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Visionary Women: Three Medieval Nystics

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and his companions by the author of Luke-Acts, as well as the controversial issue of the historical authenticity of the book of Acts itself. Because of the large number of footnotes, as well as the frequent mention of the views of many different scholars, many of them German, it may prove somewhat technical for use as a resource for ministry. However, it could be useful as a tool for a Seminary course on Acts or Paul.

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Visionary Women: Three Medieval Mystics

Rosemary Radford Ruether
Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2002
83 pages, \$9.30 Softcover

Rosemary Radford Ruether is a leading feminist theologian who teaches at Garrett-Theological Seminary in Evanston, Illinois. She has written hundreds of articles and reviews, and is the author or editor of thirty-two books, including a classic in the field of theology: *Sexism and God-talk: Toward a Feminist Theology* (Beacon Press, 1983; reissue edition, 1993). *Visionary Women: Three Medieval Mystics* was written for a popular audience, and it is an adaptation of her previous publication *Women and Redemption: A Theological History* (Fortress Press, 1998). It offers a concise introduction to the life and thought of three medieval mystics: Hildegard of Bingen, Mechthild of Magdeburg, and Julian of Norwich.

Ruether posits that these medieval mystics are vital to the spiritual life of modern Christians. The rich and creative thought of these women can provide contemporary Christians with new perceptions into faith and the medieval world. Female images inform their understanding of God (e.g., Julian's view of God as both father and mother, 54-56), the redemption and creation of the universe, the fecundity of nature, and the relation of the self to God. She argues

that without such writings the potentialities of feminine symbolism would be considerably less developed.

Ruether situates each of these women within her historical context, while examining key aspects of her theology from a feminist perspective. She presents pertinent details about each woman's life, writings and accomplishments. For instance, we learn that these women were largely self-educated, far removed from the intellectual world and university life of their male contemporaries. Ruether points to the gender politics of the time. Women's revelatory experiences, in her view, were not self-validating but rather had to be endorsed by male ecclesiastical authority. Ruether states: "Like Hildegard, Mechthild is certain of the truth of her visionary gifts and struggles against those who challenge it, but she lacks both the aristocratic hauteur and the access to the highest levels of power of church and state that protected the abbess" (31).

Although aimed at a general audience, this book challenges readers to explore different levels of interpretation. One interesting aspect Ruether explores in this book is Hildegard's consistent method of affirming her prophetic authority as a vehicle of God, while simultaneously discounting herself as a "poor little female figure." She suggests that four types of meaning could explain this dichotomy (10-15). First, this apparent disjunction was the only way a woman could achieve a public voice in medieval Christianity. Second, this self-negation corresponds to the human condition in general. Third, this dichotomy reflects her personal experience of the divine. Finally, Hildegard employs the contrast between her littleness and the divine voice as a rhetorical means not only to set forth her visions but also to contend with her adversaries and respond to petitioners' requests.

Readers who are interested in an introductory account of medieval female mystics or feminist theology will want to consult this book. Two caveats: the frequent use of technical terms and reference to scholarly concepts will challenge the popular readership for whom *Visionary Women* is intended; and readers who seek a more in depth analysis might consider going directly to her more detailed *Women and Redemption*.

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