

03-08-1999 Mary Daly and Real World Politics

"A radical feminist professor at Boston College has been given an ultimatum from the school: admit men to her classes or stop teaching. Theologian Mary Daly lets only women take her courses." (AP, 2/25/99)

In America today Dr. Mary Daly is one of a small group of public intellectuals addressing the needs and interests of ordinary people. Her writing and lectures on feminism and theology are standard texts and have influenced an entire generation of both theologians and feminists. When she takes a stand that she even implies is ethical, American needs to take it seriously.

"Daly, who is 70, taught only men when she first arrived at the Newton campus in 1966. The college of arts and science did not begin admitting women until 1970. In the early '70s, she said, she observed problems in her co-ed classes. 'Even if there were only one or two men with 20 women, the young women would be constantly on an overt or a subliminal level giving their attention to the men because they've been socialized to nurse men,' she said." (AP, 2/25/99)

Her argument, which demands reflection, is that our society has traditionally provided space for men to interact free of outside constraints, and women need the same space to interact and develop. In the words of one of Daly's students, "I think there comes a point where women need to claim their own space," said Kate Heekin, a senior from Greenwich, Conn. "If that needs to be a classroom, so be it." But is the classroom the proper environment for this space?

"Daly said she views the controversy as an attack on academic freedom and an assault on feminism by 'an extreme right-wing organization' trying to 'assert white male supremacy'."

It is true that the controversy started with a lawsuit brought by a right-wing law firm in D.C. And, some have no doubt heaped scorn upon the good professor because of her exclusionary politics. Much of that scorn comes from those who do not support Daly's vision of an evolved society in which women truly share full equality with men. One need not be overly concerned about the opinions of right-wing ideologues; their intentions are malicious. But does this mean that because Daly is on the opposite side of the fence from known misogynists that she is necessarily right?

Daly is right to demand more for women in our society. There is still a very thick glass ceiling in employment, and there are considerable discrepancies in the way we approach men and women's athletics, in spite of decades of federal pressure and support. Women are still brutalized, attacked, beaten and raped in the society at large and on college campuses as well. We have come a long way from 1966, but we also still have a long way to go. There is a great deal of violence against women and oppression of women that remains even as we move into the 21st Century.

However, Daly herself would say that men are mostly responsible for this state of affairs. So it would follow that male students would benefit from exposure to her ideas and her classes. Is it fair to say that because female college students in 1973 acted differently in the presence of their male peers that female students in 1999 are equally encumbered by the heavy socialization

mentioned above? That premise to her argument seems suspicious. Girls are still socialized differently than boys, but things do change over time. Women are now conscious of that glass ceiling because they have come to expect equality in a way that was only imagined by a few creative and courageous thinkers and activists in the 1960's, Daly among them.

More importantly though, there is an implicit assumption in her position that sexism and the oppression of women is a culturally isolated phenomenon that is not dependent on other, larger, social factors. And this assumption in particular is counter-productive. Daly seems to assert that men are not in a position to appreciate her teachings, to change from the experience, or to be supportive of the learning experience of their female peers. And this position of hers flies in the face of reality.

Most male students are themselves -- to varying degrees -- aware of their position in our class based society. Most students -- male and female -- are working class students and have an experience of oppression. Now it is certainly true that the oppression experienced by women is compounded by class oppression -- as is true of the special oppression experienced by racial minorities. But the fact of sexism and racism does not mean that white males have no experience of their own from which to empathize with the oppression experienced by their brothers and sisters.

Capitalist society breeds oppression, and to single out the experience of one gender or one race and claim that somehow it transcends the experience of the rest of the class is its own form of supremacy and runs counter to the noble intention of creating a just society. The creation of such a society requires unity and common struggle; it requires the sharing of our experiences of oppression and our struggles against that oppression. It requires women to share with men and men to share with women, it requires all oppressed peoples, Black, Brown, and white to join together and fight the common roots of all modern oppression -- which is class dependent.

United we stand, divided we fall. And that includes Professor Mary Daly.