

God and gender

by [Nadine Pence Frantz](#) in the [January 20, 1999](#) issue

By Rosemary Radford Ruether, Women and Redemption: A Theological History. (Fortress, 366 pp.)

Rosemary Radford Ruether, professor of theology at Garrett-Evangelical Theological Seminary, centers her latest book around this question: "Are women redeemed by Christ?" She studies how key theologians throughout the history of Western Christianity have treated redemption and gender relations. She considers their understanding of God's original intent for gender relations, of redemption and its relation to gender differentiation, and of the eschatological vision and its relation to present social reality. Through this method (which is more implicit than explicit), Ruether gives a complex and nuanced reading of these theologians.

Ruether demonstrates that there have been many ways of understanding redemption and its relation to gender. In the first century's development of Jesus' message, she notes the strong accent on a realized eschatology which overturns sacral-social structures, including hierarchical gender relations. Tracing the development of the phrase "in Christ there is neither male nor female," Ruether contends that the early church understood redemption as the return, both spiritually and socially, to an original vision of androgynous wholeness.

With Paul, this configuration of redemption began to change. By patristic times redemption no longer signaled a concrete change in the social situation of Christians, and the image of God was envisioned as best represented by spiritual maleness. This pattern reached an apex in the thought of the Reformers, who argued that God's intent for gender differentiation was explicitly manifested in the fallen, earthly structures of hierarchy, and that we were meant to endure the resulting pain and oppression. Thus, for women, redemption meant setting aside their femaleness in order to become spiritually whole, and accepting male hierarchy as an earthly expression of God's intended gender distinctions.

Ruether argues that the first key shift in this pattern came in the 16th and 17th centuries through the thought of Cornelius Agrippa (a Renaissance humanist) and women of the Radical Reformation (especially early Quakers). These traditions argued that gender differentiation and subordination did not exist in God's original design but were a consequence of sin. Redemption could thus dissolve the outer differences of roles and bring people back to spiritual union with God. This cleared a space for women to be saved "as female."

The second key shift, a turn from an otherworldly to a this-worldly view of redemption, took place between the 17th and 19th centuries. Twentieth-century feminism is the heir to this theological tradition, which emphasizes the present reign of God on earth, where all can live in just relation. Ruether studies the various feminist configurations of redemption available today (North American, Mujerista, Womanist, Asian, African, Latin American) and notes their similarities: they share a vision of gender equality and a commitment to overturning hierarchical social relations.

The breadth and depth of Ruether's scholarship is impressive, although her early chapters show more care and nuance than the later ones, which become little more than summaries. She makes a case for an understanding of redemption that is both grounded in a recognition that women, like men, are made in the image of God, and in the church's commitment to changing the hierarchical nature of society. Unfortunately, missing from the book is a sustained theological argument which would tell us explicitly what Ruether herself makes of the results of her historical research.

Because Ruether's own conclusions are quite sparse, the book leaves one with a series of modern portraits of redemption but without much critical reflection. Nevertheless, it's a valuable study of the complex history of redemption and how that has affected women who claim redemption through Christ.