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BEYOND GOD THE FATHER:
AN ESSAY REVIEW

Mary Daly has attacked patriarchal values where they originated and where they remain most entrenched, in the religious institutions of our society. Daly blasted the church’s anti-feminism six years ago in her widely-read book The Church and the Second Sex. Now she has criticized the theological assumptions that underlie those anti-feminine practices. More than that, in Beyond God the Father (Beacon Press, 1973) she has promised to move beyond criticism to begin a reconstruction of theology. She will give equal validity to both male and female experience in order to make a new spiritual revolution. As one who is struggling to answer the question, “Can you become a feminist and remain a Christian?” I was eager to see where Daly would take us.

Daly’s views are angry and radical. She isn’t interested in tampering with the details, with chauvinist hymns or male-centered Scriptural passages. Daly sees that the basis of Jewish and Christian traditions is patriarchy, and she strips away the symbols of these traditions accordingly. God as Father must go, Christ as male incarnation of God is out, the male-controlled church cannot be salvaged. The presuppositions of theology, a male-created discipline, must be turned inside-out before they can be used to rebuild religious thinking. In the process of uprooting these time-honored pillars of the spiritual world, she exposes the sexism that underlies the thinking of many modern theologians: Karl Barth, Teilhard de Chardin, the Berrigan brothers, among others. She is equally critical of Judaism, Protestantism, and her own Roman Catholicism. In fact, she appears to reject the Judeo-Christian tradition totally. Yet she still speaks of “God,” and all her ideas react to the old theology. She does not make it clear exactly where she stands now; perhaps no woman who is in process of leaving the old world-view behind can do so yet.

Daly’s anger at the injustices of patriarchy seems to overwhelm her at several points. One is where she speaks of castration, of the need to castrate phallic morality and other sexist excrescences. Here the violence of her language contradicts her own attack upon male violence; she does not realize that she had internalized the very fault which she criticizes elsewhere. Again, when she defends women as pure, as persons not capable of the gross injustices which men perpetrate, I suspect that her anger has blinded her to the realities of human nature. We do not need to be made saints of, we simply want to be acknowledged as full human beings.

These are not major faults; however it is the extent of her anger which causes the basic problem of the book. If you have not read any of the fast-proliferating work on sexism in religion, you will find Daly’s book an eye-opener, well worth your time. But if you have followed the increasingly impressive research of women theologians, you will be disappointed in Beyond God the Father. Daly does not move beyond criticism as she promises to do. Therefore she is not able to move on to the necessary reconstruction of theology. She begins with a discussion of what she is against, tries to re-focus on what she wants to happen, circles around, and comes back every time to another tirade against chauvinist religion. It is in this way that her anger is most damaging to her task.

True, Daly drops a few hints as to directions we might take. She makes a beginning at presenting a new nonexistenct view of Eve. She takes seriously the research of anthropologists on the societies which worshipped the Mother Goddess. She makes good use of Paul Tillich’s ontological method, of his idea of an existential courage to be, and suggests that this dynamic type of courage can be useful to women in revolutionary struggle. She suggests in passing that “others might find it useful to look at” the more open, changing, functional ideas of God found in the writings of William James, Whitehead, Hartshorne, and the young black theologian Henry Nicholson. But she herself does not follow these suggestions. Instead, she devotes considerable space to an attempt to turn the theological method of Thomas Aquinas into the tool out of which she will write a feminist theology. I suggest that Thomistic thought is unsuitable for this role because of its strong rationalistic and idealistic bent. Also, Daly devotes a chapter to a new view of the Virgin Mary. In doing so she ignores the criticisms of the cult of Mary made by other female Catholic theologians as well as her own advice that new symbols cannot be made out of old. She would have been well-advised to explore new areas of symbolism, for her re-thinking about Mary does not indicate how the Virgin can be freed from her secondary role in Catholicism. It is better for us to start afresh.

And that brings me to the crux of Daly’s problem. She tantalizes us repeatedly with two words, “liberation” and “sisterhood,” words which surely will be basic to any feminist reconstruction of religion. And yet her descriptions of these words are vague: nowhere does she give us specific ideas; what does she mean by “cosmic sisterhood”? Theology as we have known it is largely a reflection of the experience of white males and of their power structure. A renewal of theology can only come out of the experiences of persons outside that structure. I longed to learn about the spiritual experiences of Mary Daly and her sisters, about their struggles to put these experiences into radically new theological expression. In her footnotes Daly hints at these experiences, but gives us no more than a glimpse. I was hungry to hear her reactions to the work of her sister theologians, Rosemary Reuther, Nelle Morton, Elizabeth Farrians, and others. Again, they are mentioned only in footnotes. I began to wonder about the consciousness of a woman scholar who relegates almost all mention of other women’s work to footnotes!

And so I am still looking for the book that will take us beyond patriarchy, beyond God the Father. Daly’s attempt convinces me all the more that it must begin in our own experience.

Anne Barstow Driver