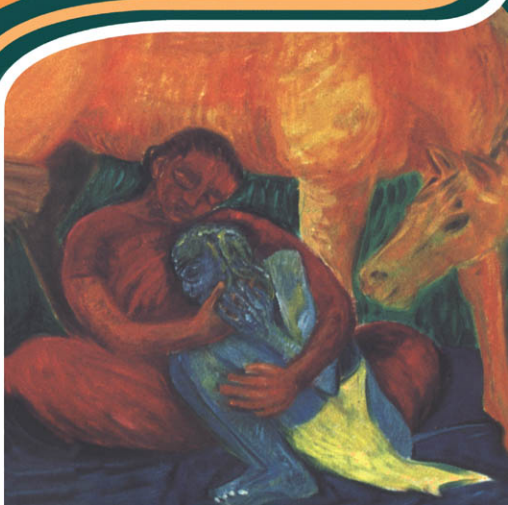


INTRODUCTIONS IN FEMINIST THEOLOGY

Introducing Redemption in Christian Feminism

Rosemary R. Ruether



Introductions in Feminist Theology

1

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Rosemary R. Ruether

This book is dedicated to my colleagues in Feminist
Theology around the world, especially to Ivone Gebara,
who has risked much to speak the truth

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Published by Sheffield Academic Press Ltd
Mansion House
19 Kingfield Road
Sheffield, S11 9AS
England

Printed on acid-free paper in Great Britain
by The Cromwell Press
Trowbridge, Wiltshire

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available
from the British Library

ISBN 1-85075-888-3

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Foreword

Mary Grey

It is a pleasure to introduce the second book in the *Introducing Feminist Theology* series¹ and especially pleasing that this is written by Rosemary Radford Ruether. This book is both a succinct and challenging introduction to the central Christian concept of redemption from a Christian feminist perspective, and at the same time engages with the ongoing creativity of Rosemary Ruether's thought. Students of Christian feminist theology will find helpful the way she traces the historical development of the interpretation of Christ as Saviour as either liberating or oppressive for women: even if the dominant effect was oppressive Ruether finds traces of more liberating strands in prophetic sects or, for example, in the neglected contribution of the writing of Hildegard of Bingen.

Writing on redemption is not a simple task.² Redemption is more like a cluster of concepts, involving what we mean by salvation, sin and grace, the saviour figure and what exactly happened in the 'Christ event': in Christian feminist terms all of these need to be put under scrutiny as to their effect on women. Already in her earlier work, *Sexism and God-Talk*,³ Ruether had suggested that whatever contributed to the full becoming of women should be considered as redemptive.⁴ In this new work, we find her bringing new voices to the conversation, especially voices of feminist liberation theologians from Asia, Latin America, Africa and women of color in the United States. Redemption is clearly

1. The first was Isherwood and McEwan, (1993).
2. As I found when writing Grey (1989).
3. Ruether 1983.
4. Ruether 1983: 18-19.

conceptualized on a global perspective as the path of liberation transforming both people and oppressive social systems. Redemption also includes the integration of human process with the dying and regeneration of the earth itself. It means learning to celebrate life while acknowledging our fragility and the limits of our life-cycles.

In this new work Rosemary Ruether has made it abundantly clear—yet again—why, for the last twenty years, her work has formed one of the pillars of feminist theology and is again guiding us forward in terms of dialogue, pluralism and a firm rooting in the commitment to end the suffering and oppression of women.

Editor's Preface

BISFT is delighted to be working with SAP in the development of an *Introductions* series. The first book, *Introducing Feminist Theology* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1993) was well-received and provided a solid resource at an academic level for those new to the subject. It also sparked off the idea for a series that would give a taste of the diversity and richness of feminist theology in its global contexts.

BISFT is committed to providing various platforms for feminist theology. These include summer schools, academic courses, monographs and the *Journal of Feminist Theology*. This series is yet another strand in the web. The series will make key ideas and leading voices in feminist theology globally accessible to a wide audience and in this way further the debates. Themes included cover a substantial range of material and a diversity of opinions. The authors have aimed to provide a challenge as well as a solid base for further investigation. Most of all they provide different voices and liberating alternatives to patriarchal theology. They provide transforming options and, we hope, they enable different choices.

We hope you experience both enjoyment and empowerment from this new undertaking.

The Editors

Acknowledgments

I wish to thank the Religion Department of the University of Bristol, England, where I delivered the first three of these chapters as the Benjamin Meeker Visiting Scholar. I also thank the Union Theological Seminary of Richmond, Virginia, where the first four chapters were given as the 1998 Sprunt Lectures.

Introduction

Christianity from its beginning has appeared to offer a gender-inclusive promise of redemption through the death and resurrection of Christ. Christianity gave both women and men the same initiation rite in baptism. Both women and men died to the 'old Adam' in the waters of baptism and rose to newness of life in Christ. The theological claim, itself originally a baptismal formula, found in Paul's letter to the Galatians, that 'in Christ there is no more male and female' appears to offer a neutralization of gender differences in the new humanity in Christ.

Yet male androcentric perspectives biased this inclusive offer of redemption even in the New Testament. The assumption that God was male threw in question women's capacity to be 'in the image of God'. Likewise the maleness of Jesus was read as re-enforcing the view that maleness was necessary for normative humanity. Women could become Christlike only through a symbolic sex change that made them 'spiritually male'.

Views of femaleness as lacking normative and full humanity, as more prone to sin, as more culpable for having caused sin to enter the world in the first place, and as having been created by God to be subordinate skewed the message of equal redemption in Christ. By the second generation of the Christian movement, in writings such as 1 Timothy, women were being defined as those who had been created second and sinned first. They are to keep silent, accept their subordination to the male and bear children in order to be 'saved'. If, from a feminist perspective, such inferiorization of women is itself an expression of sin, then women are not only not saved from sin by Christ, but indeed such Christian definitions re-enforce the sinful condition of violence against them.

This introductory book on feminist perspectives on redemption is divided into two sections. In the first four chapters I survey the historical development of conflicting paradigms of gender and redemption. In Chapter 1 I show the roots of this conflicting paradigm in the New Testament itself. The New Testament shows two important shifts in the definition of redemption: from a this-worldly social definition to an individualistic other worldly definition and from an egalitarian definition that overcomes gender (ethnic and class) discrimination to one that re-enforces gender and class hierarchy in the church, the family and society, while promising a neutralizing of these distinctions in 'heaven'.

By the end of the New Testament period, the second view, which was other worldly and re-enforced gender hierarchy in church and society had triumphed in the dominant leadership of the church. Groups that maintained the egalitarian vision of redemption continued in the second century, but they were being marginalized by the emerging dominant church and defined as 'heretical'.

Moreover the egalitarian perspective found in gnostic and apocalyptic movements themselves accepted a view that gender hierarchy was the normative 'order of creation'. They differed from the dominant orthodoxy only in seeing this creation itself as transient or even as having been created by evil, fallen powers. Thus they saw this hierarchy as already dissolved here and now for the baptized Christian living 'in Christ'.

In Chapter 2 I trace the conflict and mingling of these two paradigms from second-century Christianity to the end of the Middle Ages. The Latin Church Father Augustine used the view of women as created subordinate even before the Fall and more guilty in sin to suppress the residual views that baptism dissolved gender subordination in the church here and now. Augustine thought that women would be spiritually equal in heaven according to their merits, but would get there only by accepting their subordination here on earth, both as wives and as celibates.

This Augustinian view was re-enforced by Thomas Aquinas, who adopted the Aristotelian view that women's inferiority is not simply the result of divine law, but resides in their biological defectiveness. Yet the alternative view that celibacy and the vocation to the spiritual life overcomes gender subordination lingered, particularly in female monasticism. Leading female mystics from the twelfth to the fifteenth centuries also introduced sophiological images of God and Christ. By bringing the

female Wisdom symbol into the definition of God and Christ, women mystics, such as Hildegard of Bingen and Julian of Norwich, began to undermine the androcentric theology that made women incapable of being theomorphic and Christomorphic.

The Reformation saw both the patriarchal and the egalitarian paradigms of redemption emerge with new clarity and force. Luther and Calvin reaffirmed the patriarchal paradigm with a new emphasis on marriage as the normative life style for all Christians. By dismissing celibacy and monastic life, the Magisterial reformers eliminated alternative vocations to subordinate wifehood for women and lingering notions that women rose from subordination to equality through celibacy.

But alternative reform movements, in the humanist and radical reformation traditions, particularly the Quakers, rediscovered and developed the New Testament egalitarian paradigm of redemption. They claimed an egalitarian view of the original creation in the light of which gender subordination was defined as an expression of sin and the Fall, not as the will of God. Redemption in Christ was then defined as restoring this original equality in the image of God for women equally with men. The classical Christian theology of subordination was seen as a betrayal of the good news of redemption in Christ for women equally with men.

Nineteenth-century Americans saw two egalitarian paradigms of gender and redemption meet and mingle. In the Shakers medieval views that God is female and male (Wisdom and Power), and that women and men overcome subordination and enter into equality through celibacy were continued. The Shakers added the new proclamation of the appearance of a female Christ, representing the female side of God and completing the redemption left incomplete in the male Christ.

In feminist abolitionist leaders, such as the Grimké sisters and Lucretia Mott, the Quaker theology of original and restored equality was merged with the liberal political theory that 'all men are created equal', to found a struggle for women's full equality in both church and society as the true meaning of redemption.

In the twentieth century this claim of original and restored equality of the genders has blossomed into increasingly diverse and global movements of feminist theology in North America, Western Europe, Latin America, Asia and Africa. Feminist theologians around the world are contextualizing the feminist understanding of original and renewed equality to struggle for a redemptive transformation of their societies. Here it is assumed that redemption means overcoming patriarchal