

# **Feminist Theology: Rosemary Radford Ruether/Sallie McFague**

*Rolf Bouma, 1997*

## **The Impact of Feminist Theology**

In its 30 years of existence as an identifiable theological movement, feminist theology has carved out a solid niche in theological conversations. Feminist concerns generate discussion around conceptions of God, Christology, anthropology, and eschatology, with particular attention to the relationship of language to theology and ethics. Within the Christian community, feminism has forced a re-evaluation of language in liturgy as well as patterns of power within society and the church. Effects continue to ripple through the church as communities adapt to or retrench themselves in the face of feminist critiques.

Niches, however, have a way of becoming pigeonholes, and the ease with which women in theology are identified as feminist theologians threatens to ignore the considerable contributions which many have made to theological discussions in other areas. Rosemary Radford Ruether, for instance, has written extensively on liberation theology, anti-semitism, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the situation of the Catholic church, and various other topics of contemporary theological and ethical significance. Sallie McFague has contributed to understanding of Biblical interpretation, particularly the parables of Jesus. Both have entered the ecological arena, forging a link between the ecofeminist movement and Christian theology. Although this presentation will focus on feminist concerns, care should be exercised to respect the breadth of address which feminist theologians possess.

Feminist theology emerged as a sort of Siamese twin of its sister, the secular feminist movement. Both claim roots in the Christian women's movement, a movement which can be traced back into the 19th century. It wasn't until the ferment of the 1960's, however, and the increasingly hostile questioning directed at traditional institutions (e.g., the church) and patterns of thought (e.g., Christianity) that the question was posed with unavoidable directness: are Christianity and Christian theology irredeemably sexist, or can Christian symbols and patterns be re-imagined and re-stated in ways that properly value women? As in other movements of the '60's which unleashed their ire at Christianity (the ecological movement is a prime example), there were a significant number who jettisoned Christianity entirely, as well as those who advocated a reformulating of the tradition.

Within secular feminism, three principle strands can be identified. *Liberal feminism* focuses on issues of justice, asking that the status of as well as the opportunities for women and men be truly equal. *Radical feminism* seeks a deeper re-ordering of the world and human relations. In moderate form, this asks for an appreciation of feminine patterns

of understanding and relating, recognizing that equality of opportunity is hollow if structures remain masculine and patriarchal. Human culture itself must be re-ordered. In stronger forms, radical feminism rejects the masculine and patriarchal as being the source of disorder and evil. Rapprochement with men is not the objective; emasculation is.

Finally, a further step has been taken with the development of *ecofeminism*. Ecofeminism shares radical feminism's critique of male-dominated human culture, but observes that the deleterious effects go far beyond the human sphere. The damage done to oppressed

groups is paralleled by the damage done to the natural world. Drawing strong connections between women and the earth, ecofeminists propose that the adoption of a feminist ethic is the only way to address the ills threatening nature and human society.

Feminist theology shares these concerns with feminism, but must address a further dilemma as it seeks to reclaim the Christian tradition. Within Christian theology lie powerful principles which resonate with feminist concerns. God has almost without fail been recognized as being without or beyond gender. While there may be arguments over whether gender is a category which applies to divinity (i.e., whether God is gender-less or gender-ful), rarely has anyone in the theological mainstream dared to argue that God is predominantly of one gender. When coupled with the Biblical themes of liberation and self-actualization, these provide Christianity with significant means to combat oppression and injustice.

On the other hand, the forms of scripture, creed, and historical theology in which the tradition is carried are encased in (critics would say are saturated with and formed by) male-dominance. It is probably safe to say that no other type of theology of liberation entails such a pervasive re-imaging and re-vocalizing of the tradition. Feminists are very aware of the nuances and sway of language. It is not just the naming that is the problem, but that the naming establishes the relationships, the gridwork through which faith is mediated to women and men.

Within theological feminism, a distinction is made between revolutionary and reformist feminists. Revolutionary feminists find the Christian tradition irredeemably patriarchal and oppressive. It looks to other traditions or to new theologies.. Reformists recognize the liabilities and the potentialities of the Christian tradition, and seek to reformulate faith and practice. The two feminist theologians considered here fall within the reformist camp.

### **Rosemary Radford Ruether**

Rosemary Radford Ruether is professor at Garrett-Evangelical Theological Seminary in Evanston, Illinois. Although her background is pre-Vatican II Roman Catholic, she grew up with an open, expansive Catholicism nurtured by her mother (her father died when she was 12). Early on she was introduced to ecumenical and feminist concerns. Although almost all of her writing bears some relation to feminist concerns, she has written on a most diverse array of subjects. She has also taken serious the need to make resources

available for the reshaping of the life and practice of the community, assembling a reader of materials from various traditions on feminist theological subjects/1/ and a book of liturgical resources for religious communities with feminist concerns./2/

Ruether's methodology can be considered dialectical, with the poles of tradition and contemporary experience being held in creative tension. For Ruether, most present ills are the result of dualistic thinking, which results in a hierarchy of domination. Evils such as racism, sexism, heterosexism, classism, militarism, and so forth are the result of dualistic thinking. Dialectical thinking allows repressed persons and communities to speak and be heard. Having identified an evil or injustice, she explores the meaning of that which is being oppressed, and either by finding neglected resources

within the tradition or critically reformulating the tradition, she encourages a new understanding of the topic.

Ruether's range of inquiry for finding sources for reflection is broad. In *Sexism and God-talk*, for example, she acknowledges five such sources. In addition to the Hebrew and Christian scriptures, she examines texts from traditions deemed "heretical" by traditional Christianity, theological themes of the main Christian traditions, religious and philosophical ideas from non-Christian, Near Eastern, and Greco-Roman worlds, and critical post-Christian reflections such as that provided by liberalism, romanticism, and Marxism. Within Christianity, Ruether finds the prophetic tradition particularly helpful, although a "feminist midrash" must be used to allow this tradition to critique the patriarchal oppression of women.

Ruether uses the term "God/ess" to designate the Divine. Her understanding of God/ess as Ultimate Reality means that all religions are potential resources for understanding the Divine, and that there is the potential for reformulating traditions in a way that bridges differences and finds what is good and useful. Since certain images for God have been over-emphasized, balance needs to be introduced to reflect adequately God as source of being and as the one who empowers all things us to live out our humanity.

Ruether's revisiting of Christology has an ambitious agenda. Given her starting point in the injustices and ills of the present world, she is a severe critic of any understanding of Jesus which is ahistorical or apolitical, which makes exclusivist claims for Christ, which denigrates women, or which denies Christ's relevance for the non-human created order. She recognizes that Christology encounters an impasse. Not only misogynist Christologies which explicitly identify the maleness of the historical Jesus with normative humanity, but also androgynous Christologies unacceptably bias the vision of redemptive humanity. Ruether advocates a return to encounter with the message and praxis of the Jesus of the synoptics in recognition that his critique of religion and oppression parallels that of feminist critique. Jesus' role as liberator and iconoclast means that the maleness of Jesus has no ultimate significance, and can be seen as manifesting the *kenosis of patriarchy*./3/

Ruether's anthropology explores the differences between men and women within a framework of commitment to egalitarianism. Ruether insists that gender identity exist primarily in the realm of human reproduction, and that physiological differences do not necessarily entail either psychological or social differentiation. Ruether's understanding of sexuality claims that sexual orientation is acquired, not imprinted, and that standards for morality are the same regardless of orientation.

In *Gaia and God: An Ecofeminist Theology of Earth Healing*,<sup>/4/</sup> Ruether explores the contributions of ecofeminism to ecological understanding. She does so in a way which critiques both the assumptions of ecofeminism as well as the religious traditions. For instance, within ecofeminism there emerges a new mythology, that of the "fall" into patriarchy which brings evil and oppression to women as well as the earth. While Ruether finds elements of this new story to have value, she recognizes the danger "*of reversed forms of scapegoating and untenable assumptions about 'nature' as 'originally' paradisaical.*" The emergence of such stories must be more than just psychologically

helpful. They must be in the form of a hypothesis which is measured against the work of paleoanthropologists. Of even more importance for Ruether, though, is why ecofeminism needs such stories, which contain romantic, idealist notions of the "feminine." Her conclusion is that ecofeminism needs such stories from the past to support its contention that such states are achievable again.

One has to ask whether elements of male resentment are not built into the matricentric pattern. The matricentric core of human society remains, even under male hierarchies, and continually reproduces the insecure, resentful male, who emancipates himself from his mother by negation of women.<sup>/5/</sup>

Some see the Jewish and Christian male monotheistic God as a hostile concept that rationalizes alienation from and neglect of the earth. Gaia should replace God as our focus of worship. I agree with much of this critique, yet I believe that merely replacing a male transcendent deity with an immanent female one is an insufficient answer to the 'god-problem.'

In *Gaia and God*, Ruether takes the traditional Christian categories of creation, judgment, sin and fallenness, and redemption, analyzing them for their ideological biases, which in her view have contributed to distorted relationships. She then suggests considering them as Creation, Destruction, Domination and Deceit, and Healing as providing a more holistic meaning of traditional concepts.

## **Sallie McFague**

### **Background**

Sallie McFague graduated from Smith College and then earned a trio of degrees from Yale University. She currently serves as the Carpenter Professor of Theology at Vanderbilt University Divinity School, where she has also served as Dean in the late

1970's. Her original academic interest was literary, and her first writing project was on the subject of Christianity and literature. McFague's work follows an clear progression, with its beginning in issues of theological language evolving into development and analysis of contemporary models for God. She then takes one particular model, the ecological model of the world as the body of God, and develops it theologically. Her latest work draws out the ethical implications for Christians of an ecological model.

## **Metaphorical Theology**

McFague's background in literature is a key to understanding her approach to theology. Familiar with the philosophical currents eddying around the study of language, she uses those analyses to address theology. Theology is a matter of language, and of finding the best language available to speak of the concerns of faith.

In times past, language was considered symbolic, and there were perceived to be correspondences at a number of levels between language and religious reality. Although at times this resulted in allegorical interpretations of tenuous connection to text, it at least meant that interpreters were not deluded into imagining that strict correspondence existed between language and its referent. But with the Protestant Reformation and its emphasis upon the plain meaning of the text, McFague argues that it was simply a matter of time before literalism took hold. "Truth" is now "fact." If the Bible says "God is father," then God has to be a father.

McFague encourages a recovery of the notion that God can never be captured by language. We must talk about God, but God is beyond language. The best we can do is image God through our language, and the best way of speaking about God is metaphoric. While acknowledging her indebtedness to David Tracey's *The Analogical Imagination*, she explicitly opts for metaphoric language over analogic language because analogic language lays too much weight on similarity. McFague's idea of metaphor emphasizes the negative side of metaphor, the way in which it denies equivalence. This fits with what she calls her Protestant sensibilities which require us that every statement of what "*it is*" has a whispered "*and it is not*" attached./6/ In her understanding of metaphor, the "*and it is not*" plays a key role.

McFague entered the realm of Biblical theology through the parables of Jesus as a study in metaphor and theology. The parables are crucial to her because they demonstrate that metaphor is an indigenous Christian language. They are further important because they provide the root-metaphor for Christianity, which is the kingdom (or preferably the "rule") of God as opposed the metaphor of God as Father. This distinction is crucial because McFague agrees that a change of the root-metaphor means a change of religion. Because God as father is not the root-metaphor, a change in status of this metaphor is possible without jettisoning Christianity. McFague thereby claims to be able to answer those radical feminists who claim that Christianity's root-metaphor is patriarchy./7/

## **Models of God**

Systemic metaphors which endure are models. Models are not givens in the tradition. They are open to critique, and if they fail to meet standards of helpfulness they need to be altered or jettisoned. Some traditional models in Christianity, such as the model of God as father, have slid over from being a model of God to being an idol. McFague writes:

Among the criteria advanced for theological models are two of special significance of the issues of idolatry and irrelevance. The first is the necessity for many complementary models to intimate the richness and complexity of the divine-human relationship. If this criterion is not accepted, idolatry results. The second is the ability of the major models of a tradition to cope with anomalies. If this criterion cannot be met, irrelevance occurs. The issues of idolatry and irrelevance come together in the image of God as father, for more than any other dominant model in Christianity, this one has been both absolutized by some and, in recent times, found meaningless by others. The feminist critique of God as father centers on the *dominance* of this one model to the exclusion of others, and on the *failure* of this model to deal with the anomaly presented by those whose experience is not included in this model./8/

At the end of her work on metaphorical theology, McFague suggested a new model: God as Friend. Gender-neutral, parental models are improper, as they are too protective of humanity and do not adequately picture the cooperation of God with humans or the responsibility which God places upon humans. Friendship is non-hierarchical and egalitarian. While friendship may have its own drawbacks, one advantage to metaphorical theology is that no one metaphor has to do everything. Deficiencies can be covered by other models.

In *Models for God*, McFague explores what to her is the predominant model for the relationship of God and the world, the monarchical model, and after exposing its weaknesses, she suggests several other possibilities which address contemporary concerns: the world as the body of God, and God as mother, lover, and friend. Although the latter three have the danger of being too individualistic and personalistic, McFague believes that they best reflect the "inclusive, non-hierarchical understanding of the gospel." It should be noted that each model has implications for the branches of Christian theology, subtly and not-so-subtly altering the various subject areas of theology.

At the end of her book on metaphorical theology, McFague hinted at the subject to which her subsequent attention turned. She wrote: "Certainly our time of desecration of the natural environment desperately needs immanent, natural metaphors which will help to address the imbalance that centuries of the Judeo-Christian emphasis on humanity's 'dominion over the earth' have brought about."

It is to fill this need for immanent, natural metaphors that occupied her next two books, and the subject of Christian environmental understanding has occupied her last three.

The model which McFague proposes is the organic model: the world as the body of God. She analyzes this from the standpoint of the traditional divisions of Christian theology: theology, Christology, anthropology, and eschatology. For her, the organic model best

describes the relationship between God and the world, best resolving the tension between the transcendence and the immanence of God.

## **Bibliography**

### **Books by Rosemary Radford Ruether**

Ruether, Rosemary Radford. *The church against itself; an inquiry into the conditions of historical existence for the eschatological community*. New York: Herder and Herder, 1967.

----- . *Contemporary Roman Catholicism : crises and challenges*. Kansas City, MO : Sheed & Ward, c1987.

----- & Eugene C. Bianchi. *A democratic Catholic Church : the reconstruction of Roman Catholicism*. New York : Crossroad, 1992.

----- . *Disputed questions : on being a Christian*. Nashville, Tenn. : Abingdon, c1982.

----- . *Faith and fratricide: the theological roots of anti-Semitism*. New York, Seabury Press [1974]

----- & Eugene C. Bianchi. *From machismo to mutuality : essays on sexism and woman-man liberation*. New York : Paulist Press, c1976.

----- . *Gaia & God : an ecofeminist theology of earth healing*. San Francisco: Harper, c1992.

----- & Douglas John Hall. *God and the nations*. Minneapolis, MN : Fortress Press, c1995.

----- . *Gregory of Nazianzus, rhetor and philosopher*. Oxford, Clarendon P., 1969.

----- . *Liberation theology: human hope confronts Christian history and American power*. New York, Paulist Press [1972]

----- . *Mary, the feminine face of the Church*. Philadelphia : Westminster Press, c1977.

----- . *New woman, new earth : sexist ideologies and human liberation*. New York : Seabury Press, [1975]

----- . *The radical kingdom; the Western experience of Messianic hope*. New York, Harper & Row [1970]

----- . *Radical social movement and the radical church tradition*. Oak Brook, Ill., Bethany Theological Seminary [1971]

-----, *Sexism and God-talk : toward a feminist theology*. Boston : Beacon Press, c1983.

-----, *Sexism and God-talk : toward a feminist theology : with a new introduction*. Boston : Beacon Press, c1993.

-----, *To change the world : Christology and cultural criticism*. New York : Crossroad, 1981.

----- & Eleanor McLaughlin, *Women of spirit : female leadership in the Jewish and Christian traditions*. New York : Simon and Schuster, c1979.

-----, *Women-church : theology and practice of feminist liturgical communities*. San Francisco : Harper & Row, c1985.

-----, *The wrath of Jonah : the crisis of religious nationalism in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict*. New York : Harper & Row, c1989.

#### Books Edited by Rosemary Radford Ruether

----- & Marc H. Ellis, eds. *Beyond occupation : American Jewish, Christian, and Palestinian voices for peace*. Boston : Beacon Press, c1990.

-----, Naim Ateek, and Marc H. Ellis, eds. *Faith and the Intifada : Palestinian Christian voices*. Marjoryknoll, N.Y. : Orbis Books, c1992.

----- & Rosemary Skinner Keller, eds. *In our own voices : four centuries of American women's religious writing*. San Francisco : HarperSanFrancisco, c1995.

-----, ed. *Religion and sexism; images of woman in the Jewish and Christian traditions*. New York, Simon and Schuster [1974]

----- & Rosemary Skinner Keller, eds. *Women and religion in America*. San Francisco : Harper & Row, c1981.

-----, ed. *Women healing earth : Third World women on ecology, feminism, and religion*. Marjoryknoll, N.Y. : Orbis Books, c1996.

-----, ed. *Womanguides : readings toward a feminist theology*. Boston : Beacon Press, c1985.

#### Books about Rosemary Radford Ruether

Ansell, Nicholas John. *"The woman will overcome the warrior" : a dialogue with the Christian/feminist theology of Rosemary Radford Ruether*. Lanham : University Press of America, c1994.

Bouma-Prediger, Steven. *The greening of theology : the ecological models of Rosemary Radford Ruether, Joseph Sittler, and Juergen Moltmann*. Atlanta, Ga. : Scholars Press, c1995.

Ramsay, William M. *Four modern prophets : Walter Rauschenbusch, Martin Luther King, Jr., Gustavo Guti  rrez, Rosemary Radford Ruether*. Atlanta, Ga. : John Knox Press, c1986.

Snyder, Mary Hembrow. *The Christology of Rosemary Radford Ruether : a critical introduction*. Mystic, Conn. : Twenty-Third Publications, c1988.

Tardiff, Mary. *At home in the world : the letters of Thomas Merton & Rosemary Radford Ruether*. Maryknoll, N.Y. : Orbis Books, c1995.

Vaughan, Judith. *Sociality, ethics, and social change : a critical appraisal of Reinhold Niebuhr's ethics in the light of Rosemary Radford Ruether's works*. Lanham, MD : University Press of America, c1983.

### **Books by Sallie McFague**

McFague, Sallie. *The body of God : an ecological theology*. Minneapolis : Fortress Press, c1993.

-----, *Literature and the Christian life*. New Haven, Yale University Press, 1966.

-----, *Metaphorical theology : models of God in religious language*. Philadelphia : Fortress Press, c1982.

-----, *Models of God : theology for an ecological, nuclear age*. Philadelphia : Fortress Press, c1987.

-----, *Speaking in parables : a study in metaphor and theology*. Philadelphia : Fortress Press, 1975.

-----, *Super, natural Christians : how we should love nature*. Minneapolis, MN : Fortress Press, 1997.

### **Books Edited by Sallie McFague**

(may be found under the name *Sallie McFague Teselle*)

McFague, Sallie, ed. *The Family, communes, and utopian societies*. New York, Harper & Row [1972, c1971]

-----, ed. *The Rediscovery of ethnicity*. New York, Harper & Row [1974, c1973]

## Notes

1. *Womanguides: readings toward a feminist theology*, (Boston : Beacon Press, c1985.)
2. *Women-church : theology and practice of feminist liturgical communities*. (San Francisco : Harper & Row, 1985).
3. *Sexism and God-talk*, p. 137.
4. The term *Gaia* is the Greek name for the Mother Goddess. It is also the term given to the scientific hypothesis, pioneered by James Lovelock and Lynn Margulis, that ecological systems engage in self-regulative "behavior", and thus can be conceived of as organisms.
5. *Gaia and God*, p. 169.
6. *Metaphorical Theology*, p. 13.
7. Although McFague maintains her place within the Christian tradition by rejecting "the fatherhood of God" as the root-metaphor for "the kingdom of God," she has to insist that the kingdom of God is a metaphor not only open to, but virtually requiring a plethora of metaphors and models to picture successfully its meaning. Since she later rejects outright the most natural model deriving from the kingdom of God, the monarchical model, she has to insist on the kingdom's chameleon-like nature in order to avoid having changed the root-metaphor and giving up Christianity.
8. *Metaphorical Theology*, p. 145.
9. *Metaphorical Theology*, p. 178.