

Communities of Celebration and Resistance
Rosemary Radford Ruether's Integrative Model of Transformation

Virginia Schilder

Advised by Dr. Dan McKanan and Michelle Bentsman

A Senior Paper Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of Master of Divinity

Harvard Divinity School
Cambridge, Massachusetts

May 2023

Table of Contents

Introduction	2
Ruether's Theology	8
The Content of Ruether's Constructive Vision	10
Ruether's Theory of Change: Communities of Celebration and Resistance	16
Two Methods for Transformation	26
Starting Points for Reflection and Action	28
Ecclesial Implications	39
Lived Expressions: The Agape and Benincasa Communities	45
Conclusion: The Call and Contribution of Ruether's Vision	49
Bibliography	53

Acknowledgements

Thank you to my wondrously supportive family, partner, friends, and beloved housemates, for sustaining me and teaching me how to live into life-giving love.

Thank you to Dan McKanan and Michelle Bentsman for your enormously helpful guidance, insight, and careful attention to my work. Thank you to my classmates and fellow thesis-writers for your solidarity.

Thank you to Agape, Benincasa, Jimmy and Sofie, and all the Catholic justice-seekers and advocates who show us what it could mean to live in radical witness to the Gospel.

Thank you to my many teachers, including the Earth and its more-than-human inhabitants.

Thank you to Rosemary Radford Ruether, and to Susan Harvey who brought me to her.

Thank you to the many communities of celebration and resistance with whom I get to study, learn, dance, farm, worship, sing, advocate, care, and build the mosaic bit by bit.

Introduction

I first encountered the work of Rosemary Radford Ruether, one of the most significant Catholic theologians and feminist scholars of the contemporary era, when I was in college. I was getting my feet wet in local progressive advocacy groups at the same time I was gaining real exposure to the Catholic left and to liberation theologies. Seeking to integrate my interests in public policy and in Catholic Church issues, I yearned to be in community with people as committed to justice in social and economic structures as they are to justice in the church. Both within my faith community and beyond, I was growing frustrated with notions of change that are disconnected from land, water, and daily living; that divorce the church from the world; that see liberation as having little to do with re-learning ecological wholeness; and that lack reflection on what is actually needed for communities to flourish and overcome alienation across multiple dimensions.

Ruether spoke exactly to my longing. Reading her work, with its broad scope yet Catholic particularity and consistently *integrative* orientation, was a profound experience of feeling recognized, cared for, taught, and challenged. She articulated an analysis consistent with my experiences and a project resonant with my commitments and hopes. She accompanied me as I re-committed myself to transformation in the church and gave me tools with which to undertake and understand that work as continuous with social, economic, and ecological justice.

In May 2022, less than a year before I write this sentence, Ruether died at the age of 85. In the wake of her death, innumerable scholars, activists, and engaged people of faith, especially women, shared stories like mine—of Ruether’s tremendous impact on their work, practices, theologies, and faith lives. With this thesis, I add my voice to the chorus honoring Ruether’s life.

However, I also have another intent. I wish to illuminate the power and potential of one of Ruether’s contributions, present throughout her career’s work yet so often overlooked: her

constructive vision of how we might begin to transform society by building liberative base communities. I lift up her model of societal change because it is needed and usable, and particularly relevant for Catholics and young people like me who seek a holistic, interstructural project.

Ruether was a central contributor to the development of ecofeminism and feminist theology, and was among the first to interrogate and explicate the androcentrism of the Christian church and its theology. Ruether was an outspoken advocate of gender justice within and beyond the institutional Catholic Church. She actively participated in the peace movement and the Civil Rights struggle, including working with the Delta Ministry in Mississippi. She spent her first ten years of teaching at Howard Divinity School, where she was formed by Black liberation theology and joined in theological reflection on the Black liberation struggle. A committed democratic socialist, Ruether also served as a vice chair of the Democratic Socialists of America. Despite a tenuous relationship with the institutional church, Ruether chose to remain Catholic throughout her life, firm in her belief that she could not change the Catholic Church by leaving it.^{1,2}

Over the course of her career, Ruether authored hundreds of articles and over 40 books that brought prophetic theological resources to bear on a spectrum of social issues.^{3,4} Part of what made Ruether uniquely impactful is the broad scope of topics on which she wrote, and even more importantly, the skill with which she wove them together in her integrative analyses. Her work covers not only feminism, patristics, and theology, but racism, empire, anti-Semitism and supersessionism, capitalism, Christian nationalism, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and ecological destruction. Though many of her books and articles focus most explicitly on one of these topics,

¹ Clay Risen. "Rosemary Radford Ruether, Feminist Theologian, Dies at 85." *The New York Times*, May 27, 2022, updated May 31, 2022. <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/05/27/us/rosemary-radford-ruether-dead.html>

² In this thesis, I use capital-C "Church" as shorthand when referring to the institutional Roman Catholic Church.

³ Monique Parsons. "Rosemary Radford Ruether, a founding mother of feminist theology, has died at age 85." NPR, *All Things Considered*. May 22, 2022. <https://www.npr.org/2022/05/22/1100596818/rosemary-radford-ruether-feminist-theologian-dies-at-age-85>

⁴ Risen. "Rosemary Radford Ruether, Feminist Theologian, Dies at 85."

taken together, the corpus of her work reveals a holistic, multi-issue liberatory commitment. In this way, Ruether resisted the tendency of other white feminists of her time to seek only the institutional equality of white, bourgeois women.

Ruether is most widely known for being a feminist theologian and a proponent of women's liberation in the Catholic Church, and for famously articulating the linkages between the oppression of women and the denigration of the Earth. Much has been written on Ruether's genealogies of dominative social systems throughout history and their relationships to Christian theology, as well as on her feminist analysis and critique.

What many do not realize is that Ruether also developed a robust, ecologically-oriented vision of social, economic, and political transformation—what she calls an “*integrative feminist vision of society*.” In several of her books, Ruether moves from critique and theologizing into proposing a concrete model of liberative community arrangements. Consistent with her critical and theological work, Ruether's constructive model is feminist, ecological, communitarian, socialist, democratic, and anti-racist. It reflects her comprehensive and inter-structural approach.

Ruether proposes a liberative society in which domination is replaced by interdependence, mutuality, and ecological kinship. At the foundation of this society are what she calls, in her book *Gaia and God*, “**base communities of celebration and resistance.**”⁵ These are local communities that integrate land, labor, and daily living, and can include work collectives, assemblies for collective decision-making, and groups with shared spiritual practices or communalized living tasks. Ruether envisions overlapping groups and mutual aid networks that organically unfold into myriad forms to meet community needs, engage in solidarity for larger-level political action, and

⁵ See Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Gaia and God, An Ecofeminist Theology of Earth Healing*. Harper Collins Publishers, 1992. 268-274.

are held together in a common commitment to holistic liberation. It is by developing these multi-form base communities that we can begin to transform society as a whole.

I believe that Ruether's societal vision is sorely under-treated, both in scholarship and among Catholics. To be sure, Ruether was prolific in offering both her theological insights and her critiques of oppressive structures, so that only small portions of her books, often in their final chapters, are devoted to her communitarian vision. However, this does not undermine the value of her constructive model and its potential to serve today as a helpful resource for those in Catholic communities and beyond. In particular, I believe that leftists in the U.S. are in dire need of real proposals for constructive projects. It is Ruether's under-treated model of holistic transformation—and its implications—that I aim to bring to light in this thesis.

Ruether's basic critique is foundational to her vision. As Ruether scholar Jim Robinson describes, Ruether's "field-breaking argument" is that sexism, and all forms of domination in the West, are produced by a dualistic cosmology that ruptures a holistic worldview and sustains an entire network of hierarchical relationships.⁶ In other words, the theology historically predominant in western Christianity is that of a dominative, separate-from-Earth God lording over creation. This theology results in and reinforces other hierarchical dualisms, such as man over woman, mind over body, spirit over matter, humans over Earth, white Europeans over peoples of color, colonizer over Indigenous, clergy over laity, and so on. In Ruether's view, this dualistic paradigm, with its dominative mode of relationships, creates and upholds conditions of oppression. In turn, oppressive power structures and their associated epistemes produce and propagate this theology. In the 1995 preface to the 20th anniversary edition of *New Woman, New Earth*, Ruether writes,

As I wrote articles that fanned out across these many concerns, I saw that they cohered in describing a common pattern of social domination. They were all justified by the male ruling class through

⁶ James Robinson, "Merton and Ruether: Toward a Contemplative-Prophetic Ecotheological Anthropology." PhD diss., Fordham University, 2020. 59.

similar forms of ideological validation. I recognized that all these many concerns needed to be seen together, as part of one interconnected pattern of oppression and struggle for liberation...it became apparent to me that these many stories were interconnected parts of one story, a common system of domination and of ideological justification, with many ramifications and expressions.⁷

To be clear, this analysis does not warrant a simplistic, reductive meta-narrative of many complex systems of domination. Rather, Ruether points to the need for an integral analysis that takes seriously interconnectedness and the pervasiveness of domination as a mode of relationship. Therefore, Ruether explains, the total network of dominative relationships and structures, with their supporting hierarchical dualisms, must be transformed. Liberation has to mean the widespread interpersonal *and* systemic enactment of relationships of kinship and mutuality.

This is the foundation of Ruether's holistic societal vision. She writes that we need "a fundamental reconstruction of this whole system of relations of human people to each other and to the Earth."⁸ This necessitates changing structures. Insisting that "reforms directed at the private sphere can only be tokenism," Ruether calls for a profound social reordering with an alternative value system.^{9,10} This reordering seeks to overcome the intertwining oppressions of people and Earth, positing ecological integration as an essential grounding for social and economic justice. True ecojustice means not simply green transit and clean energy, but radical changes in the ways we live, labor, eat, and relate. Indigenous activists and teachers have long been saying this.¹¹

Ruether's vision is also inextricable from her Catholicism, though one doesn't have to be Catholic to find it useful. While the Catholic Church's patriarchal clericalist structure is informed

⁷ Ruether. *New Woman, New Earth: Sexist Ideologies and Human Liberation*. Beacon Press, Boston: 1995. xvii. Ruether liked to tell newcomers to her work to read this book first.

⁸ Cited in Robinson, 61.

⁹ Ruether, *New Woman, New Earth*, 201, 204.

¹⁰ Ruether, *Liberation Theology, Human Hope Confronts Christian History and American Power*. Paulist Press, New York: 1972. 153.

¹¹ For example, see Robin Wall Kimmerer on a gift economy in "The Serviceberry: An Economy of Abundance," *Global Oneness Project*, acc. Mar. 30, 2023. <https://www.globalonenessproject.org/library/essays/serviceberry-economy-abundance>. Ruether was in conversation with Native American teachers throughout her life.

by its androcentric theology, Ruether believes, as I do, that the capacious Catholic tradition also has liberative, prophetic resources and theologies within. This paper takes for granted that it is worthwhile for Catholics to seek to engage Catholic resources as non-exclusive founts of guidance in the process of liberation. They can be helpful for those beyond the church, too.

I am a Catholic woman, like Ruether, attracted to her work not only for her feminist critique, but also for her ability to offer creative, concrete, and practical proposals for modes of living and working that are grounded in land, that incorporate spiritual practices, and that enmesh personal conversion with wider systems-level and ecclesial transformation. Further, as someone who has chosen to remain in the institutional Church, I am drawn to Ruether because she locates herself within the Catholic tradition and is similarly committed to using its resources and engaging its people in a comprehensive—lowercase-c catholic—social project. Offering an alternative to separatist strains of radical feminism, Ruether’s feminism, in the words of Gary Dorrien, combines “a program of hermeneutical retrieval with a democratic socialist and environmental politics”—which, for Ruether and other progressive Catholics, comprises what it means to live the Christian faith.¹² To me, Ruether’s constructive vision embodies not only a uniquely integrative project, but also a vital and desperately needed expression of liberative Catholicism in the United States.

In what follows, I will briefly offer an overview of Ruether’s theology, as it relates to her constructive vision. I will then discuss the content of Ruether’s creative imagining of a liberative society, and her theory of change—how we can work for anti-dominative modes of relationship on a systemic scale. I will then offer some considerations, hope, and starting points for reflection and action, in service of beginning to implement learnings from Ruether’s vision in our own communities. Then, I will speak more directly to my fellow Catholics, examining the entwinement

¹² Gary Dorrien. *Soul in Society: The Making and Renewal of Social Christianity*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995. 263.

of Ruether's vision with ecclesial transformation, and the implications of her model for the Catholic Church. Finally, I will offer a brief glimpse into how Ruether's vision is already, in part, being lived in communities today—ending, in Ruether's style, with a concrete model.

Part of this project is simply to give much-needed attention to Ruether's constructive vision. As such, I will spend some time elucidating her model. Because Ruether presents aspects of her vision in a number of different formulations in a number of different texts, this explication entails synthesizing Ruether's vision into a cohesive proposition with which we can engage. I offer this synthesis in the first part of my paper, and I try to treat Ruether's work as one whole.

Throughout the paper, I make three arguments. First, I argue that Ruether offers a good and needed constructive societal model, in that it is ecologically- and communally-oriented, it integrates the local and the structural, it incorporates spiritual life, it maintains a relationship to the Catholic tradition, it is utopian yet historically-viable and open-ended, and it is holistic. Second, I speak to my own faith community, arguing that Ruether's societal project is continuous with the project of ecclesial transformation and necessitates new ways of being-as-church—as I believe that a liberative political theology also requires a liberative ecclesiology. I will conclude by arguing that we can and should (and in many instances, already do) take seriously Ruether's call to create communities of celebration and resistance, in which we can imagine, live into, and collectively build up a society of kinship—the Kin-dom of God.

Ruether's Theology

Before continuing, I wish to briefly outline the broad strokes of Ruether's theology, because it is inseparable from her constructive project. Ruether exposes the role of certain

theologies in sustaining oppression, which is why we need more life-affirming theologies in order to build liberatory alternatives.¹³

Ruether is emphatic that a distinctly Christian ecological theology is possible.¹⁴ In *Gaia and God*, she describes how her theology retrieves the covenantal and sacramental traditions of Christian theology of creation. She emphasizes Christ as the cosmic manifestation of God, the divine source and ground of creation and its healing.¹⁵ Rejecting the West's imperial and carceral logics, Ruether's theology entails a God not of conquest and punishment but of healing and wholeness.

As her vision entails upending domination as the operative ethic of society, Ruether's central theological task is transforming the dominative model of God lording over creation. In service of a truly ecological theology and society, Ruether posits God as "present in the diverse expressions of life on earth... manifest not just in humans, but in wolves and insects, trees and flowers, the waters that fall from the sky and waters that well up from the earth."¹⁶ She identifies Spirit, or "Thouness," in all creation.¹⁷ For Ruether, God is much greater than this universe yet also radically *here*, siding with the oppressed and inviting our participation in liberation.¹⁸

As a corrective to dualistic theology, Ruether's ecological theology is premised on community experience and "the transience of selves, the living interdependency of all things, and the value of the personal in communion."¹⁹ This affirmation of interdependent mutuality is reflected in Ruether's integrative and community-oriented societal model. With interrelatedness at the center of her theology, Ruether understands evil or sin as *wrong or broken relationship*. This

¹³ Robinson, 174-175. Theology is not just produced by cultural forces and structures, but is intimately involved in their shaping, because theology is about how we relate to the Absolute, ourselves, other humans, and creation.

¹⁴ Steven Bouma-Prediger. *The Greening of Theology: The Ecological Models of Rosemary Radford Ruether, Joseph Sittler, and Jürgen Moltmann*. The American Academy of Religion, 1995. 55.

¹⁵ Ruether, *Gaia and God*, 229.

¹⁶ Ruether, "The Politics of God in the Christian Tradition." *Feminist Theology* vol. 17, issue 3 (2009). 337-338.

¹⁷ Bouma-Prediger, 47.

¹⁸ Robinson, 228.

¹⁹ Ruether, *Gaia and God*, 251.

occurs when humans seek to maximize their own existence without respect for limitations and finitude—which is to deny our interdependence.²⁰ For Ruether, humans are not the sole image-bearers of God installed to rule over Earth, but are a part of the Earth, one species among many, “who can sustain our own life on Earth only by fitting into the flourishing of the whole ecosystem of which we are an interdependent part.”²¹ This theological anthropology is intrinsically linked to her image of God as essentially relational. Following the Trinitarian formulation of three distinct persons united in one substance, she writes, “the universe and God can only be universal by being a communion in diversity, not a reduction to singleness.”²² The interplay of oneness and many-ness is a cornerstone of Ruether’s theology and societal vision.

In sum, Ruether sets forth a theology of God as present in creation and moving here and now for salvation—which is the restoration of loving relationship. Salvation is holistic, includes the Earth, and requires material liberation.²³ Recognizing and living into our intrinsic interconnectedness with all creation, human beings are called to cooperate in God’s ongoing creative action by collectively working to build up the Kin-dom of God—which is to live into life-affirming patterns of relationship that express and foster kinship. This theology both informs and is embodied in Ruether’s constructive model.

The Content of Ruether’s Constructive Vision

Ruether calls for a society characterized by kinship, participation, and solidarity—which necessitates a more just social order, economy, and political system. At the basis of Ruether’s “integrative feminist vision of society” are networks of ecologically-integrated local

²⁰ Ruether, *Gaia and God*, 256.

²¹ Ruether, “Politics of God,” 337.

²² *Ibid.*, 337-338.

²³ Bouma-Prediger, 31, 49.

communities.²⁴ In these organic communities, cultural life, economic and political activity, and the lands and waters in which they are embedded are intimately linked, so as to embody and partake in a “living pattern of mutuality.”²⁵ Ruether explains:

What is the society we seek? We seek a society that affirms the values of democratic participation, of the equal value of all persons as the basis for their civil equality and their equal access to the educational and work opportunities of the society. But more, we seek a democratic socialist society that dismantles sexist and class hierarchies, that restores ownership and management of work to the base communities of workers themselves, who then create networks of economic and political relationships. Still more, we seek a society built on organic community, in which the processes of child-raising, of education, of work, of culture have been integrated to allow both men and women to share child nurturing and homemaking and also creative activity and decision making in the larger society. Still more, we seek an ecological society in which human and nonhuman ecological systems have been integrated into harmonious and mutually supportive, rather than antagonistic, relations.²⁶

I keep this quotation in its entirety because it best sums up Ruether’s vision, in her own words. She names the central points of democratic participation; non-hierarchical social relationships (which entails dismantling structural racism, classism, sexism, ableism, and militarism); a local economy of solidarity organized by workers around community needs; the integration of work, culture, education, and other collectivized community services; and ecological embeddedness.

Socially, Ruether calls for a fundamental reorganization of relationships, starting with healed gender relations and moving to a new model of economic and democratic engagement. Observing the close entwinement of gender-based and ecological oppression, Ruether insists that ecological liberation requires gender justice.²⁷ This means overcoming a society patterned along the dominative man-over-woman binary. In Ruether’s model of liberative community, the absence of “sex-role stereotyping” enables genuine individuation of personality and richer patterns of friendship.²⁸ Moreover, it opens possibilities for the transformation of other systems of domination, including white supremacy, capitalism, imperialism, and cisheterosexism.

²⁴ Ruether, *Sexism and God-Talk, Toward a Feminist Theology*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1983. 232.

²⁵ Bouma-Prediger, 30, 37, 49.

²⁶ Ruether, *Sexism and God-Talk*. 232-233. The fact that this integrative vision is present in Ruether’s “flagship” *feminist* text further underscores her inter-structural approach.

²⁷ Dorrien, 331-332.

²⁸ Ruether, *New Woman, New Earth*, 210.

Ruether is clear that her communitarian model is not just about “communes” in which people live together in a single house meant for a nuclear family, though a number of different living patterns are certainly possible in organic communities. Families and individuals who live near each other could work together in residential groups that share resources and equipment, and may develop communal gardening, farming, cooking, childcare, and so on. Importantly, men assume equal responsibility in all of these tasks. Children are rooted in their immediate family (however it looks) and gain relationships with a number of other nurturing and supportive adults and families.²⁹ This communalized social organization creates a balance of private and community life, overcoming social alienation and strengthening communities.

These reformulated social relationships will also require new political and economic forms that maximize participation—such as worker-owned collectives and local assemblies with rotating leadership responsibilities.³⁰ Ruether proposes communitarian socialism as a corrective to both state socialism and radical feminism, and to the oligarchy of capitalists and the estrangement of persons in economic and political life.^{31,32} In Ruether’s vision, local communities would collectively make the decisions that affect their immediate lives, in a form of participatory self-government that combats the perceived powerlessness of alienated individuals in our present system. These self-governing local communities would then participate in broader regional bodies to coordinate larger-scale efforts, such as national green transportation infrastructure. In making

²⁹ Ruether, *New Woman, New Earth*, 208.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 207-208.

³¹ In Chapter 9, “The New Earth, Socioeconomic Redemption from Sexism” in *Sexism and God-Talk*, Ruether critiques “liberal feminism” as seeking merely the equality of (white) women within institutions, “socialist feminism” as accounting for class but still androcentric in making the sphere of male work normative, and “radical feminism,” in its separatist strains, as a dehumanizing reversal of male hierarchicalism. She explains that the insufficiencies of each perspective highlight the need for the others, taken together in an integrated and open-ended way. Liberation from patriarchy is one part of a multifaceted but interrelated struggle for holistic liberation. Ruether also explains that to many such integrative feminists, communitarian or utopian socialism, which is the integration and communalization of work on the base of a communal family, is more attractive than state socialism.

³² Bouma-Prediger, 149.

local communities the primary loci of governance and change-making, Ruether's vision is guided by subsidiarity, a central principle of Catholic Social Teaching. She explains,

A democratic socialism has to be a communitarian socialism. This means the economic and political sectors of local communities are run on the principles of subsidiarity, self-ownership, and self-management. Planning, distribution, and enforcement of standards need to be ceded to larger units.... But these levels of government must be rooted in strong self-governing local communities... Only in this way can socialism be kept from becoming total alienation of the atomized individual in huge impersonal corporatisms.³³

Today, such an arrangement would, by both its direct effects and its contribution to a culture of consensus-based decision-making, counter the voter suppression tactics that actively suppress civic participation, as well as the anti-democratic dominance of corporate influence in the electoral and legislative processes. Ultimately, Ruether envisions a “democratization of decision-making” that makes it difficult for a small ruling class to monopolize resources.³⁴

Indeed, Ruether insists that liberation means a just, participatory economy. Transformation in the modes of production, distribution, and consumption of resources is necessary for economic and ecological justice. She writes, “A decentralized economy would return production to small factories, workshops, and farms owned and run by the local community”—of which we already have examples in worker-owned and -managed factories and businesses.³⁵ Ruether critiques the alienation of labor in a society in which work is not structured around the necessary activities of daily living. She asserts, “The split between home and work, women's work and men's work, is overcome by reintegrating them in a community that both raises its children collectively and owns and manages its own means of production.”³⁶ In Ruether's model, instead of assimilating everyone into “productive labor” for corporations, work is integrated with home and communal life.

³³ Ruether, *New Woman, New Earth*, 206-207. Also see Ruether, *Christianity and Social Systems: Historical Constructions and Ethical Challenges*. New York: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2009. 235-256.

³⁴ Ruether, *New Woman, New Earth*, 205, 210.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 209.

³⁶ Ruether, *Sexism and God-Talk*, 227.

Ruether's economic model entails not only a different structure but a different ethos. In her vision, labor does not serve the accumulation of resources for the capitalist class and endless, irresponsible consumption. Rather, labor directly supports the livelihood of the community and the health of the lands and waters in which it is situated. Production would be oriented around community needs and would promote true flourishing, especially through the proliferation of sustainable local food systems. With a revival of craftsmanship and guilds, workers would feel re-connected with what they produce, taking pride in their work as an expression of their creativity and desire to contribute to their communities. In Ruether's vision, work arises from one's vocation—a joyful and needed sharing of one's charism, gifts, and artistry.³⁷ Ruether describes how home and work, production and consumption, field and factory would be organically related and consciously integrated in and with the Earth, including through new structures of municipal and urban planning. Overcoming disposability culture, materials would be made to be long-lasting, and “waste” would be the reintegrated back into the system, as there is no real waste in an ecologically-balanced society.³⁸

In Ruether's view, a healed Earth demands a “transformation of all patterns of destruction”—patterns that yield poverty, famine, soil erosion, habitat denigration, extinction, air and water pollution, subjugation, displacement, and vicious militarism.³⁹ Ecological living must become a system that “becomes normal for everyday life.”⁴⁰ Ruether suggests that communities with strong local production systems and collectivized community services will experience more robust bonds predicated on reciprocity and solidarity. In Ruether's inclusive model, all are called upon to engage in the life of their communities, overcoming our alienation from what we produce,

³⁷ Ruether, “Mother Earth and the Megamachine,” in *Liberation Theology*, 125.

³⁸ Ruether, *New Woman, New Earth*, 209.

³⁹ Ruether, *Gaia and God*, 259.

⁴⁰ Ruether, *Christianity and Social Systems*, 235-236.

eat, and use; how decisions are made; and with whom we live and work. With secure communities oriented around care and participation, structured to meet people's material and social needs and engaged in wider networks of solidarity, the impulse to conquest, domination, and resource-hoarding is replaced by an impulse to cooperation. The desire to live holistically and in right relationship with other humans, creatures, land, air, and water, can further grow.

Ruether's model is also spiritually suffused. It requires not only a new social vision but a new "soul," a new social humanity that is not pervaded by an alienated spirituality but by a deeply-felt prophetic hope and vision to shape a new world on earth—the Kin-dom of God.⁴¹ A society not bent on conquering, Ruether explains, has more time for developing interiority, for contemplation, for creativity, for a cultivation of the self that affirms others in reciprocal interdependence. This vision of a society of solidarity, Ruether writes, "is not utopian, but eminently practical, pointing to our actual solidarity with all others and with our mother, the Earth, which is the actual ground of our being."⁴²

Finally, Ruether asserts that her vision is open-ended.⁴³ (This is why I call it *liberative*, not *liberated*.) She offers a concrete proposal of an integrated society, but her model is neither rigid nor fixed. Rather, community patterns can and must change over time and organically arise from the situation and needs of particular people in particular places. Ruether also stresses that her model is only one proposition among many; Catholics do not have the singular or "best" way to live. At the same time, she reminds us, "Models for such communities are not beyond our reach. We have a long tradition of Christian communitarianism to draw from."⁴⁴ As I will later show, that tradition

⁴¹ Ruether, *New Woman, New Earth*, 211.

⁴² *Ibid.*

⁴³ Ruether, *Sexism and God-Talk*, 232.

⁴⁴ Ruether, *New Woman, New Earth*, 208.

endures in intentional communities today. The reintegration of land and town, home and work, in a “pattern of diversity and balance modeled after ecological systems,” is not beyond our grasp.⁴⁵

Ruether’s Theory of Change: Communities of Celebration and Resistance

I have just presented an overview of Ruether’s vision of integrated communities and a liberatory society. But how do we get there?

The centerpiece of Ruether’s theory of change is the creation of what she calls “**communities of celebration and resistance.**” These are “local face-to-face groups with which one lives, works, and prays.”⁴⁶ They can encapsulate all or some of the functions mentioned previously in Ruether’s vision of an integrated society—worker-owned collectives, mutual aid networks, community-supported agriculture, participatory governance bodies, shared spiritual practices, communalized living tasks, and so on. We can begin to transform society by beginning to develop these base communities.

Communities of celebration and resistance are transformational spaces and networks in which systems of domination can be challenged.⁴⁷ Ruether is emphatic that it is in the grassroots, local units of society in which alternatives to oppression can unfold, in which people committed to liberation can begin to “create living patterns of mutuality” that emanate outwards into wider networks of solidarity for global struggle to overthrow exploitative systems.⁴⁸ She urges concerned peoples to develop “viable forms of local communalization on the level of residential groups, work places, and townships that can increase our control over the quality of our own lives.”⁴⁹ For

⁴⁵ Ruether, *New Woman, New Earth*, 183.

⁴⁶ Ruether, *Gaia and God*, 269.

⁴⁷ Robinson, 176.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 193.

⁴⁹ Ruether, *New Woman, New Earth*, 206-207.

Ruether, these processes of local change are also vehicles of drawing power back down into grassroots communities, so as to guard against totalitarianism.⁵⁰

Ruether asserts that dominant society needs a change of culture and consciousness. However, she is clear that consciousness change without material change at best will be superficial and at worst will actively contribute to the mystification of the status quo. Therefore, cultural transformation must be “tied to transformation of *the ways we actually live together*.”⁵¹ Individual efforts at more liberative patterns of living must be woven not only throughout our lives as a whole but also into a wider web of communities with similar commitments.⁵² Awareness will not translate into change if not sustained through relationships and practices that nourish our participation in struggle and that model the kind of world we strive to bring about. Ruether writes, “If the Revolution is really to bring about a communitarian society, the revolutionary must begin to live that new communitarian society now.”⁵³

As such, Ruether explains, “the alternative lies not in grand schemes of revolution from the top but in the patient work of building a shared community with equality and justice at the base.”⁵⁴ Robinson writes that Ruether’s model of base communities “is neither that of a naive and romantic recursion to nature nor an uncritical movement into the megamachine, but a willingness to relearn how to ‘cultivate the garden’, for it is in this process that the human community can weave itself into the more-than-human world in a mutually beneficial manner.”⁵⁵ It in these base communities that we can live into the Kin-dom, modeling just patterns of living in our localities

⁵⁰ Ruether, *New Woman, New Earth*, 206.

⁵¹ Robinson, 34. Emphasis mine.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 3.

⁵³ Ruether, *Liberation Theology*, 146-147.

⁵⁴ Ruether. “Organizing Skills Shine among Chiapans.” *National Catholic Reporter*, January 26, 1996.

<https://search-ebsohost-com.ezp-prod1.hul.harvard.edu/login.aspx?direct=true&db=aph&AN=9603156471&site=ehost-live&scope=site>.

⁵⁵ Robinson, 193.

while working for the enactment of justice widely. The end becomes laden in the means, as such communities model the broader social relationships they aim to foster.

To be sure, Ruether also emphasized structural change, and participated in systems-level policy advocacy. In her vision, communities of celebration and resistance operate as task forces or training centers for political organizing, as well as supportive families for those engaged in action.⁵⁶ Ruether ardently asserts that those wishing to join liberatory struggles in a sustained way need base communities in which to both live out their commitments and be renewed in them.⁵⁷

In *Gaia and God*, Ruether writes that an ecological culture requires three elements: The rebuilding of local and regional communities, in which people can understand and take responsibility for the ecosystem of which they are a part; just relations between humans that accept the right of all community members to an equitable share in the means of subsistence; and overcoming of the culture of competitive alienation and domination, in service of compassionate solidarity.⁵⁸ In my reading of Ruether, these three elements are mutually interdependent and are encapsulated in the communities of celebration and resistance, which are ecologically-embedded, share resources and meet needs, and embody and promote collective care.

Communities of celebration and resistance are not isolationist, but “seek to modify conventional society by remaining in its midst.”⁵⁹ Mirroring the relationship of the church to the broader world, such base communities engage “mainstream” society without being co-opted by it to sanctify the status quo.⁶⁰ Ruether envisions communities in creative-critical tension with the dominant culture as well as with the institutional Church. This dialogical tension is also reflexive,

⁵⁶ Ruether, *Liberation Theology*, 154.

⁵⁷ Ruether, *Gaia and God*, 273.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 201.

⁵⁹ Ruether, *Liberation Theology*, 154.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

entailing the community's own continual self-examination, the adaptive renewal of its critique, and the ongoing process of collectively discerning ways to live its vision more authentically.⁶¹

Liberation theologian Leonardo Boff, writing about base ecclesial communities in Latin America, warns that base communities cannot become complacent with intrasystemic liberation, but must seek to dismantle the oppressive system for all peoples.⁶² In the same way, Ruether describes how the base communities of celebration and resistance are not ends in themselves, but exist to promote the salvation—the flourishing and well-being—of all creatures. As such, they must always remain related to “conventional” society, advancing the possibility that love and justice may be made manifest in the social structures of society at large.⁶³

In *Gaia and God*, Ruether outlines three interrelated functions of the base communities of celebration and resistance, to which I now turn.⁶⁴

1. “Shaping the personal therapies, spiritualities, and corporate liturgies by which we nurture and symbolize a new biophilic consciousness.”

Though Ruether is critical of an over-emphasis on consciousness change, conversion—or *metanoia*—is a key animator of her vision. She describes social change as a conversion “to the Earth and to each other.”⁶⁵ Conversion, taken in this sense, is the call of all people. It is the transformation of the self, the renewal and redirection of one's commitments, sensibilities, and practices towards right relationship, ecological wholeness, compassion, presence, and solidarity. It is learning to feel our bodies again. Conversion, for Ruether, is an ongoing process that happens in immersion in community life—including ecological community.⁶⁶

⁶¹ Ruether, *Liberation Theology*, 155.

⁶² Leonardo Boff, *Church: Charism & Power*. Trans. John Diercksmeier. New York: Crossroad, 1985. 135.

⁶³ Ruether, *Liberation Theology*, 155.

⁶⁴ Ruether, *Gaia and God*, 269.

⁶⁵ Cited in Bouma-Prediger, 49.

⁶⁶ Robinson, 252.

Conversion is cultivated by and incites participation in communities of celebration and resistance. They nurture shifts in consciousness that open into new possibilities for collective transformation. Ruether writes that conversion is a continual process that must be rooted in our joy at life's goodness—to which ecologically-integrated community life connects us. Mirroring the “roundtable discussions” in Peter Maurin’s agronomic vision, Ruether writes that in these base communities, we can read, discuss, learn, breathe, meditate, write, observe, create, and story-tell together—all forms of fostering more grounded, holistic culture and community consciousness.⁶⁷

Shared spiritual life is a central part of Ruether’s vision for communities of celebration and resistance. Out of her liberationist theology of Christ as all-embracing, redemptive healer of creation, Ruether calls for spiritualities that promote openness and healing. While entailing deep, personal interior work, this spirituality is cultivated with and practiced in community. Robinson writes, “In Ruether’s view, as we live more intimately and attentively in the natural world, we develop collective rituals for attuning us to this state of being, and we bring these rituals into public, displaying both the horrors of eco-social degradation and the possibilities and promise of eco-social flourishing.”⁶⁸ As a community lives into greater closeness with the Earth and in compassionate, anti-oppressive forms of living, its collective spiritual life must affirm and ground those ways of living, and continuously orient its members to their inter-relatedness.⁶⁹

Ruether does not proscribe an exclusively Christian spiritual character to these base communities, nor does she imply that they require some degree of religious homogeneity or theological agreement. I think she would say that a community’s shared spiritual life can become vital without recourse to any one specific tradition, although some groups may find it life-giving

⁶⁷ Ruether, *Gaia and God*, 269-270.

⁶⁸ Robinson, 253.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 252-253.

to retain closeness to a certain tradition's practices and language. Moreover, particular faith-based groups will persist as one among many base community forms—as Ruether asserts that people will likely belong to multiple communities, finding various aspects of their life nourished in various spaces. While Ruether herself remained committed to the Christian tradition, affirming the liturgical and theological agency of all people is central to her feminist theology. She encourages collective creativity in crafting new, organic forms of liturgy and ways of relating to the Universe.

Therefore, Ruether calls communities to become their own liturgists, while leaving open the possibility of participating in institutional religious life. She is emphatic that we need corporate liturgies that are not tied to alienated, patriarchal consciousness.⁷⁰ Communal liturgies serve as spaces for communities to collectively mourn, celebrate, heal, create, and be *present* to one another. Ruether dedicated a significant body of her work to this endeavor, with books such as *Women-Church* serving as a handbook for liberative, feminist liturgies in the Christian tradition. I will further discuss the ecclesial implications of Ruether's project later on in this thesis.

Finally, participation in systems-level change is intrinsically connected to collective spiritual life. Ruether writes, “Such communities can also learn to carry liturgy to the streets, in protest marches and demonstrations that cry out against the death system and visualize renewed life in ways that can catch the imagination of others who participate with them or watch them.”⁷¹ She calls upon the arts to help “shape public liturgies of biospheric politics.”⁷² These public liturgies help to call attention to the present realities of domination, to create loci of solidarity in lament, and to imagine more just ways of living in a way that engenders hope—the precursor to creative participation.

⁷⁰ Robinson, 287; Ruether, *Gaia and God*, 270.

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Ruether. “Before and Beyond Patriarchy: Rebuilding Healing Cultures.” *Feminist Theology* vol. 2. (January 1993.) 111.

Ruether admits that these processes of change, both in localities and in broader networks, are frustrating. Hegemonic structures like global capitalism and militarism will not yield readily. This underscores the necessity of base communities that can be strongholds of support and nourishment, “where we can renew our spirits for the long haul” and experience peace.⁷³ They must serve as glimpses of the world we are seeking to create in order to carry us onward.

2. “Utilizing the local institutions over which we have some control, our homes, schools, churches, farms, and locally controlled businesses, as pilot projects of ecological living.”

Concurrent with the work of engaging shared spiritual and consciousness-forming practices, Ruether calls communities of celebration and resistance to actually begin to live in ecologically whole ways.⁷⁴ These small-scale experimentations are themselves consciousness-raising processes, too.

Rather than naively calling people in cities or suburbs to drop everything and move “back to the land,” Ruether invites us to start where we already are. I read her as instructing us: *First, look around.* She proposes beginning with a local analysis, examining our homes and local institutions to better understand how we are or are not living in ecological harmony. This entails taking inventory of our energy use; what wastes are created and where they go; how fragmentation “creates distances between the locations where we need to be;” how transportation is structured to bridge those distances; what we eat and where, how, and by whom our food is produced; who benefits from our labors; and how our neighborhoods were planned (and why).⁷⁵ Ruether suggests that communities form local committees to read, observe, and learn together, and begin to discern which aspects of these patterns they have the power to alter, to start to bring the functions of daily

⁷³ Ruether, “Before and Beyond Patriarchy,” 110.

⁷⁴ Ruether, *Gaia and God*, 271.

⁷⁵ Ruether, “Before and Beyond Patriarchy,” 109.

life into fuller right relationship. These changes might include sharing resources and skills, communalizing living tasks and transportation, shedding toxic substances, and if possible, decreasing energy use, switching energy sources, and composting.⁷⁶ Over time as we increase our community coordination and stability via mutual aid and resource sharing, greater changes might become more feasible—like starting gardens to grow our own food, purchasing less (made possible by sharing tools and resources), and perhaps even modifying our patterns of work.

These incremental shifts are generative processes that open up into greater transformations. Ruether is clear that the work of systemic change is not merely about reforming our households; this initial process of observing is not just to gather data for incremental changes. Rather, this local analysis serves as a site of primary interaction that is a basis for solidarity. It is a common project that invites learning and participation and fosters community relationships, awareness, and commitment.⁷⁷ It prompts a closer, more attentive relationship with the places we inhabit, resisting the alienation many of us experience from our own environments and neighborhoods.

Moreover, this local examination reveals the workings of broader systems of domination. It helps us to better understand the larger systems of production and consumption, as well as water and waste (mis)management, food (in)access, dirty energy production, agribusiness, redlining and gentrification, environmental racism, policing, and corporate exploitation. It exposes how wider systems enforce destructive practices in our daily lives. Ruether writes, “We begin to name and make visible the larger systems of power that keep in place the present patterns of inequity, pollution and waste, and find some ways to chip at their monopoly of control.”⁷⁸ Only from a clear understanding of the present situation can we develop effective actions and solutions.

⁷⁶ Ruether, *Gaia and God*, 259, 271.

⁷⁷ Ruether, “Before and Beyond Patriarchy,” 109.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*

Even further, it is in and through homes and local institutions that communities can start to create new patterns of relationship. Ruether calls for groups, families, and work-collectives devoted to building “a new humanity which will reflect communitarian principles.”⁷⁹ We can begin to embody anti-exploitive relationships as we together explore lifeways rooted in the Earth’s processes. This grassroots experimentation is at the heart of Ruether’s vision.

3. “Building organizational networks that reach out, regionally, nationally, and internationally, in a struggle to change the power structures that keep the present death system in place.”

Our local communities do not exist in isolation. Therefore, as we start to develop more just and ecologically-integrated ways of relating and functioning in our own localities, the imperative of reorganizing the whole system of living, working, and producing will become increasingly evident. Ruether says that this is even true on the spatial level, as the physical locations of work, living, and recreation will need to be reorganized so that they can be better integrated.⁸⁰ It will become more acutely apparent how living in ecologically-whole ways requires transforming racism, militarism, patriarchy, and capitalism. With a more tangible understanding of how systems of oppression function, and how our homes, schools, workplaces, churches, etc. are pervaded by such systems, communities become better equipped to participate in political action. They develop a clearer sense of the specific changes that are needed. Again, Ruether says that it can be useful to start with local political efforts, where concrete changes are often more readily possible.⁸¹

Over time, communities become aware of and are able to network with other groups, both in their own localities—such as town councils, local businesses, and municipal offices—as well as with other communities undertaking similar projects.⁸² They realize the inter-connectedness of

⁷⁹ Ruether, *Liberation Theology*, 154.

⁸⁰ Ruether, *Gaia and God*, 260.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 271.

⁸² *Ibid.*

their issues, especially ecological ones.⁸³ They can begin to form relationships of solidarity and join in structures-level political advocacy, placing increasing pressure on regional and national systems and political bodies. They organize into wider and wider coalitions that can together work to transform dominative systems, knowing that alternatives are already unfolding where they live.

Ruether asserts that this structural work will entail policy advocacy, approaching large public institutions like the state as bodies that can help to coordinate larger-scale transformation, such as the development of green energy and transportation infrastructure. At the same time, grassroots bodies must confront the state's implication with multinational corporations. They must seek to strengthen participatory local and regional decision-making bodies where possible, creating political and economic systems that facilitate not resource-hoarding, but commonweal.⁸⁴

An awareness of parallel struggles throughout the world is not just a result of this base community model but necessary to it. Ruether asserts that struggles for local changes will lack depth unless understood as an integral part of a new global consciousness of interdependence.⁸⁵ For Ruether, it is important that communities keep in mind their participation in an interrelated, planetary project. Moreover, particularly for people of privilege and resources in the West, Ruether writes, "we need to put faces and places on the reality of our interdependency, becoming concretely aware of how the way we waste energy, consume food and dispose of waste leaves people across our towns and across oceans with poisoned soil and waters and starving children."⁸⁶

In Ruether's model of base communities of celebration and resistance, beginning to understand and modify how we live, overcoming alienation where and how we can, enables political action more grounded in relationships and concrete community needs. It enables more

⁸³ Ruether, "Before and Beyond Patriarchy," 110.

⁸⁴ Ruether, *Gaia and God*, 260

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 272.

⁸⁶ Ruether, "Before and Beyond Patriarchy," 111.

authentic coalition-building in a growing web of solidarity, as the coalitions and communities themselves, in their dialogical cooperation, exemplify what it might mean to live in a just, interconnected world. Ruether explains that while both Christian and “secular” utopianism look forward to a new world in a future “messianic age,” both believe that we can develop in-breakings of this new world in provisional ways here and now. The process of building communities of celebration and resistance is itself an in-breaking of a new world and a new humanity.

Two Methods for Transformation

In her most famous book, *Sexism and God-Talk*, Ruether writes that there are two ways in which communities of celebration and resistance can function in building a liberative society.

The first method is “to build an alternative, communitarian system by a small voluntary group with a high intentionality and consciousness.” Experimenting on a small scale, a local voluntary group could seek to live out a fusion of this feminist, socialist, communitarian and ecological vision.⁸⁷ In this method, a community of celebration and resistance would seek among themselves to incorporate as many aspects of the base communities as possible, in a unified whole.

A second method is the formation of many overlapping sub-communities that “work on pieces of the vision separately.” Ruether writes that this could entail:

A communal child-care unit within an educational institution or workplace; an alternative energy system for an apartment building; solar greenhouses for a neighborhood; a women's collective that produces alternative culture for the society. We might develop within a self-managed institution less hierarchical forms of organization, more equal remuneration for all workers, men and women, regardless of their jobs. We might plan communities that allow more humanized relationships between the various aspects of people's lives. We might encourage a plurality of household patterns, homosexual as well as heterosexual, voluntary as well as blood and marriage-related, where groups can share income and homemaking.⁸⁸

⁸⁷ Ruether, *Sexism and God-Talk*, 223.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*

Ruether describes this second method as contributing pieces to a “mosaic” that will gradually replace “the present picture with a new vision.”⁸⁹ In accordance with this latter mosaic method, Ruether is clear that not all people will necessarily find all these functions in one base community. Rather, most will find different forms of support in a variety of groups and networks. In your locality, you may be part of one group that cultivates a communal garden and collectively owns the necessary tools; you may also be part of a group that collectivizes childcare; and another group that practices regular liturgies together. An advantage of this method is its accessibility: the mosaic method entails more feasible, one-at-a-time changes that can begin right where you are, with those who are already your neighbors and coworkers, to meet needs as they arise.

Never living in a single, totalizing base community—though she spent her final years in the Pilgrim Place community—Ruether herself lived out this second method. For example, she participated in direct political action collectives, organizations like DSA, and women-church communities (and was known for her love of growing tomatoes). Her activity in multiple overlapping communities and liberatory practices illustrates the nature of her mosaic vision.

In sum, communities of celebration and resistance can be small-scale experimental communitarian systems. Or, they can serve as pieces of the mosaic that Ruether proposes, with different communities embodying different aspects of the vision. Whatever form these groups take, it is imperative that they exist in relational solidarity for a unified struggle.⁹⁰ Because oppression, or sin, implies alienation, Ruether affirms the need to cooperatively construct alternatives.⁹¹

Ultimately, Ruether’s theory of change is predicated on the creation of base communities of celebration and resistance. These communities are processes of conversion and consciousness-

⁸⁹ Ruether, *Sexism and God-Talk*, 223. It easy here to find the resonances with the IWW and Catholic Worker motto, “creating a new society within the shell of the old.”

⁹⁰ Ruether, *Gaia and God*, 268-269.

⁹¹ Robinson, 229.

raising, with shared spiritual practices and corporate liturgies. They are sites of local observation, which serves to foster closeness to place and people, to reveal a clearer understanding of the workings of broader systems of oppression, and to enable targeted resistance. They are sites of experimentation with new ways of ecologically-integrated, communitarian living, in which we change how we actually live on the proximate level to both embody and promote right relationship. These communities can then participate in networks of solidarity with other communities, working together to confront oppressive structures through systems-level advocacy.

Ruether's theory of change is comprehensive in its attention to both local and structural transformation, with communities serving as models of just relationship as they work in solidarity to enact just relationship with and for all peoples. Her strategy incorporates movements for social and ecological justice, feminism, economic democracy, and peace as "prefigurative pieces of an unrealized collective vision." This sustained, integrative effort is what distinguishes her project.⁹²

Starting Points for Reflection and Action

How can we begin to live into Ruether's vision, and start to create and strengthen communities of celebration and resistance?

As we look to Ruether's model as instructive for our efforts today, we can first ask why her vision has not yet been more widely implemented. Ruether herself asks this question, responding that a non-exploitative world eludes us not because of an inability to imagine such a world, but because of "the insufficient collective power of those already converted to an alternative vision."⁹³ Yet, she provides an outline for building that power in local networks.

⁹² Dorrien, 285.

⁹³ Ruether, *Sexism and God-Talk*, 233-234.

Ruether points to another obstacle—the inertia of those in power. In *Christianity and Social Systems*, written toward the end of her career, she writes that building ecological societies requires local, regional, state, and global efforts. “The problem is not that we do not know what to do. The problem is the will to do it.”⁹⁴ Ruether explains that the ruling classes cling to the system, and present ecological living to “ordinary folks” as a costly option that isolated individuals undertake against a dominant system that controls their choices.⁹⁵ Further, Ruether sees the American political left as struggling to project communitarian life as viable, to express protest unhampered by conventional political channels, and to be practically useful.⁹⁶ This is where I imagine that members of the Catholic Worker movement might underscore to Ruether their skepticism about the efficacy of seeking to work with the state and other institutions for change.

Gary Dorrien believes that Ruether’s vision isn’t more broadly used because liberation theology in the U.S. primarily flourishes in academic spaces.⁹⁷ He writes, “For all its influence in academe, liberation theology has not significantly influenced the religious outlook of most American churchgoers, who remain only dimly aware of its existence or its possible influence over their pastors.”⁹⁸ This is why, as I will show the next section, church transformation is also a critical piece of this vision. The Catholic Church has a pastoral mandate to properly disseminate its own liberative theology to its members. However, again, our institutional leaders lack the will to do so.

There’s also a question of who has taken up her project. White feminists have been predominantly the ones responding to Ruether’s call for liturgical reform and crafting women-

⁹⁴ Ruether, *Christianity and Social Systems*, 235.

⁹⁵ Ibid.

⁹⁶ Ruether, *Liberation Theology*, 153-154.

⁹⁷ What’s more, liberation theologies may not even flourish in some Catholic academic spaces. Ruether lost her first and only teaching job at a Catholic college because of her positions on birth control and abortion.

⁹⁸ Dorrien, 361.

church communities. However, they sometimes neglect the other aspects of Ruether's much broader, multi-issue project.

As such, through this thesis, I seek to make Ruether's project known to a wider range of people who can do new things with it and who will carry forward her holistic, integrative approach. Memorializing Ruether in the wake of her death is an opportunity to make her tools and vision more available to those with similarly inter-structural, liberatory commitments. I have just named some real limitations, but Ruether's model remains viable and needed.

Therefore, there is reason for hope in living into Ruether's vision. Young people today, like myself, can be more readily energized by Ruether's vision because we tend to share her broad, multi-issue and intersectional view and commitments. We are yearning for grounded-ness, authenticity, mutual care, and traditions that can connect us more deeply to the Earth and to one another. Compared to our elders, we are less enamored with capitalism, less entrenched in the neoliberal mythology of individualism, and more open to systemic changes. Yet, Ruether's vision can be grasped by all generations—Catholics in particular and justice-oriented people in general.

We can undertake Ruether's project because it begins *where we are*, instituting pieces of the vision in the ways we can, with the people, places, and problems immediately around us. And, luckily for Catholics, the Catholic Church already has an infrastructure for organizing—parishes. Parishes and other faith communities are fruitful sites for these conversations and actions because they are locally-oriented units that already share a common language, values system, and spiritual practices. Parishes might begin to think about how they can be incubators for or facilitators of some actions Ruether suggests, including conducting the local ecological assessments, communalizing tasks like childcare, creating community gardens, serving as a mobilizing center for local issues, and becoming a mutual aid network (which many parishes already are).

Moreover, Catholics already have the theological language to talk about this work: integral salvation, the Kin-dom of God, and a sacramental view of the world. We also have language from Catholic Social Teaching: the preferential option, solidarity and subsidiarity, the dignity of work and workers, participation, and so on. We can use the symbols and frameworks that we have, always critically appropriated, to enter into Ruether's project. And we have models, if even partial, in Latin American base ecclesial communities, women religious communities, Catholic Worker houses and farms, and communities like Agape and Benincasa, as I will later discuss.

I have already set forth Ruether's suggestion that we begin with "ecological assessments" of our localities. But how can we bring others into this project, to together start envisioning and building communities of celebration and resistance? How can we begin to create pieces of the mosaic? In this section, I distill some strengths of Ruether's model and a few questions they prompt, so that they might serve as helpful starting points for reflection, discussion, and action, for individuals and groups (such as neighborhoods or parishes).

Rooted in communities. Dominative theologies and structures operate by creating alienation, which is only overcome in community. Therefore, strengthening local base communities, as Ruether envisions, is powerful. To combat alienation between and among humans and the Earth, we have to ground more deeply into our localities and lovingly commit to real communities of life—because "only there do we sense our embeddedness in creation and as coming from God."⁹⁹ Ruether developed this model out of her own experiences in community, which is why she is seen as the "epitome of a scholar-activist."¹⁰⁰

⁹⁹ Ruether, *Gaia and God*, 273, and Robinson, 112-113.

¹⁰⁰ Cited in Robinson, 62.

It is in our daily lives that dominative structures commit violence, and it is in our daily lives that we enact love. It is on the level of community that visions are nourished and theology is lived, and that we can change the relationships between power, work, and home.¹⁰¹ Fostering mutualistic relationships with land and neighbor enables us to begin small-scale transformations, to create support systems, and to identify and attend to real, concrete needs. The centrality of local communities in the process of liberation means that we can start to undertake this project with great effectiveness by engaging the people, places, and problems already around us.

Who are your communities? (Think beyond just humans!) Where is there alienation? What do you and your neighbors need in order to be in greater solidarity with one another?

Ecologically-integrated. The key merit of Ruether's model is its ecological grounded-ness the whole way through. Only when we halt the intertwined exploitation of people and Earth can we create a society of kinship and solidarity and an anti-exploitative economy that respects limitations, serves needs, and responds to the Earth's realities (including its abundance).

We must identify the sacred in creation—not in a romantic way that tempts us to “leave nature alone,” but in a way that requires our responsible participation in its processes, of which we are already an intrinsic part. We are called to see God's presence not only in birds, trees, and beautiful landscapes, but in ourselves and other humans—especially those who dominant culture rejects. The only proper response to this recognition is active involvement in the work of liberation.

In my own experience in advocacy spaces, there is sometimes little sense of the need to fundamentally re-link the way we live and work to the land. Ruether realizes that ecological integration must be at the center of a liberative project—because our true flourishing is inseparable from Earth's. We must reject the neoliberal reformist approach that tries to superficially “green”

¹⁰¹ Ruether, *New Woman, New Earth*, 207.

our present patterns of consumption, production, and development. Through the creation of ecologically-integrated base communities, we can instead restructure society to make it “accountable to the whole community in its environmental context.”¹⁰²

How are your politics missing a closer connection to the lands and waters on which your community lives and depends? What would it look like for your labor, home, community life, and environment to be integrated? What would need to change?

Both local and structural. Another strength of Ruether’s vision is that it is both local and systemic; both interpersonal and structural. Strong local communities can draw up into networks of solidarity to work on larger structures. Ruether’s holistic idea of change has helped me see the connections between my systems-level advocacy involvement and the smaller measures I engage where I live—like community-supported agriculture, municipal composting, resource-sharing networks, and women-churches. We can resist ecological destruction by protesting the federally-sanctioned construction of oil pipelines *and* by starting a permaculture garden with native plants in our neighborhoods. They are mutually-reinforcing actions.

While her vision begins in conversion, Ruether moves beyond individual reforms to engage in political action directed towards global systems of domination. This is a powerful response to the many Christians who remain stuck in the interpersonal realm. Annette Ahern writes, “Ruether is much more inclined to engage the world. She forcefully demonstrates the biblical basis and resources for a church-led activist mission of social justice.”¹⁰³ Our base communities cannot remain inwardly-oriented, even as they have a firm grounding in our localities, but must seek liberation for all. We have to live out alternatives *and* engage vehicles of direct political action.

¹⁰² Ruether, “Before and Beyond Patriarchy,” 107.

¹⁰³ Annette J. Ahern. “Social Justice: Now, Later or Never? The Contribution of Albrecht Ritschl and Johannes Weiss to Social Justice Theology.” *Studies in Religion* vol. 32, issue 3 (2003). <https://doi.org/10.1177/000842980303200303>, 294.

Think of a systemic issue, like environmental racism or health inequality. How does that issue manifest in your community? What policies are needed to address it structurally? What measures are needed to address it in your community? What other nearby communities or groups might be facing similar concerns? How might you reach out to them for cooperation?

Incorporates spiritual life. Ruether writes, “Although ecological conversion is both a matter of technology and of social organization, perhaps its deepest level is spiritual. It calls for a new culture and spirituality of interrelatedness.”¹⁰⁴ We need a renewed spirituality of kinship in order to heal, build, and sustain a more integrated society. We have to see the work of ecojustice and spirituality as interrelated in one process of conversion and transformation.¹⁰⁵

Collective spiritual practices are central to Ruether’s vision. They help to continually reaffirm and re-connect a community to one another, and to its values, visions, and relationships with the divine/sacredness. Without practices that express a more ultimate vision of the community and create spaces for both lament and celebration, struggle can become empty and can easily revert to the status quo of dominant society. We need a supportive spiritual life to sustain us through the long, frustrating work of change (and the hardships of life in general). We can create collective spiritual practices, in many forms, and further strengthen ones that already exist. For example, rituals with my housemates to mark the passage of seasons—which include blessings, reflection time, music, and poetry readings—connects us to the rhythms of the Earth and to the changes in ourselves, one another, and the flora and fauna of our neighborhood.

What renews your spirit? What shared rituals are practiced in your communities, even beyond explicitly “faith” spaces? What spaces, times, or experiences could be nourished or deepened with collective liturgies? What relationships need healing in your community?

¹⁰⁴ Ruether. “Destroying the Earth.” *Feminist Theology*, vol. 2 (January 1993). <https://search-ebSCOhost-com.ezp-prod1.hul.harvard.edu/login.aspx?direct=true&db=lsdar&AN=ATLA0001024583&site=ehost-live&scope=site>.

¹⁰⁵ Ruether, *Gaia and God*, 4.

Maintains relationship to the Catholic tradition. Ruether's commitment to the Catholic tradition roots her project in a community and in a framework within which to creatively work. She insists that in order to bring about change, "a charismatic community and an institutional, historical context must converge."¹⁰⁶ While the organic nature of Ruether's base community model resists institutionalization, Ruether leaves open the possibility of working with institutions. Even the Agape community, about which I will later speak, relied on help from the Catholic Church to get started. You also might notice the resonances between Ruether's communities of celebration and resistance and the tradition of base ecclesial communities in Latin America. Ruether exemplifies how to prophetically critique from within the church, and her work resonates with people like me who yearn for Catholic resources for justice work.

Remaining engaged with the tradition is an advantage for Ruether's model, as it has been for the Catholic Worker (CW) movement. Because CW has kept a connection with the Church, it has been able to keep in touch with the Church's broad social spectrum. Their engagement of Catholic symbols and beliefs allow even Catholics who do not agree with the CW message to readily understand it.¹⁰⁷ For Catholics (or Catholic-adjacent folks) interested in Ruether's project, its rootedness in Catholicism provides a common symbolic vocabulary, theology, and even source of shared identity that invites in other Catholics. Moreover, identifying one's liberative practices and theology as explicitly Catholic implicates other Catholics, challenging them to examine the sociopolitical dimensions of the faith. While arising out of the Catholic tradition, Ruether's model appeals to a sense of justice and kinship that more than just Catholics engage.

¹⁰⁶ Robinson, 111.

¹⁰⁷ Mark White and Anela Jones. "Christian Radicalism in the United States: The Catholic Worker Tradition." *Social Alternatives* 7, no. 3 (September 1988): 42.

What elements of your own faith traditions, if any, compel you to the work of liberation? How can faith serve as a common link through which to invite others into the work of building communities of celebration and resistance?

Utopian yet historically-viable and open-ended. Ruether's utopianism enlivens her project. What most excited me when I first encountered her work were her imaginative yet concrete outlines for how freer communities could be structured. We need imaginative models, because they shape our sensibilities, give us something towards which to work, and make clearer how *things can be different*. Ruether wrote that while there are many incremental steps towards a liberative society, they have to be guided by a holistic vision.¹⁰⁸ Utopian envisioning, when open-ended, flexible, and grounded in present needs, is not idealist escapism but a deeply practical tool.

It is important to imagine alternatives that improve even small aspects of daily life, but we cannot turn those visions into absolutes. Ruether's model is provisional and adaptable. It is a *suggestion*, so that we might begin, experimentally, to live into what we imagine. We cannot cling to a rigid, once-and-for-all vision, but must partake in an ongoing process (already begun!) of developing societies that sustain compassionate relationality rather than destruction.¹⁰⁹ Base communities cannot be ends in themselves, but must be open, malleable, and serve the liberation of the Earth as a whole. Their "boundaries" must be permeable and constantly re-negotiated, just as the specificities of their prophetic critique must change in response to present reality.

The utopian vision that Ruether sets forth is not abstract or "rootless," but arises from concrete experiences and traditions.¹¹⁰ Catholicism has a history of communal alternatives, such as monastic communities or movements like the Catholic Worker. In this way, Ruether's vision is historically viable—we have the resources to create this reality. We can look to the people already

¹⁰⁸ Ruether, *Gaia and God*, 259.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 115-116, 258.

¹¹⁰ Ruether. "Ecology and Theology: Ecojustice at the Center of the Church's Mission." *Interpretation* vol. 65, no. 4 (October 2011). 355.

trying out different ways of living as models to help us along the way. We can begin with the most basic needs in our localities and expand from there. We can start right now—in fact, you have already started, in all the ways you help, love, create, and care, each day.

What does your community’s “utopian” vision of the world look like? What is the distance between that vision and the realities you observe in your daily life? What are the most pressing needs of your communities, and what are you collectively most equipped to work on? What existing practices or relationships could be strengthened or “scaled-up”?

Holistic and interstructural. Ruether offers a holistic, integral vision that seeks to overcome all forms of oppression and alienation—ecological, social, economic, and ecclesial. It tends to the whole person: our spiritual lives, material needs, desires for communion, and varied charisms to lovingly offer. Ruether’s vision is comprehensive not only because it demands the transformation of social structures but also because it *calls us into a different way of being in the world*. However, this way isn’t entirely new—it was lived, in partial ways, by our ancestors, and it is lived by us, in small and partial ways, anytime we love and serve God’s creation, resisting systemic alienation by forging connections of care, presence, and tenderness. Ruether writes:

Through the fissures of the system we glimpse the forgotten world of our homeland. We learn to walk again; to watch sunsets; to examine leaves; to plant seeds in soil... To return Home: to learn the harmony, the peace, the justice of body, bodies in right relation to each other...All shall sit under their own vines and fig trees and none shall be afraid... 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.¹¹¹

Ruether’s constructive vision is, at its core, a vision of a healed and healing web of relationships. It is a coat of many colors whose rips and tears we lovingly mend, each strand tenderly valued and held in its vast network of care, including with creatures beyond humans. Her vision responds to a deep longing for planetary solidarity and a more humanizing relationality, in the intimacies of our personal lives, in our churches, and in the many intersecting social systems at large.

¹¹¹ Ruether, *Sexism and God-Talk*, 265-266.

Where do you see dehumanizing forces working in your daily life? What larger structures are at play in those forces? Where do you see humanizing forces? What people, places, or practices connect you to your humanity? What are your hopes for yourself, your community, and the world?

In this section I've provided some points of discussion for why Ruether's vision is helpful. But in truth, she doesn't require us to "convince" anyone of anything—because this project is not just intellectual but embodied, in relationships and practices that can start with whatever our communities most need. Her vision's open-endedness invites our critical collaboration and creativity in implementing it. It challenges us to see personal and structural change as *one* project that requires our participation in making mutuality our mode of living. And when the work is hard, Ruether reminds us that imagining more life-giving patterns of relationship, and connecting to our communities, places, faiths, and nourishing practices is itself liberatory work.

To guide structural advocacy efforts, Ruether outlines some policy recommendations for systems-level transformation. Here are some major themes I have consolidated:

- Promote the creation of livable towns and regional configurations in which “business, educational, political and cultural centers are integrated with their agricultural base.”¹¹² Enable people to live and work on and with land, recovering the biorhythms of days, seasons, and bodies. Enact widespread community-supported agriculture and sustainable food production and distribution. Withdraw subsidies from agribusiness and support local, traditional forms of agriculture that return to seasonal food patterns and the integration of animals, food, and native plants. This entails combating the corporate usurpation of land and returning land to local farmers, families, cooperative groups, and (I would add) especially Native American communities.¹¹³
- Institute biodiversity protections and pollution regulations, ensure the accessibility of clean water, halt the ongoing conversion and development of land, shift to renewal energy sources, and terminate disposable wastes to the extent possible.^{114,115} Overhaul the transportation system to include phasing out gasoline cars and strengthening green public transit.¹¹⁶ Subsidize the development of sustainable home technologies and ecologically-oriented designs.¹¹⁷
- Equip women and non-binary persons as responsible agents, including in reproduction. Integrate men fully into the culture of daily sustenance, including feeding, clothing, washing, nurturing, and cooking,

¹¹² Ruether, *Gaia and God*, 108, 261-262.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*, 262.

¹¹⁴ Ruether. *Christianity and Social Systems*, 232.

¹¹⁵ Ruether, *Gaia and God*, 263

¹¹⁶ Ruether, *New Woman, New Earth*, 205-206.

¹¹⁷ Ruether, *Gaia and God*, 260

as a necessary prerequisite for the transformation of larger economic, social, and political systems. Promote a “holistic culture” that “recognizes men and women as individuated persons in mutual interdependency with each other and the Earth.”¹¹⁸

- Demilitarize, across the board. Ruether emphatically describes demilitarization as the “*sine qua non* of any genuine, ecologically sustainable, biospheric economy.”¹¹⁹

To this list readers today might add universal health care, democratic education, an end to mass incarceration and police militarization, and a welcoming, compassionate immigration system.

It is important to remember that for Ruether, transformation means a profound structural and cultural re-linking of home, work, land, education, governance, recreation, and community life. For example, measures to counteract ecological denigration and climate change must go beyond “greening” our energy sources to dramatically altering how we produce and consume. “Terminating disposable wastes” requires shedding value systems such as disposability culture—which, Ruether is clear, demands the greatest change from the most affluent.¹²⁰ Demilitarization requires global elites to realize that real security is not in invulnerability, but in acceptance of finitude and interdependency with all creation. Because Ruether’s vision is holistic, it requires both structural and cultural change together. This is why communities of celebration and resistance, as incubators of kinship consciousness and alternative life-patterns, are so important. Faith communities can play an important role in this effort, generating a new ecological culture and modeling changes in their buildings and lands.¹²¹ Many have already begun this process.

Ecclesial Implications

I now turn to my fellow Catholics (and perhaps fellow Christians more broadly), arguing that Ruether’s project of political, economic, and social transformation is continuous with a project

¹¹⁸ Ibid., 263-266.

¹¹⁹ Ruether, *Gaia and God*, 266.

¹²⁰ Ibid., 263-266.

¹²¹ Ruether, *Christianity and Social Systems*, 235.

of church transformation. Ruether's social critique is intimately tied to her ecclesial critique, as she calls us into a holistic orientation that addresses distorted relationships in all places. A truly liberative political theology necessarily implies a liberative ecclesiology. We can and should apply the same power analysis and utopian envisioning we apply to social structures, to the church.

I argue that we cannot separate Ruether's societal envisioning from her view of a liberative church. Throughout her life, Ruether was committed to alternative modes of both being-as-church *and* social and economic organization. As a feminist theologian, Ruether is known for her critique of the androcentrism in the Catholic Church's theology and structure. To separate Ruether's ecclesial critique from her larger social critique would be to fail to read her work as a whole. It would miss the entire argument of Ruether's career, that western systems of domination are interrelated manifestations of hierarchical, dualistic cosmology. If we separate the dynamics operative within the institutional Church (like clericalism, white/European supremacy, and cisheterosexism) from the dynamics in broader society, we would undercut the comprehensiveness of Ruether's analysis. More importantly, we would neglect the reality that the Catholic Church is not a closed, impermeable entity, insusceptible to the dynamics of the wider world. Rather, churches themselves are hierarchies and power structures that are modeled after and reflect social systems.¹²² Even more pressingly, the Church itself is a cultural force (historically, often a dominative one) that also shapes modes of relationships, both internally and externally.

On one level, integrity of commitment to liberation on the part of Catholics demands that we also examine dominative dynamics within our church. When Ruether calls us to start in our own communities, for Catholics, this includes the church. We cannot turn away from the oppression that the Catholic Church perpetuates—its historic function as an agent of colonization;

¹²² Ruether, *Christianity and Social Systems*, 244.

its repression of and hostility to LGBTQ+ people; its exclusion of women and trans and non-binary Catholics from ordained ministry; the ongoing abuse including the sexual abuse of children by clergy; and the persistence of white supremacy and Christian nationalism, especially in the U.S. Church whose bishops increasingly align themselves with the American political right. We will not achieve the full participation of all genders in any sphere when the Church continues to confine power to cisgender men. We will not achieve a political system oriented around consensus and collective discernment when the Church models a top-down, unilateral, and hierarchical model of governance. We will not achieve an anti-racist, abolitionist society when many in the U.S. church continue to show unwelcome to Black parishioners, discourage Black seminary candidates, and refuse to even say Black Lives Matter. This is not a call for Catholics to abandon the church in order to participate in liberation with moral consistency, but to see the necessity of working for the church's transformation. Ecclesial and wider societal transformation are intertwined because dominative relationships and theologies operate in both. So, we have to work in both.

On another level, if the church is to be an agent of liberation, it cannot do so without transforming itself. Holistic transformation includes the institutional church. The church has liberative resources which it must preach and practice; it also has the material and organizational resources to institute significant changes, especially around energy and land use. Ruether writes that a renewed understanding of Christian hope, one that encompasses ecojustice, "needs to be embodied much more deeply in our preaching, worship, and biblical study." She explains,

This vision needs to become a visible part of how we design our churches and worship spaces. It needs to flow out in our stewardship of the land and buildings of our church communities through a praxis of recycling and conservation of energy. It can be expressed in the transformation of our lands from wasteful overwatered lawns to natural grasses and permaculture gardens to help feed the poor. Only by embodying the vision of ecojustice in its own teaching, worship, and praxis can the church make itself a base for an ecojustice ministry to the larger community in which it stands. Ecojustice becomes central to the church's mission only when it is understood as central to the church's life. Anything less will lack credibility.¹²³

¹²³ Ruether, "Ecology and Theology," 362-363.

Catholic Sisters are a powerful example of living this call, as many women religious communities have begun to take land justice seriously, evaluating their land holdings and how they are stewarded, and undertaking projects like permaculture farming.¹²⁴

More broadly, the church has to see integral liberation as part of salvation and orient itself around real material action. Pope Francis began to outline this in his 2015 encyclical, *Laudato Si.* Ruether is clear that this will require a change in how we understand the church's mission.

The mission of the church is to be an expression (not the only or exclusive expression) of a struggle to overcome this dominator system and to transform the ways humans connect with each other and with the earth into more loving, life-giving, peacemaking relations.... Our mission is not to flee earth for some transcendent realm called 'heaven' but to put ourselves in harmony with this divine will for just, peaceful and loving relationships, to bring them to earth, to make them present on earth.¹²⁵

The church's mission cannot be separated from material liberation in the world and from the healing of the wounds wrought on the Earth by exploitative systems. Ruether asserts, "this holistic perspective is central to the biblical vision of redemption."¹²⁶

Taking seriously the mission of the church to bring about right relationship requires struggle within the institutional Church. As Robinson puts it, for Ruether, "to be for the church means to be against the church in a more ultimate way."¹²⁷ To build the Kin-dom of God is to be against "an ossified institution entangled in systems of domination," "actively resisting the current shape of the church that one fundamentally loves."¹²⁸ Ruether calls for Christian institutions that are "flexible enough to be responsive to the living God, and empowered enough to actively transform a corrupt order."¹²⁹ Building such a church is essential to the process of liberation.

¹²⁴ The Adrian Dominican Sisters, in southeastern Michigan, are one great example.

<https://adriandominicans.org/Justice-Peace-Creation/Permaculture>

¹²⁵ Ruether, *Christianity and Social Systems*, 243.

¹²⁶ Ruether, "Ecology and Theology," 354.

¹²⁷ Robinson, 95.

¹²⁸ Ibid.

¹²⁹ Ibid, 98.

Ruether explains that while the church has generally stopped short of deep transformation, there are always prophetic minority movements within it.¹³⁰ In *Gaia and God*, she writes that we inherit cultures of domination and deceit, as well as cultures of critique and compassion.¹³¹ We use the latter to check the former. Christians committed to this work, Ruether writes, have three tasks. First, we must contest the co-option of the church by reactionary powers, and instead affirm a prosocial and anti-imperialist faith. Second, we must seek broad inter-denominational and ecumenical alliances for holistic justice, without selling out vulnerable groups. Third, we must reach out to and coalition-build with peoples of other traditions (or none). We must decenter the Church as the sole salvific agent in world history, while simultaneously affirming that “redemption in Christ can be one language among others for a vision of a peaceful and just planet.”¹³²

How can the institutional Catholic Church serve as a model for the kind of relationships we wish to see in society at large? I think Ruether’s work on women-churches offers a way to enter into this question. Our church should think about how we can begin to structurally enact our values of participation, care and tenderness, radical inclusivity, and the dignity of *every* person in their particularities (and in their gifts and calls, including to ordination). The church can shed its identity as a divinized hierarchy, becoming instead a polycentric church of service and incarnation. This would require the hierarchy to disperse power, wealth, and ministerial authority—perhaps more widely teaching ministerial skills in the way the Benincasa community equips its members to be liturgists and hermeneuts (as I will soon discuss). Church leadership could support but not subsume the life of communities like women-churches, in a similar way in which some Catholic bishops used to support and promote base ecclesial communities in Latin America.

¹³⁰ Ruether, *Christianity and Social Systems*, 244.

¹³¹ Ruether, *Gaia and God*, 258.

¹³² Ruether, *Christianity and Social Systems*, 253.

Ultimately, I argue that Ruether's political vision implicates new ways of being-as-church, in addition to new patterns of societal organization. We can and must live into more life-giving modes of social relationship in the ways in which we structure ourselves as church. We can model liberation in the way we gather and practice as a community of faith. We have to be thinking about how we organize ourselves not just economically, socially, and politically, but also ecclesiastically. This is why Ruether devoted much of her life and work to the development of women-church communities that offer an alternative way of practicing, gathering, and contemplating. This is why she emphasizes the need for corporal liturgies and shared spiritual practices in her vision of base communities of celebration and resistance. And this is why, in liberative communities like Agape and Benincasa, new ways of being-as-church are central.

Catholics are called to create faith spaces that embody liberation in the way we serve, pray together, worship, read scripture, and teach religious education. In whatever forms of collective spiritual life we participate, we must place just relationality at the center—critically examining who leads, whose authority and input is recognized, what language and names we use for the Divine, towards what our theologizing and ritual is oriented, what and whose songs, prayers, stories, and images we engage... these things matter. They structure how we go about the world, how we understand God, how we understand ourselves and creation, and how we strive to live.

Finally, for Catholics to participate in justice movements and begin to live into right relationship in our homes and localities, we need and *deserve* to be nourished in/by our faith communities and our tradition in ways that are not fettered by—indeed, that actively reject—dominative systems like white supremacy, cisheterosexism, and clericalism. We need our tradition and its most life-affirming resources and practices to hold, sustain, and center us. But that tradition has to be critically appropriated, always in context of the lived realities of communities today.

Only then can it become for us a source of life, opening access to the practices and experiences that bring us into communion, into encounter with the risen Christ, and into the Kin-dom.

Lived Expressions: The Agape and Benincasa Communities

Ruether's model is not a far-off fantasy. Her vision is already being lived by intentional land-based Catholic communities today, such as the Agape Community in Ware, Massachusetts and the Benincasa Community in Guilford, Connecticut.

In his dissertation, Jim Robinson describes how the Agape community, of which he is a member, embodies Ruether's call to create communities of celebration and resistance.¹³³ I will not try to repeat what Robinson has already beautifully and extensively articulated. He compellingly sets forth how Agape engages all three of Ruether's elements of base communities: Agape shapes spiritual and ritual practices that stimulate love of life, engages as a pilot project of ecological living, and participates in networks of solidarity with other communities.¹³⁴ For Agape co-founders (and consistent, long-term residents) Suzanne Belote Shanley and Brayton Shanley, Agape may serve as a totalizing community experiment proposed in Ruether's "first" method. For Agape's other members and the many who participate in its activities to varying degrees, Agape may be more of a hub or center point of Ruether's "second" method.

In their book, *Loving Life on the Margins, The Story of the Agape Community*, the Shanleys name Ruether as one of the authors who led them to "examine the social gospel and base communities, which led to questioning the power structure of church and country."¹³⁵ From the start, Agape members have lived into Ruether's holistic analysis of power in the church and in

¹³³ Robinson, 239.

¹³⁴ Ibid., 250.

¹³⁵ Suzanne Belote Shanley and Brayton Shanley. *Loving Life on the Margins, The Story of the Agape Community*. Athol, MA: Haley's, 2019. 22.

broader society. They are aware of the parallel between a “male-dominated priesthood and a male-dominated civil government.”¹³⁶ Agape confronts patriarchy in its political, spiritual, and liturgical life—for example, using gender-inclusive lectionaries and language in prayer, placing women in ritual leadership, and actively advocating the ordination of women.¹³⁷

The Shanleys describe relying on the support of the Catholic Church in Agape’s early days, now remaining Catholic with “porous boundaries” yet decidedly located on the Church’s margins.¹³⁸ Robinson explains how Agape is grounded in Catholicism but attuned to broader engagement, identifying themselves as “public Christians” compelled to reject violent institutions. They do so through prayerful witness, vigils, fasting, and other liturgical practices which “powerfully fulfills Ruether’s call for communities to take their liturgies ‘to the streets.’”¹³⁹ They reflect Ruether’s assertion that corporate liturgies can nourish and guide socially-engaged action: “We were finding our place increasingly on the margins economically and socially with fidelity to scriptures leading us from community liturgies, daily prayer, and public protest to serving those in need in prison, providing hospitality to those out of prison and working with victims of war.”¹⁴⁰

In addition, living and working with land, including through biodynamics and permaculture, is central to Agape’s life. However, the Shanleys have found, in their teaching and outreach, that their agrarian vision often fails to resonate with urban communities of color who do not have the same economic and social safety nets as did Agape’s founders. This should prompt important questions and creative strategies about how to implement Ruether’s project of ecological integration in a way that is not only legible or accessible to people with land and material resources.

¹³⁶ Robinson, 275.

¹³⁷ *Ibid.*, 274.

¹³⁸ Shanley and Shanley, 67-68, 85.

¹³⁹ Robinson, 256.

¹⁴⁰ Shanley and Shanley, 85, emphasis mine.

The Shanleys describe closeness with the Earth as fostering “closeness to the Divine,” what Ruether calls a “biophilic” consciousness, and an immanent, sacramental theology.¹⁴¹ The Agape community practices a theology and spirituality of kinship and solidarity that is also foundational to Ruether’s work. In their book, the Shanleys write that the future of Agape will be “inhabited by those who seek mystical union with Divine Love in ordinary everyday life experience. They may not be found in church but in creative evolutions of Church, a renaissance in new religious forms.”¹⁴² The lived reality of Agape evinces—and its members articulate—new modes of being-as-church as central to Agape’s charism, spiritual life, and justice mission.

The Benincasa Community is also an example of a community of celebration and resistance—committed to contemplation, learning, activism and service, and right relationship. They offer hospitality and retreats, work with land, and participate in social justice action, as well as leading regular liturgies, prayer, and contemplative practices that center on resistance to racism, militarism, sexism, capitalism, and environmental degradation.¹⁴³ Benincasa also has a “Peter Maurin Garden,” modeled after Maurin’s “agronomic universities,” where they practice restorative farming techniques. They share the food grown there with local pantries and soup kitchens.¹⁴⁴

I had the privilege of interviewing two Benincasa community leaders, Sofie and Jimmy, who explained that while seeking structural change is central to Benincasa’s life, relationships are the main driver of the community. Those relationships, that include solidarity with other communities like Agape and Catholic Workers, make political action possible. For example, Benincasa has prayed for immigration reform outside of St. Patrick’s Cathedral, and housed protestors from the Coalition of Immokalee Workers, who joined in Benincasa’s house church

¹⁴¹ Shanley and Shanley, 171.

¹⁴² *Ibid.*, 302.

¹⁴³ Benincasa Community website, acc. Jan. 27, 2023. <https://www.benincasacommunity.org/about>

¹⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

liturgies. Benincasa members have also participated in change work within the institutional Catholic Church, including protesting with survivors of clergy sexual abuse. Jimmy described wanting to be “a thorn in the side” of the institutional church, explaining, “because of the way Catholic policy influences American politics, there is a responsibility for us to not just leave.”¹⁴⁵

As with Agape and Ruether’s model, shared spiritual life is at the core of Benincasa’s existence. Jimmy and Sofie emphasized the Benincasa community’s desire to not just protest but also to create something new—collectively discerning new forms of liturgy, rotating who presides, training one another to give homilies, and learning liberative and accessible forms of exegesis. These efforts are about not just generating new religious practices, but also equipping people to “use their voice,” “disseminating knowledge and power,” uplifting women as liturgists and teachers, and nurturing each person’s gifts.¹⁴⁶ These are all characteristics of Ruether’s women-churches, too, and the ethos of participation and shared spiritual life at the heart of her communities of celebration and resistance.

In this way, both Agape and Benincasa exemplify not only an alternative way of living in community, but an alternative way of being-as-church. Robinson cites Ruether’s emphasis on the significance of constructing communities that integrate contemplative and prophetic action.¹⁴⁷ Ruether’s vision of this synthesis, in the context of ecological and communitarian patterns of living, is embodied in the structure of life at Agape and Benincasa.

Ruether asserts that the structure and functions of various communities must organically arise from the needs of their inhabitants. My interlocutors from Benincasa expressed this same notion: “We don’t want to be a replicable model—it has to be led by your own spirit and

¹⁴⁵ Interview with Sofia Estrada and James Hannigan, Oct. 16, 2022.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid.

¹⁴⁷ Robinson, 291.

community.” This is the nature of the rootedness that Ruether uplifts. Roots cannot be translated or copied; being grounded in place means that a community is alive to and shaped by the particularities of its people and the more-than-human communities in which it is embedded. Ruether states that her vision, her theology, and the resources of Christianity are but a few suggestions among many for a liberative way of living. In the same way, the Benincasa leaders assert, “We are just sharing our way of life, showing what is possible.”¹⁴⁸

Agape and Benincasa offer us, as Ruether does, not only sorely-needed, concrete practical examples, but *hope*—glimpses of what it could mean to live in right relationship. The freedom we seek is already materializing, just as salvation and the Kin-dom of God have already been activated and set in motion in and through Christ’s incarnation, life, and resurrection. Ruether describes the “nucleus of the alternative world” as existing in the experimentations of new possibilities “within the womb of the old.”¹⁴⁹ The tools are here, the vision is here, the alternatives are here, unfolding within a world that is pervaded with care and grace more than it is by destruction and alienation.

Conclusion: The Call and Contribution of Ruether’s Vision

I believe that Ruether’s constructive vision makes an important contribution to Catholics, communitarians, activists, young justice-seekers, lovers of the Earth, and all those yearning for a freer world. She offers us a synthesized method of transformation that marries personal conversion, spiritual practices, and local engagement to community re-structuring, coalition-building, and systems-level political action. This comprehensive vision is brought into focus and begins to unfold when we build communities of celebration and resistance—making changes to communal patterns of living in our own localities, to the extents that we can within a death-dealing system.

¹⁴⁸ Interview with Sofia Estrada and James Hannigan, Oct. 16, 2022.

¹⁴⁹ Ruether, *Sexism and God-Talk*, 233-234.

Ruether also offers us, especially those in progressive advocacy spaces and the Catholic left, a needed emphasis on ecological integration. She illuminates how ecological grounded-ness can give rise to both an alternative economic model *and* an alternative ethos of relationship—calling for a cooperative social order explicitly characterized by mutuality and harmony with the Earth.¹⁵⁰ We need to grow closer to place and consider the broader horizon of integration with *all of creation* in our progressive advocacy. Advocating environmental protections and clean energy is of course critical, but it must always be part of a wider vision of transforming the ways in which we work, eat, produce, relate to each other and to the Earth, and understand ourselves (and God!) therein. And even as the policies we advocate may expand state power, we must ensure that we are promoting the creation of integrated and empowered local communities as much as possible.

Ruether's model also inflects communitarianism with a stronger ability to build networks of solidarity for structural change. Ruether shares Maurin's view of building a new society within the shell of the old via the creation of land-based alternative communities, and in conjunction with direct political action. In this way, her model is not just resistance by contrast, but a transformative project that entails both living alternatives *and* engaging vehicles of protest and advocacy. She wants to transform both the person and the system. She begins with personal conversion (which is never an individual process), and from there turns to organizing into coalition to confront systems. Those coalitions, in turn, foster the ongoing process of consciousness-raising and conversion.

Therefore, Ruether's model calls us to think about transformation holistically, to make changes in the ways we live here and now, to develop grounded community (including ecological), and to integrate the individual with the communal, the local with the structural. Ruether's model of change is consistent in its expression of interrelatedness and kinship, and in its essential

¹⁵⁰ Bouma-Prediger, 147.

understanding that we are embedded in networks of human and more-than-human communities, and that life-giving transformation happens through and in interdependent relationships.

Moreover, Ruether offers a good and needed model from which Catholics can learn, and a project in which Catholics can participate. Her model can help Catholics integrate justice work with efforts at ecological wholeness, new modes of communal life, and liberative ways of being a faith community. Her vision is not merely compatible with but arises from and is continuous Catholic theology and its history of embodied alternatives. Yet, Ruether's vision is also open, flexible, and accessible enough to invite wider collaboration, adaptation, and solidarity.

Finally, we all—especially my fellow Catholics—are called to a project of liberation. We are called to conversion. Ruether tells us that it is not enough to be converted in theory, or to be converted to advocacy work that is disconnected from actual patterns of living. We have to begin to model the forms of right relationship that we advocate on a structural level in our own lives and communities. The ends must be embedded in the means; this is a Catholic teaching. And when we begin, with our communities, to change how we relate, to allow the Kin-dom to begin to break into our daily lives, we must continually keep the big systems in view.

Ruether proclaims, “The nucleus of the alternative world remains, *like the Church* (theologically, as the Church), harbingers and experimenters with new human possibilities within the womb of the old.”¹⁵¹ Christianity is open to re-energization because of its roots in social protest and its “continual insistence on conversion”—a dialectic between inward change and collective practice that Ruether's model captures.¹⁵² She carries forward the traditions of Gospel radicalism and liberation theology—whose mandate to pursue justice is even taken up by the contemporary popes—that see transformation of a destructive and life-negating social order as central to the

¹⁵¹ Ruether, *Sexism and God-Talk*, 234. Emphasis mine.

¹⁵² White and Jones, 41.

practice of the faith. Living in loving, life-affirming ways and taking action to free ourselves, our Earth, and our siblings around the world are what it means to follow Christ. Communities like Agape and Benincasa are powerful examples of radical witness to the Gospel today.

If we are to be free from the alienation wrought by domination and oppression, we need to pattern our lives, communities, and systems in ways that promote right relationship with all beings—and we need practical, concrete proposals for how to do it. Ruether gives us one, providing an integrative model of ecologically-grounded social, economic, political, and ecclesial transformation. Ruether’s work calls attention to the need for imaginative visions of change, for greater closeness to local communities and land, and for *every person* to participate in a collective and ongoing process of conversion and liberative action. Fortunately, Ruether shows us that we can begin to enact transformation by building and strengthening communities of celebration and resistance right where we already are.

Dorrien places Ruether in a cloud of witnesses of all those committed to keeping alive the vision of a cooperative commonwealth, to generating communities that preserve the habits that sustain life and “the memories that remind them to care.”¹⁵³ Ruether reminds us to care. She reminds us that we were made for and are called to the fullness of loving relationship, that we are an intrinsic part of this Earth that is brimming with the presence of God. She reminds us—indeed, crafts for us and shows us—that alternatives are not only conceivable but possible and already unfolding, including with the tools of the Catholic tradition. It is Rosemary’s memory and call to action, and her inspired vision of communities of celebration and resistance, which I hope this project sustains.

¹⁵³ Dorrien, 335.

Bibliography

- Ahern, Annette J. "Social Justice: Now, Later or Never? The Contribution of Albrecht Ritschl and Johannes Weiss to Social Justice Theology." *Studies in Religion* vol. 32, issue 3 (2003). <https://doi.org/10.1177/000842980303200303>.
- Benincasa Community website, acc. Jan. 27, 2023. <https://www.benincasacommunity.org/about>
- Boff, Leonardo. *Church: Charism & Power*. Trans. John Diercksmeier. New York: Crossroad, 1985.
- Bouma-Prediger, Steven. *The Greening of Theology: The Ecological Models of Rosemary Radford Ruether, Joseph Sittler, and Jürgen Moltmann*. The American Academy of Religion, 1995.
- Dorrien, Gary. *Soul in Society: The Making and Renewal of Social Christianity*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995.
- Estrada, Sofia and James Hannigan. Interview with author. Oct. 16, 2022.
- Kimmerer, Robin Wall. "The Serviceberry: An Economy of Abundance," *Global Oneness Project*, acc. Mar. 30, 2023. <https://www.globalonenessproject.org/library/essays/serviceberry-economy-abundance>.
- Parsons, Monique. "Rosemary Radford Ruether, a founding mother of feminist theology, has died at age 85." NPR, *All Things Considered*. May 22, 2022. <https://www.npr.org/2022/05/22/1100596818/rosemary-radford-ruether-feminist-theologian-dies-at-age-85>
- Risen, Clay. "Rosemary Radford Ruether, Feminist Theologian, Dies at 85." *The New York Times*, May 27, 2022, updated May 31, 2022. <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/05/27/us/rosemary-radford-ruether-dead.html>

- Robinson, James. "Merton and Ruether: Toward a Contemplative-Prophetic Ecotheological Anthropology." Dissertation, Fordham University, 2020. <http://search.proquest.com.ezp-prod1.hul.harvard.edu/dissertations-theses/merton-ruether-toward-contemplative-prophetic/docview/2417375978/se-2>.
- Ruether, Rosemary Radford. "Before and Beyond Patriarchy: Rebuilding Healing Cultures." *Feminist Theology* vol. 2. (January 1993.) <https://search-ebSCOhost-com.ezp-prod1.hul.harvard.edu/login.aspx?direct=true&db=lsdar&AN=ATLA0001024585&site=ehost-live&scope=site>.
- *Christianity and Social Systems: Historical Constructions and Ethical Challenges*. New York: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2009.
- "Destroying the Earth." *Feminist Theology*, vol. 2 (January 1993). <https://search-ebSCOhost-com.ezp-prod1.hul.harvard.edu/login.aspx?direct=true&db=lsdar&AN=ATLA0001024583&site=ehost-live&scope=site>.
- "Ecology and Theology: Ecojustice at the Center of the Church's Mission." *Interpretation* vol. 65, no. 4 (October 2011). <https://search-ebSCOhost-com.ezp-prod1.hul.harvard.edu/login.aspx?direct=true&db=a6h&AN=ATLA0001866300&site=ehost-live&scope=site>.
- *Gaia and God, An Ecofeminist Theology of Earth Healing*. Harper Collins Publishers, 1992.
- *Liberation Theology, Human Hope Confronts Christian History and American Power*. New York: Paulist Press, 1972.

——— *New Woman, New Earth: Sexist Ideologies and Human Liberation*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1995.

——— “Organizing Skills Shine among Chiapans.” *National Catholic Reporter*, January 26, 1996.

<https://search-ebshost-com.ezp-prod1.hul.harvard.edu/login.aspx?direct=true&db=aph&AN=9603156471&site=ehost-live&scope=site>.

——— “The Politics of God in the Christian Tradition.” *Feminist Theology* vol. 17, issue 3 (2009). <https://doi.org/10.1177/0966735009102362>.

——— *Sexism and God-Talk, Toward a Feminist Theology*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1983.

——— “Time is Ripe for Participatory Economic Order.” *National Catholic Reporter*, 28, no. 2

(Nov 01, 1991): 18. <http://search.proquest.com.ezp-prod1.hul.harvard.edu/trade-journals/time-is-ripe-participatory-economic-order/docview/215339306/se-2>.

Shanley, Suzanne Belote and Brayton Shanley. *Loving Life on the Margins, The Story of the Agape Community*. Athol, MA: Haley’s, 2019.

White, Mark and Anela Jones. “Christian Radicalism in the United States: The Catholic Worker

Tradition.” *Social Alternatives* 7, no. 3 (September 1988): 39–43. <https://search-ebshost-com.ezp-prod1.hul.harvard.edu/login.aspx?direct=true&db=qth&AN=24568472&site=ehost-live&scope=site>.