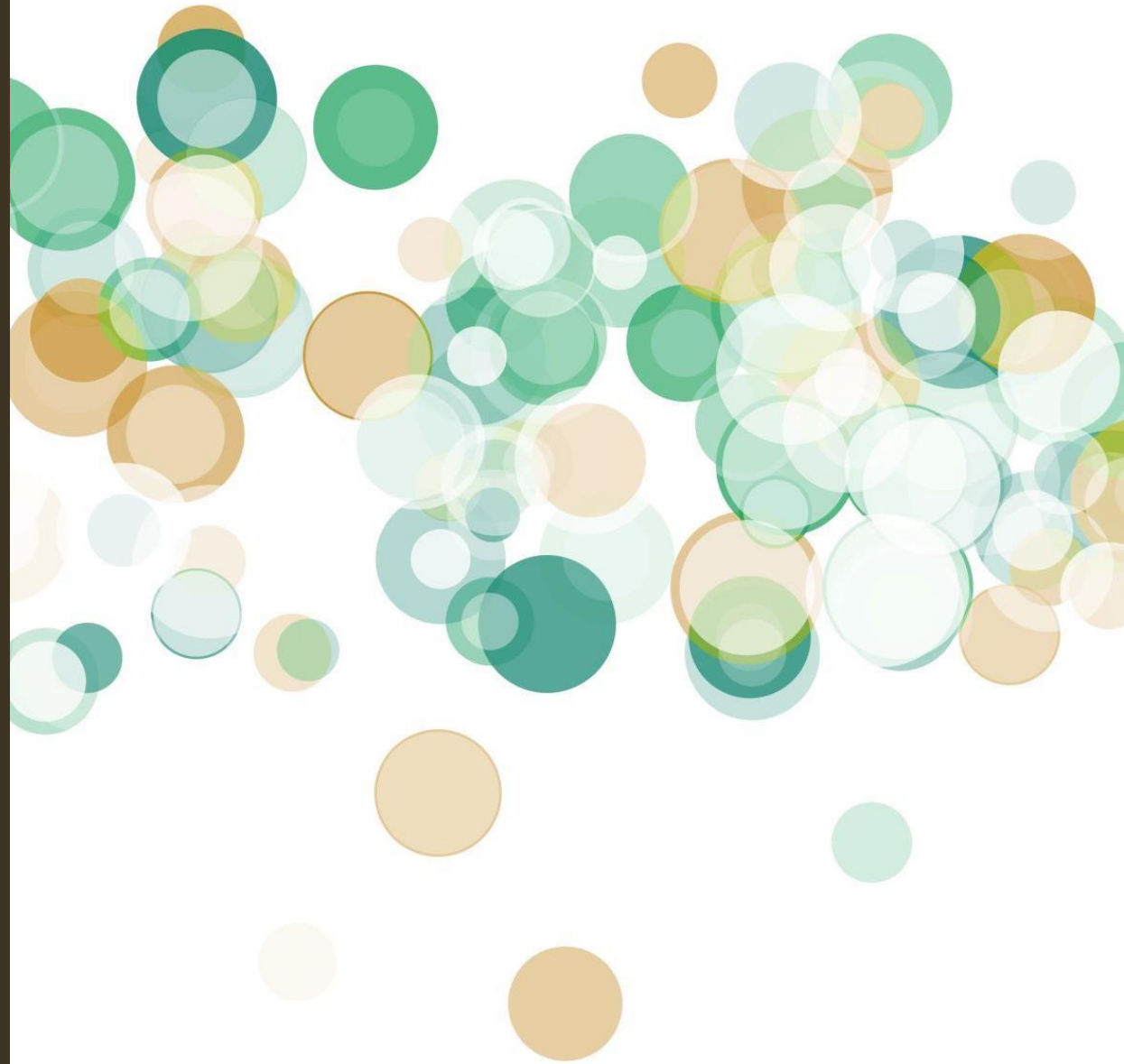
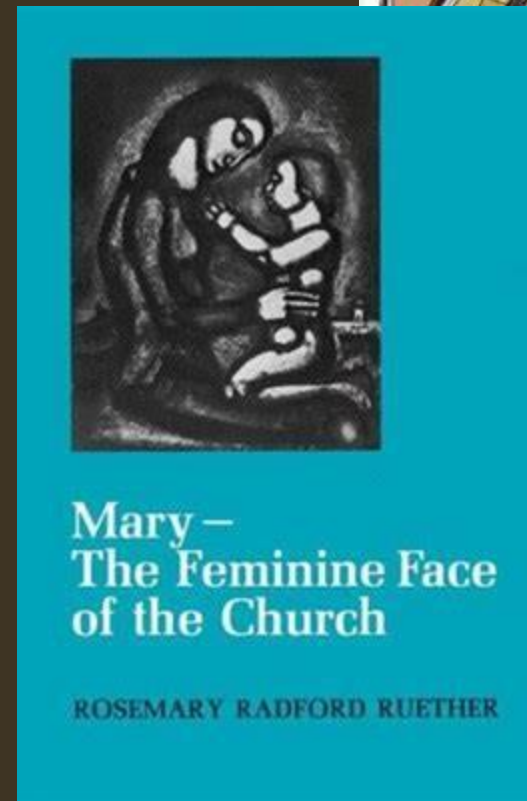
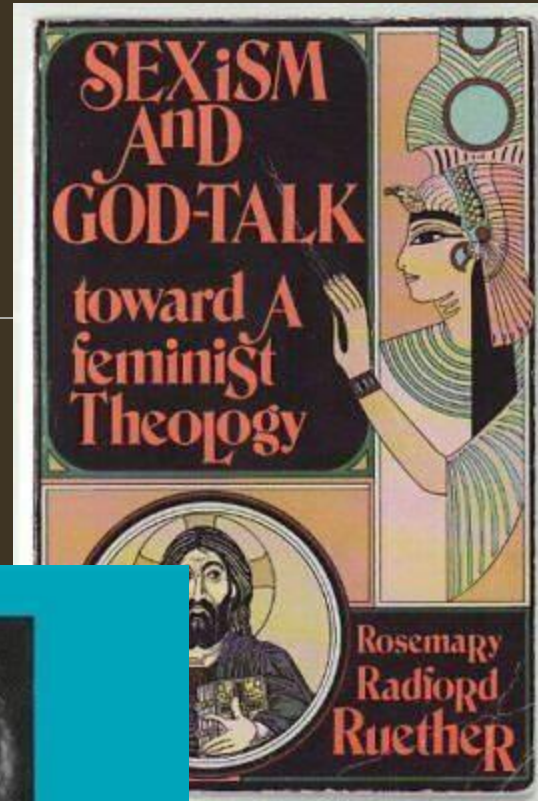

Rosemary Radford Ruether

By Neve Pule



Ruether: An Introduction

Rosemary Radford Ruether, born on 2nd November 1936, was a greatly influential theologian who authored/co-authored over fifty books throughout her academic career [1] with topics ranging from anti-Semitism to the civil rights movement. However, Ruether's most famous books are written about her feminist theology, through which she sought to expose central issues with patriarchal and male-dominated theology and bring to light feminist alternative readings of Scripture.



Early life

Ruether grew up in a female-dominated environment due to her father being away at war [2] and her father passing away in 1948 when she was only 12. [3] Ruether and her mother returned to America from Greece where her father had been stationed, and Ruether was surrounded by women like her mother and aunt Mary. [4]

This strong matriarchal background arguably influenced her theological thinking by showing her that women were just as competent and capable as men. Furthermore, she had Jewish members of her Roman Catholic family [5] which helped her to understand how the Hebrew Bible was to be used, but also helped her to avoid the antisemitism that had been a pitfall for many early feminist theologians.

Early life (continued)

Ruether reportedly described her childhood as made up of "matricentric enclaves led by intelligent, articulate and self-confident women." [6]

As she grew older, Ruether became immersed in a circle of women who were friends of her mother, like Helen Marston Beardsley, who had founded the San Diego Women's International League for Peace and Freedom and was an active socialist. [7] This likely impacted Ruether's views on society because by being around progressive thinkers, she would have been aware of different political opinions.



[Helen Marston Beardsley,](#)
[1892-1982](#)
[\(sohosandiego.org\)](#)

Civil Rights Movement and its impact on Ruether

During the summer of 1965, Ruether, who had already been involved with the civil rights movement for African Americans, travelled to Mississippi with other students to work with the Delta Ministry. [8] She described this as a turning point in her life, which helped her to become increasingly aware of the harsh inequalities that exist in the world. [9]

"Another such wakeup call happened on a visit to Latin America, she happened to remark to her companion that the strawberries in the field were a vivid red and looked delicious, yes came the reply, red with the blood of the workers who are exposed to the pesticides that keep the fruit red and kill them." [10]

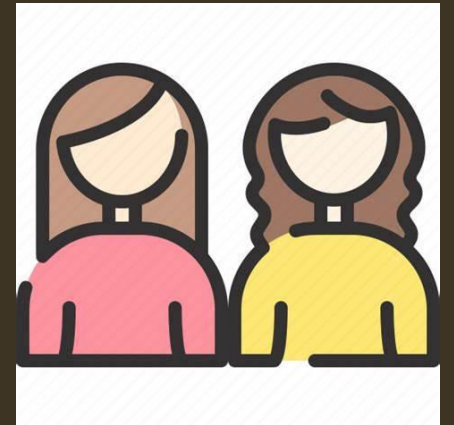
Feminist Theology

Throughout Ruether's work is the overriding theme of fighting for justice for those who experience injustice and discrimination- particularly women. In her own words, "Basically, I don't like injustice and I don't like to see religion used to justify injustice and oppression." [11]

She argued that feminism is essentially getting rid of anything that "suppresses or goes against the experience or complete freeing of women." [12]

Ruether famously criticised patriarchal anthropology, which she argued comes perilously close to viewing women as the cause of sin in the world [13]

Highly critical of the patriarchal influences on the Church, Ruether believed that to create a true feminist theology, history would have to be critically re-examined. [14]

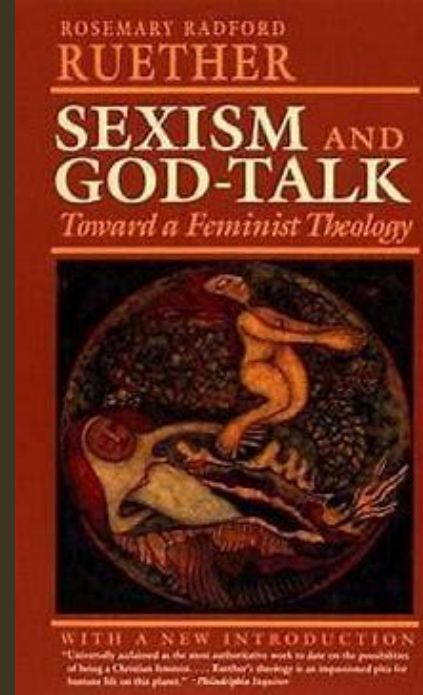


Sexism and God-Talk: Toward a Feminist Theology

The work of Ruether is best represented in her most famous piece of literature, *Sexism and God-Talk: Toward a Feminist Theology*. It is a classic text and digs deep into systematic treatment of women in the Judeo-Christian tradition. In the book, she argued against the suppression of women's rights, and taught that there had been a corruption of equality throughout Church history.

A key part of the feminist theology laid out in *Sexism and God-Talk* is the coining of the term God/ess, which Ruether created to combat the fact that Judeo-Christian belief uses masculinised terms when referring to God, which Ruether argued was not necessary. [15]

Instead, Ruether argued that the divine should be seen as both male and female, and yet neither male nor female, and so created this term 'God/ess' to represent this androgynous view of the divine. [16]



Eco-feminism

Another focal point of Ruether's was ecological issues, and how they relate to feminism and theology. Named eco-feminism, some scholars like Ruether believed there to be a link between the patriarchal domination of women, and the domination over and destruction of the earth's resources. [17]

For example, in her book *To Change the World: Christology and Cultural Criticism*, Ruether argued against criticisms of eco-feminism. Some criticisms of eco-feminism include the liberal progressive argument, which states that science will eventually eliminate all the side effects of domination of the earth's resources, the Marxist view that social revolution will end all problems, etc. Ruether argued in response that these arguments do not solve the cultural issue of domination and subjugation, which she thought were the key problems that perpetuated environmental issues. [18]

Critiques of Ruether's work

Ruether's feminist theology has generated criticism from other scholars as well as the Catholic Church.

Linda Hogan has raised the question: where is the tipping point between radically changing a Christian tradition and creating an entirely new belief system? Ruether's new systems, Hogan believes is more pagan and heretical than it is Catholic Christian. This also raises the important question: at what point does one's radical diversion from the traditional doctrine of a religion mean you are no longer part of said religion? [19]

Furthermore, Ed Miller and Stanley Grenz argued that it is impossible to judge Ruether's truth claims, as she does not provide sufficient evidence. In addition, they argued that if feminist experience is the highest authority, how do you prove or disprove arguments as nothing can be tested or conclusively proven. It could also be argued that Ruether's views exclude the male perspective, and make generalisations about the entire male gender, when the issue is really with a select few. [20]

Conclusion

Rosemary Radford Ruether passed away on Saturday, May 21, 2022.

Ruether's contributions to various fields, including her writings on feminism, anti-Semitism, racism and the civil rights movement have all made her a greatly influential figure within the field of theology.

Mary E. Hunt, member of the Women's Alliance for Theology, Ethics and Ritual (WATER) at the bequest of Ruether's family, wrote the following obituary:



"Dr.. Ruether was a scholar activist par excellence. She was respected and beloved by students, colleagues, and collaborators around the world for her work on ecofeminist and liberation theologies, anti-racism, Middle East complexities, women-church, and many other topics. Her legacy, both intellectual and personal, is rich beyond imagining. The scope and depth of her work, and the witness of her life as a committed feminist justice-seeker will shine forever with a luster that time will only enhance. Let us rejoice in the privilege of having known her." [21]

Sources

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