An anthology of radical feminist writings from the current women's movement. Forty-five articles ranging from the personal to the theoretical and drawn largely from the feminist annual NOTES.
The Spiritual Dimension of Women's Liberation

by Mary Daly

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Women who are committed to achieving liberation and equality often turn away from organized religion, seeing it either as irrelevant or as a stubborn and powerful enemy, placing obstacles to all they seek to attain. Having been turned off by institutional religion they choose to leave it behind and forget it, except when it really shows muscle—as in the struggle over abortion laws. Some, on the other hand, have opted to continue their relationship with church or synagogue in the hope of changing sexist beliefs, laws, and customs in these institutions. The second choice is based upon a conviction that there are important values transmitted through these institutions that make it worth the pain and effort of staying in and fighting the system.

These are personal choices and no one can set down hard-and-fast rules for everyone to follow. However, it is important that women be aware of the issue of religion. First of all, it is necessary to understand institutional religion's role in the oppression of women, which it continues to exercise in this culture whether they personally relate to it or not. Second, women should be sensitive to

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the fact that the movement itself is a deeply spiritual event which has the potential to awaken a new and post-patriarchal spiritual consciousness.

**Institutionalized Christianity and the Oppression of Women**

The Judaic-Christian tradition has been patriarchal down through the millennia, although sometimes this has been modified or disguised.¹ The Bible reflected the oppressed condition of women in ancient times. In the Decalogue of the Old Testament a man’s wife is listed among his possessions, along with his ox and his ass. The biblical story of Eve’s birth, which has been called the hoax of the ages, fixed woman’s place in the universe. The story of the Fall of Adam and Eve perpetuated the myth of feminine evil, giving a powerful image of woman as temptress—a dominant theme in Western culture for thousands of years. In the New Testament, the Apostle Paul put women in their place: veiled, silent, and subordinate. In the early centuries of Christianity the Fathers of the Church classified women as fickle, shallow, garrulous, weak, and unstable. In the Middle Ages, Thomas Aquinas decreed that they are misbegotten males, and theologians dutifully taught this for centuries.

In the modern period Popes and theologians greeted the first wave of feminism with the double-talk of the feminine mystique: Women should be equal but subordinate. On childbirth, Pope Pius XII pontificated: “She loves it [the child] the more, the more pain it has cost her.” Today, some liberal Catholic and Protestant theologians admit that sexism exists in the churches but show little inclination to do anything about it. All of this, of course, is in blatant contradiction to Christian teaching about the worth and dignity of every human person.

Although there have been outstanding “exceptional women” in every period of Christian history, their existence has had almost no effect upon the official ideology and policies of the churches. This fact can be understood when it is realized that the Judaic-Christian tradition has functioned to legitimate male-dominated society. The image of God as exclusively a father and not a mother, for example, was spawned by the human imagination under the conditions of
patriarchal society and sustained as plausible by patriarchy. Then, in turn, the image has served to perpetuate this kind of society by making its mechanisms for the oppression of women appear right and fitting. If God in “his” heaven is a father ruling “his” people, then it is in the “nature” of things and according to divine plan and the order of the universe that society be male-dominated. Within this context a mystification of roles takes place: the husband dominating his wife can feel that he represents God himself. A theologian such as Karl Barth could feel justified in writing that woman is “ontologically” subordinate to man.

It might seem that intelligent people do not really think of God as an old man with a beard, but it is quite possible for the mind to function on two different and even contradictory levels at the same time. For example, many speak of God as spirit and at the same time, on the imaginative level, envisage “him” as male. The widespread concept of the Supreme Being has been a not very subtle mask of the divine father figure, and it is not too surprising that it has been used to justify oppression, especially that of women, which is said to be “God’s plan.”

In the third chapter of Genesis:
“. . . And thy desire shall be to thy husband and he shall rule over thee . . . .”

Doctrines about Jesus also have often reflected a kind of phallic obsession. Some theologians have argued that since Jesus was male and called only males to become apostles, women should not be ordained. The doctrine of a unique “incarnation” in Jesus reinforced the fixed idea of patriarchal religion that God is male and male is God. So also did the image of the Virgin kneeling in adoration before her own Son. The mechanism that can be seen in all of this is the familiar vicious circle in which the patterns of a particular kind of society are projected into the realm of religious beliefs and these in turn justify society as it is. The belief system becomes hardened and functions to resist social change, which would rob it of its plausibility. (In a matriarchal or a diarchal society, what credibility would the image of a divine patriarch have?)

Patriarchal religion tends to be authoritarian. Given the fact that
the vicious circle is not foolproof, there is always the possibility that beliefs may lose their credibility. For this reason they are often buttressed by notions of “faith” that leave no room for dissent. For example, the believer is often commanded to assent blindly to doctrines handed down by authority (all male). The inculcation of anxieties and guilt feelings over “heresy” and “losing the faith” has been a powerful method used by institutional religion to immunize itself from criticism. Women especially have been victimized by this.

Traditional Christian ethics also have been to a great extent the product and support of sexist bias. Much of the theory of Christian virtue appears to be the product of reactions on the part of men—probably guilt reactions—to the behavioral excesses of the stereotypic male. There has been theoretical emphasis upon charity, meekness, obedience, humility, self-abnegation, sacrifice, service. Part of the problem with this moral ideology is that it became generally accepted not by men but by women, who have hardly been helped by an ethic which reinforced their abject situation.

This emphasis upon the passive virtues, of course, has not challenged exploitativeness, but supported it. Part of the whole syndrome has been the reduction of hope to passive expectation of a reward from the divine Father for following the rules. Love or charity has been interpreted to mean that people should turn the other cheek to their oppressors. Within the perspective of such a privatized morality, “sin” often becomes an offense against those in power, or against “God”—the two being more or less equated. The structures of oppression are not seen as sinful.

It is consistent with all of this that the traditional Christian moral consciousness has been fixated on the problems of reproductive activity to a degree totally disproportionate to its feeble concern for existing human life. The deformity of perspective was summed up several years ago in Archbishop Robers’s remark that “if contraceptives had been dropped over Japan instead of bombs which merely killed, maimed, and shriveled up thousands alive, there would have been a squeal of outraged protest from the Vatican to the remotest Mass center in Asia.” Pertinent also is Simone de Beauvoir’s remark that the church has reserved its uncompromising humanitarianism for man in the fetal condition.
“... But I suffer not a woman to teach, nor to usurp authority over the man but to be in silence; for Adam was first formed, then Eve; and Adam was not deceived, but the woman being deceived, was in the transgression.”

(Timothy 1,2:12-14)

Although both of these remarks are directed at the Catholic Church, the same attitudes are widespread in Protestantism. Many theologians today do, of course, acknowledge that this passive and privatized morality has failed to cope with structures of oppression. However, few seriously face the possibility that the roots of this distortion are deeply buried in the fundamental and all-pervasive sexual alienation which the women’s movement is seeking to overcome.

The Spiritual Potential of the Movement

As the women’s revolution begins to have an effect upon the fabric of society, beginning to transform it from patriarchy into something that never existed before—into a diarchal situation that is radically new—it will, I think, become the greatest single challenge to Christianity to rid itself of its oppressive tendencies or go out of business. Beliefs and values that have held sway for thousands of years will be questioned as never before. The movement, if it is true to its most authentic and prophetic dimensions, is possibly also the greatest single hope for the survival and development of authentic spiritual consciousness over against the manipulative and exploitative power of technocracy.

The caricature of a human being which is presented by the masculine stereotype depends for its existence upon the acceptance by women of the role assigned to them—the eternal feminine. By becoming whole persons women can generate a counterforce to the polarization of human beings into these stereotypes, forcing men to reexamine their own self-definition. This movement toward the becoming of whole human beings, to the degree that it succeeds, will transform the values and symbols of our society, including religious symbols.

The women’s liberation movement is a spiritual movement be-
cause it aims at humanization of women and therefore of the species. At its core it is spiritual in the deepest sense of the word, because it means the self-actualization of creative human potential in the struggle against oppression. Since the projections of patriarchal religion serve to block the dynamics of creativity, self-actualization, and authentic community by enforcing reduction of people to stereotyped roles, the challenge to patriarchy which is now in its initial stages is a sign of hope for the emergence of more genuine religious consciousness. The becoming of women may be not only the doorway to deliverance from the omnipotent Father in all of his disguises, but, to many, also a doorway to something, namely, to a more authentic search for transcendence, that is, for God.

Women’s liberation is an event that can challenge authoritarian, exclusivist, and non-existential ideas of faith and revelation. Since women have been extra-environmentals, that is, since we have not been part of the authority structure which uses “faith” and “revelation” to reinforce the mechanisms of alienation, our emergence can unmask the idolatry often hidden behind these ideas.

". . . The head of every man is Christ; and the head of every woman is man . . . ."

Saint Paul (Corinthians, 1,11:3)

There could result from this becoming of women a remythologizing of Western religion. If the need for parental symbols for God persists, something like the Father-Mother God of Mary Baker Eddy will be more acceptable to the new woman and the new man than the Father God of the past. A symbolization for incarnation of the divine presence in human beings may continue to be needed in the future, but it is highly unlikely that women or men will find plausible that symbolism which is epitomized in the Christ-Mary image. Perhaps this will be replaced by a bisexual imagery which is non-hierarchical.

The becoming of women can bring about a transvaluation of values. Faith can come to be understood in a non-authoritarian and universalist sense. Hope, rather than being restricted to expectation of rewards for conformity, can come to be experienced and understood as creative, political, and revolutionary. Love will mean unit-
ing to overcome oppression. It will be understood that the most loving thing one can do for the oppressor is to fight the oppressive situation that destroys both the oppressor and the oppressed. Suffering, which has been so highly esteemed in Christianity, will be seen as acceptable not when abjectly and submissively endured, but when experienced in the struggle for liberation.

"And if they will learn anything, let them ask their husbands at home; for it is a shame for women to speak in church."

(Corinthians 1,14:35)

The ethic emerging in the struggle has as its main theme not prudence but existential courage. This is the courage to risk economic and social security for the sake of liberation. It means not only risking the loss of jobs, friends, and social approval, but also facing the nameless anxieties encountered in new and uncharted territory. There is the anxiety of meaninglessness that can be overwhelming at times when the old simple meanings, role definitions, and life expectations have been rooted out and rejected openly, and a woman emerges into a world without models. There is also the anxiety of guilt over refusing to do what society demands, an anxiety which can still hold a woman in its grip long after the guilt has been recognized as false. To affirm oneself and one’s sisters in the face of all this requires courage.

"Likewise, ye wives, be in subjection to your own husbands . . . ."

Saint Peter (Peter 1,3:1)

Such courage expresses itself in sisterhood, which is not at all merely the female counterpart of brotherhood. Sisterhood is a revolutionary fact. It is the bonding of those who have never bonded before, for the purpose of overcoming sexism and its effects, both internal and external. It is the coming together of those who are oppressed by sexual definition. The Christian churches have been fond of preaching the “brotherhood of man,” which included women incidentally, as baggage. However, the concept has never been realized because brotherhood in patriarchy, despite frequent attempts
to universalize the term, is exclusive and divisive. "Brother" means us versus them. It begins by excluding women as "the other" and continues its divisiveness from there, cutting off "the other" by familial, tribal, racial, national, economic, and ideological categories.

Women are learning to be aware that brotherhood, even when it attempts to be universal, means a male universalism. The churches, the peace movement, the New Left, for the most part fail to notice the need for change in the situation of the more than 50 percent female membership of the groups to which they would extend their brotherhood.

The "sisterhoods" of patriarchal society have really been mini-brotherhoods, following male models and serving male purposes. The religious sisterhoods within the Catholic Church, for example, have been male-dominated according to Canon Law. These communities, though they have offered an alternative to marriage and attracted some gifted women, have used the word "sister" in an elitist and divisive sense and have supported the ideology of sexism.

The sisterhood of women's liberation involves a strategic polarization which is different from all of this. It implies polarization for the sake of women's internal wholeness or oneness, because as in the case of all oppressed groups, women suffer from a duality of consciousness. We have internalized the image that the oppressor has of us and are therefore divided against ourselves and against each other by self-hatred. We can only overcome this by bonding with each other. Sisterhood implies polarization also for the sake of political oneness, to achieve liberation. However, its essential dynamic is directed to overcoming the stereotypes that reduce people to the role of "the other." That is, it points toward a unity deeper than most theologians are capable of envisaging, despite the great amount of ink that has been spilled on the subject of "the bonds of charity."

Sisterhood is an event that is new under the sun. It is healing, revolutionary, and revelatory—which is what Christian brotherhood was claimed to be but failed to be. It is at war with the idols of patriarchal religion, but it is in harmony with what is authentic in the ideals of the religious traditions. In this sense, the movement in its deepest dimension is itself both anti-church and church. It has
the potential to release the authentic values that have been distorted and suppressed by the sexism of synagogue and church.

Footnote

1 A documented historical study and criticism of this can be found in my book, *The Church and the Second Sex* (New York: Harper and Row, 1968).