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The thesis of Katherine K. Beyer entitled

Rosemary Radford Ruether's Ecofeminist Eschatology:

Where Is Heaven?

submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Bachelor of Arts in Liberal Studies in the School for Summer and Continuing Education of Georgetown University has been read and approved.

[Signatures]

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Date

April 14, 1994
Rosemary Radford Ruether's Ecofeminist Eschatology:
Where Is Heaven?

A Thesis
submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the
degree of
Bachelor of Arts in Liberal Studies

By

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Georgetown University
Washington, DC
April 19, 1994
Abstract

This thesis discusses Rosemary Radford Ruether's ecofeminist theology and, primarily, her eschatology. Eschatology is defined as the construct of "last things" within theology. A brief overview of Ruether's life is given in order to assess the impact that her personal life has had on her theology. Further, the major themes within her ecofeminist theology are reviewed, such as her attack on the patriarchalization of religion, the misogynist views held against women, and the human domination of the earth.

Within the major body of the paper, three differing eschatological views are highlighted (Platonic, Jewish, and Christian). These eschatologies (in which Ruether finds the roots of escapism, as well as the negation of the natural cycle of life and death) are the primary ones with which Ruether dialogues within her own eschatology. She critiques these eschatologies thoroughly, and her views on the potential destructive tendencies of Platonic, Jewish and Christian eschatologies are reflected in this paper. After discussing her critiques of these eschatologies, an in depth look at Ruether's own eschatological constructs is given. Ruether does not truly construct a doctrine of last things within her theology. Rather, she avoids future paradise scenarios and immortality in favor of an emphasis on this-
worldly justice.

In the concluding sections of this thesis, Ruether's eschatology is critiqued on her relationship to her Christian identity, the viability of her eschatological views within this world, and the evaluation of the hope and justice provided within her ecofeminist eschatology. Within this evaluation, her theology is found to be different in significant ways from traditional Christian theology, especially in her lack of belief in resurrection and the existence of heaven. Her eschatology, however, is worthy of notice, especially in her admonishment that all people should work to end domination within the world. But her eschatological vision can be impractical when taking a hard look at the true nature of human limitation and its ability to serve justice. Her eschatology also fails to provide an outlet for the human need to harbor a transcendent imagination, in which consciousness can explore truth and justice which lies past empirical limitations. Finally, although her work is found to be thorough and note-worthy, Ruether's eschatological constructs leave a serious gap in explaining the nature of such ontological conditions as suffering and illness—conditions which often find their explanation within religion. Ruether erringly denies the necessity for humans to address these things.
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Introduction

This research project focuses on and integrates two main topics: eschatology and Rosemary Radford Ruether's ecofeminist theology. Because of Ruether's unique view of Christian theology, which she approaches from the vantage point of liberation theology, feminism, and ecology, she also constructs an eschatology that reflects her concerns with the fate of the oppressed—under whose auspices she includes women, minorities, the poor, Jews, and the earth, itself. I would like to dialogue with Ruether's eschatology, comparing it to more traditional Christian eschatology, as well as to dissect her historical arguments that lead to her own formulation of a non-traditional, earth-centered eschatology. In the process of pursuing a dialogue with Ruether's eschatology, I will discuss the meaning of the term "eschatology," briefly search into Ruether's own personal theological motivation, and touch on the major issues with which her ecofeminist theology concerns itself. Once Ruether's eschatology has been analyzed, I will discuss the human need for a working eschatology and finally evaluate Ruether's eschatological doctrines in the light of fulfilling these human needs as well as the need of fulfilling her own theological purposes. Most importantly, I will, given her basis as a Christian
theologian, evaluate her claims to Christian (Catholic) identity that is questionably and uniquely framed by her eschatological viewpoint.
What Is Eschatology?

Before I begin my evaluation of Ruether's theology, I believe it is important to discuss the term, "eschatology." Eschatology is a simple concept for a complex human response to the future. Webster's Unabridged Dictionary defines it thus:

1. a study or science dealing with the ultimate destiny or purpose of mankind and the world
2. ultimate destiny or purpose esp. according to Christian doctrine
3. a science that deals with or a doctrine or theory about things of final importance to mankind.1

In common parlance one speaks of eschatology as those ideas which deal with "end things." Two contemporary theologians, Susan Brooks Thistlethwaite and Mary Potter Engel, sum up Christian eschatology in this way,

Eschatology, the study of "the last things," usually and unsurprisingly comes last in traditional systematic theologies and includes extended discussions of death and resurrection, the last judgement and the end of earthly existence, damnation, and eternal life.2

Eschatology deals with the ramifications of human finitude and human questions about life and death. Eschatological theory gives meaning to the otherwise unknown part of the life process, that is, it answers the question, "What happens at the end?" Not all eschatologies explain "the end" in the same way or agree with each other. After discussing Ruether's life and feminist theology, I will return to the various constructs of eschatological thought.
About Rosemary Radford Ruether

Rosemary Radford Ruether is a feminist theologian whose work concerns itself with the quality of life on earth for all people and living things. Her mission to integrate humanity with the rest of the world is admirable, however, her work has clashed with conservative views. Accusations against Ruether's work as a feminist theologian are often espoused in conservative, evangelical theological circles. One such example of criticism admits that Ruether is, "perhaps the leading feminist theological writer in the United States today"1, but later assails her by claiming that, "Ruether and all those feminists who want to erase the distinction between God and his creation finally share with the most radical feminists, who have abandoned the Christian church and faith altogether ...."2 By her own admission, Ruether's childhood status and upbringing would not, from an outsider's point of view, lend itself particularly to any overly "liberal" or "radical" investigations into religion and life's meaning. She writes, "My excursions into historical research have always been related to questions of personal identity, as a Christian, a Roman Catholic, a

2. Ibid., 23.
woman, an American, white, educated, and 'middle class.'

How does a woman from such a "normal," comfortable background, take the leap into the controversial territory of human rights, feminism, and ecology--and, most unusually of all, attack these social problems from the venue of theology? The answer comes from the workings of Ruether's own mind which has the courage and stamina to ask the following question directly after admitting to being this "normal" Christian, Catholic, female, American, white, educated and middle class person: "What does it mean to be those things in a sexist world, an unjust world, a world shaped by religious and racial bigotry, in a church which has too often been on the 'wrong side'?"

Ruether's outward life's journey has been directed by the questions of her inward life's journey.

Ruether was brought up in a Catholic family, with a conservative father who fought in World War II and died at a young age during a trip overseas after the war. She says that her "very conservative father actually had relatively little influence on my personality. My identity was shaped by a much less conservative mother and a community of sisters who worked our development together after my

4. Ibid.
father's death in 1948 (when I was twelve)."5 She was brought up primarily under the guidance, caretaking and authority of women. Along with the influence of her mother and two older sisters, there was the constant support and companionship from her widowed mother's childhood (female) friends. Ruether writes, "I ... feel lucky that my mother and her generation of friends were a product of the old feminist movement of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries."6 Upon reflection of the societal and intellectual heritage she received from her mother and her friends, Ruether acknowledges,

I realize that the reason my own flight into critical freedom and growth always felt so natural, so inevitable, so firmly supported by the Ground of Being that upheld me, was because the real heritage upon which I drew was not the official patriarchal heritage, but the unofficial matriarchal one.7

This rather romantic view that Ruether holds of her upbringing can be explained by the fact that certainly it seems real enough to her (and highly influential as well.)

Ruether's early education was private and Catholic, but untypical of the stereotypical Catholic upbringing about which one hears many humorous remarks. About the education,

5. Ibid., 19.
6. Ibid., 22.
she writes,

My mother steered our upbringing in such a way that we tended not much to encounter the more parochial (and ethnic) versions of American Catholicism—a high-toned Jesuit parish which drew theologians from Georgetown University; the friendly private chapel of a nearby Carmelite community; a private rather than a parochial Catholic school; these were the memories of my childhood. The result was that my impression of Catholicism was of something with deep historical roots, both profound and meaningful in content, not something trite or vulgar.

Her higher education began with an undergraduate education at Scripp's College, a women's liberal arts college in California. She writes, "I start my discussion of my journey in faith there because those years of undergraduate education were for me, years of dramatic intellectual awakening." While an undergraduate she was able to compare and synthesize ancient Greek, early Christian, and medieval Christian thought. She relates,

The teacher most influential in my interest in religious studies was Robert Palmer. This might appear paradoxical, because he was also the most outspoken in his negative evaluation of Christianity ... It was from Palmer I discovered that a religious proposition, such as Christ's resurrection, is not primarily a doctrine demanding rational assent to a "fact" about something that

8. Ibid., 20.
9. Ibid., 17.
happened to someone else long ago, unrelated to myself. Rather it is a statement about something that could "happen to me;" about the renewal of my life.10

Ruether's Christianity became, not just the religion of her parents, but a religion that launched her own personal journey and dialogue in search of life's meaning and purpose. Not surprisingly her interest in eschatology revealed itself early in her education as the subject of her undergraduate thesis. "As an undergraduate I became curious to understand the development of the concept of afterlife in early Christianity. I worked this through in a B.A. thesis on the development of eschatology in the intertestamental Jewish apocalyptic literature."11 (With this thesis she was also able to address Jewish theological history, which was ignored at Scripps.) At the time of her graduation from Scripps, "Ruetherian" life-themes were already appearing which become important to her later work—a heritage of feminine influence, a strong Catholic/Christian identification, a broad and liberal higher education, and a clear leaning toward theological issues as a way to ascertain personal discovery and disseminate her social platforms.

After her undergraduate work, she married and juggled

10. Ibid., 25-26, 27.
11. Ibid., 45-46.
motherhood and wifehood along with the pursuit of a master's degree, a doctorate degree, teaching at Harvard and Howard Universities, and book publishing. This experience of being a working mother enhanced her awareness of feminist issues.

It exhausts me even now to think of the enormous energy I have had to put out in order to continue to be a creative thinker and writer, and yet maintain the minimum expectations of family life in our society. Although I might feel satisfaction in the fact that I have managed to be a winner in this difficult game, actually I experience the most acute sense of injustice.12

Not only does this quotation capture some of the personal side of Ruether's feminist leanings, but it also captures her sense of the impact that society has had on her struggle to be a woman within it. The sense of injustice is one addressed in her feminist theology in great detail, both from the vantage point of historical theological views and current theological thinking. Whereas Ruether's feminist theology has its roots in personal experience (both positive—from her mother, and negative—from society) it has its expression in societal, theological and historical critique.

12. Ibid., 116.
Rosemary Radford Ruether's Theology

Ruether's feminist theology has developed from a personal, a historical, and an ecumenically driven script. Her personal experiences and questions have guided her into theological exploration. Her depth of knowledge in the historical background of ancient civilizations of the Western world has moved her religious exploration beyond the Christian theological sphere. And her overwhelming critique of traditional and modern ecumenical wisdom has made her controversial.

Ruether's methodology for creating her feminist theology is quite untraditional. She incorporates many non-traditional sources into her arguments. In her book, Sexism and God-Talk, Ruether explores the basis for feminist theological thought by critically exploring traditional Christian systematic theology. As for her investigative sources for this inquiry, she explains,

I draw "usable tradition" from five areas of cultural tradition: (1) Scripture, both Hebrew and Christian (Old and New Testaments); (2) marginalized or "heretical" Christian traditions, such as Gnosticism, Montanism, Quakerism, Shakerism; (3) the primary theological theme of the dominant stream of classical Christian theology--Orthodox, Catholic, and Protestant; (4) non-Christian Near
Eastern and Greco-Roman religion and philosophy; and (5) critical post-Christian world views such as liberalism, romanticism, and Marxism. ... All these traditions are sexist.1

The use of heretical texts, Greco-Roman philosophical texts, or Marxist texts, in the pursuit of understanding Christian theology is highly unusual (and, I suspect, very unsettling for mainstream theologians). Ruether, as is her thematic tendency, refuses to reject rejected material, especially since her mission is to evaluate the status quo. In this regard she says, "The expansion of the range of the cultural contexts, the spread of a much more vast planetary and cosmic history, exploded the small world of parochial Christian theology with its defined parameters."2 Fellow feminist theologian, Susan Brooks Thistlethwaite, admires and defends Ruether's mission,

She is, after all, primarily a historian. She has examined three millennia of human history through a new interpretive lens. Sensitivity to gender issues has yielded genuine insights, but they are not insights unconnected to the multiple concrete ways of being human: to be a particular race, to be in a body and to occupy a place on a social and economic scale.3

2. Ibid., xix.
As Thistlethwaite points out, Ruether has a rigorous human and social conscience which permeates her work as a theologian. The social condition on earth is never far removed from the forefront of her thought. Ruether ties her social conscience into her theology in the following way:

The starting point for feminist theology, perhaps all theology, is cognitive dissonance. What is, is not what ought to be. Not only that, but what we have been told is, is not always what is, and what we have been told ought to be, is not always what ought to be. ... Our first stage of reflection is exploring this cognitive dissonance. From reflecting on it, we begin to shape an analysis of our social historical context and experience. We begin to identify what we characterize as "evil," or what should not be, by reference to affirmations of what is "good," or what should be. From this reflection we can move to the topics of human "nature." ... this reflection on what kind of beings we are, situated between aspiration and alienation, can shape our reflection about our relation to the community of beings around us, animals and plants, the earth and the galaxies.4

As is typical of Ruether, she descends agilely from theological heights into the realm of human fallibility, and further into the earthly process of nature. Her descent is theologically reflected when comparing her broad treatise of feminist theology within Sexism and God-Talk (1983) (speaking of "God/ess" and humanity) to her most recent

4. Ruether, Sexism, xviii.
book, *Gaia and God* (1992), which concentrates on combining feminism and ecology (speaking of humanity and earth), subject matter partly touched on in *Sexism and God-Talk*.

In broad strokes, Ruether's feminist theology centers around the patriarchalization of both Christianity and the society it was born into. Patriarchalization reverberates throughout the religion in the forms of sexist language (in the Bible and other church writings), oppression of female participation within the church(es), cults of female identity (for example, Eve—the seductress/sinner and Mary—the virgin/saint), and negative attitudes towards the "natural" and cyclical processes in which women participate (e.g., birth, menstruation, care-taking, and renewal). The theme of man's historical domination over the "natural" order of earth's cycles, as well as man's domination over women, is what most haunts Ruether. Thus we encounter Ruether's shift of concentration from singularly feminist theology into ecofeminist theology (*Gaia and God*).

Domination by man, under the auspices of divine mandate, over women, animals and earth, is the proverbial thorn in Ruether's side—a thorn that causes a nasty infection. She writes,

> If dominating and destructive relations to the earth are interrelated with gender, class, and racial domination,
then a healed relation to the earth cannot come about simply through technological "fixes." It demands a social reordering to bring about just and loving interrelationship between men and women, between races and nations, between groups presently stratified into social classes, manifest in great disparities of access to the means of life. In short, it demands that we must speak of eco-justice, and not simply of domination of the earth as though that happened unrelated to social domination.5

Where does Ruether's theology fit into this social and ecological scenario? Again domination plays the major theme as Ruether answers,

Classical Western cultural traditions, which were codified between 500 B.C.E. and 800 C.E., and of which Christianity is a major expression, have justified and sacralized these relationships of domination. Thus 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.6

Ruether argues that male domination, whether religious or secular, is leading us astray, away from peacefulness and into suffering and anxiety. She writes, whereas, "We do not need to and should not totalize negative judgement against past biblical and Christian cultures"7, we still "need a

6. Ibid., 3.
7. Ibid.
vision of a source of life that is 'yet more' than what presently exists, continually bringing forth both new life and new visions of how life should be more just and more caring."\textsuperscript{8} These "visions" that Ruether holds with utmost importance brings us into the realm of her eschatology, which is the major subject of this paper. In considering her eschatology, as well as the Greek, Hebrew, and Christian eschatologies with which she dialogues, I find that the notions of evil, sin, redemption and eschatology all bind themselves together into one story of the human condition. In the following three sections, I will discuss at length Ruether's basis for her "vision," which is developed by her critical analysis of patriarchal, Western tradition. Through analysis, we will find that Ruether's eschatological thought represents the very essence of her ecofeminist theology.

\textsuperscript{8} Ibid., 5.
Evil, Sin, and Suffering: The Precursor to Eschatology

It is difficult to discuss eschatology without back-tracking to discover the roots or the need for eschatological thought. Within my research I have found a direct corollary between eschatology and the theological view of the perplexing cycle of human life, what ails it, and the solution to suffering within the context of the finite human condition. As Ruether puts these ideas,

Fundamental to human experience is a basic sense that things are not as they should be. Self-consciousness allows humans to stand out from their environment and imagine better alternatives, in relation to which both the natural and human society are judged as lacking. It would be better not to be cold, hungry, in danger of injury and death from surrounding tribes or carnivorous animals, or subjected to strife within one's own community.1

In most religions, whether it be Christian, Jewish, Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist, or, for that matter, Greek philosophical thought, one can see a similar background belief system at work: Humankind is imperfect; life on this earth is finite; life brings struggle and suffering; humans relate to a greater power or more perfect ideal in order to obtain hope

that helps them rise above their unsatisfactory condition on earth. In other words, religions deal with trying to answer the hard questions concerning the human condition. Eschatology, dealing with the "final things" of human existence, is the culmination of the answers to those perplexing questions.

Of these religions and philosophies, Ruether dialogues most often with ones found historically throughout Western culture--Greek philosophy, ancient Babylonian nature religion, Judaism, Christianity, and even Native American religion. She acknowledges that her dialogue falls far short of universality, but she answers her own question about her concentration on Western intellectual tradition,

Why do I construct the cultural line of discussion around Western Christian tradition, with its roots in the Babylonian, Hebrew, and Greek cultures? ... First, because this is my tradition and therefore it is the culture for which I must be accountable. Second, it is a culture that has shaped and continues to shape (particularly in its secularized, scientific form) the rest of the world ... It is the major culture and system of domination that has pressed humans and the earth into the crises of ecological unsustainability, poverty, and militarism we now experience.2

What is this Western Christian tradition with which

2. Ibid., 10.
Ruether dialogues? How does it view the human condition, which in turn influences its eschatology? As Ruether infers in her quotation above, Western Christian tradition is influenced by Greek philosophy, the nature religions of Babylon, and Judaism, all of which were present in the Western world at Christianity's birth. When looking for the answers to bettering the human condition, each of these groups come up with differing solutions.

Nature religions, Greek philosophy, Judaism, and Christianity all attempt to build a bridge between the human and the divine. Schisms between divinity and humanity are reflected in the concepts of "fallen nature," sin, and evil. "Redemption" comes in various forms, differing for each of these groups. For the Babylonian religion, which Ruether cites as an example of "nature" religions, the epic of Gilgamesh deals with the human struggle of the cycle of life and death. Ruether writes,

The basic thought of Babylonian religion ... is that human beings are fundamentally mortal. Death is their portion. It is precisely mortality that separates humans from the Gods and Goddesses ... The great Babylonian epic of Gilgamesh explores the theme of man's (the male's) vain search for immortality. The hero, Gilgamesh, is brought face to face with the specter of his own mortality through the death of
his friend, Enkidu.3

In her book on the Gilgamesh epic, Rivkah Scharf Kluger concurs with Ruether about the importance of this "quandary of mortality" theme,

Through Enkidu's death Gilgamesh becomes aware of death as a human reality. Enkidu's death is reflected, as it were, onto Gilgamesh's human existence. ... Only with the realization of death and the limit of time, does life become real. ... I think that is what this epic deals with. But we will see that it does not end with a solution, but is the beginning of a very deep quest. After all, this was a very ancient time, and the problem has been carried on in further religious development through the ages.4

Indeed this "further religious development" is precisely what is being addressed in this section of the paper.

The ironic acceptance of mortality as the beginning of life is part of the resolution, or "redemption," of a nature religion, such as was found in Babylon. Ruether writes,

... the denial of the possibility of human immortality does not mean a denial of religious hope within the limits of finite life. Ancient Near Eastern culture sees the cycles of renewal of nature as the key to the constant hope for renewal of life, resurrected from drought and death.5

5. Ruether, Sexism, 241-42.
The religious hope is found in the renewing cycle of "life over death, cosmos over chaos." I am not sure whether, for the Babylonians, perpetuation of the cycle of life is more important than individual immortality, but it appears from the epic that immortality is viewed as unrealistic for human expectation: Humanity cannot be removed from the cycle of life and death; the cycle is greater than humanity's power.

When the gods created mankind  
Death for mankind they set aside.  
Life in their own hands retaining.

Within Greek philosophical thought, mostly through the great influence of Plato, the nature cycle is rejected. Dualism of body and soul takes nature's place as the most important aspect of life's journey through the human condition. Ruether writes of Plato's view of the soul,

Plato, in the Phaedrus, describes his understanding of the soul's journey. The souls originate in the realm of the stars, where they accompany the gods on their journeys in the heavens. In this way the souls are nourished through contemplation of the eternal realm of ideas. But those souls who cannot control the unruly steed of their passions lose their wings, sink to earth, and take on a body.

6. Ibid., 242.  
7. Ibid., 241.  
"Sin" is associated with the human passions, and hope for the soul is seen in its release from the body upon death. W. C. K. Guthrie, in his book on the Greek philosophers, explains Plato's dualism,

The body is compared both to a prison and a tomb, from which the soul longs to be released in order that it may fly back to the world of Ideas with which it had conversed before its life on earth. The doctrine of Ideas stands or falls together with the belief in immortality—or at least the pre-existence—of the soul.9

Plato's eschatological vision is the permanent reunion of the soul with the "world of Ideas." Again Guthrie explains, "Philosophy is, in the words of the Platonic Socrates, 'a preparation for death', in that its business is to fit the soul to stay permanently in the world of the Ideas instead of being condemned to return once more to the limitations of a mortal frame."10 Redemption for our life on earth, then, is to pursue the life of a philosopher.

In Hebrew religious thought, neither dualism nor immortality is part of the belief system or culture. Ruether writes,

For most of Hebrew scripture there is no development of the idea of personal

10. Ibid., 96.
immortality. Future hope is collective and historical, rather than individual and eschatological. The ancient Babylonian and Canaanite myths of seasonal renewal were transferred to the renewal of the earth and society from historical injustice. Human disobedience brought on divine wrath ... Obedience to God, in turn, would bring a return of happiness and prosperity ....11

Human disobedience to God and God's law, then, could cause the Jews to experience God's wrath, although whether this violation of God's law would be called "sin" is unclear. However, there does exist in Hebrew thought a strong demarcation between "good" and "evil," and acting within the boundaries of goodness and evilness is a free choice for the Jews that leads to their ongoing relationship with God and God's response to their choices. Ruether examines these choices,

Jewish thought, in the Hebrew scriptures and the Talmud, did not accept the concept of a fall from original goodness that rendered humans incapable of doing good or appeasing God and therefore needing a savior to render them acceptable to God. For the Jewish tradition, humans retain their freedom to choose good or evil, and to be pleasing or unpleasing to God accordingly.12

Redemption for the Jews comes not through a savior, but in the form of a hope for an ideal, idyllic life on earth,

in which God's people (the Jews) are obedient to the Law and God's justice reigns. Ruether explains,

Through adherence to God's commandments it was hoped that there would come that redeemed time when justice and peace would reign on earth. Hebrew hopes for redemption projected an ideal vision of human life, in its natural and social contexts onto a future era of history. This would be the messianic age, the coming reign of God on earth ....13

This hoped for kingdom of God ties in with the message of Jesus, who, despite the popular categorization of him solely with Christianity, was a Jew. Robert Spivey and Moody Smith, New Testament exegetes, say, "The center of Jesus' message is the proclamation of the inaugurated kingdom of God."14 In Jesus' time period, strains of apocalyptic thinking appear which differ from the futuristic redemptive vision in Ruether's quotation above. One group of Jews, the Essenes, build their sect around an apocalyptic vision,

... they looked toward to the future vindication of Israel, or at least of their own community as the remnant of the true Israel. This vindication was expected in the form of an apocalyptic drama, indeed, a conflict, in which the forces of light would overwhelm those of

Within this apocalyptic framework, the concept of resurrection becomes evident, which, in Ruether's opinion, changes the path of Hebraic identity from one that accepts death, to one that creates a system of justice in the afterlife,

The most decisive break with the earlier prophetic concept of a redeemed future historical age was signaled by the inclusion of the resurrected dead from the past ages. The idea of bodily resurrection was originally included in Jewish future hope more to solve the problem of injustice unrequited than the problem of mortality. By resurrecting the unrewarded righteous and the unpunished evil-doers of past ages, it was possible to imagine that the scales of justice could finally be balanced in history. ... Such concepts were still operating within the framework of finite future history. But the introduction of the idea of the bodily resurrection brought in a new element which was incompatible with the historical nature of earlier prophetic hope.16

When Christianity was born out of the Jewish tradition into the Hellenized world, it inherited the two differing eschatologies of Greek philosophy and Jewish religion. Christianity's struggle to incorporate both the Greek notions of dualism and immortality with Jewish messianism, resurrection, and holy covenant has had a great influence on

15. Ibid., 21.
its views of sin, redemption, and eschatology. Ruether says, "Christian eschatology fuses the apocalyptic eschatology of post-Biblical Judaism with the Platonic eschatology of the soul that separates itself from its bodily encumbrance through mortification and returns to the true home in Heaven."17 Although Christianity has evolved over the centuries, it remains inextricably linked to Jesus Christ and his act of saving humanity from its schism with God.

This schism is viewed in Christianity as originating with the myth of the fall of Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden into "sin" and knowledge. Whereas this myth is found in the Old Testament and is part of Hebraic tradition, Ruether notes, "Hebrew thought itself, in the Scriptures and early Rabbinic writings, did not take this story very seriously."18 However, she also notes that, "Christian theology has understood it to be divine revelation and hence has taken this rather odd folktale with consummate theological seriousness."19

In Pauline theology, one of the basis from which Christian theology is derived, the idea of sin and evil partakes both in the Hebraic tradition of having the ability

17. Ruether, Sexism, 244.
18. Ibid., 166.
19. Ibid.
to choose good or evil, and the Greek tradition of having
the soul inescapably locked into the sinful body. Ruether
writes that,

The fusion of these two views compounded
the dilemma of human entrapment in sin
and evil in Christian teaching, an
entrapment for which humans are both
culpably guilty and yet incapable of
escaping through their own "natural"
 Capacities.20

A good example of the two traditions within Paul's theology
is expressed by him in Romans 6:1-11. In Romans 6:1-4, he
relates the Hebrew choice of goodness through, not only the
free choice of baptism, but also the free will to
discontinue to live in sin (regardless of God's grace) after
baptism,

What shall we say then? Are we to
continue in sin that grace may abound?
By no means! How can we who died to sin
still live in it? Do you know that all
of us who have been baptized into Christ
Jesus were baptized into his death? We
were buried therefore with him by Christ
baptism into death, so that as Christ
was raised from the dead by the glory of
the Father, we too might walk in the
newness of life.21

The Greek necessity for death to eliminate sin is a
predominant theme in Romans 6:1-4, but spelled out even more
specifically in Romans 6:5-7,

For if we have been united with him [Jesus] in a death like his, we shall certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his. We know that our old self was crucified with him so that the sinful body might be destroyed, and we might no longer be enslaved to sin. For he who has died is freed from sin. (my emphasis)22

This necessity of "death" of the old self in baptism to free ourselves from sin, and be renewed to a new life (resurrection), as did Jesus, leads to the unique Christian eschatological doctrine of one's new resurrected life in Christ being ever-lasting, just as Jesus' resurrected life is ever-lasting. Paul writes of the foundation for this Christian belief in Romans 6:8-11,

But if we have died with Christ, we believe that we shall also live with him. For we know that Christ being raised from the dead will never die again; death no longer has dominion over him. The death he died to sin, once and for all, but the life he lives he lives to God. So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus.23

Pauline theology incorporates the necessity of death (in baptism, but also in mortality) in order to obtain freedom from sin, sin which is associated with bodily existence. Christ is the redeemer; death is the emancipator; immortality is the prize. Ruether writes,

22. Rom. 6:5-7 RSV.
23. Rom. 6:8-11 RSV.
The redemptive work of Christ is seen not only as giving the baptized the power of virtue and uniting them with the power of immortal life, which can transform their fleshly bodies into spiritual, immortal bodies at the resurrection, but also as overcoming the subjugation of the cosmos itself to its "bondage of decay."24

Through Jesus Christ, the cosmos is regenerated, baptized humanity is regenerated, death is conquered, and, in the end, a just and serene life with God is pictured as the denouement to an evil, mortal world. Tony Kelly, an Australian priest and theologian, writes about this "last place, called "Heaven,"

The prospect of fulfillment in a final union with God tugs like an undertow in the depths of human consciousness, the "secret we cannot hide and cannot tell": a fulfillment not only explicitly promised in the scriptures and traditions of our faith, but intimated in all our searchings, all our loves, all our hopes. The self-transcending thrust of our being is a promise yet to be kept. There is a homing instinct at the heart of our selfhood life longing for its fullness.25

This eschatological scenario is, in broad strokes, the mainstream Christian vision, one with which Ruether dialogues as she searches for a just life on earth.

Ruether's Critiques of Tradition

Ruether's own eschatological views can only be thoroughly presented and appreciated by first taking a look at her criticisms of the Greek, Judaic, and Christian eschatological traditions. For the most part, Ruether finds that each of these perspectives poorly represent the true nature of sin, evil, and redemption, although at the same time she chooses not to completely reject all aspects of these traditions (as mentioned earlier in this paper). Ruether takes her own upbringing in the Christian tradition seriously, as well as acknowledging that Christianity is a very strong faith source for millions of people; the Christian institution cannot be discarded overnight because of its faults. She writes,

The Christian tradition is one of those communities of accountability that has profoundly valuable themes for eschatological spirituality and practice. It also has problematic defects and bears a significant responsibility for the legacy of domination of women and nature. But, for that reason, its liberating potential should not be disregarded.1

As I have already indicated, Christian theology has

been deeply influenced by both the Greek philosophical and Judaic theological traditions. Within the Greek tradition, Ruether is most concerned with the impact that the concepts of dualism (body and soul) and immortality (of the soul) have on Western intellectual tradition. Ruether states, "It was from the Platonic tradition of Greek philosophy, and its exaggeration in Gnosticism, that Western culture derived the view that evil resides in the physical body and the material world, over and against the conscious mind." 2 For Ruether, dualism is troubling because it negates the goodness of our mortal bodies and lessens our ability to accept and care for our lives here on earth, as well as care for the natural world at all. If evil is rooted in the world, than one's primary objective will be to escape it,

The evaluation of mortal life as evil and the fruit of sin has lent itself to an earth-fleeing ethic and spirituality, which has undoubtedly contributed very centrally to the neglect of the earth, to denial of our commonality with plants and animals, and to the despising of the work of sustaining the day-to-day process of finite but renewable life.3

Greek dualism and its sustained life within Christian tradition profoundly hits home against Ruether's ecological sensitivities.

2. Ibid., 122.
3. Ibid., 139.
Not only does Ruether find that the dualistic thought process has an impact on the environment, it also has an impact on the status of women as well. Women have, throughout the patriarchal cultures of Greece, Rome, Judaism, and Christianity, been associated with the "body" half of the body/mind split. Ruether tells us, "In Greek philosophy women are symbolized as analogous to the lower realm of matter or body, to be ruled or shunned by transcendent mind." 4 Within Hebrew culture, although it does not share precisely the body/mind split of Greek philosophy (humans are considered in their entirety to be creations of God, mind and body), the woman's body is still considered "impure" and her nature "lower" than males. Women receive misogynist treatment and exclusion, similar to that in Greek society. Ruether elaborates,

... females are rigorously marginalized. Women do not receive the Torah from God or Sinai. They are banished so that men can be pure to receive God's covenant. The covenant is given to the male assembly of Israel, and women are defined by it but are not members of it in their own right.5

Christianity inherits from the Greek anti-body/pro-mind split and the tradition of female inferiority of both the

5. Ruether, Gaia, 178.
Greeks and Jews. The result is a misogynist view of women by church fathers. Augustine, according to Ruether, believes that, "patriarchy is the natural order of society, reflecting the innate inferiority of women, their lack of a capacity for headship, and their subjugation to the male as the representative of the 'image of God.'"6 Calvin calls women "the gateway to the Devil."7 If the male body is considered to be the center of sin, as we have seen with Paul, then the woman's body is considered doubly cursed.

The result of this association of the body with sin in Christianity has led to the popular (but drastic, according to Ruether) act of asceticism. All in all, "Celibacy is the optimal state of life by which Christians prepare themselves for the end of this world and the immortal world to come."8 Ruether tries to determine whether asceticism is a blessing or a curse for women,

Christian asceticism was deeply ambivalent toward woman. One side of ascetic thought ... imagined freedom from marriage and childbearing as liberating women from subordination in the patriarchal family. By adopting celibacy women overcame the "curse of Eve," were restored in Christ to equality with man, and enabled to act as active agents in Christian preaching and ministry. But this liberation was

6. Ibid., 185-86.
7. Ibid., 193.
8. Ibid., 186.
predicated on a rejection of women's sexual and reproductive roles as inherently debasing.9

For Ruether, the origin and causes of Christian sin have created many deeply disturbing misogynist views. It is these types of problems that her feminist theology addresses. The focus of Christian eschatology on escaping the mortal body into a transcendent sphere with one's "spiritual body,"10 also creates agitation for Ruether along her ecological lines. As quoted before, if the earth is a temporary place, why take care of it? Her ecological feathers are not only ruffled by dualism and immortality, but also by the strain of apocalyptic thinking that swept through Judaism during the Roman occupation. Ruether sees the apocalyptic visions as a natural offshoot of the prophetic tradition that was substantial within Judaism at that time,

Apocalyptic is the offspring of prophetic thought. ... These visions of the reversal of Israel in world dominion were elaborated over ... two centuries. ... This process of development reaches its fullest form in the Christian Book of Revelation, written during the persecution of Christians by Roman

9. Ibid., 188-89.
emperor Domitian (c. 95 C.E.). Ruether finds cause for distress pertaining to apocalyptic thinking. Just as with Greek philosophy, in apocalypticism, immortality is the ultimate good. She explains her fears about immortal thinking,

Apocalypticism, like Platonic eschatology, is based on the fantasy of escape from mortality. Death itself is the "last enemy" to be overcome. The very nature of the life of the biosphere, rooted in mortality and renewal through disintegration, is denied. ... The foundation of this fantasy of escape from the body, earth, and evil is a certain model of God, a God unrelated to earth, body or mortality. A God who is absolute good against absolute evil in a way that is unrelational. It is this concept of a transcendent, unrelational God, and the identification of themselves with this God, which allows apocalypticists to imagine themselves safe from world destruction.12

But it is this idea of destroying whatever one considers evil (and enjoying that earthly or human destruction) that Ruether finds does the most damage in encouraging and increasing the world problem of domination and transgression,

... the apocalypticist, far from being concerned about the evidences of destruction, is immensely cheered by them. Violence directed against others with whom they do not identify is

11. Ruether, Gaia, 81, 70, 71.
12. Ibid., 83-84.
evidence of divine punishment, while violence against themselves is persecution of the righteous. Both forms of violence are proofs that the "last things" are happening and one's own deliverance is at hand. 13

Inherent in apocalyptic thought is that there will be "winners" and "losers," eternal justice for the "good" and eternal damnation for the "bad." But the most frightening problem is considering who determines who's god is right in a world of multiple gods. Are we left with only "might is right" to determine the winner? Ruether perceives an imbalance in thinking when answering the last question in the affirmative. This imbalance is rooted in domination and the dominated. Ruether cannot stress strongly enough her distress pertaining to the imbalance of relations in this world,

I have come to think of our task of creating a just, peaceable society as a continual process of finding sustainable balances in a web of relationships of humans to one another and to our fellow creatures of nature. 14

The reality of domination and imbalance is in fact what her definition of "evil" and "sin" is within her theology. When focusing primarily on the feminist side of her theology she writes of the imbalance of sexism,

The recognition of sexism as wrong,

13. Ibid, 84.
evil, and sinful brings about the total collapse of the myths of female evil. The recognition that the social structures of marginalization of women are unjust creates a fundamental metanoia, or turning around, from the perception of woman as "other" to the recognition of woman as equivalent human person. ... Sexism as sin centers on distorted relationality.15

When addressing sin and evil in the broader constructs of her ecofeminist theology, she opposes the objectifying of evil,

... the reality of evil does not lie in some "thing" out there. ... evil lies in "wrong relationship." All beings live in a community, both with members of their own species and with others for which they depend for food, breath, materials for construction, and effective feedback. Yet there is a tendency in the life drive itself in each species to maximize its own existence and hence proliferate in a cancerous way that destroys its own biotic support.16

Ruether acknowledges realistically that evil can exist within the life cycle, the one that she praises with compassion throughout her writing,

The life force itself is not unequivocally good, but becomes "evil" when it is maximized at the expense of others. In this sense "good" lies in limits, a balancing of our own drive for life with the life drives of all others in which we are in community, so that the whole remains in life-sustaining

15. Ruether, Sexism, 174, 175.
harmony. The wisdom of nature lies in the development of built-in limits through diversity of beings in interrelation, so that none outrun its own "niche." 17

Right relationships and balances in all aspects of our lives and the world signify for Ruether redemption from sin and evil. Without this balance, we destroy the possibilities of true goodness in the world.

17. Ibid., 256-57.
We've become familiar up to this point with Ruether's criticism of traditional theologies, and her criticisms are long and thorough. It is not unreasonable to wonder whether there exists anything within historical or current theology that fits Ruether's criteria for her own theology. However, she has let it be known that she does not completely reject her theological heritage. In fact, while it may appear that all she does is criticize tradition, she does find a few points of communion between her theological ideas and those of others, which reinforce her eschatological views.

Out of the Hebrew tradition she finds a redeeming ecological factor within the covenantal tradition. She writes of the Hebrew concept of covenant, "Hebrew thought knit the covenantal relation of God to Israel in a close relation to the gift of the 'land.'"1 And within this land, "In covenant, both blessing and curse, success and disaster, God is sovereign, hence all events have moral meaning and purpose."2 Jesus aligned himself in the covenantal tradition, "This intimate unity between justice and right

2. Ibid., 210.
relations to nature in the covenantal relation between God and Israel is largely lost in the New Testament. It was probably important in Jesus' own understanding of the coming Kingdom, which he saw himself commissioned to announce.  

Ruether's theology is concerned with having a "God"-based relationship with the earth. The covenantal tradition appropriates this relationship,

A covenantal vision of the relation of humans to other life forms acknowledges the special place of humans in this relationship as caretakers, caretakers who did not create and do not absolutely own the rest of life, but who are ultimately accountable for its welfare to the true source of life, God. This covenantal vision recognizes that humans and other life forms are part of one family, sisters and brothers in one community of interdependence. ... Each life form has its own purpose, its own right to exist, its own independent relation to God and to other beings.

Within the covenant one's spirituality is based on one's mutuality with earth, which is crucial to Ruether's eschatological vision.

As well as being able to use the essence of Hebraic covenantal tradition within her ecofeminist theology, Ruether also sees some parallels between her views and the cosmological tradition of the Christian faith. This

3. Ibid., 214.
4. Ibid., 227.
tradition is based on the belief that Christ is,

(1) the manifestation of God, (2) the immanent presence of God that creates and sustains the cosmos, and (3) the divine power remanifest at the end of time, healing the enmity that has divided the cosmos and reconciling the cosmos to God.  

Reconciliation of the world to God is the prime factor within this cosmological tradition, with Christ as the primary conduit,

Christ is seen as the power of the new creation, not severed from the cosmos created in the beginning, but the principle through which this cosmos was originally created and now is renewed and reconciled with God.  

The most important aspect of the cosmological tradition, in reference to Ruether's theology, is the emphasis of its basis in reconciling human minds to their bodies—discounting dualism. As Christ is the immanence of God's wisdom made into human flesh, and as Christ has reconciled us bodily to God's grace and wisdom, so can we humans be reconciled to our existence as conscious and bodily creatures. In other words, Ruether finds within this cosmological tradition, a Christian way of saying its alright to be human and mortal, which she believes is so important for humans to accept,

5. Ibid., 232.
6. Ibid., 233.
It is this juxtaposition of the capacity of consciousness to roam through space and time, and its utter transience in its dependence on our mortal organisms, that has generated much of the energy of what has been called "religion" in the past. Much of this religious quest has sought to resolve this contradiction by denying it, imagining that consciousness was not really dependent on the mortal organism. The mental self could survive, and even be "purified" and strengthened, by the demise of the body. This concept of the "immortal self," survivable apart from our particular transient organism, must be recognized, not only as untenable, but as the source of much destructive behavior toward the earth and other humans.7

In Ruether's eschatological vision, the acceptance of the cycle of life and death is primary if one is to escape "sin" and have the proper relationship to the rest of the earth, which is also bound by mortality.

As we have seen earlier in this paper, the acceptance of human mortality is key to the Babylonian eschatology. The constantly renewing cycle of nature is the way to hope. Ruether has great respect for the earth's natural cycles, and along with the Babylonian example, she looks at Native American eschatological views to illustrate an example of the human being in concert with the earth in both life and death. Ruether describes the opinions of Vine Deloria, an Native American and his book, God is Red, as he criticizes

7. Ibid., 251.
Christian tradition,

In Deloria's view the idea of a universal linear project of salvation through history, leading from creation and the saving acts of God in Israel and Christ through the Church to the end of the world, translates into universal imperialism. ... The human is set above the nonhuman in a way that allows the human infinite rights to manipulate, use up, or destroy the nonhuman. ... Humans alone bear the "image of God." 8

Ruether writes further to illustrate, approvingly, the Native American point of view which contrasts the Christian human/God image,

Indians ... have a sense of the human and the nonhuman as one family of life. God/ess is the great Spirit that animates all things. ... The human is not outside, but within, the great web of life. 9

The native American view of "the great web of life" inherently affects its eschatological stance,

This view of the whole cosmos as a community of life conditions the way the Indian views death. For Deloria, the white man's religion (Christianity) promises immortality but creates fear and obsession with death. The Indian is fearless toward death because the Indian lives on, not as an isolated individual but in the collective soul of the tribe. ... The Indian accepts personal finitude and can receive death as the proper culmination of life. Since Indians do

9. Ibid.
not live individualistically, death is not the end but only a point of transformation to another state of life. Earth and people are one. One generation arises from the womb of the earth as the previous generation returns into the earth.10

Ruether cherishes a concept of earth and humanity which is close knit and interdependent. In the culmination of all her criticisms and affirmations, she writes of her own eschatological views in reference to the linear thinking of Christian eschatology and its heaven-based goals,

Instead of endless flight into an unrealized future, I suggest a different model of hope and change based on conversion or metanoia. Conversion suggests that, while there is no one utopian state of humanity lying back in an original paradise of the "beginning," there are basic ingredients of a just and livable society. The ingredients have roots in nature and involve acceptance of finitude, human scale, and balanced relationships between persons and between human and nonhuman beings.11

Our greatest responsibility, as we reconfigure our relationships with people and the earth, is to focus on what we have in this life, and not concentrate on the unknown of heaven,

We can do nothing to assure that there will be an immortal dimension to our lives. Our responsibility is to use our temporal life-span to create a just and good community for our generation and

10. Ibid., 251.
11. Ibid., 254.
for our children.12

"But," we ask Ruether, "do I have no other purpose than to participate in life's cycle? Is individual life meaningless in this cycle of living and dying? How can I be sure there is no heaven and immortality of my soul?" She answers,

The appropriate response to these questions is an agnosticism. We should not pretend to know what we do not know or to have had "revealed" to us what is the projection of our wishes. ... There needs to be a compatibility between our wishes and what we know of our finite nature and primary responsibilities. What we know is that death is the cessation of the life process that holds our organism together.13

Again we argue, "But I feel so hopeless with this view! Ruether, you do not answer my questions about my own death and the meaning of my life! What happens to me?" At this point, we struggle with the loss of our individuation. Until reading Ruether, we had felt comfortable and singularly important.

The "I" in death, the singular event of "my" death, is of pressing importance to our Western minds. So Ruether attempts to answer, "What has happened to me?", even though

this sort of speculation would seem out of context with her previous "we only know what we can know" quotation,

In effect, our existence ceases as individuated ego/organism and dissolves back into the cosmic matrix of matter/energy, from which new centers of the individuation arise. It is this matrix, rather than our individuated centers of beings, that is "everlasting," that subsists underneath the coming to be and passing away of individuated being and even planetary worlds. 14

We could, at this point, charge after Ruether with questions like, "How do you know all this about the matrix and our origins of being? You said we cannot know what happens after death." We could charge after her, but we must remember that while Ruether takes on an overwhelmingly social sheen in her ecofeminist theology, she is after all a theologian, and her work does ensue from a basis of faith. What we are reading in this section of the paper are her formulations for her eschatological visions based in her particular foundations of faith. Ruether chooses not to make a confession of the existence of heaven and individuated immortality as a condition for her faith and theology. But it becomes clear to us, looking at the last quotation, that her faith is based in this underlying "matrix," which is her source of the cycles of life and

14. Ibid.
death. Ruether writes in her own defense,

... the problem of personal immortality
is created by an effort to absolutize
personal or individual ego as itself
everlasting, over and against the total
community of transcended egoism to
relation to community, we can also
accept death as the final relinquishment
of individuated ego into the great
matrix of being.15

Ruether, in her particular faith and theology, wishes
to uphold this "relation to community" above all, as a
source with which we can deconstruct our patterns of
domination and individuation. "Alright," we say to Ruether,
"until we have this earthly community that is built upon
right relationships, how do we reassure those who are
donated, those who are suffering, those who lose their
children to accident, disease, or war? If we cannot look to
justice by God in heaven, where do we turn to relieve our
sorrow?" She answers us rather unreassuringly,

Recognition of the tragic dimension of
finite life is essential to wisdom. ... We need ... to learn to become wise in
the absorption of the tragic dimension
of life which we cannot change or
control. At death we hand these
achievements and this wisdom over to
Holy Wisdom, who will transmute it into
a transcendent mode of being beyond our
powers.16

Ruether tells us that, realistically, we must make life on

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15. Ibid., 257-58.
earth as good as possible. This is our responsibility, this is what we can control. We cannot control death, but maybe if the conditions of domination and persecution in the world ceased, we could control in some small way the number of young and tragic deaths in the world. But, Ruether reminds us, we can never conquer death.

We must evaluate whether we can find hope in Ruether's "eschatology," which does not truly address "last things," but the ongoing cycle of life and death. We must ask, in the process of creating her theology, has Ruether left God behind? Has she shirked her Christian roots? Is Ruether living a pipe-dream with her call to a reconfigured world? Is justice convincingly addressed in her theology? The next section of this paper will consider these questions.
Evaluating Ruether's Eschatology

Ruether presents us with an atypical eschatological view where heaven, resurrection, and immortality are rejected. Yet, as I mentioned in the preceding section, she does not create her eschatological argument outside of the context of religious faith. If Ruether is a woman of faith, then what is the nature of it, and can she still be called Christian within her confessional process? The nature of Ruether's faith is embedded within the cycle of life on earth, from which she produces her ecofeminist theology. Whereas she rejects "God" as the masculine, father figure, she does not discount the existence of a transcendent presence, which she calls the "Matrix." "The great Matrix, which supports the matter-energy of our individuated beings, is the ground of all personhood." 1 Ruether clearly cannot be considered agnostic in her belief in a greater power than human beings. The Matrix is "God"-like in the way that all things flow from it and all things return to it, although the Matrix appears more passive and less active in this process than the Judeo-Christian God. The Matrix also

serves the purpose, like the Judeo-Christian God, of balancing human error and sin, sin (domination) as defined by Ruether. In her theology, Ruether uses the transitional term "God/ess" (a less radical looking and sounding term than Matrix, but different from the male image of God) to represent her idea of the Matrix. She speaks of how God/ess corrects the human evil of imbalance, like the Christian God, but unlike God, does not require one to be disjoined from the life cycle to overcome sin,

The God/ess who is the foundation of our being-new being does not lead us back to a stifled, dependent self or uproot us in a spirit-trip outside the earth. Rather it leads us to the converted center, the harmonization of self and body, self and other, self and world. It is the Shalom of our being.2

Ruether is dependent within her theology on an outside, yet benign, source beyond this world to align human interplay and response into right action. According to Ruether, the only way we can tap into the strength of her transcendent source, the Matrix, is by putting our faith into the Matrix's call to order. How do we know what this order of human life should be? It seems as if Ruether, like any good prophet, is "revealing" the message of the Matrix to us. She has a dedicated mission in letting be known what

it would be like to live in a reconfigured world which is
run under the power, wisdom, and blessing of the Matrix.
Toward her cause, Ruether reaches beyond intellectualized
theology, and forges a broader theology which expresses
sociological and economic responsibility.

Does Ruether's new brand of theology mean she can no
longer be counted as a Christian theologian? Considering
her strong basis and training in Christian tradition, I
believe that the very core of her theological dialogue is
immersed in the Christian theological tradition. This
dialogue, however, does not discount her rejection of many
basic Christian theological traditions. Ruether assuredly
is not a classical Christian theologian. She has a mission
to change and expand the course of Christian theology.
Christina Traina, a theologian at Northern University in
Illinois, writes of Ruether's theological expansion in
Traina's review of *Gaia and God*,

Though Ruether's Christian ecofeminism
may stand on shifting ground and yield
no new strategies, this book presents
her theology at its most ambitious. She
makes an urgent and convincing case for
extending the liberation paradigm to all
creation, and proves that in the proper
hands the movement for earth renewal is
not a threat to genuine Christianity but
a comprehensive tool for a necessary
overhaul of Western theology.3

3. Christina Traina, "An Argument For Christian
By rejecting classical Christian theology, Ruether has not rejected completely the promise and potential that Christianity holds if it is removed from the stringent grip of its patriarchal theology and order. In fact, Ruether's own theological work is closely parallel to the actions of Jesus and the early Christian community. Ruether writes about the early Christians and their mission,

Implicit in the early Jesus movement is a challenge to religious authority embodied in past revelation and institutionalized in the hands of a privileged group of interpreters. Jesus declares that, God has not just spoken in the past but is speaking now. ... Those of low or marginalized status (Jesus and his disciples) speak not simply as interpreters of past traditions but as the direct word of God ... Jesus frees religions from the fossilization of past traditions (which doesn't mean he rejects those traditions) and makes it accessible in the present.4

Whereas, with Jesus, religious authority is challenged, the rejected are embraced, Jewish tradition is not entirely rejected, and the Kingdom of God is pronounced to be among us, so Ruether similarly challenges current religious authority, embraces the rejected (including rejected theology), does not discount entirely all Christian tradition, and pronounces that the balance of the Matrix can

4. Ruether, Sexism, 121.
be in our midst.

Ruether's work is not necessarily in conflict with Jesus and his tradition. However, Ruether parts company with Christian theology as she apprises that Jesus' most important function within her theology is his life's work and example, rather than his death and resurrection. The theological emphasis on Jesus' death and resurrection places him beyond history and creates Jesus as the divine "Son of God," God made flesh, and creates Christ the Redeemer. In rejection of such Christology, Ruether writes,

To encapsulate Jesus himself as God's "last word" and "once-for-all" disclosure of God, located in a remote past and institutionalized in a cast of Christian teachers, is to repudiate the spirit of Jesus and to recapitulate the position against which he himself protests.5

Ruether's this-worldly interest, as expressed in her eschatological views, puts her at odds with the crucial Christian moment—that of Jesus' resurrection and hence the revelation that his death serves as atonement for our sins. Although she has not (as far as my research has shown) stated specifically her disbelief that Jesus was resurrected (and is waiting in Heaven for the time of his "Second Coming"), her rejection within her theology of the concepts

5. Ibid., 122.
of heaven and resurrection lead her to a different evaluation of Jesus. In other words, the gifts of the Spirit with which Jesus was endowed were revealed in his life not his death. And the revelation of "God's" will continues through time within the community of the faithful. In this regard she writes,

Christ, as redemptive person and Word of God, is not to be encapsulated "once-for-all" in the historical Jesus. The Christian community continues Christ's identity. As vine and branches Christic personhood continues in our sisters and brothers.6

The continuing revelation within the Christian community makes resurrection and heaven less prominent when considering the mission of Jesus. According to Ruether, he lays the foundation of the church with his life's work, and this work is continued in life, not death.

It makes sense that Ruether would take her inspiration and revelation from Jesus' life on earth considering the emphasis she puts on the life-cycle within her ecofeminist theology. But, within traditional Christian theological formulation, Jesus' death is the all important event that signals humanity's realignment with God. His resurrection holds tremendous significance—a symbol of God's new covenant with humanity. Resurrection is symbolic of the

6. Ibid., 138.
revelation of the Christian community that Jesus' true
nature is that of the "Christ." Paul writes of the basic
premiss within Christian theology that the resurrection of
Jesus is primary.

Now if Christ is preached as raised from
the dead, how can some of you say that
there is no resurrection of the dead?
But if there is no resurrection of the
dead, then Christ has not been raised;
if Christ has not been raised, then our
preaching is in vain and your faith is
in vain. We are even found to be
misrepresenting God, because we
testified of God that he raised Christ,
whom he did not raise if it is true that
the dead are not raised. For if the
dead are not raised, then Christ has not
been raised. If Christ has not been
raised, your faith is futile and you are
still in your sins.7

Although Ruether disagrees with the traditional view of
Christian sin, and the necessity of redemption from it, the
rejection of the importance of Christ's resurrection--and
the rejection of the event itself--puts Ruether's theology
outside of the basic constructs of Christian theology.
Knowing that Ruether finds deep significance in the life and
work of Jesus makes it no less awkward that her theology
cannot be aligned to traditional Christian theology. It
seems to me that the label "Christian" still carries the
weight of a belief in Jesus as God incarnate, hence his

7. 1 Cor. 15:12-17  RSV.
being chosen to be resurrected. In this respect, Ruether cannot be called Christian in the traditional sense. Perhaps the best way to describe Ruether's theology is as a "derived" Christian theology, where her basis is derived from Christianity but has developed, through thorough critique, into something different from tradition.

Ruether's unconventional eschatology is, in itself, derived from her "derived" Christian theology. Ruether's ecofeminist theology stresses that we live within the finitude of our life-cycle and the confines of our earth. Death comes and returns us, not to heaven, but to earth. As I stated before, Ruether is of the opinion that life and death is what is known (i.e., what is revealed to us), and this cycle is what we must accept. But if we have been brought up to believe in a God who reigns in heaven and is waiting for our arrival there after our death, can there be hope in Ruether's agnostic eschatology? Can the human race so easily accept the confines of a limited, worldly existence? How necessary is the concept of an eschatological heaven in giving meaning to our religion and lives?

Elizabeth Achtemeier, an evangelical theologian, is unswayed by Ruether's eschatological arguments. She responds scathingly to Ruether's rejection of heaven,
... meaninglessness haunts human life. Perhaps that meaninglessness can be most poignantly illustrated by Ruether's view of death. There is no eternal life for those of faith in Ruether's female God/ess religion. Rather the end she envisions for all of us and our communities is that we will simply end up as compost. ... Such a view finally means that there is no purpose for the creation of each individual human being, and that my life and yours in our communities have no eternal meaning beyond their brief and transitory appearances on this earth.8

In Achtemeier's opinion, in order for life to be meaningful, individually and collectively, eternal life must be present as a final passage for the faithful. Eschatological hope is mandatory in her Christian theology.

But what is this "hope" that traditional Christian eschatology addresses? Even more than giving our lives meaning, Christian hope signifies the wish for resolution to the difficulties of the human condition, and addresses the issues of final justice, and the end of pain and human suffering. It addresses the individual relation to God, the overcoming of human sin and evil, and the promise of a world where we find truth and do not have to deal with our human foibles and selves. Tony Kelly, the Australian priest quoted earlier, writes about heaven and hope,

... heaven is an irreplaceable symbol in the language of Christian hope. It is irreplaceable since hope is always looking to its fulfillment in terms of its Christ, its God, its body, its loves, its questions. Yet to such a hope, heaven remains a symbol of what is not yet, and of what can never be fully known.9

Heaven is an expression, for Kelly, of human desire, the desire to better know God and our "good" selves. Ruether, in her eschatology, does not abandon this desire to find hope within the revelation of the good. What Ruether does not do, however, is place the culmination of this hope in an extraterrestrial or transcendent sphere. What Ruether's eschatology presents to us is not necessarily hopelessness, but a different approach to portraying hope within the constructs of faith. Still we must ask if Ruether's construct of hope is enough.

Ruether's eschatology seeks out the kind of hope that can be known here on earth. This hope lies within the negation of old concepts of sin and evil. Christine Smith, a feminist theologian working out of United Theological Seminary of the Twin Cities, reiterates Ruether's new concept of sin as a point of agreement in feminist theology,

... there has been a persistent shift from sin and evil being defined as

pride, disobedience, idolatry, and alienation to sin and evil as a violation of right relation, a sign of brokenheartedness, a betrayal of trust, the reign of injustice, the consequence of disparities of power, and as tyrannical systems of oppression....

The sin defined within feminist theology reinforces Ruether's concept of sin as imbalance, which can be produced individually or collectively. "Right relation" can overcome this sin here on earth. For Ruether, heaven does not provide the necessary hope towards the resolution of the problem of this type of sin. Unlike in Achtemeier's view, meaninglessness does not come in a theology and world without heaven, rather, meaninglessness comes in a theology and world that depends on heaven to serve justice.

The "ecojustice" that Ruether espouses requires very mature and responsible action on the part of human beings. This maturity calls us to a higher level of global consciousness. The hope that ensues from the reconfiguration of our attitudes and relations to each other and the earth is not passive, but active. In order for Ruether's eschatological vision to take place, all humans must cooperate and be called into action.

Again, we must ask, is hope grounded in our actions enough? Are we capable of performing the acts of selfless

justice that are required if the good life of Ruether's eschatological vision is to be obtained? Are human beings fully capable of achieving balance? Or rather, is imbalance a natural offshoot of our limited capacities as human beings? At the core of Ruether's ecofeminist theology, she puts her faith into the goodness of our limited capacities. These limits, such as death, are natural. They keep us humble and have the potential to remind us of our fallibility. Yet these precise limits that make us human and give Ruether cause for celebration (rather than denial), may be the weak point in her eschatological construct.

Ruether is highly dependent on social action to create a just society. She purposefully rejects a God-driven, saving act which leaves the responsibility of the world to a transcendent justice. The Matrix leaves the workings of the world to the will and whim of the creatures on it. Such passive guidance leaves human power to go unchecked as long as it does not oversee itself.

But the irony of this situation is that as limited beings, we are not only limited physically, but also intellectually. Our capacity to discern truth and to create justice are equally as fragile as our mortal beings. More poignant than this fact is that we know we are limited in perspective, yet we have an intuitive sense of what is
greater than our capacity to attain. We can never glimpse infinity in this lifetime, but we can imagine its concept. This schism between our human boundaries and our imagination causes a great deal of frustration within the confines of human consciousness. Into these empty depths we have poured our transcendent speculation. It is in this void that God dwells. We desire attainment of the truth that we sense, but cannot know fully. Transcendent truth, justice and meaning is out there somewhere, and we depend on God to be our guide to it.

Despite Ruether's misgivings, this perspective, too, can keep us humble, although Ruether has wisely warned us of the dangers of identifying too closely with our transcendent imagination and not closely enough with our human selves. We should accept more willingly our finitude, as Ruether admonishes us to do. However, I do not believe, as she does, that we can maintain a hopeful eschatology around our finitude. Even if we were able to attain control of our moral condition, represented by the ecojustice that Ruether envisions through social reorganization and education, imbalance would not be conquered; there are ontological conditions in the world which we cannot control even with our best behavior—natural disasters, accidents, illness. What do we do with these injustices, which are equal causes
of imbalance? A greater hope than ourselves is needed to address these events.

Our transcendent imaginations have filled this void of hope with speculation of a goodness greater than we can attain here on earth. Because of our ability to discern injustice, we cannot avoid our capacity to create a better world in our minds. And this better world is imagined far beyond the reaches of the socially and ecologically balanced world that Ruether envisions. As long as there is injustice and imbalance that is beyond our capability to control, we will imagine another, better world. Our human capability to use our transcendent imagination to define a better world, or a better concept of being, is not as harmful as Ruether would have it. This process engages us in a necessary outlet for human wishes, desires, hope, meaning and survival. As Ruether proposes, our better world must start with our realignment with ourselves. But, even further, Ruether does humanity a disservice by cutting short our ability to envision transcendent truth and justice. We need to dialogue with a greater perspective than ourselves in order to create a better world here on earth.
Conclusion

Within this paper, I have explored Rosemary Radford Ruether's ecofeminist theology in order to better understand her unconventional eschatological position. Ruether's theology, which is founded on the faith in the greater cycle of life and death, maintains a strong viewpoint against dominance and against relationships which are out of balance. Sin and redemption take on a new meaning in the light of her theological stances. Ruether remains highly critical of Western theological tradition, which perpetuates imbalance between men and women, western culture and other cultures, as well as between humanity and the earth. Her perceptions, research, critiques, and work shed a valuable light on the truth of these claims.

Ruether's respect for the life-cycle is dedicated and admirable. Her message to take care of what we have here on earth is necessary for the continuing survival of the world as we know it. In light of the emphasis that she puts on the health of the earth and the creatures in it, her eschatological conclusions (which negate escape from the cycle of life and death) are not surprising. Her eschatology holds true to her ecofeminist theology.

Within her own constructs, Ruether's theology and
eschatology make sense. She is thorough and consistent within her theological thesis. Her critiques of tradition all reach toward the same point. This point, this culmination of her theology, puts a great deal of faith in human action to correct the wrongs, the "sin," addressed within her theology. Humans are responsible for creating and maintaining justice on earth. As her eschatology emphasizes, justice should not be delayed into another sphere or time. An argument can hardly be made against her desire for "ecojustice" on earth. Surely peace and balance are universal in their appeal. However, Ruether cuts us short where transcendent imagination is concerned, which is one of the many ways in which her theology clashes with traditional Christian theology.

The transcendent imagination fulfills a basic need within the human consciousness, a need which people expect religion to address. My fear is that as Ruether continues to ignore this need within her theology and eschatology, the many useful and enlightened insights which she holds in relation to traditional theology and current society will go unappreciated and unapplied in light of her unreassuring eschatology. Those people who go looking for a neatly packaged, happy eschatological ending will not find it within Ruether's eschatology. She remains "this-worldly"
throughout her theology, and regardless of the sensical justifications she gives for remaining earth-bound, her lack of transcendent imagination diminishes the prospect of the success of her work here, among people who live on her beloved earth.
Bibliography


