

sense of shame and blame imposed on these persons, despite the fact that in many cases the obesity cannot be charged to the patient's own behavior.

Miller concluded his presentation by urging greater attention to the invisible and the too visible in an attempt to create a community of care "committed to the virtue of treating people with respect and fairness."

A lively discussion followed, focused on the difficulty of distinguishing difference from disability. While recognizing the dangers of the medical model, a number of those present reminded us that there are indeed real diseases and real handicaps that deserve treatment. Sometimes the judgment must be made that a handicap ought to be eliminated if possible. We were urged to critique approaches to ethics that make such recognition impossible.

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NORTH AMERICAN CONTEXTUAL THEOLOGIES

Topic: The History of the Symbolism of the Sacred Feminine
 Convener: Nancy Pineda-Madrid, St. Mary's College of California
 Presenter: Rosemary Radford Ruether, Graduate Theological Union

In her presentation, "Why Do Men Need the Goddess? Male Creation of Female Religious Symbols," Rosemary Radford Ruether presented a synopsis of her forthcoming book, *Goddesses and the Divine Feminine* (to be published by the University of California Press). Ruether challenged the widespread idea held by contemporary feminist scholars that female symbols of the divine in both Judaism and Christianity may be "seen as a 'remnant' of a prepatriarchal women-centered religion." In contrast, she posited the following thesis: "Gender hierarchy in patriarchal anthropology is a system of stratified relationships. The symbolism of masculine and feminine are two parts of one system. To make the feminine side of this system explicit in religious symbolism does not undermine, but empowers the masculine side, while restricting women." In support of this thesis, Ruether examined two versions of the heterosexual structure of the God-human love relationship. In the first version, God is constructed as male and humanity symbolized as female, and in the second, the divine is represented as female and humanity symbolized as male.

In her analysis of the first version, Ruether draws on the prophetic books of Hosea and Jeremiah and posits that these texts were not addressed to Hebrew women but were an account of how Hebrew males imagined that God would treat their waywardness. In similar fashion, the Song of Songs was read in such a way that male mystics, like Bernard of Clairvaux, imagined themselves as

females, whether as "blushing brides led to the marriage bed with their bridegroom Christ," or as mothers impregnated by Christ offering their breast milk to those in their care.

Moreover, argued Ruether, when God is imaged as female and humanity represented as male, as in the Wisdom literature of the Hebrew scriptures, then the contrast between "good" and "bad" women comes to the fore. Much of this literature (e.g. Proverbs) is misogynistic with women frequently "depicted as the dangerous adversaries of the sage's love of wisdom." Ruether further posited that in "Christianity a celibate spirituality made love of Wisdom or of Mary even more excluding of actual women." In the case of Mary, the "ideal" of virgin mother was set up "against all real women" to further "a repressive purity and submissiveness." The presentation offered additional evidence with an analysis of God imaged as "Lady Love" in the writings of the Beguine mystic, Hade-wijch, and those of the 17th century Lutheran mystic, Jacob Boehme. Similarly, the Sophia spirituality of Protestant mystical millennialism promoted the adoption of celibacy. This was reinforced by "the love of Sophia [which] was seen as preserving the aspirant male soul from falling into the arms of carnal women."

Contrary to widespread claims, historical evidence suggests that "[f]emale symbols in Christianity, whether for Mary, the soul, the church or Holy Wisdom, have mostly been constructed by men in ways that empower themselves, often at the expense of women."

Ruether concluded her presentation with the proposal that feminist theologians (and other feminist scholars) must face the substantive task of creating "a truly nonsexist symbol system that no longer values one gender against another, or sets the masculine and the feminine as "complementary" opposites . . . Rather the whole system needs to be symbolically (and socially) reconstructed."

In the subsequent discussion several themes emerged. First, while we need to acknowledge the thirst of modern Christian women for female symbols of the divine, a distinction must be made between deep faith in a liberative vision of God, and what historical evidence suggests. A matriarchal myth may be useful, perhaps necessary and valid, but should not be read into history with scant attention to evidence. How might feminist theologians excavate history responsibly in the development of their work? Second, in light of male hierarchical views of the divine that split the divine from earth and from nature, what are the current streams within feminist theology and thought that bridge this destructive divide? How do recent developments in ecofeminism address this? Third, given contemporary, widespread "high Mariologies" (that are misogynistic), how might we develop a body of feminist readings in Mariology and thereby liberate Mary?

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