

# THE DEATH OF GOD THE FATHER

CARL RASCHKE

Fortunately or not, Mary Daly's *Beyond God the Father*<sup>1</sup> may be remembered for some time as one of the most significant theological tracts of the 1970s. The stature of the book, however, rests neither on its style of argument — which amounts to bombastic overkill — nor on method of scholarship — which is all too ideologically selective — nor from the plausibility of its conclusions, which are eclipsed by Daly's merciless contentious tone. Rather, its virtue has to do with the boldness by which Daly formulates the issue, (an issue which is apt to elicit rancor in many quarters): Is God the Father dead?

One may note, of course, that the "death of God" motif is a well-explored and familiar one. The proclamation of God's "death" harks back to Nietzsche, who first coined the expression. Daly herself alludes to Nietzsche whenever it suits her convenience, despite the fact that she can hardly be considered a soulmate of that notorious woman-baiter. In truth, Daly's ideas are congruent with Nietzsche's in one overriding respect. As in the case of Nietzsche, one nods with awe at her prophetic acumen as to the temper of our age. Yet one must approach with major reservations the particular "solution" to the dilemma she uncovers. Nietzsche, for one, could only offer the individual exercise of the "will to power" as an exit route from the dark night of "nihilism", which he saw as the consequence of God's demise. Notwithstanding her advancement of the tempting and by now popular nostrum of "androgyny," Daly advances a more subtle version of the "will to power" notion. Her difference with Nietzsche lies in the *form* of such a will to power which she envisages. The Nietzschean will to power, Daly suggests, must be shown by women as a collective affirmation in their struggle to overcome the tutelage of their historical male overloads.

Daly conjures up the specter of the women's liberation movement as haunting not only those who champion the traditional discrimination of sexual roles in society, or the conventional psychological models of feminine identity, but also the very religious myths and symbol systems which have presided over Western culture for thousands of years. "Religious symbols fade and die when the cultural situation

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<sup>1</sup>Mary Daly, *Beyond God the Father* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1973).

that gave rise to them and supported them ceases to give plausibility." Daly maintains that the awakening of women in the mid-twentieth century is an episode of immense consequence. The woman's revolution has fissured at the seams the legitimacy and consistency of the Western religious world picture with dramatic implications for the future. So-called "sociologists of knowledge", or students of "ideology," have long been aware that conceptions about reality have an inertia which resists change in actual social and historical circumstances. This inertia is lodged pre-eminently within those master myths, or pivotal symbols, which are usually religious in nature, and which endure as the last chunk of support structure to give way in the historical collapse of disintegrating institutions, attitudes, and ways of living.

The sociologist Leon Festinger has termed the disparity between a time-tested belief and its historical viability one of "cognitive dissonance."<sup>2</sup> Though all confirmation for the belief has been exploded by chaotic and contradictory events, it may be yet retained in some form, because the alternative is psychically too painful. The symbol survives, not because it can better organize reality, but because it carries the weight of the past and thereby still makes "sense," albeit with diminishing force. However, eventually the symbol can no longer withstand the pressure of counterevidence. The symbol no longer compels belief. The gods are unmasked as idols, and we enter into the age Nietzsche dubs the *Göttzendämmerung* — the "twilight of the idols."<sup>3</sup>

Daly is saying that God the Father, too, has been laid bare as an idol, no longer commensurate with the modern experience of humanity. The women's liberation movement thus performs the same task at the broader cultural level which Nietzsche commissioned for solitary thinkers: it "philosophizes with a hammer," tapping the idols to show they ring hollow, then smashes them.

What Daly means by the "death of God the Father" can be elucidated more aptly if we first examine what Nietzsche himself had in mind when he spoke of God's death. Nietzsche announces the death of God in his celebrated parable of the madman from his book *The Gay Science*. The signal theme of the parable is not only that God has

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<sup>2</sup>Cf. Leon Festinger, *A Theory of Cognitive Dissonance* (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 1957).

<sup>3</sup>Nietzsche expression *Göttzendämmerung* is, of course, a wry pun on the myth, immortalized in Wagner's opera, of the *Götterdämmerung*, the "twilight of the gods." The gods (*Götter*) are exposed as idols (*Göttzen*). The idols are naturally not only the Western theistic conceptions about God, but the metaphysical and value schemes which derive from it.

died, but that we — his worshipers — have killed him.<sup>4</sup> “All of us are his murderers.” The death of God is therefore a mood of modern consciousness. It is a stark historical eventuality. But this “event” entails much more than the withering away of belief in a sovereign ruler of the universe. The death of God involves the thoroughgoing loss of a transcendent ideal which makes our experience intelligible. Even more pointedly, it constitutes the disappearance of a center of value. And without such a center, humankind plunges into the dark night of *nihilism*. Nihilism is the end product of the self-destructive career of Western morality. “What does nihilism mean? *That the highest values devalue themselves*. The aim is lacking.”<sup>5</sup> Nihilism is our destiny, our inescapable historical condition.

Both Nietzsche and Daly share a prophetic vision of the history of modern humanity wherein the death of God as an event has taken place. But neither one suffices as an *historian*, who might sketch out the process by which the advent of nihilism has occurred. How did it come about that we have “murdered” God? Daly gives a radically revisionist prospect toward Nietzsche: the killing of God is the slaying of God the father? But what are the implications? Every death in the riddling onrush of time must be a vanishing trail of signs, a veiled configuration of moments, pointing toward a resurrection. The end suggests the beginning, and the beginning the end.

To grasp the drift of history we must pass beyond both prophetic consciousness and the scheme of historical causality graphed by historians to what might be regarded as “metahistory,” the inner dynamic of history itself. Such a dynamic, however, does not constitute a bloodless, speculative abstraction from concrete historical developments, but indicates the “essence” of history itself.<sup>6</sup> A contemporary historical writer who has gone a long way toward supplying this overview of history is Amaury de Riencourt, author of *Sex and Power in History*.<sup>7</sup> For de Riencourt, it is the feminine which is the very clue to history. The feminine is therefore the hidden kinetics of the pro-

<sup>4</sup>Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Random House, 1974), p. 181.

<sup>5</sup>Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will To Power*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Random House, 1967), p. 9.

<sup>6</sup>I am using the term “essence” in a somewhat technical or arcane sense, the one employed by Heidegger. “Essence” (German = *Wesen*) means the active dynamic of Being itself, where *Wesen* is not taken neologically as a verbal form. History, for Heidegger is not a sequence of mere events, but the outworking of the understanding of Being itself. History, therefore, points within itself to its own origins, as Heidegger would have it. To talk about Being is not to obscure the issue, but to get to the very root of the problem of sexism itself, which rests on the basic religious symbols and metaphysical concepts of Western thought. That, at least, is Daly’s argument. To understand the destiny of man and woman one must uncover the *essence* of human historicity.

<sup>7</sup>Amaury deRiencourt, *Sex and Power in History* (New York: David McKay, 1974).

cess, what Elise Boulding has felicitously termed the "underside of history."<sup>8</sup>

In the beginning was the womb, the physical analogue for the darkness and suffusing silence which held primitive humanity in awe. Woman's fecundity was perceived in the inchoate mind of ancient man as the manifestation of the inscrutable mysteries of birth, life, and death. Woman was (to turn a phrase from the philosopher Martin Heidegger) "the shepherdess of Being."<sup>9</sup> Being itself was apprehended in terms of this mystery. As Heidegger observes, the word "being" is derived from the Greek word *physis*, which means the process of "emergence," "coming forth," of things standing alone and dwelling with a life of their own.<sup>10</sup> The ancient cult of the *Magna Mater* signified the male's adoration of Being with respect to its primordial source. "Woman power and magic control over nature were closely interconnected in the mind of early man. . . . Man already felt cut off from nature, and woman was the obvious intercessor."<sup>11</sup> But the end of the neo-lithic period in history saw the decline of the Great Mother. The cult of the eternal feminine was swept away by the "patriarchal revolution," which brought the enthronement of the male sky deities, such as Zeus, the sovereign ruler and law-giver.<sup>12</sup> The reign of Zeus also spelled the beginning not only of a new social order, with woman demoted from her former prerogative as hierophant to a position of child breeder and servant, but also the imposition of a new intellectual outlook, where "reason" (logos) and "law" as artificial human constructs replaced the chthonic rhythms of the cosmos. Father Sky (*Dyaus Piter*) becomes lord of Mother Earth. The Erythraean sibyl, once the autonomous guardian of the mundane mysteries, was seized as the chattel of male priests. The new "law" (*nomos*) did not well up from "below," but was handed down from "on high" by the male legislator, the prophet who speaks in the name of God the Father. Man's passive sense of the *mysterium tremendum* in the face of the wonder of self-generating life was transformed into the "Promethean" drive to steal fire from the gods. The feminine custody of, and deference toward life itself, whose powers are concentrated in the sexuality of woman, yielded to the triumphant, masculine will to power, to subdue nature and have dominion over the whole earth.

<sup>8</sup>See Elise Boulding, *The Underside of History* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1976).

<sup>9</sup>Cf. "Man is the Shepherd of Being," Martin Heidegger, "Letter on Humanism," in *Basic Writings* (New York: Harper & Row, 1977), p. 210.

<sup>10</sup>See Martin Heidegger, *Introduction to Metaphysics*, trans. Ralph Mannheim (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1959), p. 51ff.

<sup>11</sup>de Riencourt, p. 18.

<sup>12</sup>The change from chthonic deities to the Olympian sky gods in the history of Greek religion is discussed in chapter 11 of Gilbert Murray, *Five Stages of Greek Religion* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1925).

DeRiencourt argues that the masculine will to power could only burst forth when the mystique of woman and the sacrality of life itself had been violated. The affirmation of the will to power was essentially that of man anointing himself as the cause and arbiter of life. The origin of the will to power lay in man's discovery of paternity.

DeRiencourt hypothesizes in line with certain modern anthropological discoveries that certain primitive peoples have no understanding of the male's role in procreation. For the aboriginal mind, DeRiencourt suggests, it was woman, and woman alone, who was responsible for the genesis of life. Woman was therefore an awesome wonder-worker, who harbored within her uterus the miraculous potencies of creation. Men tried jealously to mimic her proficiency through religious rituals and by inventing exclusively phallic secret societies, but their efforts could only be a pathetic and feckless pantomime. Sooner or later, however, the male learned of his biological agency, and this new "knowledge" became the scaffolding for the mythology of patriarchy. Since it was man who sowed the seed of life, it was he who thereby arrogated to himself the role of progenitor. Man imagined himself the creator, and woman became his passive *incubator* of a life which was primarily *his*. Genealogies were now traced through the male line. The innate physical strength of man can now be asserted in order to subjugate woman for his social and cultural purposes, and it was no longer kept in check by his former reverence toward her.

Such a discovery, if indeed it constitutes an actual historical realization, might be considered the primeval *gnosis*. It is the *gnosis* from which emanated the myth of God the Father. Just as man is the agent, the ruler, the singular cause, so divinity comes to be symbolized no more with reference to autochthony, but in the guise of a transcendental Creator and authority, the Prime Mover, the Lord of human destiny. God becomes Father, who does not engender and nurture the world, but begets it (that is, creates it by *fiat*) and sustains it. The very notion of causality betokens the mythic reminiscence of this discovery. As Nietzsche said: "The entire theory of responsibility depends upon the naive psychology that the only cause is will and that one must be aware of having willed in order to believe in *oneself* as cause."<sup>18</sup> The notion of causality was the ontological expression of the Promethean *Wille zur Macht*.

In the patriarchal picture of creation, henceforth, feminine *physis* becomes *nous*, which Plato in his *Timaeus* regarded as the initial source of motion, the self-moved mover. Thus Plato has his Demiurge say: "Gods, children of gods, who are my works of whom I am the

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<sup>18</sup>*Will to Power*, p. 163.

artificier and father, my creations are indissoluble, if so I will."<sup>14</sup> God the Creator casts down woman as wily temptress, the embodiment of the life force that seduces man into disobeying the voice from on high, as in the Garden of Eden story.<sup>15</sup> Insofar as man struggles for dominion over the natural world, he must keep rein on the dark allurements of woman, the earth-mother. As happens with every religious revolution, the sacrality of the dethroned divinity is invested with a demonic aura. The fertility goddess becomes identified with satanic powers. Behind Eve lurks the evil witch Lilith. Pandora, the ancient Greek counterpart of the great mother, is transformed into the mischievous woman-child whose curiosity unleashes misery and suffering into the universe.

As Martin Heidegger says, "man forgets Being." Rather, he forgets the mystery of Being itself. Man demonstrates his forgetfulness by objectifying and taking for granted what was previously mysterious, by becoming concerned with "beings" alone as inert entities which he can regiment and control for his own ends. Man alienates woman as the dangerous "Other," as Simone de Beauvoir puts it.<sup>16</sup> He forgets woman as the origin of life, the source of names. He takes away from woman, as Mary Daly contends, the power of names,<sup>17</sup> and confers on her his own name. To name is to have power, to possess the capacity for creation. It was Adam, who in the Garden of Eden narrative, took charge of naming the animals. The forgetfulness of Being makes possible the congenital narcissism of man. God the Father becomes a signature for man's push toward self-perfection, the management of life and nature with technology.

In Christianity, DeRiencourt notes, however, we find the first rumblings of feminine revolt. The Cross represents the emasculation of divine omnipotence. The Death-of-God theologians during the last decade rightly observed that God died on the cross, but it was God the Father, as Daly notes, who also died. The Cross signifies the sacrifice of the Father's power, the abdication of his independence, might, and detachment from the world. The Cross is God's *kenosis*. God "emptied" himself by being "born of woman." DeRiencourt insists that there was good reason for the fact that many of the earliest converts to Christianity happened to be women. In female eyes the pas-

<sup>14</sup>Plato, *Timaeus* 41a.

<sup>15</sup>Augustine, for example, saw the Fall of man as due to sexual "lust" or intercourse into which Eve tempted Adam. *City of God*, ch. xiv. This interpretation of Genesis colored the Medieval notion of woman as the temptress, the "daughter of Eve."

<sup>16</sup>Simone de Beauvoir writes: "[Man] is the Subject, he is the Absolute — she is the Other." *The Second Sex*, trans. H.M. Parshley, (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1953), p. xvi.

<sup>17</sup>Daly, p. 8.

sion of Christ presented itself as a mythic re-enactment of the primeval vegetation myth, of woman producing life without the seed of man. The idea of the immaculate conception reflects this remembrance. Just as Ishtar in the Semitic myth held the dying Tammus in her arms, so in the poignant iconography of the *pieta* we have the Virgin cradling her lifeless son.

But Christianity did not reverse the patriarchal revolution. The reminiscence of the eternal feminine passion was co-opted by Christian mythology. Just as the cult of the Cybele was monopolized by eunuch priests, so the cult of the Virgin was appropriated by celibate male monks. The monastic attitude implied an apotheosis of pure "spirit" as opposed to womanly flesh. Christ was the "second Adam," unsullied by the sin of concupiscence. "Creation" (that is, genesis, the procreativity inherent in life) is "fallen," and the flesh must be "crucified" (in Saint Paul's language) in order to reinvigorate it. Likewise, woman, who is the weaker vessel and incarnation of fleshly propensities, must be put in her place.

By the same token, the dichotomy of spirit and flesh can be seen as an ideology which elevated the male disposition and sanctified his will to power. The will to power is the will to disrupt, to overthrow, to extort. Perhaps Freud had greater insight than we give him credit for, when in *Totem and Taboo* he diagnosed the myth of Christ's sacrifice as a symbolic recapitulation of the slaying of the primal father by his lustful sons, jealous of the old man's sexual prerogatives. The crucifixion was the murder of the male Deity, and it heralds over the long course of history, as the death-of-God theologians submitted, the "coming of age" of man. But it is the coming of age of man who has alienated himself from woman. The tribe of sons — promiscuous, avaricious, power-crazed — grows up bent on the wholesale "rape" of the natural world, their final consummation of the will to power evinced in the technological mastery of the earth. Interestingly, the death of God movement was coincident with the sexual revolution and the invention of "the pill." Sex in the contemporary era, De Riencourt maintains, is masculine sexuality, phallic hegemony, the transformation of woman as sex object.<sup>18</sup> All Western theology and metaphysics reveals itself, according to Nietzsche, as the unfettered will to power. Nihilism reigns! Sex is no longer a sacramental reintegration with the mysteries of life, but an instrumentality of hedonism. We enter the age which has demythologized "the vaginal orgasm." Female sexuality is subordinated to the male pleasure principle. The clitoris is vaunted as the "little penis." In the same vein there grows a col-

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<sup>18</sup>deRiencourt, p. 338f.

lective repugnance for nurturing roles. Kate Millett extols "artificial wombs" which will allegedly "liberate" women not only from men, but from their bodies as well. The contemporary age, according to DeRiencourt, finds "Pandora's daughters in revolt." The oppressed ape the values of the oppressor; they flaunt and strategically deploy them in the ultimate, apocalyptic battle of the sexes.<sup>19</sup>

DeRiencourt observes, however, that we have reached "the end of the iron age," the closure of millenia of male supremacy, not only with respect to political and social power, but also in the sense of breaking the male monopoly on religious symbols. The change now underway must be visualized not as external, but as "essential" history of the resurgent feminine. To conceive the resurgent feminine Mary Daly invokes the symbol of the Second Coming, which she contrasts with the first Coming, the tacit divinization of man. The masculine preoccupation with the First Coming has resulted in what Daly dubs "Christolatry," the hypostatization of the male principle. The Second Coming "is not a return of Christ but a new arrival of female presence, once strong and powerful, but enchained since the dawn of patriarchy." Daly goes on: "Unlike the so-called First Coming of Christian theology, which was an absolutizing of men, the woman's revolution is not an absolutizing of women, precisely because it is the overcoming of dichotomous sex stereotyping, which is the source of the absolutizing process."<sup>20</sup> Man has absolutized himself. Woman, in comparison, has been taught to be self-effacing as a living expression of the *Christian* ideal of sacrificial love. Woman poses as the suffering servant who surrenders her life for man in his agonistic quest for selfhood, autonomy, and glory. Woman is not only the underside of history, but the "other side" of God. God the Father is Luther's *Deus absconditus*, the distant God of damning and castrating wrath, the cosmic macho male. God the mother is the "revealed God," the loving God, the God who is the fullness of life. The Second Coming is the revelation of God's *Other Side*, the manifestation of Woman, not as meek and self-deprecating "Other," the face behind the veil, but the missing chink in the puzzle of creation. Woman expropriates the power of naming. The Second Coming is that of a Christ with a new name, "the name known only to himself" (herself?) (Rev. 19:11).

If Christ is "the image of the invisible God" (Col. 1:15), furthermore, the name "Christ" must encompass male and female. "So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them." (Gen. 1:27) But does the co-

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<sup>19</sup>DeRiencourt, p. 403ff.

<sup>20</sup>Daly, p. 97.



mingling of male and female in the new idea of Christ necessarily entail pure androgyny, the erasure of sexual distinctions: If by "androgyny," one means merely the obliteration of "sex-role stereotypes", which Daly talks about, then the idea of the Second Coming would refer only to a shift in social attitudes. Very often in our current lexicon "androgyny" connotes nothing more than interchangeable domestic duties, rules of social etiquette, common clothing, etc. The word can also evoke a new perspective on sexual psychology. Male and female may be distinguishable as concerns anatomy, but not in the depths of the psyche, where masculine and feminine remain co-equal archetypes. Unfortunately, the notion of androgyny too commonly lacks dialectical tension. It implies bare identity of male and female, not identity in difference. This latter, reductionistic view of androgyny often mirrors the patriarchal prejudice: that woman cannot be considered "different" from man, except in the most obvious physiological aspect, because singular "feminine" qualities are *ipso facto* inferior to the masculine. Even Mary Daly herself has internalized the value assumptions of patriarchy in significant measure, inasmuch as she represents overt strategies of power. The crux of such an issue arises when Daly calls for the affirmation of feminine "power" as a check and rival against male predation. But the question is not one of power but of "presence." The Second Coming must be a symbolic articulation of the realization that male and female presence belong together; they complement each other as in the Taoist metaphysics of *yin* and *yang*, where the "power" (*te*) lies in the unity of the "way" (*tao*) that is beyond distinction, yet manifests itself through distinction. The power of the *tao* resides in complementary presences. Neither masculine "will to power" nor feminine generativity constitute superior values, but both are necessary for the plenitude of life.

If women, therefore, as Daly puts it, are bearers of the New Being, it is the Being of the Christ in whom male and female are one in their *co-presence*, their *interdependence*. The New Being is the transcendence of God the Father's death, the overcoming of nihilism. Nihilism is the inability to affirm or value anything but "power" itself. Nihilism is the rejection of life, the amnesia of its origins. The transcendence of nihilism through the revelation of New Being (woman as Second Coming) is not the glorification of femininity independent of the masculinity in the fashion to which Daly alludes, but the correlation and co-presencing of genders on both the physical and psychic planes. The Second Coming takes into itself the First Coming, but not merely as a supplement or explication. In the beginning is the end, and in the end the beginning. "I am the Alpha and the Omega,

the beginning and the end." (Rev. 21:6). The New Being is the dialectical realization of the natural and the mimetic, flesh and logos, egg and sperm, passive and active, subtlety and majesty. Man and woman are not programmed, "stereotyped," into the exhibition of these qualities, but each contributes what the other is lacking. Man must address himself to woman, and woman address herself to man, in the space of dialogue and recognition which Martin Buber calls the sphere of the "between." The alternative, DeRiencourt laments, is perhaps racial suicide. The war between the sexes cannot have a victor, only losers. The death of God the Father prefigures the birth of a new, uncharted, and perhaps perilous age in Western history. The New Being is neither "sisterhood" nor "brotherhood". It is the revelation of the secret energies of *humanity*, which can be harnessed for a millenium of creative transformation, or can erupt like hot magma and touch off a holocaust.

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