

WOMEN'S CONSULTATION ON CONSTRUCTIVE THEOLOGY

- Topic: Women's Freedom: 40 Years on since Ruether's *Sexism and God Talk: Towards a Feminist Theology*
- Conveners: Cristina Lledo Gomez, BBI-The Australian Institute of Theological Education
Margaret Mary Moore, Independent Scholar
- Treasurer: Jessica Coblentz, Saint Mary's College (Notre Dame, Indiana)
- Secretary: Jennifer Owens-Jofre, Saint Louis University
- Award
- Convener: Julia Feder, Saint Mary's College (Notre Dame, Indiana)
- Moderator: Cristina Lledo Gomez, BBI-The Australian Institute of Theological Education
- Presenters: Theresa A. Yugar, California State University, Los Angeles
Rachel Bundang, Santa Clara University

This panel explored how much freedom women, particularly feminist theologians, have (and have not) gained since Rosemary Radford Ruether's (1936–2022) strivings for the beginnings of a feminist theology in her book, *Sexism and God Talk: Towards a Feminist Theology* (1983). It honored both Ruether's and Teresia Hinga's (1955–2023) contribution to feminist theology, given that initially Hinga was scheduled to deliver the presentation with Theresa Yugar and only weeks before the convention, passed away. Thankfully, Rachel Bundang was able to step in at the last minute to present with Yugar. Hinga in fact studied under Ruether and recently published *Valuing Lives, Healing Earth: Religion, Gender, and Life on Earth* (2021), a co-edited volume with Yugar, on eco-feminist theology, a trajectory that Ruether herself set with her own feminist ecotheological work.

The panel explored the pressing questions for feminist theologies today such as women's roles in the church, women's bodies and reproductive capabilities, violence against women and the ongoing silencing of them in the church and the academy. Yugar described herself as a woman living on the margins because she is Catholic, lay, a woman, a feminist theologian, and called to be ordained but denied entry into a Catholic seminary, as she says in her own words, "because of my sex". Yugar pointed to the number of feminist theologians who themselves have been "targeted, persecuted, and silenced by the Vatican for their theological perspectives which privileged women's bodies, voices, and experiences." And such targeting and/or marginalization included the scrutiny of the US Leadership Conference of Women Religious between 2007 and 2012, as well as "disinvitations" rather than invitations to speak on justice for women, excommunications, and the highlighting of the dignity of the planet over the dignity of women. For Yugar, patriarchy maybe the cross of women for all time, but feminism would be their liberation—pointing to the various and abundant feminist theological work already forged out of a hermeneutics of suspicion, out of frustration with a church that sends inconsistent messaging on women and their dignity, and out of a deep belief of women's own equal dignity and worth as *imago dei*. Yugar suggested a list of ways the church could truly care for women and named the number of male clerics who were to be celebrated for their support of women, some at the great cost of their own vocations to priesthood.

Bundang responded by thinking through the promises of freedom and the ongoing “unfreedoms” in the church, using the framework of friendship—given what Bundang saw as the enduring friendships, mutual mentoring, and collaborative scholarship between Ruether, Hinga, Yugar and Bundang. Bundang explains: “I use friendship as my lens because these are voluntary associations: we choose each other freely...and lifelong friendships in particular, grounded in affection, affinity, and kinship, are themselves lifegiving and formative.” With this approach in mind, Bundang set the scenery for the consequent table discussions after the panel presentation, highlighting first that women’s ordination remains an issue in the Catholic Church but also that it was no longer as galvanizing as it once was. She pointed to one of its detrimental consequences, women finding their ecclesial home somewhere else given their paths to ordination are “dead-ended,” creating an unfortunate “Catholic brain drain.” Bundang then pointed to the dissonance between the church and the world in terms of how women inhabit their bodies and take up public space. She says: “Implicitly we tell women and girls to take, develop and engage their gifts in other spaces where they might be more welcome and free to flourish” but in the church space, their “opportunities for participation, leadership, and growth” are limited, leading Bundang to ask: “How might we model a religious and spiritual life that takes the inherited faith as its starting point, and grow forth from that, rather than pushing people out?” Bundang suggests against becoming “mouthy” women theologians and instead becoming either better models or better teachers of questioning and interrogating rather than teaching answers or to simply have faith. She also suggests the reimagining of relationships as a way of reimagining ecclesial structures, something to be done even prior to our theologizing. Mommy theology, negative associations for women, bodily autonomy and women’s health, violence against women and their ongoing silencing in the church were the other topics placed on the table for discussion by Bundang. She ended her presentation with her learnings from Ruether and Hinga—“their shared commitment to those they claim as their communities of accountability, and their clear vision in incorporating everyday lived experiences into the theologies they saw and imagined and wrote.” The panel discussion afterwards moved back and forth between the idea of women staying or leaving the church. The toll of staying was weighed against the toll of leaving. One woman in the room pointed to the work of fellow women theologians as redeeming and the only reason she was able to remain in the church. Many in the room agreed they found themselves in similar positions. The session ended with an awareness of the ongoing problems but a sense of not being alone in the struggle, even finding life in the friendships we had as fellow theologians together in the struggle.

The session moved onto the presentation of the Ann O’Hara Graff Award. This year’s recipient is Cecilia Gonzalez-Andrieu. Layla Karst, Jennifer Owens-Jofre, and Susan Abraham spoke of the impact of Gonzalez-Andrieu on their scholarship and teaching but also on a wider scale, of her advocacy for women and people on the margins. In the acceptance of the award, Gonzalez-Andrieu paid tribute to her mentor Alejandro Garcia-Rivera. Over 40 people were in attendance.

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