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# Review: 'Women and Redemption: A Theological History'

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*Women and Redemption: A Theological History.* By Rosemary Radford Ruether. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 1998. xi + 366 pages. \$45.00.

Prolific scholar Rosemary Radford Ruether has produced a significant study of Christian feminist theology. Throughout this work, her final criterion for theological judgment lies in the impact of various religious understandings on the well-being of women which is then extended to the well-being of all humans, all creatures, and the cosmos. The theological task she has undertaken is to unmask patriarchy and other forms of oppression and to move toward redemptive liberation.

The first five chapters constitute a selective historical investigation of gender and redemption from New Testament times to the present. Ruether argues that current biblical scholarship reveals a Jesus whose teaching and practice point beyond the patriarchal setting of his time. She then investigates how various Jewish and Christian sources in the early Christian centuries interpret creation, fall, and redemption in ways that reflect patriarchal assumptions. She finds St. Paul acknowledging that, although gender subordination expresses the order of creation, the final redemption will include gender equality. In this life, however, Paul favors a futurist eschatology according to which practitioners of gender equality in the here and now are interpreted anticipating the providential plan. Paul's followers are described as splitting into two camps: one, representing orthodoxy, combined spiritual equality in redemption with social subordination in this life; the other, representing various nonorthodox groups, emphasized celibacy, separation from the patriarchal family, and freedom for travel and preaching.

Groups such as the Corinthians, whom Paul was admonishing, as well as the Montanists, Marcionites, and Valentinians, tended toward a more realized eschatology. Ruether engages the views of these groups sympathetically insofar as they promoted gender equality not just in spiritual ideals but in actual social and ecclesial practices. Her feminist reading of Valentinian myth, however, stands in contrast to standard interpretations, such as that of Alexander Böhlig in *Gnosis und Synkretismus*, which stress the self-sufficiency of the male and the dependency of the female.

Ruether's reading of Augustine is decidedly negative. She labels him the "Father of the Inquisition" who promotes a coercive God. Gregory of Nyssa and his sister, Macrina, are able to construe the God-human relationship in a way more supportive of women's role.

Ruether shows how medieval assumptions about women's subordination are reflected in the works of Hildegard of Bingen, Thomas Aquinas, Mechthild of Magdeburg, and Julian of Norwich. She uses the women as examples of those who found avenues of affirming women's spirituality despite their cultural milieu. She uses Aquinas as an example of one whose recognition of gender equality in salvation remained mired in logical contradictions.

Reformation theology, notes Ruether, brought with it new forms of theological misogyny. But new paths for appreciating the dignity of women were articulated by figures such as Cornelius Agrippa, Mary Cary, early Quakers Margaret Fell and Sarah Chevers, and Shakers Ann Lee and Benjamin Seth Youngs. These views challenged female subordination not only in eschatology

but also in the theology of creation, with application not only to the end of time but also to ministry in the here and now. Still, cautions Ruether, these figures retained a strong focus on gender complementarity in social roles. Later Quakers such as the Grimke sisters, Lucretia Mott, and Susan B. Anthony, as well as Presbyterian-raised Elizabeth Cady Stanton, drew out fuller social, political, and cultural implications of an anthropologically-grounded gender equality.

This history forms a backdrop for Ruether's four concluding chapters, which present a global survey of contemporary feminist liberation theologies. She devotes a few pages each to capsule reports on a wide range of feminist theologians from Europe, the U.S., Latin America, Africa, and Asia. Included are Dorothee Soelle, Catharina Halkes, Letty Russell, Ada Maria Isasi-Diaz, Maria Pilar Aquino, Mercy Amba Oduyoye, and Chung Hyun Kyung, to name a few. Quite interesting is Ruether's sympathetic retrieval of positive elements of the theologies of Mary Daly and Carter Heyward as she offers criticisms of their more extreme positions. Daly and Heyward function as foils that make some of Ruether's own positions seem less extreme by comparison.

Ruether's occasional references to Vatican positions are condescendingly dismissive. She expresses the desire to move beyond all dualisms, but she maintains a sharp distinction between the church as a community of faith and the church as a hierarchical structure. Also, Ruether's christological views have few points of resonance with traditional understandings.

This is an interesting, informative, and well-written book by an internationally renowned scholar that belongs in every college library. It will be useful as a text in courses on feminist theology, liberation theology, and contemporary religious thought, especially if balanced by texts that present alternative viewpoints.

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*An Introduction to Catholic Theology.* Edited by Richard Lennan. New York: Paulist, 1998. iii + 189 pages. \$15.95 (paper).

Richard Lennan has put together a book of essays written by himself and seven other historians, philosophers, and theologians from the faculty of the Catholic Institute of Sydney, Australia. They have written primarily for beginning college and university students to deepen their understanding of the faith, to present the essential principles and methods of Catholic theology, and to foster fruitful dialogue with other traditions.

The work, unlike many texts of essays, is integrated; namely, the authors have collaborated to produce mutually referenced approaches covering the major tracts of importance for contemporary theology. The development is based on five unifying principles: (1) that theology is a rational human activity, (2) inseparably related to the human desire for meaning and fulfillment, (3) is an interpretation of a faith experience responding to God's self-revelation in Jesus Christ, (4) that lives within a community of faith and its tradition, with the Bible as its norm for truth, and (5) with a view to action in response to the issues and needs of the world today.