

October 16, 1928–January 3, 2010



Mary Daly, radical feminist theologian and philosopher who spent most of her career teaching at Boston College, died in Gardner, Massachusetts on January 3, 2010, at the age of eighty-one, and after several years of declining health. Daly's incomparable contributions to the fields of religion, philosophy, and feminist studies have been duly noted in the many obituaries published in leading newspapers around the world following her passing. Countless expressions of appreciation, local gatherings to remember her and her work, a large national memorial service, and a gathering of intimates to bury her among the illustrious at Mount Auburn Cemetery in Cambridge, Massachusetts, have honored her in all of her complexity. Still, there is much to ponder and many issues to address as the legacy of this great feminist pioneer takes shape.

Mary Daly was born of Irish parents in Schenectady, New York, where she grew up. She was educated in Catholic schools, graduated with a degree in English from Saint Rose College in Albany, New York, and received an MA in English at the Catholic University of America. She earned a doctorate in religion at Saint Mary's College in Notre Dame, Indiana, at a time when women were unwelcome in most doctoral programs in theology in the United States. Daly supplemented that degree with two more doctorates in philosophy and sacred theology from the University of Fribourg in Switzerland where she did a lot of her studies in Latin. It was a language skill that stood her in good stead in later creative endeavors. To articulate the new ideas and insights she developed, Mary Daly coined new words and redefined others, always with careful, critical attention to etymology.

Daly spent the 1960s in Europe studying and teaching. In a series of postcards to her mother, who spent some time with her in Switzerland, she wrote of her excitement at being in Rome for

Vatican II. Picture her as a young student hanging around the edges of the Council, chatting up the press, learning about church politics, and collecting tidbits of ecclesial gossip! She was in her intellectual glory. She told her mother not to worry if she did not return to Fribourg on the appointed day since she was having such a great time in the Eternal City.

She saw up close and personal in Rome the workings of a patriarchal organization. Gradually the reality of institutional sexism became painfully obvious and eventually too much to bear. As a woman, indeed as a Catholic woman with far more theological education than many of the assembled bishops and cardinals who had voting rights when she did not even have voice, there was simply no place for Mary Daly in the Roman Catholic Church.

From that experience, Daly began her lifelong efforts to expose and change the inferior place of most women in the world. Gradually her scope enlarged to include special concern for animals and Earth, for the eradication of war, and the end of poverty. But it was her insistence on the well-being of women that led her and other pioneering colleagues to create the feminist theologies that are taken for granted today.

Mary Daly was a writer and a teacher. Her writings speak for themselves, beginning with her dissertations and ending with her clarion call to “Sin Big.” Her audience was the world, not just the academy. She lectured widely and spoke often at conferences, bookstores, seminars, and even a restaurant. It is safe to say she is one of the few members of the American Academy of Religion who published an article in *The New Yorker* and/or appeared on Roseanne Barr’s television show.

This popular approach did not help Daly become a full professor at Boston College. The Dean of the College of Arts and Science spelled out the problem, “Nevertheless in arriving at a determination of an appropriate level of excellence in your publications, the Committee recognized the contrast between your works and the more typical demonstrations of scholarly methodology in publications by which candidates for promotion to Professor are judged.” (*Outer course*, 389). Indeed the contrast was and remains vivid, but not in the way the dean intended. The academy does not necessarily reward its best and brightest. More’s the pity.

Daly considered her books to be her primary legacy. *Beyond God the Father* remains on the syllabi of many courses in feminist studies in religion, indeed of many general introductions to religion. Sad to say, it is still fresh and provocative despite decades of efforts by the rest of us to

eradicate the problems Daly pointed to in patriarchal religions. Exclusive use of male language and metaphors for the divine was but the tip of the patriarchal iceberg.

Daly received hundreds of letters (before e-mail) from women who thanked her for helping them make sense of their lives. Theologian Rita Nakashima Brock wrote of Mary Daly, “Perhaps the most transformative theologian of the twentieth century. *Beyond God the Father* remains the landmark book in feminist theology.”

The controversies opened in *Gyn/Ecology* remain part of contemporary conversation. The complexities of race, class, and nationality remain to be unpacked by Daly’s successors. Debates about her positions on race and her opinions on transsexuals rage in blogs and at conferences long after her death. There are few colleagues in religion whose work has such a broad and diverse reach across disciplines and throughout activist groups. It may not have gained her an academic promotion, but it certainly made an enormous difference in the world.

Mary Daly’s autobiographical *Outercourse* is a compelling read about one woman’s efforts to unmake the world. Her life was rather solitary; her closest companion for many years was a beloved cat. However, she was wonderfully well-accompanied by people she never met who remain in her intellectual debt, as well as by close collaborators and friends. Happily, a small team of friends and colleagues, myself included, was privileged to accompany her in her waning years. We assured that she lived and died with dignity and peace. She had taught us that sisterhood was important and we deepened in that knowledge as she aged.

Mary Daly was at heart a teacher. Over her decades (1967–1999) on the faculty at Boston College, she loved the classroom and her students. While much has been made of her decision to teach men separately from women, few people realize that in the early years at Boston College her students were nearly all males. Some of them recall her very fondly, including a young man who was viciously harassed by some white racist classmates. He confided his situation not to his Jesuit professors, but to Daly, who noticed his distress, listened to and understood his oppression (because of her own), and supported him as he regained his academic and emotional footing.

Daly enjoyed the Socratic approach, always questioning her students with keen interest in their answers. In later years, after she finished teaching at Boston College, I invited her to join my interns at WATER (the Women’s Alliance for Theology, Ethics, and Ritual) for a seminar by telephone. She reveled in it, asking the young women what they *felt* about a topic as well as

what they thought. She was wildly intuitive — a nice personal bookend to her raving rationality. She loved trees and plants, and she enjoyed nothing more than a swim in the pond behind her apartment.

Her last students were part of a “hedge school” she started. These were informal discussions and seminars with feminist graduate students in Boston who wanted to learn with her. Ironically, the eighteenth and nineteenth century hedge schools were created by Catholics who resisted converting to the Anglican tradition. Daly, true to her roots, revived the idea to feminist ends.

Mary Daly attended many AAR Annual Meetings over the years. She said she went to see her friends. She was part of the group that initiated the Women’s Caucus. She was active early on in the life of the Women and Religion Section. She always liked to have a panel on her latest publication even though she criticized “academia” as a locus for intellectual work. This year’s meeting will include two panels reflecting on her legacy.

Mary Daly was controversial in her life and remains controversial after her death. She challenged basic assumptions about how the world ought to be. She asked no one’s pardon for trying to make it different, especially when it came to women. Her methods were not universally appreciated, even by many who agreed with her goals. But she changed the world by opening up the hard philosophical questions of Being and Sinning, by positing the importance of all women, including Crones, Lesbians, and Hags, by unmasking patriarchy in its myriad disguises, and by insisting on sharing the “life energy” with all beings without exception.

Religious studies after Mary Daly is a new thing for which future generations are in her debt. Hers is a legacy to celebrate by delving deeply into tough questions that reshape the world and by enjoying the process as much as she did.

This In Memoriam piece was written by Mary E. Hunt, Women's Alliance for Theology, Ethics, and Ritual.

Join us for two Annual Meeting sessions on Mary Daly.

A31–110
Women and Religion Section
Celebrating and Cerebrating Mary Daly (1928–2010)
Sunday, October 31, 2010, 9:00 AM–11:30 AM
Marriott Marquis Hotel – Marquis Ballroom C

Mary Daly's life and work have always been wildly provocative and controversial. Thus her ongoing significance in theology, philosophy, and feminism should be vigorously discussed and debated. This panel of leading feminist women will offer a cross-section of perspectives on Mary Daly's thought and activity. The philosophic categories she developed (such as Be-ing, the Sado-Ritual Syndrome, and Nag-Gnostic), landmarks in her life such as her battles with her (unnamed Jesuit) employer, the feminist debates over race and transgender people, and the issues she embraced — including animal rights, environmentalism, lesbian-feminism, and opposition to genetic manipulation — will form the heart of this well-rounded discussion. **Emily Culpepper**, the chair-crone, will ensure that there is significant time for audience participation and that our panel will present diverse perspectives as a catalyst for our critical thinking together.

The impact Mary Daly had, both personally and through her work, will be highlighted by each participant, as noted below:

Mary E. Hunt will reflect on the life and work of Mary Daly as it shaped and was shaped by feminist Catholicism.

Judith Plaskow will talk about how *Beyond God the Father* shaped her theology when it was just in the process of formation. She will also highlight aspects of the book that have remained formative for her over the years.

Laura Levitt will reflect on how Mary Daly continues to be a presence in her feminist theory classroom, most powerfully in relation to Audre Lorde's open letter to Daly. What she will reconsider is how teaching this letter has changed over the years, especially after learning that Daly did reply to Lorde. How does Daly get remembered and what does a reconsideration of her relationship to Lorde mean for new generations of students in Women's Studies? How is Daly's legacy perceived in contemporary popular culture, for instance in her presentation in Wikipedia?

Traci West will reflect on her first encounter with Mary Daly's writings as a college student who wanted to become an ordained Protestant minister in the late 1970s, and on the invaluable role of radical feminist critics for the church. She will also comment on the significance of Audre Lorde's letter to Mary Daly for advancing the discussion of white feminist racism.

Zayn Kassam will discuss Mary Daly's views of non-Western women and practices relating to such women that she finds problematic, and relate these, where possible to her views on the treatment of nature.

Carol Adams will reflect on things she learned from her personal friendship with Mary Daly in the early 1970s, when, with Mary's encouragement, she began exploring ideas that became *The Sexual Politics of Meat*. In addition, she will discuss Mary's decentering of the human in her writings and her celebration of the life and living of multitudes of nonhuman beings.

Xochitl Alvizo will explore an approach to addressing the limits of Mary Daly's work that will be more feminist in tone and method than that usually employed by her critics. She will also boldly proclaim and celebrate Daly's Elemental gifts to feminists' lives and work, including her own.

A31-222

Lesbian-Feminist Issues and Religion Group

Bedazzling Diversity: Mary Daly's Transformative Influence on Lesbian, Gay, and Feminist Identities

Sunday, 1:00 PM-2:30 PM

Marriott Marquis – A601

Mary Daly (1928-2010) famously described the women's movement as a "creative political ontophany" (*Beyond God the Father*), yet she always maintained that those who participated in this ontophany were multiple and diverse. This panel will examine the ways in which her thought shaped lesbian, gay, and feminist identities, especially within religious studies and theology. The participants on the panel hold distinct subject positions, and come from different scholarly generations. Each panel member will speak to their initial experience of encountering the words, works, thought, and person of Mary Daly, as well as framing larger questions of her impact on the field and the world.

Yvonne Zimmerman, Methodist Theological School in Ohio, Presiding

Panelists:

Tiffany Steinwert, Boston University

Jennifer Rycenga, San Jose State University

Dirk von der Horst, Claremont Graduate University

Sheila Briggs, University of Southern California

Robyn Henderson-Espinoza, Iliff School of Theology and University of Denver