religions

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Encountering the Divine, Resisting Patriarchy: Rosemary Radford Ruether's Prophetic Catholicism

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Abstract: While Rosemary Radford Ruether is widely, and rightly, acknowledged as a prophetic Catholic scholar–activist, her interest in and experience of mysticism is rarely emphasized. However, Ruether had an impactful mystical experience as a young woman, and the themes of this experience echo throughout her body of work. This paper paints a portrait of Ruether as both a profoundly prophetic scholar–activist and a spiritually attuned seeker of the very divinity that she encountered in her twenties. In the process, this paper first offers a democratized and demystified vision of mysticism by drawing on the work of Bernard McGinn, Dorothee Söelle, and Jess Byron Hollenback. Next, it offers a biographical sketch of Ruether, contextualizing her early mystical experience within the broader pattern of her spiritual and intellectual path. It interprets Ruether's mystical experience, through which she encountered the divine as a feminine presence suffusing creation, as a meaningful source of inspiration for her decades-long commitment to an anti-patriarchal, ecofeminist theology.

Keywords: Rosemary Radford Ruether; mysticism; feminist theology; ecofeminist theology; Catholic; prophetic

Citation: Robinson, Jim. 2023. Encountering the Divine, Resisting Patriarchy: Rosemary Radford Ruether's Prophetic Catholicism. *Religions* 14: 1230. https://doi.org/10.3390/rel14101230

Academic Editor: Cristobal Serran-Pagan Y Fuentes

Received: 1 September 2023
Revised: 17 September 2023
Accepted: 19 September 2023
Published: 25 September 2023

1. Introduction

Rosemary Radford Ruether is widely acknowledged as a deeply generative and powerfully prophetic Catholic theologian. In a *New York Times* article published shortly after her death on 21 May 2022, Clay Risen refers to Ruether as "a pioneering theologian who brought feminist, antiracist and environmental perspectives to bear on the traditional teachings of the Roman Catholic Church" (Risen 2022). Through her voluminous scholarship, Ruether has articulated a critical analysis of the "systems of domination" that shape our unjust and unsustainable status quo, lending laser-sharp attention to the ways in which aspects of her own Christian tradition have been appropriated to solidify, sanction, and even sacralize this status quo.[1] Ruether has simultaneously highlighted the prophetic potential embedded in the Christian tradition, and the capacity for Christianity to serve as a liberating, life-giving, and transformative force.[2] For Ruether, the "prophetic-liberating tradition", by which people of faith critique, renew, and reimagine the existing religious and social order, is "central" to the biblical tradition (Ruether 1993b, pp. 23–24).[3] In alignment with this tradition, Ruether's work consistently emerged from and contributed to scholarly movements promoting theological renewal, as well as activist movements enfleshing social justice and ecological flourishing. True to her feminist[4] commitments, Ruether's written work was inextricable from an expansive relational web, consisting of persons and communities seeking to transform the world (Ruether 1993b, p. vii).[5] With this in mind, Gary Dorrien refers to Ruether as the "epitome of a scholar-activist" (Dorrien 2006, p. 187). For Dorrien, every book that Ruether produced "had a community behind it", because she "forged friendships with activists in various fields and wrote books out of her activist commitments" (Dorrien 2006, p. 187).

While Ruether's legacy as a prophetic scholar–activist has been solidly acknowledged, her interest in and experience of mysticism is rarely emphasized. However, she devoted portions of her corpus to exploring historical mystics and mysticism (Ruether 2002), and she

had her own transformative mystical experience as a young woman (Ruether 2013, p. 18). The key themes of this experience reverberate throughout her body of work. This paper paints a portrait of Ruether as both a prophetic scholar–activist and a spiritually attuned seeker of the very divinity that she powerfully encountered through a mystical experience as a young woman. First, this paper offers a demystified and democratized vision of mysticism and its transformative impacts in conversation with Bernard McGinn, Dorothee Söelle, and Jess Byron Hollenback. Next, it offers a biographical sketch of Ruether, situating her early mystical experience within the larger fabric of her spiritual and intellectual journey. It then traces the link between Ruether's mystical experience, in which she encountered the divine as a feminine presence permeating creation, and her decades-long commitment to an anti-patriarchal, ecofeminist theology. It argues that Ruether's early mystical experience can and should be viewed as a significant spark of inspiration in the vibrant fire of her life's work as a justice-oriented scholar–activist.

2. Demystifying and Democratizing Mysticism and Mystical Experiences

Bernard McGinn notes that the term "mysticism" is a relatively recent one. It first appeared in the seventeenth century, and it did not blossom into popular use until the nineteenth century (McGinn 2006, p. xiv). The adjective "mystical", a Greek word which translates to "hidden", has been widely employed by Christians since the late second century, at least (McGinn 2006, p. xiv). McGinn specifically defines Christian mysticism as the particular arena of Christian life "that concerns the preparation for, the consciousness of, and the effect of what the mystics themselves have described as a direct and transformative presence of God" (McGinn 2006, p. xiv). He highlights the transformational impact of mystical experiences, observing that the mystic's "encounter with God transforms their minds and their lives" (McGinn 2006, p. xvii). For McGinn, Christian mysticism entails the opening to, the experience of, and the impact of a fundamentally transformative encounter with God. This encounter significantly changes the life of the mystic, inspiring them to encourage others to "open themselves to a similar process of transformation" (McGinn 2006, p. xvii).

Dorothee Söelle similarly emphasizes the deeply transformative impact of mystical experiences, while also explicitly attempting to "democratize mysticism", to locate mystical experiences within a relational web, and to highlight the link between mystical experiences and active resistance to the status quo (Söelle 2001, p. 14). Söelle proposes that mystical experiences are accessible to all human beings, rather than merely being periodically gifted to the privileged few. She simultaneously expands the scope of mystical experience beyond the domain of the private interiority of the individual self, emphasizing the necessary enmeshment of personal mystical experiences within a broader sociopolitical fabric. In this regard, she aims to completely "erase the distinction between a mystical *internal* and a political *external*" (Söelle 2001, p. 3). Furthermore, Söelle senses a pattern of resistance exhibited by a wide range of mystics. Whether mystics engage in a prayerful withdrawal from mainstream existence or a spiritually charged confrontation with the status quo, they ultimately offer a "No! to the world as it exists now" (Söelle 2001, p. 3). The "normal world", which mystics stand in resistance to, is an order that is "founded on power, possession, and violence", and which therefore exists in striking dissonance with the tone of their own experiences of the divine (Söelle 2001, p. 198). For Söelle, genuine mystical intimacy with the divine must converge with an active, ethical commitment to the flourishing of others. For us to flourish together, the systems that structure our world must be dramatically transformed.

Synthesizing insights from McGinn and Söelle, we can identify mystical experiences as transformative in nature, democratically available to all, inextricable from a broader sociopolitical context, and capable of animating active resistance to the existing arrangement of our world. With these ideas in mind, it remains helpful and necessary to more thoroughly consider the elements that make a highly charged and transformative experience a specifically mystical experience. In an effort to do so, we will turn to the work of Jess Byron

Hollenback, who helpfully maps out the specific contours of mystical experiences across numerous religious traditions, highlighting seven key qualities that commonly surface in these experiences. He notes that, while some mystical experiences involve all seven of these features, others do not. Furthermore, Hollenback emphasizes that the specific expressions that these seven key features take vary significantly depending on the particular mystic, as well as their cultural context.

Most essentially, mystical experiences entail a kind of dilation of consciousness, which grants intimate access to invaluable religious insights. The first mark of such experiences is that they involve a "radical, trans-sensory metamorphosis of the subject's mode of consciousness" during their waking state (Hollenback 1996, p. 40). While the mystic retains waking awareness, they perceive "by means of some faculty other than the five physical senses" (Hollenback 1996, p. 43). Indeed, for Hollenback, the majority of mystical experiences appear to be "akin to hallucinatory phenomena" (Hollenback 1996, p. 43). Second, mystical experiences provide one with direct access to realities deemed the "ultimately real" by their own religious and cultural traditions (Hollenback 1996, p. 40). For instance, in a Christian context, a mystic might suddenly plunge into an experiential encounter with Jesus, the Holy Spirit, the Godhead, or the presence of Sophia shining through creation.

Mystical experiences tend to be illuminating (often literally), shedding light on profoundly significant spiritual truths that stimulate highly charged affective responses. The third facet of mystical experiences that Hollenback highlights is that they provide knowledge about realities that are of the "utmost importance for human salvation" (Hollenback 1996, p. 40). They disclose significant and saving truths. In this respect, mystical experiences commonly elicit a "response" that involves "all of one's being" (Hollenback 1996, p. 40). Naturally, an experience that activates such a response is brimming with a surplus of emotion. This, for Hollenback, is the fourth key characteristic of mystical experiences. They are "heavily laden with affect" (Hollenback 1996, p. 41). Fifth, mystical experiences tend to bring about an "illumination that is both literal and metaphorical" (Hollenback 1996, p. 41). What once was hidden is suddenly revealed, as if some mysterious source of light had suddenly flooded a previously darkened room, illuminating its contents.

While mystical experiences are "fundamentally amorphous" and "historically conditioned", they generally emerge from what Hollenback terms the "recollective act" (Hollenback 1996, p. 41). The content of specific mystical experiences is amorphous in that this content does not conform, universally, to a predetermined pattern. Mystical experiences are, in fact, inextricable from and informed by the specific historical and religious contexts in which the mystic is situated. Hollenback observes that the specific details of various mystical experiences across religious traditions differ significantly, such that Inuit shamans have markedly different mystical experiences than Christian mystics (Hollenback 1996, p. 75). Finally, despite the vast variety of shapes that mystical experiences take, they usually unfold through the act of recollection. Recollection, for Hollenback, refers to the concentered and single-pointed focusing of the fullness of one's being (Hollenback 1996, p. 94). Mysticism emerges, in this regard, from concentrated attentiveness, which allows for a deepening immersion in an experiential realm that might otherwise be clouded over by distracted forms of thinking, acting, or feeling.

Rosemary Radford Ruether had one such mystical experience in her twenties. As we will see, the content of her experience resonates with aspects of mysticism highlighted by McGinn, Söelle, and Hollenback. Ruether's mystical experience, like all mystical experiences, is inextricable from her larger life. In her description of her experience, she is sensitive to the influence of her upbringing on the tone and textures of her vision. Furthermore, the impact of this mystical experience can be sensed in Ruether's life and writing as it continued to unfold through and beyond her twenties. The impact can be sensed in her deeply prophetic resistance to the status quo, which emerges throughout her scholarship and activism. For Söelle, this is the hallmark of an authentic mystical experience: it enkindles a "No! to the world as it exists now" (Söelle 2001, p. 3).

3. Journeying into Justice: The Life and Legacy of Rosemary Radford Ruether

Rosemary Radford Ruether understood her scholarly path to resemble the pattern of a spiral. "I sometimes describe my intellectual journey as spiraling," she writes, "rather than changing from one perspective and topic of concern to another" (Ruether 2006, p. 280). In her dozens of books and hundreds of articles, Ruether addressed a wide variety of topics, from ecclesiology to ecology, from feminist theology to Latin American liberation theology, from Black theology to Buddhist–Christian dialogue (Ruether 2006, p. 280). For Ruether, this is absolutely not a scattered galaxy of issues. Instead, these particular issues are "deeply interconnected", and "most of them have been present in my thinking since the early 1970's" (Ruether 2006, p. 280).

Ruether's spiraling scholarship is inextricable from the concrete contours of personal experience, and she has long been convinced of the central significance of experience to theological production. In a letter sent to Thomas Merton in February of 1967, Ruether writes, "I distrust all academic theology", asserting that "only theology bred in the crucible of experience is any good" (Ruether 1995, p. 25).[6] In *Sexism and God-Talk: Toward a Feminist Theology*, Ruether identifies experience as the "base of all theological reflection", whether or not this is consciously acknowledged (Ruether 1993b, p. 12). Mary E. Hunt describes Ruether's theological production as being both "intellectually rigorous and grounded in daily experiences" (Hunt 2014). As Hunt has it, Ruether's theology is "as much about the ozone layer as about her garden" (Hunt 2014). Ruether's theology is inseparable from her life story, and from the particular assemblage of experiences that shaped her, including her mystical experience.

Born in 1936, in St. Paul, Minnesota, and raised in Washington D.C. and La Jolla, California, Ruether was brought up in an atmosphere of religious diversity, in which she sensed that "a multiplicity of perspectives living together has always seemed normal" (Ruether 1992, p. 10). Ruether's mother, Rebecca, was Catholic, and her father, Robert, was Episcopalian; her extended family included her Jewish uncle, David, as well as Unitarians, Quakers, and Russian Orthodox Christians (Ruether 1992, p. 10). As a young woman, she embraced the perspective that "Going to Mass was the usual way I could encounter God, but an Episcopal or Russian Orthodox liturgy, a synagogue service or a Quaker meeting, were places where the same God could also be found" (Ruether 2013, p. 37). Ruether would, throughout her life, "remain a Catholic as an ecumenical and interfaith Christian" (Ruether 2013, p. 65).

The women in Ruether's life had particularly powerful impacts on her spiritual and intellectual journey. Ruether was formed "in a series of matricentric enclaves led by intelligent, articulate, and self-confident women", both within and beyond her own home (Ruether 2013, p. 1). Ruether's mother had an especially significant impact, leading her to declare that "in the nurturing of my faith and spiritual life I can think of only one important person: Rebecca Cresap Ord Radford, my mother" (Ruether 1993a, p. 164). Ruether's mother modeled a way of being rooted in the Catholic tradition and equally open to ongoing intellectual inquiry and spiritual seeking. She embodied a "lucid balance of serious spirituality and intellectual freedom" (Ruether 1993a, p. 164). Ruether attended Catholic mass with her mother while also occasionally attending Quaker meetings with one of her mother's friends, who brought her to marches in solidarity with the United Farm Workers, as well as pacifist rallies (Ruether 2006, p. 281). These experiences enabled Ruether to realize "that one can connect with several religious traditions at the same time without choosing between them" as well as that one "should relate religion to peace and social justice" (Ruether 2006, p. 281). In addition, Ruether was significantly empowered by the atmosphere of her Catholic grade school and high school, which she remembers as an "all-female world of nuns and girls" (Ruether 2013, p. 4). As a student, the nuns of the Sisters of Providence encouraged her intellectual pursuits, and later in her career, Ruether delivered a speech at the order's motherhouse in Indiana, which had been transformed into an "ecojustice center" (Ruether 2013, p. 5).

After high school, Ruether went on to study at Scripps College, in Claremont, CA (Ruether 2013, p. 7). She married her husband, Herman, during her senior year, and gave birth to her first of three children soon after graduating (Ruether 2013, p. 2). By 1965, Ruether had received her M.A. in Roman History and her Ph.D. in Classics and Patristics from Claremont Graduate School (Ruether 2013, p. 9). That summer, Ruether entered into an embodied involvement in the Civil Rights movement, traveling to the headquarters of the Delta Ministry in Beulah, Mississippi, where she volunteered with Head Start (Ruether 2008, pp. 21–22). Her experience in Mississippi was "dangerous and frightening" (Ruether 2008, p. 22). She recalls one night during which hooded members of the Ku Klux Klan drove through campus, shooting through the windows of the buildings (Ruether 2008, p. 22). Reflecting on her experience, Ruether writes, "That summer, social justice permanently entered my thinking and life" (Ruether 2008, p. 22). It was, for Ruether, a "crucial turning point in my social consciousness" (Ruether 2006, p. 282).

When the summer ended, Ruether and her family moved to Washington D.C., where she taught at Howard, a historically Black university, through 1976 (Ruether 2013, p. 15). Her experiences in the summer of 1965, as well as her experiences at Howard, molded her "praxis/thought in its formative stage in the context of the African American struggle" (Ruether 2012, p. 186). While teaching at Howard, Ruether became deeply involved in a social justice-oriented Episcopalian parish in Washington, DC.[7] Ruether's children "grew up on" protest marches, which frequently "flowed out of the church we had joined" (Ruether 2013, p. 16). Through her scholarship and teaching at Howard, and through her involvement at St. Stephen and the Incarnation, Ruether became immersed in the theory and praxis of radical Christianity. As Mary Joanne Henold puts it, "in the sixties, Ruether became deeply involved in the civil rights and peace movements as well as the Catholic left" and that "while pursuing her academic career as a theologian, and raising her children in a racially integrated Washington neighborhood, she could frequently be found at demonstrations, on picket lines, and occasionally in jail" (Henold 2008, pp. 39–40).

In the late 1960's, Ruether's feminist consciousness was activated, and she began to connect feminist insights with theological reflection (Ruether 2013, p. 17). During this time, she was questioning the existence of God "in the sense of a male person outside and ruling over the universe" (Ruether 2013, p. 18). Amidst this questioning, Ruether "had a vivid experience, something like a dream or visual hallucination", in which she found herself in the "great hall of a huge fortress". (Ruether 2013, p. 18). The long hallway led to a staircase, which she climbed. Finally, after numerous levels of stars, she arrived at the top level and stood before a door. She was struck by the sense that, behind this door, was God's throne room. With a feeling of "excitement" and "nervousness", Ruether opened the door (Ruether 2013, p. 18). She beheld a throne room, but the throne itself was empty. She recognized, in that instant, that there simply was no solitary God inhabiting a throne at the apex of a pyramid of power. As the absence of this deity impressed itself upon her, the presence of a strikingly different divinity emerged. She experienced this God as a "great nurturing and empowering energy that existed in and through all things, sustaining and renewing them" (Ruether 2013, p. 18). Despite the fact that this divine presence was not merely "anthropomorphic", she found this presence to be "more maternal than paternal" (Ruether 2013, p. 18). From this moment forward, the "Great Mother" became Ruether's "operative understanding of the divine" (Ruether 2013, p. 18). Tracing the link between this vivid experience and her own upbringing, Ruether writes, "The matrix of mothers who had nurtured and empowered me as I grew up" served as the "experiential base for this vision of the Great Mother" (Ruether 2013, p. 18).

In accordance with McGinn's understanding of Christian mysticism, Ruether's revelation of the "Great Mother" served as a deeply transformative encounter with God. In alignment with Söelle's vision, the specific content of this experience is inextricable from Ruether's broader relational web, including the inspirational and empowering women in her life. Furthermore, the impact of the experience can be sensed in Ruether's ongoing resistance to patriarchal religion and culture through her scholarship and activism. The

experience unfolded during a waking state, though the content of the experience was, as Hollenback notes of many mystical experiences, "akin to hallucinatory phenomena" (Hollenback 1996, p. 43). In Ruether's words, her experience was "something like a dream or visual hallucination" (Ruether 2013, p. 18). Ruether's experience involved an illumination of the "ultimately real", to use Hollenback's language, and this particular illumination simultaneously subverted the patriarchal mirage proffered by the mainstream (Hollenback 1996, p. 40). Based on Ruether's description, the experience was charged with affect, and it offered life-giving, liberating, and ultimately salvific insights, as it amounted to the melting of a patriarchal idol and the encounter with a "nurturing and empowering" divine presence (Ruether 2013, p. 18). In Ruether's description, she gave herself over whole-heartedly to the experience, entering into its frame and steeping herself in its power.

The seeds planted by this experience can be sensed in Ruether's blossoming scholarship, which she devoted to prophetically resisting systems of injustice, including the system of patriarchy, while constructively articulating feminist and ecofeminist alternatives. Ruether wrote "Male Chauvinist Theology and the Anger of Women", her first talk on feminist theology, in 1968, and she delivered it in numerous seminaries and churches before publishing it in 1971 (Ruether 2008, p. 30). Her concern for ecology developed soon after. Early on in her career, she "sought to connect ecology and feminism, both in recognition of the way the domination of the earth is metaphorically interconnected with the domination of women in patriarchal ideology, and also to reveal how women's use and abuse in society interfaces with the abuse of nature" (Ruether 2013, p. 27). Ruether continued to clarify and enflesh these ecofeminist commitments in scholarship and activism when, after teaching for over a decade at Howard, she was appointed to the Georgia Harkness Chair in Applied Theology at Garrett-Evangelical Theological Seminary (Ruether 2013, p. 24). Ruether officially retired from Garrett in 2002 (Ruether 2017, p. vii). She then taught for a number of years at the Graduate Theological Union in Berkeley, California, before spiraling back to Claremont School of Theology and Claremont Graduate University, where she had done her own doctoral work (Ruether 2017, p. vii).

Ruether died on 21 May 2022. Her death, like all deaths, is not an end. Instead, it is akin to a supernova. Ruether had scattered the insights generated within her core far and wide, and these insights—like elements generated within a star—serve as the building blocks for novel expressions of theology and activism that continue to be developed in the present. In "The Chispa Carrier: Rosemary Radford Ruether", Renny Golden observes that the "rising of women/is what she wrote for, the fire she lit again and again" and that "We are her legacy/a choir of wild women intoning a Magnificat" (Golden 2011).

4. Ruether's Anti-Patriarchal, Ecofeminist Theology

Ruether articulated and employed a theological method that is firmly grounded in the soil of human experience. For Ruether, scripture and tradition, which are often understood to be the "objective sources of theology", are "themselves codified collective human experience" (Ruether 1993b, p. 12). Scripture and tradition crystalize past experiences, transmitting them into the present. From Ruether's perspective, "every great religious idea begins in the revelatory experience" (Ruether 1993b, p. 13). A "revelatory experience", in Ruether's description, is effectively a mystical experience. It amounts to a profound "breakthrough" that transcends "ordinary fragmented consciousness", offering "interpretive symbols illuminating the means of the *whole* of life" (Ruether 1993b, p. 13). One can sense, in this description, echoes of Ruether's own mystical experience, which led her to recognize the unreality of a patriarchal deity elevated above creation and to experience, instead, a divine force permeating every element of reality. Following the experience, the symbol of the "Great Mother" became Ruether's "operative understanding of the divine" (Ruether 2013, p. 18). If all theology emerges from experience, and if religious ideas can be traced to revelatory experiences, it is only natural to suggest the Ruether's own mystical experience contributed a meaningful charge to her own constructive work in feminist and ecofeminist theology.

Ruether's sense of the centrality of experience can be traced, at least partially, to an insight from the classist Robert Palmer, with whom she studied as an undergraduate at Scripps. Robert Palmer's "favorite formula" regarding the origins of religious traditions, which he learned from Walter Otto, was "First the god, then the dance, and finally the story" (Ruether 1982, p. 26). Convinced of the validity of this formula, Ruether believed that "religion begins in theophany" (Ruether 2013, p. 91). While religious insights emerge from an encounter with divinity, the vital energy released by these insights can become warped and corrupted by institutions over time. "The encounter" with the divine, "must be spelled out, danced out, worked out in culture in order to realize its full implications, but then these cultural structures take over and choke off access to the reality that they are supposed to mediate" (Ruether 1966, p. 52). While Ruether's own theophany placed her into intimate contact with a feminine expression of the divine, it simultaneously marked a decisive decentering of the patriarchal image of God, which has ossified over the course of centuries. Ruether acted, throughout her career, to deconstruct this patriarchal deity, and to articulate an alternative theological vision.

Ruether argued that patriarchy is, without question, the cultural milieu undergirding and encompassing both the Hebrew Scriptures and the New Testament (Ruether 1993b, p. 22). Patriarchy has, therefore, "been incorporated into religious ideology on many levels" (Ruether 1993b, p. 22). In this respect, aspects of the Bible reflect the patriarchal culture in which it was composed, and these aspects can be—and have been—appropriated in order to bolster sexist interpersonal relationships and social systems, including in ecclesial arrangements. For Ruether, the myriad manifestations of patriarchal ideology within the Bible are not to be "cleaned up or explained away", but rather recognized, critically grappled with, and ultimately "denounced" (Ruether 1993b, p. 23). In Ruether's understanding, the Bible simultaneously contains generative resources that can be employed in order to deconstruct and dismantle patriarchy, while inspiring the development of more just and sustainable patterns of being in its ruins. The Bible contains not only fodder for the "religious sanctification of patriarchy" but also "resources for the critique of patriarchy" (Ruether 1993b, p. 22). Ruether retrieved and recentered these resources in fleshing out her feminist and ecofeminist theology.

As early as 1972, in "Motherearth and the Megamachine: A Theology of Liberation in a Feminine, Somatic and Ecological Perspective" Ruether began to articulate what scholars would now identify as an ecofeminist theology, two years before the term "ecofeminist" was even coined.[8] This groundbreaking essay attends to the interlacing subjugation of women and the natural world, while holistically envisioning constructive alternatives to this two-fold domination. For Ruether, patriarchal cultures emanate from and reify a "one-sided expression of the ego claiming its transcendental autonomy by negating the finite matrix of existence"(Ruether 1972, p. 122). Patriarchal systems sanction and sacralize this negation, associating women and other oppressed groups with the material realm which is to be transcended and controlled. An "exclusively male God", who transcends and acts upon this material realm from afar, amounts to the "theological self-image and guilty conscience of this self-infinitizing spirit" (Ruether 1972, p. 122). This whole system, for Ruether, must be recognized, resisted, and radically transformed. This will require a "total abolition of the social pattern of domination and subjugation", and the development of an alternative ethos, alternative practices, and alternative structural conditions (Ruether 1972, p. 124). Such total transformation must emerge through concrete, grassroots efforts, which will feed into broader shifts that will ultimately radiate out as a "global struggle to overthrow and transform the character of power structures" (Ruether 1972, p. 125). In the process, human beings and human communities must exchange their intentions and weapons of domination and violence for a willingness to skillfully "cultivate the garden", by sensitively linking the "powers of rational consciousness" with "the harmonies of nature in partnership" (Ruether 1972, p. 125).

Throughout her career, Ruether offered similarly sharp critiques of patriarchal systems and the ideologies which undergird and sanction them, including the rendering of God

as a solitary male deity hovering above creation. In the process, she constructed and promoted ecofeminist alternatives. Her constructive theological vision aligns closely with the content of the mystical experience that she had in her twenties. For instance, Ruether wrote in *Women and Redemption: A Theological History*, that God "is not a 'being' removed from creation, ruling it from outside in the manner of a patriarchal ruler" (Ruether 2012, p. 187). This image of God is, after all, the very image that melted in the course of her mystical experience. Instead, "God is the source of being that underlies creation and grounds its nature and future potential for continual transformative renewal in biophilic mutuality" (Ruether 2012, p. 187). In *Sexism and God-Talk: Toward a Feminist Theology*, Ruether referred to this divinity as "God/ess", the sacred being who does not sanction the "existing hierarchical social order", but who instead "liberates us from it", calling us into a "new community of equals" (Ruether 1993b, p. 69).[9]

5. Conclusions

Rosemary Radford Ruether is rightly recognized as a prophetic scholar–activist, who devoted her energies to confronting and transforming ideologies, relationships, and systems marked by domination, including the system of patriarchy. She should also be recognized as a spiritually attuned seeker of the divine, whose prophetic work is inextricable from her spiraling constellation of experiences, including her mystical encounter with the divine as a young woman. Much of Ruether's theology flowed in close continuity with this mystical experience, during which the radical absence of an enthroned patriarch ruling over creation opened a space for her to encounter an intimately present and liberating divinity. Throughout her career, Ruether expanded upon this essential dynamic. She deconstructed the idol of patriarchy while actively constructing an alternative theological, social, and ecological vision aimed at animating a more just and sustainable world. Ruether's *Sexism and God-Talk* ends with the following prayerful affirmation: "The Shalom of the Holy; the disclosure of the gracious *Shekinah;* Divine Wisdom; the empowering Matrix; She, in whom we live and move and have our being—She comes; She is here" (Ruether 1993b, p. 266). Ruether encountered this divine presence through her transformative mystical experience, and her ongoing faith in this divinity can be sensed in her efforts to envision and enflesh an alternative, ecofeminist, future.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

Notes

1 See (Ruether 1992). Ruether observes that "we inherit not only a legacy of systems of domination, but also cultures that teach us to see such relations as the 'natural order' and as the will of God" (p. 3).

2 See (Ruether 1993b). Ruether argues that "Prophetic faith denounces religious ideologies and systems that function to justify and sanctify the dominant, unjust social order" (p. 24).

3 For a critical assessment of Ruether's turn to the prophetic tradition, see the work of feminist theologian and biblical scholar Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza. See, for instance, (Fiorenza 1994). Fiorenza proposes that Ruether constructs a "rather idealized picture of the biblical and prophetic traditions" without adequately accounting for their own "oppressive androcentric elements" (p. 17).

4 See (Hill Fletcher 2013). Hill Fletcher articulates a feminist theological anthropology, arguing that "We are fundamentally relational, we exercise creativity under constraint as embedded and embodied beings within this relational nexus, and we have the capacity to think ourselves forward or to know ourselves into interbeing in community with others" (p. 209).

5 In order to appreciate the rootedness of Ruether's scholarship in concrete communities, one might review the "Acknowledgments" of *Sexism and God-Talk.* Ruether notes that she composed portions of the text while living at Grailville, in Loveland, Ohio (vii). Ruether thanks the community for their hospitality, and she thanks the "community of women" living there, "who read and responded to" her manuscript (vii). For an analysis of the feminist commitments of the Grail, see (Kalven 1989). The Grail is an international movement that is grounded in the Christian tradition, led by women, animated by feminist convictions, and committed to justice (p. 120).

[6] Rosemary Radford Ruether to Thomas Merton, Mid-February 1967, in (Ruether 1995, p. 25). For additional reflections on Ruether's theology, all of which specifically attend to Merton and Ruether's exchange, please see the following additional works by this author. See (Robinson 2020). Also see (Robinson 2021, pp. 120–28). Also see (Robinson 2023).

[7] See (Ruether 1967). Ruether describes St. Stephen and the Incarnation as an ecumenical Episcopal church, with a significant number of Roman Catholic parishoners, and with ministers coming from a number of denominations, including the Presbyterian Church and the Baptist Church (p. 153).

[8] See (Ruether 2007, p. 77). The concept of ecofeminism was initially developed by Françoise d'Eaubonne, who founded the "Ecologie-Féminisme" group in 1972, and who used the term "ecofeminism" in her 1974 book *Le Féminisme ou la mort* ("Feminism or Death") (p. 77).

[9] Ruether emphasizes that the symbol "God/ess" is intended to bring together feminine and masculine forms of God-talk, while preserving a monotheistic vision (p. 46). Though this symbol, like all symbols, is ultimately provisional and "inadequate", it aims to gesture toward an "unnameable understanding of the divine that would transcend patriarchal limitations and signal redemptive experience for women as well as men" (p. 46).

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