

Philosophy of Religion

Rosemary Radford Ruether: The Female Nature of God

I. The Problem

Ruether maintains that traditional western theism has embedded its idea of God in a male-dominated framework. The idea of God is expressed through exclusively masculine language situated in patriarchal systems. This has contributed to a theological model that alienates woman from God. Men are portrayed as the primary bearers of the image of God. Women have this divine image derivatively and thus secondary. Hence, the woman's relation to God is conceptualized as mediated through the man. She can have no direct experience of God.

II. Suppression of the Feminine

Ruether argues that the feminine has been a part of the western traditions, Christian in particular, but that the feminine has been suppressed for various theological and sociological reasons.

The feminine is found in the scriptural traditions. For example, the "wisdom of God" in the Hebrew Bible (Christian Old Testament) is personified as a woman in ways that reflect goddesses as creators and redeemers in ancient near east religions. The gnostic religions in the second through fourth centuries also elevated the feminine in their heterodox Christian systems, but these were ultimately rejected by the Christian orthodoxy and along with them the divine feminine that had acquired a more prominent place. The role of the Virgin Mary as mediatrix (intercessor between humans and Jesus) and the "Mother of God" in Catholicism contains vestiges of the divine feminine.

Elements of the feminine, though found in the western traditions, are ultimately situated within the context of a male-dominated structure of patriarchal relationship. "The female can never appear as the icon of God in all divine fullness, parallel to the male image of God" (p. 33).

III. Pagan Feminism

Ruether argues that since the 1970s feminists have tried to replace traditional male-centered patriarchal theology with a female-centered revival of the Goddess of nature religion, together with the suggestion that matriarchal systems have a more ancient pedigree than later patriarchal systems.

Ruether argues that the Pagan Goddess religion is inadequate since (i) it presupposes a conception of the feminine that is rooted in 19th century Romanticism (and hence threatens to entrap women in the same stereotypes from which it wishes to emancipate them) and (ii) it merely replaces one extreme (Male God) with another extreme (Female God) and thus reproduces the same pathology.

IV. Eastern Religions

Ruether argues that we find in some of the eastern religious tradition a more sensible view of the feminine as a bearer of the image of God.

Based on Judith Ochsorn's work, Ruether claims that gods and goddesses in the near eastern religions do not fall into stereotypical patterns of masculinity and femininity. The Goddess represents all the features of the divine. She's not a mere expression of the "feminine," over against gods as expressions of the "masculine."

Ruether maintains that religious traditions that have a plurality of divine foci (centers) in male and female forms are better able to accommodate the vision of the Divine as beyond male and female. Neither "male" nor "female" provides an exclusive image of God. Each contains the fullness of the divine.