

Mary Daly, radical feminist theologian, dead at 81

Thomas C. Fox | Jan. 4, 2010



Daly in 1987 (Photo by Gail Bryan)

Mary Daly, radical feminist theologian and a mother of modern feminist theology, died Jan. 3 at the age of 81. She was one of the most influential voices of the radical feminist movement through the later 20th century.

Daly taught courses in theology, feminist ethics and patriarchy at Boston College for 33 years. Her first book, "The Church and the Second Sex," published in 1968, got her fired, briefly, from her teaching position there, but as a result of support from the (then all-male) student body and the general public, she was ultimately granted tenure.

According to a 2000 *Cross Currents* profile, "Much of her work since that time has consisted in blowing exuberant raspberries at the Vatican, Boston College, and the keepers of the patriarchal flame generally -- who may have expected no better outcome from educating a woman, and must feel betrayed and vindicated by turns."

Mary E. Hunt, co-founder and co-director of the Women's Alliance for Theology, Ethics and Ritual (WATER), announced the death Jan. 3 online in "The Feminist Studies in Religion" bulletin:

"With a heavy heart, yet grateful beyond words for her life and work, I report that Mary Daly died this morning, January 3, 2010 in Massachusetts. She had been in poor health for the last two years.

Her contributions to feminist theology, philosophy, and theory were many, unique, and if I may say so, world-changing. She created intellectual space; she set the bar high. Even those who disagreed with her are in her debt for the challenges she offered. ... She always advised women to throw our lives as far as they would go. I can say without fear of exaggeration that she lived that way herself."

Daly once wrote: "There are and will be those who think I have gone overboard. Let them rest assured that this assessment is correct, probably beyond their wildest imagination, and that I will continue to do so."

She was an exuberant participant in and shaper of the feminist movement of the 1970s, and 1980s.

The only child of working-class, Irish-Catholic parents in upstate New York, she grew up with a strong sense of her ethnic and religious heritage. As a young woman, she developed a desire to become a philosopher and a

theologian. Encouraged by her parents, and especially by her mother, Daly pursued her intellectual dream, eventually becoming a victor over a Catholic educational system that prevented women from earning graduate degrees in philosophy by studying at the University of Freiburg where she earned graduate degrees in philosophy and theology.

Daly was influenced by thinkers ranging from Thomas Aquinas to French feminist Simone de Beauvoir to Virginia Woolf, according to Who2.com.

In fact, Daly, the feminist, developed a kind of perverse fondness for Aquinas, whom she called "the fat old monk." She learned to "decode" the thinking of a man who, she cheerfully admitted, conceived of women as "misbegotten males."

Eventually, in her life and scholarship she developed a sweeping analysis of "patriarchy" as the root of women's oppression and of all social ills in which people are treated as objects.

After "The Church and the Second Sex," she said she moved from "Christian reformist" to "radical, post-Christian" feminist.

Studying archetypal forms and prepatriarchal religion convinced Daly that church doctrine consisted of a series of significant "reversals." She explained these to *NCR* writer Jeanette Batz in 1996:

- the Trinity, from the triple goddess once celebrated worldwide;
- the virgin birth, from the parthenogenesis that once begat divine daughters;
- Adam giving birth to Eve.

Women operating on patriarchy's boundaries, she once wrote, can spiral into freedom by renaming and reclaiming an ancient woman-centered reality that was stolen and eradicated by patriarchy.

She took great delight in castigating the "eight deadly sins of the fathers": processions, professions, possession, aggression, obsession, assimilation, elimination and fragmentation. "Laugh out loud," she urged, "at their pompous penile processions."

As for God, there's simply no way to rid the language of allusion, she wrote, so, "if you must be anthropomorphic," she preferred "Goddess."

Daly most often contemplated the divine essence as a verb, Be-ing itself, so that worship is "not kneeling in front of a so-and-so but swirling in energy." Her language echoed quantum physics, and she was flattered if you said so: "I do think about space-time a great deal," she admitted. "It's a kind of mysticism which is also political."

These attitudes toward life and religion were reflected in the Feb. 26, 1996 issue of *The New Yorker* in which she wrote:

"Ever since childhood, I have been honing my skills for living the life of a radical feminist pirate and cultivating the courage to win. The word "sin" is derived from the Indo-European root "es-," meaning "to be." When I discovered this etymology, I intuitively understood that for a woman trapped in patriarchy, which is the religion of the entire planet, "to be" in the fullest sense is "to sin."

"Women who are pirates in a phallographic society are involved in a complex operation. First, it is necessary to plunder--that is, righteously rip off gems of knowledge that the patriarchs have stolen from us. Second, we must

smuggle back to other women our plundered treasures. In order to invent strategies that will be big and bold enough for the next millennium, it is crucial that women share our experiences: the chances we have taken and the choices that have kept us alive. They are my pirate's battle cry and wake-up call for women who want to hear.?

And so Daly would like to say: "I urge you to Sin. ... But not against these itty-bitty religions, Christianity, Judaism, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism -- or their secular derivatives, Marxism, Maoism, Freudianism and Jungianism -- which are all derivatives of the big religion of patriarchy. Sin against the infrastructure itself!"

Daly poured much energy into breaking down age-old boundaries of critical thought. Her work helped set the stage for other feminist theologians who rose up in the 20th century to offer critiques of male-dominated theology that would reshape Christian thought. Several of these groundbreaking women included Rosemary Radford Ruether, Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza, and Rosemary Haughton.

Boston College Jesuits worked uneasily with Daly for more than three decades before parting ways. According to Jack Dunn, Boston College spokesman, the university never terminated Daly's contract as a tenured professor.

"In 1999 she attempted to take a leave of absence (as she had in each of the previous instances in which a male student had attempted to gain access to her class) and her request was not granted. She then offered to retire from teaching at BC. A year later, she reneged on her retirement agreement and the case ended up in court where Judge Martha Sosman ruled against her motion for preliminary judgment."

In February, 2001, Boston College and Daly's supporters announced that a settlement had been reached.

Other Daly books include:

"Gyn/Ecology: The Metaethics of Radical Feminism," which defined categories of political theory and philosophy of religion.

"Pure Lust: Elemental Feminist Philosophy," an exploration of patriarchy and feminist vision.

"Websters' First New Intergalactic Wickedary of the English Language," a humor-filled work of words aimed at "freeing the English language" from its patriarchal roots.

"Outercourse: The Be-Dazzling Voyage," a philosophical autobiography.

"Quintessence... Realizing the Archiac Future: A Radical Elemental Feminist Manifesto," another consideration of feminist thought.

"Amazon Grace: Re-Calling the Courage to Sin Big."

[New York Times profile of Mary Daly](#)[1]

[Cross Currents interview with Mary Daly](#)[2]

Some of the information in this article comes from [Who2.com](#)[3], the online biography Web site.

Fox is NCR Editor.

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