Mary Daly was born in Schenectady, New York, in 1928 and died at the age of 81 in Gardner, Massachusetts in 2010.[[1]](#footnote-1) The life, teachings and writings of the self-proclaimed “Radical Feminist Philosopher”[[2]](#footnote-2) would influence the newly emerging feminist movement of the 1970’s as well as feminist theological thinking well into the new millennium. She was educated in Catholic schools receiving a BA in English from St. Rose College in Albany, New York in 1950 and a MA in English at The Catholic University of America in 1952. Daly then went on to obtain three doctorates. The first from St. Mary’s College in religion in 1954, and at the University of Fribourg in Switzerland she completed doctorates in philosophy and sacred theology in 1963.[[3]](#footnote-3)

In the recent publication of *The Mary Daly Reader,* Mary Hunt offers a biographical sketch of Daly’s life which is summarized here. It was in her early teaching years and visits to Vatican City that she began to realize the extent of the patriarchal system of the Roman Catholic Church and later returned to the United States accepting a teaching position at Boston College in 1966. It was there that she published her first major book titled *The Church and the Second Sex* in 1968, which brought both praise and disdain especially in the eyes Boston College’s administration. Hunt states that “Daly considered her books to be her legacy” including *Beyond God the Father* (1973) which is described as “the landmark book in feminist theology” by theologian Rita Nakashima Brock.[[4]](#footnote-4) Other of her books include *Gyn/Ecology* (1978) and her autobiographical *Outercourse* (1992). Daly wrote her influential books during the rise of feminism in the United States, illustrating her philosophy and thinking during that time, marrying the feminist movement to theology. The following provides a brief summary of some of her radical feminist expressions as presented in three of her books.

Her first book, *The Church and the Second Sex* was inspired in part by the writing of female philosopher Simone de Beauvoir (1908-1986) who criticized the Catholic Church and its oppression of women. Daly agreed “that “femininity” was a social construct rather than an eternal, unchanging essence.” It was also in this book that Daly began a recurring emphasis on the importance of activism. She wrote that rather than being a “helpless spectator” there is need for “creative thought and action.”[[5]](#footnote-5)

In *Beyond God the Father*, Daly shifts to a philosophy of God “liberated from static anthropocentrism with the help of Tillichian ontology.”[[6]](#footnote-6) Here Daly scribes, in likely her most memorable quote “If God is male, the male is God.”[[7]](#footnote-7) In this book, Daly provided for women and all her readers in its’ era an opportunity to look beyond the patriarchal church and sexist society to what Daly described as the search for ultimate meaning and reality, which some would call God and which Daly named the “Be-ing” which is “the Verb from whom, in whom, and with whom all true movements move.”[[8]](#footnote-8) Using a verb to name God was characteristic of Daly’s theology, which included active participation in society to bring about the changes in the patriarchal society and church that she identified and demanded.

As Daly wrote her early books, she realized the language available to her was not adequate to express the thoughts and insights she was developing, so she became accustom to inventing her own words or neologisms, which she published in *Websters’ First New Intergalactic Wickedary of the English Language*, more commonly known as the *Wickedary.[[9]](#footnote-9)* And as is evident by the title, not only did she coin new words, but also created new worlds or galaxies.

Three significant events demonstrate Daly’s commitment to radical feminism philosophy and transformed her writing and teaching into a “cause celebre.” The events also represent the realities of proclaiming feminist truths in a highly patriarchal institution. The first occurred after the publication of *The Church and the Second Sex* in 1968. Outraged by the book, Boston College gave her a one-year terminal contract, but after significant student and academic protest changed its position and granted her tenure. The next came in 1971, when she was asked to speak at Harvard Memorial Church. This would be the first sermon to be delivered by a woman since the church opened in 1936. Daly took the pulpit, renounced the church and led a walkout of like-minded women. In was in this speech that Daly first introduced one of her most notable theological concepts, stating “as long as God is imaged exclusively as male, then the male can feel justified in playing God.”[[10]](#footnote-10) The last noted in this paper was Daly’s practice of only teaching female students in her classrooms to ensure a safe and creative environment, although she did privately tutor any men who wanted to learn the material. Her teaching practice brought both attention and criticism. Daly was never advanced to full professor at Boston College because her publication (*Beyond God the Father)* was found to be “deficient in scholarship” and “popular theology, unworthy of consideration for promotion.”[[11]](#footnote-11)

Daly was not a static theologian, but an activist who lived her beliefs and theories of radical feminism. Hers was a powerful voice for many women in the late 20th century who were fighting daily battles for equality. She encouraged, even demanded that the fight continue. In *Beyond God the Father* she wrote about the importance of the (feminist) movement and that “movement is in our imaginative-cerebral-emotional-active-creative be-ing.”[[12]](#footnote-12) Her life was a force of nature that continues to direct critical thinking in feminist theology. Daly articulated the “ethical outrage” that was all too often stifled by patriarchal institutions, both professional and religious. She exerted pressure to keep the ethical outrage alive, balanced with a vision of hope.[[13]](#footnote-13) Her ability to demonstrate her theology through conscious and thoughtful actions at critical points in her career is a blueprint for feminist even today.

1. *Encyclopedia of World Biography*, 2nd ed., s.v. "Mary Daly" accessed May 7, 2017, http://du.idm.oclc.org/login?url=http://go.galegroup.com.du.idm.oclc.org/ps/i.do?p=GVRL&sw=w&u=udenver&v=2.1&it=r&id=GALE%7CCX3404701642&asid=ff17e864112ec045289b7bbbe68d5305. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Jennifer Rycenga and Linda Barufaldi, eds., *The Mary Daly Reader* (New York: New York University Press, 2017). 303. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Rycenga and Barufaldi, *The Mary Daly Reader,* xv. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Rycenga and Barufaldi, *The Mary Daly Reader,* xvii. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Rycenga and Barufaldi, *The Mary Daly Reader,* 13. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Donald W. Musser, *A New Handbook of Christian Theologians,* (Kindle Edition: Abingdon Press, 1996). 2686. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Mary Daly, *Beyond God the Father, Toward a Philosophy of Women’s Liberation,* (Boston: Beacon Press,1973). 19. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Daly, *Beyond God the Father,* 198. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Rycenga and Barufaldi, *The Mary Daly Reader,* 3. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Rycenga and Barufaldi, *The Mary Daly Reader,* 40. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Rycenga and Barufaldi, *The Mary Daly Reader,* 331. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Daly, *Beyond God the Father, 1.* [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Rycenga and Barufaldi, *The Mary Daly Reader,* 7. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)