



Daly, Mary (1928-2010)

by Tina Gianoulis

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Radical feminist philosopher, theologian, and linguist Mary Daly was no stranger to controversy. An outspoken lesbian-feminist and separatist, Daly provoked outrage by challenging established ideas and institutions that she considered destructive to women's power and creativity.

From organized religion to the university world she calls "academentia," to men themselves, Daly dissected the "death-loving" culture of patriarchy and its effects on the minds and hearts of women. However, her brilliant body of work was far more than a litany of complaints. It was a joyously iconoclastic search for liberation, and an exploration of a hypothetical women-centered landscape where patriarchal domination has lost its power.

Daly was born on October 16, 1928 into an Irish Catholic family in Schenectady, New York. She attended Catholic schools and was drawn to the study of religion and philosophy. After earning her first Ph. D. in religion at St. Mary's College in Indiana, she wanted to study theology. She was disappointed to find that no theology graduate program in the U.S. admitted women. Undaunted, she went to Switzerland to study at the University of Fribourg, where she received two more doctorate degrees, in Catholic theology and philosophy.

In 1966, she returned to the U.S. and began an assistant professorship at the Jesuit-run Boston College, where she began a long career of stimulating feminist rebellion and challenging oppression.

Her first book, *The Church and the Second Sex* (1968), was a look at misogyny within the Catholic Church, and provoked an immediate reaction from the Boston College administration. Daly was notified that she would not be reappointed after the end of the quarter. However, Daly's students, all men at the time, rushed to support her. Their protests convinced the college not only to rehire Daly, but also to give her a promotion to the rank of associate professor with tenure.

For the next thirty years, Daly continued to teach religion and women's studies at Boston College while studying, speaking, and writing about women's liberation. As she explored the issues, her ideas evolved and became increasingly radical.

In *Beyond God the Father: Toward a Philosophy of Women's Liberation* (1973), she began to view all organized religions as stemming from patriarchy and therefore from a basic philosophy of abasing and oppressing women. By the time she published *Gyn/Ecology: The Metaethics of Radical Feminism* in 1978, she had begun to postulate the need for a new language in which to express women's realities. *Gyn/Ecology* includes an extensive index of new words, created by Daly to replace oppressive patriarchal language and concepts.

Daly carried this idea even further in *Websters' First New Intergalactic Wickedary of the English Language*, which she wrote with Jane Caputi in 1987. In *Beyond God the Father* Daly had said, "The liberation of language is rooted in the liberation of ourselves," and in the *Wickedary*, Caputi and Daly create a new

vocabulary to express their philosophy of women's spirituality and liberation.

Neither Daly's philosophy nor her linguistics is ponderous and solemn. Her words are tricksters, puns, and fabrications that give a playful, if resolute, tug to patriarchy's beard. The non-linear nature of the *Wickedary* has caused some modern analysts to call it an early example of hypertext, though it is in print rather than cyber form. Like the best hypertext, the book is filled with cross-references that encourage the reader to participate actively in her reading experience.

Daly came out publicly as a lesbian in the early 1970s. Always a holistic thinker, she never regarded her lesbianism as merely a sexual identity. It became part of her redefinition of the universe in terms of the feminine.

In the *Wickedary*, Daly defines Lesbian as "a Woman-Loving woman; a woman who has broken the Terrible Taboo against Women-Touching women on *all* levels [and] rejected false loyalties to men in every sphere." From this perspective Daly had little interest in gay liberation, which she viewed as male-dominated. She also clashed with post-modernists about the issue of transgender, which she saw as reinforcing and validating gender stereotypes.

Throughout her feminist career, Daly remained a separatist, maintaining the importance of women-only space, in the face of staunch opposition, first from male chauvinists, and later from post-modernists. During the mid-1970s, she began to restrict her women's studies classes to women only. Though she taught some men separately, she felt that having even one man in a women's class changed the dynamic dramatically. Because men were used to taking up space and women were accustomed to allowing them to take it, women were unable to relax and explore new ideas when men were present.

Though some had objected to this policy through the years, Daly had maintained her women-only classes. In 1999, however, two male students attended Daly's class with the express purpose of challenging her "exclusionary" policy. One of the students was backed by a right wing think tank called the Center for Individual Rights (CIR), and neither student had the proper prerequisites for the class. Even though Daly continued to offer separate classes for men truly interested in her subject, Boston College officials demanded she open her classes.

Instead, Daly took a leave of absence. The college responded by attempting to force Daly to retire. A flurry of litigation followed, with CIR threatening to sue the college for discrimination, and Daly suing B. C. for breach of tenure. A settlement was reached in 2001, with Daly receiving an undisclosed amount of money.

In her retirement, Daly, who called herself a "revolting hag," with words reclaimed from the patriarchy, continued to write and speak out as one of the foremost feminist thinkers in the world.

She died on January 3, 2010 following two years of failing health.

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Tina Gianoulis is an essayist and free-lance writer who has contributed to a number of encyclopedias and anthologies, as well as to journals such as *Sinister Wisdom*.