Quakers, viewed the church as anticipating the final redemption of humanity and restoration to its original equality. While the larger social world may operate according to patriarchal rules, the church is governed by the countercultural vision of the equality of men and women. Second, *liberal feminism*, which arose during the eighteenth-century Enlightenment, argued for the equal rights of all human beings, regardless of gender. Unlike eschatological feminism, the focus is on transforming the social, political, and economic institutions of this world. Third, the many forms of *romantic feminism* see masculinity and femininity as equal yet complementary dimensions of the human personality.

Ruether argues that we need to find a "creative synthesis" between liberalism and romanticism. She advocates the equality of persons, regardless of gender, race/ethnicity, or class, but hesitates to embrace the view that men and women have equal yet complementary natures. For this reason, Ruether does not fully endorse the use of the category of *androgyny* in some recent feminist writings.

*Androgyny* has been used in recent feminist thought to express the human nature that all persons share. *Androgyny* refers to possession of both male and female of both halves of the psychic capacities that have been

traditionally separated as masculinity and femininity. The word *androgyny* is misleading, however, since it suggests that males and females possess both “masculine” and “feminine” sides to their psychic capacity. The term thus continues to perpetuate the ideas that certain psychic attributes are to be labeled masculine and others are to be labeled feminine and that humans, by integrating these “masculine” and “feminine” sides of themselves, become “androgynous.”<sup>11</sup>

All humans, contends Ruether, are called to integrate the rational and relational capacities. “We need to affirm not the confusing concept of androgyny but rather that all humans possess a full and equivalent human nature and personhood, as *male* and *female*.”<sup>12</sup> While Ruether stresses the commonality of the essential human nature of both men and women, other thinkers differentiate between women’s nature and men’s nature.

This debate over whether men and women have different natures is one of the most intriguing elements in the current study of theological anthropology. The theologian Serene Jones poses the question in the following manner: “Is being a ‘woman’ the product of nature or nurture? Put another way, does ‘womanhood’ express an inborn, natural female disposition or follow from socially learned behavior?”<sup>13</sup> The nature-nurture debate asks whether our personalities result from nature (our genetic or biological makeup) or nurture (the influence of our family, culture, or personal experience).

Most thinkers would argue that both have a determinative role in our development, but in the context of feminist thought, the question centers on the issue of gender. Is it true to say that women are more nurturing and intuitive than men? If so, is that a result of socialization, evolution, or biology? Do women and men have different psychological dispositions that result in them having fundamentally

different views of human relationships, concepts of morality, and approaches in spirituality?

The role of gender in human identity and social roles extends to debates regarding women's ordination in Roman Catholic circles to competing theories of child development in modern psychology. It demonstrates the centrality of the concept of *imago Dei* to Christian thought and practice yet indicates, as well, the wide-ranging importance of the question.

The concept of the *imago Dei* is the basis for Ruether's account of the desired state of affairs toward which women and men should strive. This future state of personal integration and social reconstruction represents the realization of the potential with which humans were originally endowed when they were created in the image of God. Where patriarchy enforces separation between supposedly manly and womanly behavior or social roles, feminism calls for integration: personal or psychic integration of rationality and relationality and social integration that breaks down barriers between men and women. In this way, we reconnect with the *imago Dei* and more fully recapture the human potential intended by God at the creation.<sup>14</sup>

## **Ruether's Feminist Theology**

Ruether describes her theological project as an examination of the interconnection between theological ideas and social practice. In broad terms, Ruether sees ingrained patterns of patriarchal social thought and practice being legitimated by reference to scriptural and traditional sources that themselves express this patriarchy. To break this vicious cycle, theologians working today need to recover ideas that were marginalized or suppressed from mainline Christianity and to reassert the prophetic tradition that challenges the status quo. In this way, they can construct a theology that moves us away from patriarchy to an egalitarian vision for

women and men in both the church and the world. An assessment of Ruether's theology requires that we look at both poles in this position: her theological ideas and her social analysis.

Biblical writings are regarded by Christians as reliable means through which God has communicated to them. Many a theological controversy has been spawned over the question of how exactly Scripture conveys God's revelation (literally, the unveiling of God) or in what that revelation consists. Essentially, however, the problem is knowing what comes from God (and therefore should be the standard for Christian belief and action) and what comes from humans (and therefore can be changed). What, then, is Ruether's own understanding of revelation, and how does Scripture function as a source of God's revelation?

### **Ruether on Revelation and Scripture**

Ruether states, "By *revelatory* we mean breakthrough experiences beyond ordinary consciousness that provide interpretive symbols illuminating the whole of life."<sup>15</sup> By this definition, revelation is understood primarily to be experience, not the writings in the Bible or church doctrine. More specifically, revelatory experience consists of breakthrough moments, in which we arrive at a new understanding of our lives.

Scripture and church life function as the customary means through which most Christians connect with that revelatory experience, but Scripture and church life can also block that experience. When this occurs, the idea that is promoted by either the Bible or the church must be reworked. The experience is what is most important. Scripture and church life are primary connections to that Christian revelatory experience, but ultimately, they are subject to reinterpretation or alteration.



Ruether sees recurring episodes in Christian history in which the original revelatory experience is domesticated by the community that transmits it. That community defines its content and saps it of its original power. The history of determining the canon (the list of accepted books of the Bible) illustrates for Ruether this deterioration of revelation into rigid codification. Church teachers and leaders designate which writings are accepted as revelatory and which are considered heretical or less inspired than others. She writes, "In the process the controlling group marginalizes and suppresses other branches of the community, with their texts and lines of interpretation. The winning group declares itself the privileged line of true (orthodox) interpretation. Thus a canon of Scripture is established."<sup>16</sup> In other instances, church members believe their leaders are out of touch with the spirit of the original revelatory experience. This sparks either a reform movement within the community or a drive to break away from the dominant authority.

Given Ruether's insistence that the original revelatory experience can be muted or suppressed by controlling authorities, how can we identify what is truly God's revelation and not human manipulation of God's message? Ruether proposes the following test for discerning God's revelation: "The critical principle of feminist theology is the promotion of the full humanity of women. . . . Theologically speaking, whatever diminishes or denies the full humanity of women must be presumed not to reflect the divine or an authentic relation to the divine."<sup>17</sup> Any church practice or belief that supports patriarchy or domination is judged, therefore, not to be in accordance with the original revelatory experience of liberation and equality.

Ruether applies this norm for revelation to the Bible and is quite willing to concede that not all elements of the biblical tradition are part of the "usable tradition" for

contemporary theology. She states a clear preference for the prophetic tradition and its willingness to speak truth to power. Scriptural texts or interpretations that scapegoat women for the existence of evil in the world, that do not promote egalitarian understandings of the human person, or that confine women to certain social roles are to be rejected. "Feminist readings of the Bible can discern a norm within Biblical faith by which the Biblical texts themselves can be criticized. To the extent to which Biblical texts reflect this normative principle, they are regarded as authoritative. On this basis many aspects of the Bible are to be frankly set aside and rejected."<sup>18</sup>

In her address to the American Academy of Religion on the future of feminist theology, Ruether restated many of her theological positions regarding revelation and Scripture, as well as her conviction that contemporary theologians need to continue to address the problem of patriarchy.

The community of the good news against patriarchy needs the courage of its convictions, the confident trust that they are indeed in communion with the true foundations of reality, the true divine ground of Being, when they struggle against patriarchy, despite all claims of authority. This faith lies first of all not in the Church, its tradition, including Scripture. The patriarchal distortion of all tradition, including Scripture, throws feminist theology back upon the primary intuitions of religious experience itself, namely, the belief in a divine foundation of reality which is ultimately good, which does not wish evil nor create evil, but affirms and upholds our autonomous personhood as women, in whose image we are made.<sup>19</sup>

In this excerpt of Ruether's address, we find a restatement of the priority of revelatory religious experience, the

egalitarian vision grounded in the biblical understanding of all humans as created in the image of God, and the need to critically evaluate all appeals to Scripture and tradition for patriarchal presuppositions.

### **Assessments of Ruether's *Sexism and God-Talk***

Ruether's critics charge that her approach does not provide adequate standards by which to judge competing claims of truth. If there is a "patriarchal distortion" in both Scripture and church pronouncements, then is the only remaining reliable source of God's revelation the original revelatory experience? That seems to make the hard work of assessing the truth of a theological statement a highly subjective enterprise. Is this assigning experience more authority than it rightly deserves in the exposition and defense of certain theological positions over others?

The theologians Ed. L. Miller and Stanley Grenz contend the following:

The heart of the debate over feminist theology lies in its appeal to the feminist consciousness as its highest authority, as well as the use of women's experience to determine what is and what is not normative in Scripture and the Christian tradition. Critics fear that if we draw our "critical principle" solely from the consciousness of a particular group—such as women—we have effectively eliminated any other criterion for engaging in self-criticism. As a result, feminist theologians run the risk of merely replacing an old ideology with a new one.<sup>20</sup>

Other critics of Ruether's work fear that the Christian identity of feminist thought is being endangered when experience is given priority over Scripture and tradition. The theologian Linda Hogan voices the following concern:

To what extent can a theologian who gives priority to women's experiences and [practice] over against texts and traditions, considered to be foundational and thereby preeminent, be considered Christian? Would not the identity of Christianity be too fragmented if each group claimed priority for their experiences, over Scripture and tradition, and yet called themselves Christian? Is there not a core which must remain, regardless of experience, if one wishes to call oneself Christian?<sup>21</sup>

Hogan's concerns are a sampling of other similar questions raised by Ruether's approach to revelation and Scripture: Are scriptural teachings and traditional church practices hopelessly patriarchal? If so, what source replaces them in a theology that identifies itself as Christian? Are there some popular scriptural interpretations or church teachings that are only minimally corroded by patriarchy? Should traditions deemed heretical by the early church be incorporated into contemporary theology? Who has the authority to offer definitive and binding judgments on such matters?

### **The Future of Feminist Christian Theology**

The feminist theologian Anne E. Carr identifies three major emphases in contemporary feminist theology. The first is a "*critique of the past*," including both Scripture and writings of influential Christian thinkers.<sup>22</sup> This would include Old Testament passages placing responsibility for sin squarely on the shoulders of women and New Testament passages that command women to be silent in the churches (1 Corinthians 14:34). There are, as well, a litany of passages from major theologians in the early, medieval, and modern ages that reflect various patriarchal points of view.

"Second on the agenda of Christian feminist theology," writes Carr, "is the *recovery of the lost history of women* in

the Christian tradition."<sup>23</sup> The work of the New Testament scholar and feminist theologian Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza represents this type of undertaking. In her work *In Memory of Her*, Schüssler Fiorenza takes as her starting point the unnamed woman in the gospel who anoints Jesus in Bethany. Jesus tells his disciples, "Truly I tell you, wherever the good news is proclaimed in the whole world, what she has done will be told in remembrance of her" (Mark 14:9). Despite this pronouncement by Jesus, writes Schüssler Fiorenza, "the woman's prophetic sign-action did not become a part of the gospel knowledge of Christians. Even her name is lost to us. . . . The name of the betrayer is remembered, but the name of the faithful disciple is forgotten because she was a woman."<sup>24</sup>

Carr describes the third task of feminist theology as "*revisiting Christian categories* in ways that takes seriously the equality and experience of women."<sup>25</sup> The central Christian doctrine that is refashioned is the exclusive use of masculine language referring to God. The theologian Elizabeth A. Johnson asserts, "Feminist theological analysis makes clear that the tenacity with which the patriarchal symbol of God is upheld is nothing less than violation of the first commandment of the decalogue, the worship of an idol."<sup>26</sup>

Relating these three tasks to the question of theological anthropology, we can begin to see the specific contributions feminism has made to contemporary theology. In terms of the first task, the theologian Mary Ann Hinsdale writes,

*Critique* of malestream theological anthropology has been a constant feature of feminist theology since the late 1960s. In terms of a "corrective," feminist theological anthropology has always insisted on more than a remedial inclusion of women in patriarchal theological reflection; rather, it has been concerned to lift up "women's voice" not simply as critic, but as a shaper of theological anthropology.<sup>27</sup>

In terms of the retrieval of lost history, some thinkers turn to marginalized or suppressed traditions about the human person within mainstream Christianity, while others look outside the Christian tradition. This raises the question of how deeply patriarchal Christianity is. Some thinkers have concluded that Christianity is inherently patriarchal and thus no longer identify themselves as Christians. "Other feminists," writes Ruether, "wish to affirm the possibility of feminist theology within the Judeo-Christian tradition. They seek to uncover the more fundamental meaning of concepts of God, Christ, human personhood, and sin and redemption that can criticize the deformation of these concepts as tools of male domination."<sup>28</sup>

The third task of the feminist theologian is to propose new, richer understandings of the Christian message. As the theologian Michelle A. Gonzalez notes,

For centuries the doctrine of the *imago Dei* has been misinterpreted to benefit male authority and render women subservient in their "defective" humanity. A critical feminist reconstruction counters centuries of misreading the Christian tradition, arguing that both men and women reflect the divine image fully. This theological anthropology presents an egalitarian vision of humanity that reflects the relational, trinitarian God in whose image we were created.<sup>29</sup>

The current discussion within feminist Christian circles concerns what form this theological reconstruction should take.

## Conclusion

Ruether insists, "Feminist theology needs to affirm the God of Exodus, of liberation and new being."<sup>30</sup> In the next chapter, we will examine how another theologian,

Gustavo Gutiérrez, also affirms the need for contemporary Christians to heed the call of “the God of Exodus.”

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### © Discussion Questions

1. What impact has the feminist movement had on college-age women and men today?
  2. What does it mean to say that humans are created in “the image of God”? What does it mean to say that humans are “fallen”?
  3. Is Scripture God’s revelation? Does Scripture reflect patriarchal patterns of thought? What implications for Christian theology follow from your answer?
  4. Do men and women have different natures? Are women by nature more nurturing? Are men by nature more aggressive?
  5. What are the strengths and weaknesses of Ruether’s theology?
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### © Notes

1. Karl Barth, “The Strange New World within the Bible,” in *The Word of God and the Word of Man* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1957), p. 28.
2. James J. Bacik, *Contemporary Theologians* (Chicago: Thomas More Press, 1989), p. 180.
3. Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Disputed Questions* (Nashville, Tenn.: Abingdon, 1982), pp. 17–18.
4. Rosemary Radford Ruether, “The Development of My Theology,” *Religious Studies Review* 15, no. 1 (1989): 1.
5. Ruether, *Disputed Questions*, p. 118.
6. Ed. L. Miller and Stanley J. Grenz, *Fortress Introduction to Contemporary Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998), p. 162.
7. Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Sexism and God-Talk: Toward a Feminist Theology* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1983), p. 93.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 61.
9. *Ibid.*, p. 93.
10. *Ibid.*, p. 95.

11. *Ibid.*, pp. 110–111.
12. *Ibid.*, p. 111.
13. Serene Jones, *Feminist Theory and Christian Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), p. 23.
14. Ruether, *Sexism and God-Talk*, p. 113
15. *Ibid.*, p. 13.
16. *Ibid.*, p. 14.
17. *Ibid.*, pp. 18–19.
18. *Ibid.*, p. 23
19. Rosemary Radford Ruether, “The Future of Feminist Theology in the Academy,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 53 (1985): 710.
20. Miller and Grenz, *Contemporary Theology*, p. 175.
21. Linda Hogan, *From Women’s Experience to Feminist Theology* (Sheffield, England: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995), p. 107.
22. Anne E. Carr, *Transforming Grace: Christian Tradition and Women’s Experience* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1988), p. 7. Italics in original.
23. Carr, *Transforming Grace*, p. 8. Italics in original.
24. Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her* (New York: Crossroad, 1983), p. xiii.
25. Carr, *Transforming Grace*, p. 8. Italics in original.
26. Elizabeth A. Johnson, *She Who Is: The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse* (New York: Crossroad, 1992), p. 39.
27. Mary Ann Hinsdale, “Heeding the Voices,” in Ann O’Hara Graff, ed., *In the Embrace of God* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1995), p. 23. Italics in original.
28. Rosemary Radford Ruether, “Feminist Theology,” in Alan Richardson and John Bowden, eds., *The Westminster Dictionary of Christian Theology* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1983), p. 211.
29. Michelle A. Gonzalez, *Created in God’s Image* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 2007), p. 168.
30. Ruether, *Sexism and God-Talk*, p. 70.

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### © Suggested Readings

For a short introduction to Christian feminist theology, see Anne M. Clifford, *Introducing Feminist Theology* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 2001). For a helpful annotated bibliography, see Natalie K. Watson, *Feminist Theology* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Wm. B. Eerd-



mans, 2003). For a discussion of feminist theological anthropology, see Michelle A. Gonzalez, *Created in God's Image* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 2007). For a discussion of theological method in feminist theology, see Anne E. Carr, "The New Vision of Feminist Theology," in Catherine Mowry LaCugna, ed., *Freeing Theology* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1993).

For a brief overview of Ruether's theology, see Mary Hembrow Snyder, "Rosemary Radford Ruether," in Donald W. Musser and Joseph L. Price, eds., *A New Handbook of Christian Theologians* (Nashville, Tenn.: Abingdon Press, 1996). For a scholarly engagement with Ruether's theology, see Nicholas John Ansell, *"The Women Will Overcome the Warrior": A Dialogue with the Christian/Feminist Theology of Rosemary Radford Ruether* (Lanham, Md.: University Press of America, 1994). Also helpful is the retrospective on Ruether's theology in *Religious Studies Review* 15, no. 1 (1989).