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Pure Complexity: Mary Daly's Catholic Legacy

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Abstract

Mary Daly was among the most influential feminist theologians and philosophers of the twentieth century. This analysis of her complex relationship to the Catholic tradition shows the many ways in which she both drew inspiration from and was oppressed by Catholics and Catholic institutions. Nonetheless, she left an indelible mark on the catholic (small 'c') tradition, encouraging others to see the violence as well as the wisdom that shapes it.

Key Words: Mary Daly; Catholic Church; feminist; complexity

Pura Complexidade: O legado católico de Mary Daly Resumo

Mary Daly foi uma das mais influentes teólogas e filósofas feministas do século 20. A presente análise de sua complexa relação com a tradição católica nos mostra o quanto católicos e instituições católicas lhe serviram de inspiração e também como forma de opressão. No entanto, ela deixou uma marca indelével na tradição católica (com 'c' minúsculo), encorajando outros a ver tanto a violência quanto a sabedoria que moldam essa tradição.

Palavras-chave: Mary Daly; Igreja Católica; feminista; complexidade

Pura Complejidad: el legado católico de Mary Daly Resumen

Mary Daly fue una de las teólogas y filósofas feministas más influyentes del siglo 20. El presente análisis de su compleja relación con la tradición católica nos muestra como católicos e instituciones católicas le sirvieron de inspiración y también como forma de opresión. Sin embargo ella dejó una marca indeleble en la tradición católica (con 'c' minúscula), animando a otros a ver tanto la violencia como la sabiduría que moldean esa tradición.

Palabras-clave: Mary Daly; Iglesia Católica; feminista; complejidad

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I am grateful to Mary Daly for persevering against monumental odds to leave us a legacy that we have only begun to inherit. May she be a blessing and an inspiration as we go about our common work.

My focus is on a small piece of that legacy, the Catholic part. I have entitled my remarks “Pure Complexity,” a shameless riff on Mary’s book *Pure Lust: Elemental Feminist Philosophy*.¹ I think it describes the nature of her Catholicism. It was pure in its seamless connection to who she was and how she lived in the world. Purity is not easy, as anyone who knew Mary could attest. But her Catholicism was at the same time complicated in the variegated, multi-dimensional ways in which she challenged, changed, and shaped a faith tradition against its will. No one ever accused Mary Daly of being simple in any sense of the word. But insofar as she was complicated she was purely so.

“Pure complexity” also describes her relationship to Boston College. From her early years as the only woman in the Theology Department, through her various tenure and promotion struggles, to the last years when she sued the university for violating her tenure rights by cancelling her 1999-2000 classes, her relationship to Boston College (and perhaps Boston College’s relationship to her) was, to put it politely, “pure complexity.” But history is not our topic. I am not Mary Daly and Boston College of old is gone. Nevertheless, I acknowledge her complex history with Boston College as it shaped her theological legacy. Perhaps by doing so clues will emerge for how Boston College and theological colleagues can foster collegiality and solidarity across the many diversities that shape contemporary contexts.

I explore Mary’s Catholic theological legacy in three moments. First, I offer a thumbnail biography of Mary and her work for those who might not be familiar with her. Second, I share three anecdotes that illustrate something of her relationship to Catholicism. Finally, I conclude with what I think are the lasting aspects of her Catholic theological legacy. All of this is from my feminist Catholic perspective.

(1) It is amazing how even someone of Mary Daly’s stature can be forgotten quickly in her own context although in her case obituaries were ubiquitous. She died in Gardner, Massachusetts, on January 3, 2010 as the *Boston Globe* reported. The *New York Times Magazine* piece, “The Lives They Lived,” which profiled prominent people who died in 2010 (Dec. 26, 2010) included Mary Daly with George Steinbrenner, Jimmy Dean, Lucille Clifton, Lynn Redgrave, and Richard Holbrooke among other luminaries who passed away in 2010. I like to think they would each be flattered to be in her company.

1 Mary Daly, *Pure Lust: Elemental Feminist Philosophy*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1984.

Mary Daly was born of Irish parents in Schenectady, New York, where she grew up. "Aren't we Lucky to be Irish?" they instilled in her. She was educated in Catholic elementary and high schools. She graduated with a degree in English from St. Rose College in Albany, New York, followed by an M.A. in English at The Catholic University of America. She earned a doctorate in Religion at St. Mary's College, Notre Dame, Indiana, at a time when women were unwelcome in most U.S. doctoral programs in theology, including Notre Dame's.

This so-called "lady's degree," as the St. Mary's doctorate was known, did not satisfy Mary Daly. She supplemented it 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.

Mary spent the first half of the 1960s in Europe studying, teaching, and travelling. She worked for several colleges' Junior Year Abroad programs. By the time she returned to the United States to begin her teaching career she walked into the midst of the Civil Rights movement and a nascent women's movement. She job-hunted when there was a desire on the part of many colleges and universities to hire women, albeit as she recognized quickly, largely as tokens. She got several offers but accepted Boston College's.

Vatican II was in full swing during her Europe years. 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. It made her recall a young boy taunting her on the way to school when she was a child saying that she could not be an altar girl. 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.

Far from hating the Church as most people think she did, I contend that it was her very love for the rich Catholic intellectual and spiritual tradition that motivated at least her early work. After all, gender was all that distinguished her from the other Irish, Catholic people in theology. Imagine if she had been from a minority racial/ethnic group, of a less scholarly bent, or any of myriad other differences. Gender alone was a sufficient barrier to keep her at bay.

Mary recognized that the institutional Roman Catholic Church was paradigmatic of the world when it came to women. So she began her lifelong

efforts to expose and change the inferior place of most women, especially women who are poor and uneducated. 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 including her clarion call to “Sin Big.” Her audience was the world not 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 Boston College Theology Department who published an article in *The New Yorker* and/or appeared on Roseanne Barr’s television show.

This popular approach did not help her become a full professor. The Dean of Boston College’s College of Arts and Science spelled out the problem he perceived: “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.”² Indeed the contrast was and remains vivid, but surely not in the way the dean intended. Mary Daly saw this as a classic “reversal” of things, rather like Alice in Wonderland when things are upside down. The academy does not necessarily reward its best and brightest. A series of volumes entitled “Feminist Interpretations” of various scholars puts Mary Daly in the ranks of Plato, Simone de Beauvoir, Hegel, Mary Wollstonecraft, Kant, Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Foucault, and Aristotle.³

Mary considered her books to be her legacy. *The Church and the Second Sex* was her opening salvo.⁴ It was followed by the classic *Beyond God the Father* which remains on the syllabi of many courses in feminist studies in religion, indeed of many general introductions to religion.⁵ Sad to say, it is still fresh and provocative despite decades of efforts by many feminist theologians to eradicate the problems Mary Daly pointed to in patriarchal religions. Exclusive use of male language and metaphors for the divine are but the tip of

² Mary Daly, *Outercourse: The Bedazzling Voyage – Containing Recollections from My Logbook of a Radical Feminist Philosopher*. San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1992, p. 389.

³ See Sarah Lucia Hoagland and Marilyn Frye, Editors, *Feminist Interpretations of Mary Daly*. University Park, PA: The University of Pennsylvania Press, 2000.

⁴ Mary Daly, *The Church and the Second Sex*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1986.

⁵ Mary Daly, *Beyond God the Father: Toward a Philosophy of Women’s Liberation*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1973.

the patriarchal iceberg. She received hundreds of letters (pre e-mail) from women who thanked her for helping them make sense of their lives.

The controversies she opened in *Gyn/Ecology* remain part of contemporary conversation.⁶ The complexities of race, class, and nationality remain to be unpacked by Mary's successors. Debates about her positions on race and her opinions on transsexuals rage in blogs and at conferences long after her death. I can think of 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.

Her provocatively titled *Pure Lust* marked the shift from theology to philosophy in her work. She had to write her own dictionary, what she called *Webster's First New Intergalactic Wickedary of the English Language*, to explain the way in which she used words, indeed to introduce new ones.⁷ Crone, witch and hag, epithets hurled at women for centuries became honorifics in her hands.

Mary Daly's autobiographical *Outercourse* is a compelling read about one woman's efforts to unmake the world.⁸ *Quintessence* was her radical feminist manifesto-calling women to act courageously, something she said you learned by being courageous.⁹ Finally, in *Amazon Grace* she spelled out "the courage to Sin Big".¹⁰ I daresay hers was a unique body of work of pure complexity.

Her life was rather solitary with her closest companion for many years a beloved cat. However, she was wonderfully well accompanied by people she never met who remain in her intellectual debt, as well as by a close collaborators and friends. Happily, a small team of friends, Team Mary, of which I was a part, 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 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 because Rome did not permit women to receive degrees in Liberal Arts (as opposed to Education) at Boston College until 1969.

⁶ Mary Daly, *Gyn/Ecology: the Metaethics of Radical Feminism*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1990.

⁷ Mary Daly (with Jane Caputi), *Websters' First New Intergalactic Wickedary of the English Language*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1987.

⁸ Mary Daly, *Outercourse: The Bedazzling Voyage – Containing Recollections from My Logbook of a Radical Feminist Philosopher*. San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1992.

⁹ Mary Daly, *Quintessence: Realizing the Archaic Future – A Radical Elemental Feminist Manifesto*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1998.

¹⁰ Mary Daly, *Amazon Grace: Re-Calling the Courage to Sin Big*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006.

Some of the men students recall her very fondly, including a young man whom Boston College Professor John McDargh reported was viciously harassed by some white racist classmates. He confided his situation not to his Jesuit professors, but to Mary 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.

She enjoyed the Socratic approach, always questioning her students with keen interest in their answers. In later years, after she finished teaching at BC, I invited her to join my interns at the Women's Alliance for Theology, Ethics and Ritual (WATER) 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 about it. She was wildly intuitive, a nice personal bookend to her raving rationality. She loved trees and plants; 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 18th and 19th century hedge schools were created by Catholics who resisted converting to the Anglican tradition. Mary, true to her roots, revived the idea to feminist ends.

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. Even many who agreed with her goals did not appreciate her methods. 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 many disguises, by insisting on sharing the "life energy" with all beings without exception. It is a rich legacy.

(2) Mary's relationship to Catholicism is evident in three anecdotes that demonstrate the "pure complexity" of the woman and her thinking.

When Team Mary prepared Mary's papers to be archived at the Sophia Smith Collection at Smith College we found many treasures. Among them were post cards from Rome that Mary sent to her mother, Anna Daly, who was living with Mary in Fribourg, Switzerland, at the time. This was in the mid-1960s when Mary was a graduate student doing her double doctorates in Europe during the Second Vatican Council.

Mary penned a note to her mother—all this before cell phones and email—to say that her mother ought not to worry if Mary did not return to

Fribourg on the day she was scheduled as she was having such a great time in Rome. Her fun consisted of hanging around the Council, talking with journalists over strong Italian coffee, meeting bishops and other theologians along the way. I picture her as a young student learning about church politics, and collecting tidbits of ecclesial gossip! She was in her intellectual glory. It was a heady time for a young Catholic woman who apparently harbored some hope that there was a place for her in the whole mix called church.

Even the most casual reader of Mary Daly knows that the story did not turn out that way. Instead, she gradually came to see the absurdity of the pompous plumed patriarchs and the futility of their efforts to lead anyone anywhere as long as women, queer people, and the majority of the Catholic population in most parts of the world was banned from their Euro-centric, clerical deliberations.

She wrote *The Church and the Second Sex* (1968) as a report of those experiences with still some hope that things might change. As institutional Catholic repression only increased, she issued *Beyond God The Father* (1973) to clarify that any hopes of an inclusive church were in vain and that women ought to move on to greener pastures. Her reissuing of *The Church and the Second Sex with the Feminist Post-Christian Introduction and New Archaic Afterwords by The Author* (1986) left no doubt about her view of the Roman Catholic Church as a corrupt institution.¹¹ This was before the public revelation of priest pedophilia and its cover-up by bishops. Mary Daly was always ahead of the curve.

A second story brings us up several decades to the early 1980s when many Catholic women, thanks to the insights of Mary Daly and other feminist scholars, had long since kicked the institutional Catholic dust from our Birkenstocks and started the women-church movement.¹² It was an effort to take the best values of our tradition—love, justice, mutuality, and equality—and live them out in local base communities and organizations so that we can focus on the needs of the world not the failings of the Roman Catholic Church. Women-church groups function just fine without clergy and with full participation by all adult members of the ekklesia.¹³ There is no structural connection to anything Roman Catholic and there is an increasing reliance on a wide range of spiritual resources.

¹¹ *The Church and the Second Sex with the Feminist Post-Christian Introduction and New Archaic Afterwords by The Author*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1986.

¹² Women-Church Convergence, www.women-churchconvergence.org.

¹³ See for example, Rosemary Radford Ruether. *Women-Church: Theology and Practice of Feminist Liturgical Communities*. San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1985.

Women-church leaders were planning a large conference in Cincinnati in 1983 with the title “Women-Church: Claiming Our Power.” It was the bright idea of the planners to invite Mary Daly to speak. It fell to me to call and tender the invitation. I can still hear her roaring response: “Why would I want to participate in anything that had to do with church?”

Grasping for straws, I allowed as to how she might possibly be interested in the “women” aspect of it. I knew she liked women. I explained as gently as I could that the women-church movement, despite its name, was in those days primarily women from the Catholic tradition who saw things in much the same way as she did. Mary Daly considered my point. In a lower tone she replied, “Well, if I were going to do *anything* that had to do with that stuff this would be the group I would do it with.” Needless to say, she was not a speaker at the meeting. But she was ours.

Mary opened the intellectual and spiritual way for many people to leave aside patriarchal religion. She was understandably impatient with any of what she saw as backsliding or accommodation. I have come to agree with Mary Daly that some moves, like ordaining women as Roman Catholic priests, are terribly fraught since they reinforce and reinscribe the very system that is problematic. But I think along the way she also missed out on some of the richness, both intellectual and personal, that comes from trying to construct something new out of the ashes of the old. After all, she was more Catholic than most of us and loved the tradition despite herself.

The third story is short and sweet. Professor Jennifer Rycenga of San Jose State University and I were part of the team that cleaned Mary’s apartment and helped her settle into assisted living in 2008. We went to see her at the new place, taking a few books and pictures we thought would be a comfort to her. One of our choices--rather a lucky guess--was a well-used copy of Thomas Aquinas’ *Summa Theologica*. Mary was delighted to have it with her, handled it gently and with a certain reverence. By that time some of her brightness had dimmed but it was evident that she still valued the work of Thomas Aquinas that had so shaped her own thinking. Pure complexity she was.

What do these three stories demonstrate?

First, I think it is clear that her postcards from Rome were the original “postcards from the edge.” It was a margin that she deftly and courageously turned into a center à la Bell Hooks.¹⁴ I think it is fair to say that she sparked millions of people to see the blatant hypocrisy and injustice of a male-only clerical caste pretending to be the guardians of the Catholic theo-ethical jewels that Mary Daly so valued early in her life.

¹⁴ Bell Hooks, *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center*. Cambridge: South End Press, 1984.

She declared a pox on their house and they on hers. I am confident that history will treat her far more kindly than it will treat those who continue to abuse children, disregard women, dishonor queer people in the name of a divine few recognize. In short, Mary Daly was right early about institutional Roman Catholicism.

Second, her reaction to the women-church movement was typical of her reaction to many things that she did not fully understand—like racism and transgender people—in that it was blunt and reflexive. This is not a helpful way for a public intellectual to further the conversation. On consideration, she softened her view, even changed a bit as she increasingly understood, for example, how we at the Women's Alliance for Theology, Ethics and Ritual (WATER) serve no church but provide feminist intellectual and pastoral resources that women want and need regardless of their faith perspectives.

To her credit, Mary Daly continued to grow in her support for the variety of ways women create radical spaces for survival and thriving. I take this as evidence of her understanding far more deeply on racism and transgender than her sometime unnuanced public statements would indicate. At the same time, her unambiguous challenges force the rest of us to re-examine presuppositions, guard against cooptation, and otherwise stay on our theo-political toes. It is a trade off.

Finally, there is simply no denying that for whatever reasons she loved the *Summa* and all of its complicated, well parsed, thoughts. I suspect it was not just because she was the “peeping Thomist” I always jokingly accused her of being. Rather, it was because she respected the Catholic intellectual tradition in which, despite her many moves away from it, she was formed. She knew it could be a source of cosmic goodness. So she made it so despite the institution's failings.

(3) What then of Mary Daly's Catholic legacy?

Based on these anecdotes, I submit that Mary Daly's feminist relationship to Catholicism, a good subject for a book, had many layers. While she was formed in the 2000-year-old faith tradition, she changed it more than it changed her. For the safety and well being of the world, this is a good thing for which future generations remain in her cosmic debt.

Her legacy includes some very specific aspects. First, she left little doubt about her belief in the divine. At age 14, while lolling by a swimming hole she had an encounter with a Clover Blossom that revealed to her that she should become a philosopher. A decade or so later while in graduate school in South Bend, Indiana, a hedge spoke to her. Yes, a hedge. It said simply

“Continued existence,” which she interpreted to mean that life, or what she called “being” goes on after death.

A first intuition might be to seek medical care for such a delusional person as Mary Daly. But I think the truth is that among us there are people, not many but a few, who see the world as it “really” is. Mary Daly was one of them. Just like Rachel Carson who said, “in every grain of sand there is the story of the earth,” Mary Daly saw beyond the beyond in flowers and hedges. She lived out those intuitions against phenomenal odds rather like other mystics in our Catholic tradition. In short, she was not in the business of religion because it was lucrative or prestigious but because she really believed.

Second, her life makes clear that theology is rooted in the experience of the theologians. We have learned this from other liberationists—African America, Latino/a, queer, post colonial, among others—but Mary Daly’s feminist experience was dynamic and shaping in ways that proved too rich for the blood of some and just what the rest of the world needed. Subsequent Catholic theological work has been subject to a gender critique thanks to Mary Daly, though I hasten to add some things have not changed much.

Third, Mary Daly’s Catholic approach to religion was planetary in its reach and political in its goals. As I have sought to make sense of the three-pronged disaster in Japan in 2011, I have gone back to Mary Daly for insight. She warned in 1992, “that nuclear reaction threatens our lives and the life of the planet” and had cautioned that if we remain locked in the “Looking Glass Society” (patriarchal mirror world of deadly reversals and projections) “life will depart from this planet” (*Outercourse*, p. 177 quoting from *Beyond God the Father*, p. 198).

She described visiting Richland, Washington in 1974, home to nuclear plants and high-level radioactive waste storage. She was the guest of women who opposed the nuclear activities. She described the people who supported it—husbands who worked in the nuclear industry and wives who were told little about it but sought psychiatric care to cope with their lives. She was chilled by observing couples dancing “as if they were in a stupor” (*Outercourse*, p. 178). Mary Daly reminds me of the need for more scrutiny in what we now accept as the inevitability of nuclear power in a world that largely values profit over people.

Japan’s current tragedy is part of what Mary foresaw. She tried to make connections between how we treat one another—women and men, humans and animals—and how the planet responds. She flagged Genetically Modified Food early on as an aberration. She opposed virtually every war in the last four decades. She supported the rights of animals and abhorred environ-

mental destruction. It was all a part of her activist Catholic-rooted theology that has justice at its core.

(4) Conclusion

I must confess that I sometimes wish Mary Daly had been wrong in some of her insights. But as history unfolds she looks smarter every day. The challenge is how to embrace her vision now and hope it is not too late. The “pure complexity” of the project invites widespread participation.

Mary Daly did not get everything right. I had my share of differences with her. But in my view, she was right about the basics: (1) we are not in control of everything, or put another way, the divine matters; (2) who we are, how we are treated, and how we behave shapes the world and religions; and (3) the role of religious studies is to make sense of the cosmos and act in the public arena on that understanding, namely, to facilitate justice.

This is a Catholic legacy, pure and complex, perhaps more accurately a “catholic” small ‘c’ legacy in that ‘catholic’ means “liberal, having broad interests, or wide sympathies.”¹⁵ That was Mary Daly’s Catholic legacy. I am humbled to bequeath to my own daughter.

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