The Feminist Theology of Rosemary Reuther: A Challenge to Pope Francis

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Introduction

1. Feminist theology includes: demonstrating the flaws of patriarchal theology that is androcentric (man-centered), misogynist (hating women) and sexist; finding alternative traditions to challenge this bias; re-envisioning theological themes that will help free women from bias. It could flourish only as women, beginning in the 1960s, entered seminaries, did professional ministry and became theologians; the Quakers, starting in 1667, argued for a feminist reading of the scriptures; Mary Daly published The Church and the Second Sex in 1968; rediscovery of important women like Teresa of Avila, Catherine of Siena and Hildegard of Bingen; New Testament Studies by Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza in her book In Memory of Her (1982); work of Elizabeth Johnson, She Who Is and Sandra Schneiders; Ivone Gebara, Brazilian eco-feminist.

2. Ruether’s Sexism and God Talk (1983) is still the most important contribution to a systematic feminist theology. Born Nov. 2, 1936; grew up in a woman centered context, went to Catholic schools, by age 30 she had 3 children, completed her masters and doctorate, was writing her first book and was a professor at Howard University. She also taught at Garratt-Evangelical Theological Seminary and Pacific School of Religion; likes to paint; often speaks out against war and for Palestinian rights and for the mentally ill (her son David has schizophrenia) and for eco-feminism. She is still a practicing Catholic, married, teaching one class a semester at Clermont, just published her autobiography, My
*Quests for Hope and Meaning.* She is not a philosophical theologian but an historian of culture who sees religious symbols as culturally conditioned and as “living metaphors of human existence.”

3. Progressive theologians (men and women) who generally like Pope Francis, have been critical of his statements on women that reinforce gender stereotypes: women have distinctive skills “sensitivity, intuition” “special concern” for others; “feminine genius”; women ordination not open to discussion; women have “a particular sensitivity for the things of God” especially “mercy, tenderness and love.”

I. Ruether’s Feminist Theology

A. Methodology

1. The usual approach of drawing on Scripture and classical Christian tradition to do systematic theology is inadequate because it simply perpetuates a sexist bias (all written by men).

2. Ruether draws on Gnostic Gospels, Pagan mythology, alternative Christian traditions like the Quakers, reinterpretation of the Bible and Christian tradition, modern movements of liberalism, romanticism, Marxism and the experiences of women, especially stories of women suffering from sexism.

3. She emphasizes the Biblical prophetic tradition that has God against oppression and opposes idolatry.

4. Whatever harms women is not of God and whatever helps women flourish is.

B. Anthropology

1. Critique: sexual complementarity puts women into a position of inferiority and subjugation; ancient cultures had men doing the hunting and agricultural plowing while women did never ending domestic work. Men became identified with the world of freedom and culture while women were identified with necessity and the fixed world of nature. Genesis portrays the woman (Eve) as temptress causing men to fall from grace. Men as well as women are harmed by patriarchy (rule of the father). Androgyny (men taking on feminine qualities and vice versa) simply preserves the stereotyping that causes the problem.
Aristotle identified men with mind and reason, and women with emotion, passion that must be controlled. Christian sexism: Augustine (women not fully in divine image), Aquinas (women are misbegotten males); Puritans saw women as dangerous and this led to witch hunting in the 14th to 17th centuries.

2. All men and women are made in the image and likeness of God and are products of the earth. We are relational creatures called to live in community. We all need space to develop our distinctive gifts and talents. Men and women must help each other move toward greater maturity. Women need to play an active role in the public world and men must do their share of the domestic work. All human beings possess a full and equivalent nature and are called “to live relationality” on the basis of mutuality.

3. Human consciousness is a complex form of developing matter which is always inspirited to some degree. Intelligence is the interior dimension of human energy (influence of Teilhard) and calls us to be caretakers and cultivators of the whole ecological community. We are rooted in nature, in the earth.

4. The self is part of a network of relationships and not an autonomous entity. She does not accept a “permanent soul unrelated to this context” (My Quests p. 107).

5. We possess a “complex consciousness that seeks meaning, interacts in relationships and generates creative processes” that is “the mental interiority of the bodily self.” The mind results from the brain and body in its social and historical context. (My Quests p. 128)

C. God

1. Critique: God seen as male justifying patriarchy. It is a mistake to add feminine imagery to an all-male God. The apocryphal Gospels apply feminine imagery to the Holy Spirit “my mother the Holy Spirit” leaving us with an androgynous image of the Trinity (2 males and 1 female).

2. We need inclusive language grounded in the experience of men and women.
3. Religions of the Near East had images of the “mother-goddess.” When male gods appear they are equivalent and not complementary images of the divine.

4. Ruether speaks of God as “primal matrix” and “the great womb” (like Tillich’s ground of being).

5. The Hebrew Scriptures. The Exodus portraying Yahweh the liberator of oppressed people: there are references to God crying out like a woman in labor (Is 42:14-16). Wisdom is a subtle representative of the divine presence in the world and instructs men in the mysteries of God’s knowledge (Wisdom 8: 2-4). From the Old Testament, Ruether uses God as liberator, the Mother who nurtures and Wisdom who guides. The Old Testament prohibited idolatry, meaning we cannot make male imagery into an absolute, suggesting God is male.

6. New Testament. Ruether points to Luke’s Gospel using the experiences of both men and women. Building the kingdom is like a farmer sowing seeds and a woman leavening bread (Lk 13:18-21). Jesus’ treatment of women is important, including them in religious discussions (Mary and Martha in Luke 10:38-42). Ruether says Abba was used by adult males to show respect to older men. She thinks the New Testament notion of God can lead to a community of equals. Gal 3: 28, where it says in Christ there is neither male nor female, represents the thrust of the teachings of Jesus and can be used to fight sexism.

7. Ruether uses the word “God-ess” to suggest that we will find new ways of naming God as we overcome patriarchy.

8. Ruether emphasizes the immanence of God, not a male God up in the sky, a being removed from creation, but the source of being that energizes continuing transformation of nature and the human community. God cannot intervene out of respect for the evolving world and human freedom.
9. Ruether is leery of parent language (both mother and father) as too suffocating and favors redeemer and liberator.

D. Sin and Salvation

1. Critique: classical theology emphasized pride as the main source of personal sin; following Paul and Augustine put blame on Eve for original sin that caused the loss of a happy, harmonious human existence; and failed to adequately address systemic evil and social sin.

2. A feminist criticism reveals the way women have been presented as the cause of evil in the world. Pandora opening the box of evils and Eve tempting Adam. The original sin takes the opposition of self and other and turns it into the good self against the other less than human (superior males dominating inferior females masters oppressing slaves, humans exploiting nature, etc.). Patriarchy hurts both men who are denied intimate contact with children and women who are denied the opportunity to develop their full potential as community leaders. All who participate in sexist relationships contribute to the accumulated evil in the world. We can recognize this only because we begin to envision another way of relating on the basis of equality and mutuality. Ruether says dualism is the original sin as represented by the good and evil interpretation of sexual differences, men representing freedom and rationality and women necessity and emotion.

3. Social sin: sexist attitudes get embedded in institutions and systems that produce false consciousness. Males have protected their domination in various ways: women were to keep silent in church (1 Tim); gang rapes of vulnerable women; binding feet in China; witchcraft trials in Puritan New England, 17th century; women denied the vote until 1920; denial of woman’s ordination in the Catholic Church; women’s fashions, for examples, shoes; pornography; wife battering; women paid less for similar work; women doing most of the domestic work. All of this creates an integrated patriarchal culture that becomes the norm for human relations. Men are taught to dominate or be dominated; to abstract
themselves from the real harm being done to others; to pursue goals without thought about means; to project onto women the alienated parts of male humanity. All sin is relational and contributes to an atmosphere of demonic forces that in turn influence personal choices. Sexism is a demonic power. Patriarchy is a system bigger than any of us and extremely hard to discern and dismantle. We do have power to oppose it even if in small ways. Historically, female gossip has been a covert way of resisting sexism. The feminist movement enables more women and men to overcome false consciousness. All women have contributed to sexism in some ways (trying to please men). Older women are often more open to seeing the destructive aspect of patriarchy, but often are dependent on men economically and few expressing their anger and alienation. We all need a fundamental self-esteem to build our own identity and develop our own talents. Mary Daly helps free women to express anger and to choose their own path. Ruether is critical of male feminists who claim to understand women’s true nature and offer advice on dealing with sexism. She sees Jungian psychology as the intellectual base for male feminism (Sexism p. 190). Men should be in solidarity with a particular woman or group that is struggling to find their own way (for example, supporting her education by sharing in domestic work).

4. Personal sin: women have the same capacity as men to dominate and control, to be selfish, to misuse power, but men have had more opportunities to do so. Women do not have “a different nature” or innate spiritual abilities that prevent them from distorting human relationships. Men do have more opportunities in our culture to do sinful things that hurt others. There are sins of omission in which men and women accept patriarchy without challenging it. We all need to become more grounded selves that foster genuine human relationships but this requires a supportive community.
5. Salvation occurs in this world when: individuals become agents of their own destiny; married couples relate on a basis of equality and mutuality; small groups work for justice; more people care for the environment; and society becomes less patriarchal.

E. Christology

1. Criticism: Christians appropriated the Jewish notion of the Messiah and applied it to Jesus without keeping its social implications while focusing on the idea of a divine savior. This led to an anti-Judaism bias in Christianity in the New Testament, among the Fathers and still present today. Classical Christology mirrored the establishment of Christianity as the imperial religion of the Christian Roman Empire. Just as the Logos governs the universe, so the Emperor and the Church govern the political universe, masters govern slaves and men govern women. Androgynous approaches are not helpful, for example, mystics like Julian of Norwich calling Jesus mother and father.

2. We must reinterpret Christology remembering that faith in Christ suggests a final fulfillment with partial signs of that now and keeping Jesus in his Jewish context.

3. Jesus of the Synoptic Gospels supports feminism, a prophet who breaks social taboos, proclaims a reversal of the social order where domination and oppression are ruled out in favor of equality and mutuality. Jesus says call no man Father, suggesting we must avoid oppressive social relations. Jesus tells us to obey God, not man, which is an enduring reminder to avoid oppressive social structures. He spoke of the Messiah not as a king but as a servant. Leaders must be servants. Jesus shows special concern for women (Samaritan woman at the well, the Syro-Phoenician woman with a sick daughter, woman with flow of blood, prostitutes).

4. Jesus, the homeless Jewish prophet, as liberator subverts structures of oppression and embodies a new order based on mutuality.
5. Christ is in a dynamic relationship with redeemed humanity (vine and branches image). He cannot be “encapsulated one-for-all in the historical Jesus” (Sexism p. 138).

F. Church

1. Critique: The image of Church as bride of Christ ends up supporting patriarchy. Nuptial imagery supports sexual complementarity notion that make women subservient (Eph 5 wives be subject to husbands). Mariology is used to support women being passive receptive like Mary. The institutional Church is governed by celibate males that set the rules and interpret the tradition. Since the time of Constantine the church has often enjoyed privilege in return for supporting the State.

2. Church is a community of equals (Gal 3:28 in Christ there is neither male nor female – perhaps an early baptismal text).

3. Church is a charismatic community – all members have the Spirit of Jesus who continues to speak today. Acts 2 says the Spirit is given to men and women.

4. Woman-church movement thinks women should not seek ordination in a patriarchal church but should join women’s base communities where there is equality in leadership (Mary Hunt and Elisabeth Fiorenzo) this led to Women-Church Convergence that seeks to eradicate patriarchy in church and society. Vatican has not responded.

5. The Roman Catholic Women Priests (RCWP). In 2002, seven women were ordained by a Catholic bishop on the Danube River; several women were ordained bishops. In 2012 they claim 9 bishops, 81 priests in USA, Canada and Europe. In general they are highly educated and have much experience. They claim apostolic succession even though that concept is challenged by scholars. May 2008 the Vatican excommunicated all these women. Ruether sees the 2 movements as complementary.

6. The Church, a symbol-producing community, should be the avant-garde of liberated humanity and the support system for that process. The historic churches mostly support
patriarchy creating great disappointment among feminists. Historically, women have been denied ministerial roles.

7. Alternate traditions: the church has never denied that the gifts of the Spirit are given to women as well as men. Roles for women: early Gnostics, acceptance of Joan of Arc, radical Puritans, Quakers, secularized liberal feminism fostered women’s ordination (Antoinette Brown first woman ordained in Congregational Church in 1853). By 1970s many Protestant denominations were ordaining women but into the same clerical caste without challenging the sexist bias.

8. The role of base communities in transforming church. Ruether says women need feminist groups to nourish their spiritual life and as a prod to help redeem the institutional church from patriarchy (a dialectical relationship). She remains a faithful Catholic, tithing her time and energy for church reform.

9. NT ministry is service, not control. Clericalism is rooted in the belief that people have no direct access to the divine but need clergy mediation. Ministers should empower others.

10. Sacraments: their celebration and interpretation arises from the communities’ collective experiences of its life of grace. Liturgy uses special gestures and rituals (symbolic distance) to open up the deeper dimensions of transformed life that gives us energy for ordinary life.

11. The liberated church must be involved in transforming society. It helps to focus energy on a single project that offers the possibility of some success. This is a dynamic interplay between liberating individuals and institutions. Liberalism and socialism (modern forms of biblical notion of the Messiah) have helped Christians appreciated the social dimension of the Gospel. Niebuhr’s Christian realism stressed human limitations in order to provide a solid basis for a more just society. Feminist theology assumes a unity of creation and the redeemed world, of spirituality and social justice. Liberal feminism insists on the equal rights of women based on a common human nature (right to vote, education, employment,
etc.) but domestic work keeps women from seizing new opportunities. Socialist feminism invited women into the male-influenced workforce promising economic independence offering state supported day care centers, etc. This strategy has not really worked and women have not thrived in socialist economies.

Radical feminism (Mary Daly) exposes the inhumanity of males who treat women as sexual objects and encourages a culture of rage and anger. Promotes a feminist spirituality over against male physicality and violence (reversal of patriarchy which makes men the enemy of women).

Integrated feminism espoused by Ruether, affirms: democratic participation; equal value of men and women; equal access to education and jobs; gives ownership and management to base communities; creating an organic community where men and women share in home making and child rearing as well as political and economic public decision making; caring for the environment in a sustainable way. There are two ways of moving toward this new society: (1) small groups that combine all aspects of this vision; (2) concentrating on one part of the vision (educational opportunities for all). Christian Life

G. Christian Life

1. Importance of liturgy as symbolic action. It provides an alternative vision of human community.

2. Ecofeminism: Christian life includes living a simple lifestyle and attending to the earth, to care for the environment. Men came to dominate nature and women in the same historical process of creating the world of freedom and culture while controlling nature and women the world of necessity. Women and land were seen as possessions of men who could use them for their own ends. Men monopolized food production using plow animals and saw themselves as owning the land. Calvinism destroyed the notion of nature as sacrament of
divine presence. (God is revealed only through the scriptural word). The natural world is controlled by demonic powers. Women were the gateway of the devil and independent women were often the ones tried for witchcraft in Salem and elsewhere. The scientific revolution and the age of colonialism enabled Western Europeans to appropriate land and resources in the Americas, Asia and Africa and to enslave indigenous populations. All of this led to enslaving women and polluting the earth to the benefit of white males who developed more sophisticated weapons to mainline control. Ecofeminism addresses these problems striving for a just and sustainable planet: we must see that we came from the earth, are dependent on the natural world, have destroyed the ecological balance, and have to transform production, consumption and waste into sustainable patterns that help keep nature healthy. We are nature become conscious of itself. God is the immanent source that sustains the whole planetary community, the font that produces such a variety of plants and animals, the matrix that sustains the whole ecosystem. All relations of domination must be replaced by relationships that are mutually enriching: men and women sharing public and domestic work; humans working together to sustain the world of nature and the cycle of growth and disintegration which we share. Today climate change caused by burning fossil fuel leads to melting of polar ice caps, rising sea levels, flooding and odd weather patterns. Starhawk female American neo-pagan activist offers 5 principles for an alternative economy: (1) shift from fossil fuels to solar and wind; (2) more human labor and less machines; (3) recycling of waste as fertilizer; (4) cultivation of biological and cultural diversity; (5) greater efficiency in using resources. Other ecofeminists include Brazilian liberation theologian Ivana Gerhara and process theologian Catherine Keller. Ruether supports smaller local forms producing crops for local consumption (there are about 1,000 community-supported farms in the US); an increase in urban and suburban gardens. We
can learn from monasticism that rejected excessive consumption, cultivated the land, while abstaining from meat, and promoting sustainable use of resources.

H. Eschatology

1. Critique: traditional popular view on immortality of the soul that separates from the body in death and goes to heaven, hell or purgatory. Ruether thinks this denigrates the body and nature and is part of a patriarchal theology.

2. Babylonians had no sense of the afterlife and the Gilgamesh Epic suggested the secret for immortality was useless or a failure; the early Israelites had no belief in a blissful afterlife but developed hope in a Messiah who would bring a new era of happiness, peace and justice for the righteous. Late Jewish thought incorporated notions of the immortality of the soul (Wisdom 3: 1-9 – the souls of the just are in the hands of God). Early Christianity kept the apocalyptic notion of a new era: for example, the Book of Revelations speaks of a millennium when Christians arise and reign with Christ followed by a final battle with the Devil and a final judgment when the evil are punished in everlasting fire and the good are rewarded. By the Constantine era (4th century) mainline Christianity focused on the immortality of the soul separated from the body.

3. Paul developed the idea of a spiritual body freed from finite limitations and the particularity of gender. Gregory of Nyssa (c 335-395) and the other Greek Fathers thought humans originally had spiritual bodies, took on carnal bodies in the Fall but regain spiritual bodies in heaven. Augustine taught the female spiritual body in heaven would no longer excite lust.

4. Ruether notes the work of Vine Deloria, God is Red, that contrasts: the view of Native Americans that does not fear death because it does not seek personal mortality but accepts collective immortality in being buried in the earth with ancestors; and the white man’s desire for personal immortality and consequent fear of death and belief in a personal afterlife.
5. She criticizes liberal thought and socialism for a utopian view that the kingdom can be established on this earth often at the expense of care for the natural world (great pollution in China).

6. She cites Anne Wilson Schaef’s *Women’s Reality*, claiming men are more interested in personal immortality than women who are more accepting of finitude.

7. Ruether’s own position: accept life on its own terms including the cycle of birth and death. Do all we can to create a more just, peaceful and livable world without expecting utopia. Hebrew practice of the Jubilee Year is instructive: debt forgiveness, slaves released, land and animals rest (Lev 25:8-12). Every social movement leaves something undone and generates new contradictions. Jesus, who came to liberate captives and provide daily bread and preach to the poor is our model.

8. Ruether thinks agnosticism is the appropriate response to the question of personal immortality. Upon death, our conscious ego dissolves back into the cosmic matrix. Accepting death means accepting our finitude and the abiding character of the everlasting matrix that contains us all. We must trust Holy Wisdom to give transcendent meaning to all our attempts to do good.

II. Ruether and Pope Francis

A. Personally: She likes him, applauds his care for the poor, thinks he should appoint women to high places but does not expect him to do anything on women’s ordination. She personally does not want to put energy into convincing him.

B. Her theology challenges the common patriarchal outlook shared by the Pope and suggests some practical advice in responding to feminist interests.

1. It attacks the root cause of patriarchy that transforms reproductive gender differences into a value-laden theory of sexual complementarity that prizes male characteristics over female traits. Hans Urs von Balthesar made this into a philosophical principle. Ruether insists that
this theory of sexual complementarity is a product of historical development and should be abandoned as harmful to men as well as women.

2. Anthropology: do not speak about women’s innate maternal instincts; but raise up examples of strong women’s involvement in public life like Dorothy Day.

3. God: do not limit your language about God to male imagery like Father, King and Lord; but sometimes speak of God as Mother, Liberator and Source of Life.

4. Sin and Salvation: do not support the abuses of patriarchy; but take steps to bring greater equality to the church and society.

5. Jesus: do not preach only on the Exalted Jesus of John’s Gospel; but call us to imitate the synoptic Jesus who came to liberate captives and serve others.

6. Church: do not totally close off the discussion of women priests; but listen to the experience of women ministers and re-examine the arguments for women’s ordination.

7. Christian Life: do not divorce liturgy and life; but call all of us to continue Christ’s work of establishing equality, justice and peace.

8. Eschatology: do not allow thoughts of heaven to divert us from healing this world; but find creative ways to combine the struggle for gender equality and care for the environment.