

RESURRECTION OF THE BODY IN FEMINIST THEOLOGY

Topic: Two Feminist Proposals Concerning the Resurrection of the Body
Convener: Nancy Pineda-Madrid, Boston College
Presenters: Rosemary Radford Ruether, Graduate Theological Union
Elizabeth A. Johnson, Fordham University

This session offered an engaging presentation of two feminist proposals, which revealed the complexities involved in feminist reconstructions of the resurrection of the body.

In her presentation, "The Resurrection of the Body: What Can We Believe?" Rosemary Radford Ruether argued that the "great matrix of matter/energy which is the foundation of our personal body/self is also the foundation of the body/self of the universe. This great communal Person is the Holy Being into whom our individual achievements and failures are gathered up, assimilated into the fabric of the universe and carried forward to new possibilities." She developed her argument drawing on process theology, contemporary physics, and the insights of Gregory Nazianzus.

Ruether situated her remarks in her lifelong critique of dualisms. She put forward a "holistic view of the human person" which entails a nonnegotiable understanding of human persons as "body/soul wholes." Such an understanding means that eschatology "must include the whole self, hence the body."

From contemporary physics and ecology, we come to appreciate, claims Ruether, "the miracle of continually recycled organic life, aiding its natural processes of disintegration and reintegration. This is truly the resurrection of the body as an everyday miracle." It is this miracle of organic renewal that is "the root of the religious concept of resurrection of the body."

Ruether called into question the idea of personal immortality claiming that it was created "by the effort to absolutize the personal or individual ego/organism as itself everlasting, rather than the total community of being." Our insistence on a personal or individual ego as everlasting is but another expression of our misguided endeavor "to split inner self from body, mind from matter, rather than recognizing this vast matrix of matter/energy, rooted in divine being, as itself alive, the ground of personhood and body as one." For in death the "component parts" that come together "to make up individuated self/organism are not lost [but rather] they change their form, they become food for new beings to rise from out composted bodies."

At the end of her presentation Ruether concluded, "So perhaps for us the resurrection of the body as new vegetation from composed soil might be the natural sacrament of a deeper transformation to which we point, but whose reality lies in the hands of God from whom all things came and are renewed."

In her presentation, "Resurrection of the Body in Feminist Theology: Debate with Rosemary Radford Ruether," Elizabeth Johnson observes that the "critique of dualism and passion for justice may also lead down a different path, toward

affirming 'eternal life' or the resurrection of the body for individual persons and the universe itself." For Johnson this path is found in what we believe about God because "[q]uestions about death and life 'after' death are ultimately questions about God." Whatever can be said about life "after" death is essentially an "interpretation of the faithful and powerful love of God in whose presence even death is a creature." Therefore, her claims are based on the "typical ways of divine acting: creating, redeeming, and making holy the world." She extends what we know of God into the future with trust that God will "be acting there in typical fashion." Therefore, "the future will not be reabsorption for us creatures, but resurrection, to practical and critical effect."

Johnson supports her assertion by noting that the "creating work of the Spirit of God results in ever more diverse forms of being, sustained by divine relationship," and more specifically, in the case of the death of human persons, "the same Creator Spirit creatively preserves each person's distinctiveness in a communion of life, so that not one gets lost." Moreover, the redeeming work of the Spirit, "who raised Jesus from the dead grounds hope that what ultimately awaits is not annihilation but new, transformed life." Finally, drawing on Rahner's axiom "Nearness to God, and genuine human autonomy, increase in direct and not inverse proportion," Johnson posits that "if this is the effect of relationship to God in life, it is fitting to hope that the Spirit can preserve persons in their own uniqueness in and through death in order to make possible a new and eternal communion."

Johnson further suggests that liberation theologies of the third world have demonstrated that eschatological hope can be a "critical and creative force in society." Poor women of the third world have articulated, in their feminist liberation theologies, "that hope for life with God after death for human persons and the whole earth not only does not cut the moral nerve for action on behalf of justice but actually sustains it, especially in violent situations."

Johnson concluded her presentation with the proposal that "the focus of our hope needs to be on bringing about the reign of God in peace, justice, and the integrity of creation on this earth here and now. . . . the goal of justice is better served through combining historical with transcendent hope." A rich discussion followed their presentations.

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