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Religious Studies and  
the Nuclear Age

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## Chapter 9

*God and Her Survival in a Nuclear Age*

As director of the Los Alamos laboratory that developed the bomb" J. Robert Oppenheimer had the honor of naming its first test. He named that test *Trinity* after one of John Donne's Holy *Sonnets*. Oppenheimer was merely the first" though possibly one of the more erudite" of modern interpreters of the bomb as "the Second Coming in Wrath" (Winston Churchill). Modern fundamentalists such as Hal Lindsey, Pat Robertson" and John Wesley White have specifically identified the bomb with God's judgment and a world-destroying nuclear war with the salvation of the righteous.'

To whom can we turn for help in countering the threat of these theologies of salvation by nuclear destruction? The threat itself is very real. Some have argued that nuclear apocalypticism was the viewpoint of Ronald Reagan

when he was president.z Certainly" in the cultural trend that began in the late 1970s" what used to be regarded as the aberration of the far Right has now become the Center" and what used to be the Center is regarded as the Left. A true Left is currently out in left field. What is true of the general culture is becoming true in theology. Rightist theologies are increasingly portrayed as the moderate option.} However" these theologies of salvation by the bomb (which Chapman, in Chapter 8 of this book" describes as "nuclearism") are" in fact" an evisceration of the doctrine of God.4 What alternatives are there to these rightist theologies?

Protestant liberalism" as represented by the work of Gordon Kaufman and Paul Tillich, offers a critique and specific alternative to nuclearism. Mary Daly, a feminist theologian" provides a different critique and a very different

alternative. It is the argument of this essay that the Kaufman-Tillich route is not" in fact" a genuine alternative. Daly's work provides significant gains" but she" and other white feminists such as myself" need to attend to the work of black women writers" who know a lot about survival. The work of these black women particularly challenges the white-dominated West" a location of the nuclear threat" to find a way of talking about God that affirms the goodness and value of the world and also mandates justice in history.

## LIBERALS AND THE BOMB

It would seem at first glance that liberals of both a Protestant and Catholic stripe would be the logical ones to provide an alternative" since they are also the targets of fundamentalists. And it is true that a consistent theological statement condemning nuclearism has come from a liberal perspective. Gordon Kaufman's *Theology for a Nuclear Ages* addresses nuclearism directly.

Kaufman describes his work as "constructive theology"<sup>6</sup> by which he means the ongoing work of each generation of Christians to construct a world of meaningful discourse about God. Constructive theology is a recent variant upon the basic themes of liberalism. One definition of *liberalism* in theology is that it is a trend in Protestant theology in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries "which aims to show that Christianity is rational and expedient and reconcilable with the human desire for autonomy."<sup>7</sup> Kaufman's theology is liberal in that he adheres to the notion that theology is rational discourse" is possible discourse" and is necessary to a humanity that finds itself in history and must deal with that fact.

Why is it" asks Kaufman, that only the apocalyptic fundamentalists are asking the meaning of the nuclear threat" this "momentous religious fact right before our eyes?" Kaufman sets it as one of his tasks to pursue the logic of the "fundamentalists on the far religious right who follow out the implications of the biblical apocalyptic imagery of an earthly holocaust as the ultimate expression of God's sovereignty over history,"and who "are apparently willing to go so far as to suggest that a nuclear disaster" if it ever comes" could only be an expression of the purposes of god. "<sup>8</sup> These fundamentalists further believe that those who work to prevent such a climax to human history are in fact guilty of opposing God's will. Kaufman's conclusion is that the notion of the sovereignty of God itself as "the central traditional claim" of Christian theology is "way 'out of sync'" with the nuclear age.<sup>9</sup>

As constructive theology" rather than a deductive theology (in which God is treated as the only subject and human beings are seen as the passive objects

of God's action), Kaufman's proposal is for a project of the human imagination to reconceive the relation of God, the world, and human beings. If one of the constructive tasks of theology is to make a meaningful world, one way to accomplish the task is to excite the human imagination to find a place in that world. The key point, of course, is that, as Kaufman says, a "God conceived in terms of the metaphor of creativity or constructive power ... will be of a very different sort from a God conceived in terms of violent destructiveness." And, in the logic of Kaufman's argument, each image will either excite human actions to transform creatively the institutions of the world toward construction or find divine justification for destruction or passivity.

Kaufman's enterprise illustrates very well the genius of Protestant liberalism: its embrace of the immanence of God in the world. The immanence of God is most often the point cited as the weakness of liberalism; that is, that its doctrine of God is too subjective, that revelation becomes synonymous with human experience, and hence that there is no judgment on evil." Conservative critics of liberalism always fault its accommodation to modern culture, charging that liberalism makes "man" the measure of all things and dethrones God. They charge that liberalism fails to deal with the sinfulness of human nature and society's innate fallenness.<sup>12</sup>

Liberalism has faults certainly, but not these. Its failure is rather that it has never repudiated the philosophy of Cartesianism or modern philosophical idealism. It holds to a myth of the individual (usually a white male) as the locus of an independently functioning objective reason. From this independent reason liberals generalize to "humanity," with an Anglo-Saxon male face. Liberals look for abstract universals," which undermines their commitment to the immanence of God. The true weakness of liberalism resides not in its embrace of immanence, but in its half-hearted immanence that is colored by romanticism and confined to a particular class and race experience. The embodied character of existence is never embraced, and hence a mind-body dualism remains in its commitment to immanence.

Liberals thus repudiate the flesh of common human experience and extend that repudiation into communal life. As a solitary individual, a liberal is essentially alone, despairing of any genuine sociality. (In Chapter 8 of this book, Chapman links this alienation directly to nuclearism.) This viewpoint has produced a doctrine of God both immanentist and essentialist. Whereas God is the basis of Existence (the ground of being), God (like the human consciousness) is alienated from the material, physical world. But the physical, material world is the stuff of what it means to be.

The liberal viewpoint has thus produced an alienated rationalism. In 1972 Kaufman wrote with some confidence: "Though the cultural crisis that helped

give neo-orthodoxy its hearing is by no means past, we have learned to live with it pretty well and are beginning to hope once again that man [sic] can sufficiently control his destiny to manage both the bomb and the population explosion."<sup>14</sup> Kaufman wrote these words in the second age of the Bomb, the period in which images of nuclear destruction were pushed from the public mind, especially by the Vietnam War. This second period of the Bomb was marked by a naive faith in human rationality-embodied strategically in the concept of deterrence. <sup>15</sup> Even though the acronym MAD (Mutually Assured Destruction) should have revealed easily that this was an unstable situation and anything but rational, it did not. (In Chapter 3 of this book, Chernus shows that the faith in rationality continued to dominate nuclear imagery, at least in the most widely read magazines, in the 1980s.)

Faith in human rationality is a hallmark of liberalism. In 1972 Kaufman's problem with God was the term God itself. God is not feeling, not word, not ethics, not ecclesiastical structures, he wrote, but "ultimate loyalty or faith."<sup>16</sup> But as that which transcends any finite reference by definition (i.e., the ultimate), what meaning can the term have "to our modern empirical, secular, and pragmatic temper?" There is no clear empirical evidence for the existence of God, and evidence is the criterion sine qua non of reality in "the way we have come to conceive natural and historical order under the influences of modern scientific, philosophical, and historical studies."

Kaufman's answer to this "problem" is that "God is a symbol for God," in the words of Paul Tillich, whom he quotes. <sup>19</sup> And Kaufman does more than quote Tillich; he constructs a definition of God that depends on Tillich's "God above God" in *The Courage to Be*.<sup>20</sup> Kaufman writes, "God is a symbol-an imaginative construct-that enables men [sic] to view the world and themselves in such a way as to make action and morality ultimately (metaphysically) meaningful."

Kaufman has not varied significantly from this definition of God in 1985. God as symbol is "the ultimate point of reference. <sup>22</sup> That he has not varied significantly in his theological answers may be regarded as surprising,<sup>23</sup> since clearly his assessment of the capacity of human beings to "live with [the bomb] pretty well" has undergone a drastic reassessment. But this reassessment has not included a weakening of the commitment to rationality. Kaufman continues to believe that disembodied reason will enable us to think our way to a concept of God that can "relativize" and "humanize" our situation.<sup>24</sup> "We are attempting to find a contemporary way to think of God, to conceive that reality which grounds our existence, and devotion to which can provide us with significant orientation as we face the frightening pass to which human history today has come."<sup>25</sup>

Yet, Kaufman's God "as point of reference" actually pulls his doctrine of

God away from that which "grounds our being"; namely, our material, embodied life. In this sense the liberal God is wholly unaffected by what happens to us in this frightening nuclear age. Kaufman should be frightened. Kaufman is alone in facing this looming catastrophe. The sense of being alone is the companion anthropology to the liberal doctrine of God. It is well to remember that the "God above God" is Paul Tillich's answer to his assessment of the fundamental existential dilemma of man [sic] - estrangement.<sup>26</sup> Kaufman, in his work of 1981, *The Theological Imagination*, describes the human need for "social interdependence" experienced in childhood and then remarks that "the strong undercurrent of anxiety which most of us experience much of the time appears to be directly correlated with the absence, or potential absence, of such supporting figures."<sup>27</sup>

Kaufman is expressing two of the hallmarks of liberalism: both his own sense of alienation, and his projection of that experience onto the whole of humanity. He writes, "as we mature to adulthood, we become aware that no human being can be absolutely relied on."<sup>28</sup> "In this respect, as Paul Tillich has argued, human anxiety is 'ontological'; it belongs to our human existence as such."<sup>29</sup> From his own experience of existence as alienated and from Tillich's confirmation of this alienation, Kaufman projects this alienation into his definition of the human situation. But this alienation is interpreted wholly in abstract essentialist categories such as "ontological," or our "human existence as such," and never in concrete social and material terms.

The inability of liberals to actually deal with the theological nuclearism of the religious Right is based in the fact that, as Carter Heyward said in addressing the American Academy of Religion, the liberal God "is such a gentleman."<sup>30</sup> That is, the God of liberalism is above the hassle of human history. The liberals' God does not care whether we rule the world or not and hence has nothing at stake. The God of nuclearism has everything at stake. The limited God of liberalism will not harm us-or help us either.

#### GOD, THE GODDESS, AND THE BOMB

In her work, *Pure Lust: Elemental Feminist Philosophy*, Mary Daly discusses Robert Oppenheimer and the bomb to illustrate the parameters of what she calls the *sadosociety*. The *sadosociety* depends on the abstractionist, nature- and female-despising works of sadoasceticism. This is the denial of the basis in nature of all life, the reversal of concepts that prepares society to accept as "rational" the notion that destruction is a form of "saving." As American troops once "saved" Vietnamese villages by destroying them, so nuclearisms will save the world from "Godless communism" by destroying it.<sup>31</sup>

Oppenheimer was thus an agent of patriarchy's *biocide*: "the degenerative and life violating tendencies" that are becoming more aggressive in the "aging and deterioration of patriarchy itself."<sup>32</sup> When he named the first nuclear test

*Trinity* after Donne's poem to the Christian God, he chose this name as the "sadospiritual legitimation of this lust and its technological ejaculations." The opening verse of the poem, "Batter my heart, three persona God," is well chosen, according to Daly, because it reveals that "the battering of the Earth and of her creatures is the consequence of this disordered sentiment."<sup>33</sup> Daly even quotes the response of Winston Churchill to the report of the successful first test of the new weapon. Churchill, who was relaxing in his zippered siren suit, read the report, then waved his cigar with a flourish. "Stimson," he rumbled, "what was gunpowder? Trivial. What was electricity? Meaningless. This atomic bomb is the Second Coming in Wrath."<sup>34</sup>

For Daly, God is the problem (as Kaufman put it in another context). "The earthy/ unearthy males have vaporized and then condensed/ reified their self-images into the sublime product, god,"<sup>35</sup> in the process of projecting all that is most holy and sacred onto the cosmos where it cannot undergo natural processes such as death. This theology must be wrathful because it must murder and dismember the Goddess. Unable to do away with nature per se, the underlying reality of which the Goddess is a symbol, Christian theologians have previously been content to ritually murder her and preserve a certain carved remnant in Mary. The advent of nuclear technology, however, makes the complete murder of the Goddess (nature) possible, and it has exposed this fault line at the heart of Christian theology-the oft-times barely concealed contempt for the earth and its symbol, the Goddess.

"Women," however, "need the Goddess," as Carol Christ explicitly says in her now famous article.<sup>36</sup> In her identification of four reasons why women need the goddess, Christ returns again and again to the symbolism of the female divinity as an affirmation of the bodily, material aspects of human existence. For Daly, the Goddess is the symbol of the reintegration of the radical disconnections between mind and body, spirit and matter, transcendence and immanence whose symptom patriarchy is. Such reconnection or "ontological interacting is participation in Being."<sup>37</sup> It is the way of *biophilia*, or love of life.

Daly's work can be read as corrective to the problem of liberalism, a fact she herself discusses at some length in considering the theology of Paul Tillich. Daly's reading of intellectual history in the West finds that the separation of philosophy and theology in the "Enlightenment" occurred alongside the ritual murder of the Goddess in the European witch-hunts. "For dismemberment of wisdom logically correlates with the dismemberment of the Goddess."<sup>38</sup> The separation of philosophy and theology has had several pernicious effects. One

was the decrease in the "personal intensity of concern which motivated the medieval philosopher-theologians." <sup>39</sup> Intimately connected to the emergence of the "disinterested" scholar is the "fact that philosophy was denuded of interest in final causality—a violation compared to lobotomy."<sup>40</sup>

Further, philosophers ceased having any interest in "separate intelligences" or angels. Although Daly acknowledges that today such speculation is the stuff of science fiction, the "philosophy of angels has had power to inspire the philosophical imagination, raising questions about the nature of knowledge, will, change, being in time and space, and intuitive communication." <sup>41</sup> When the spiritual-philosophical imagination is thus bifurcated, genuine creativity, which is rooted in the theological "spirit-force" of life, becomes inaccessible or "deeply buried." We are told it doesn't exist.

The greatness of Paul Tillich, in Daly's view, is that of all recent theologians he did not lose sight of final causality. He "noticed the materialization/ fragmentation that prevails in modern philosophy, attributing this to a split between ontological and technical reason." <sup>42</sup> Tillich's analysis of this split between ontological and technical reason is where the problems begin. Tillich always wants ontological reason, or reason in itself, to have control over technical reason, or the process of "reasoning." Since the middle of the nineteenth century, however, "reasoning" has threatened to break away from "reason." Tillich, according to Daly, ends up picturing the process of technical reasoning, as opposed to the abstraction of reason itself, as a "sort of wayward wife who refused to meet the demands of her lord and master and finally not only threatened but actually obtained a divorce—in the middle of the nineteenth century."<sup>43</sup>

It is wholly unsurprising, Daly notes, that this is the period of that separation. It is the first wave of feminism, in which female independence, represented by "technical reason," first emerged. Liberal feminism claimed "technical reason," or the process of reasoning, for its own and opted for the body half of the mind-body split. The tension for liberal feminists has always been that "technical reason" is seen as a threat by liberals themselves, including Tillich, who are always afraid that the "subservient half will break away and become the servant of 'non-rational' forces." <sup>44</sup> The fact that liberal men buy into "this bifurcated vision" is consistent with the other distortions of Western culture.

Science as envisioned by Oppenheimer is the result of this radical disjuncture when nature is seen as the object of scientific inquiry with no ends (final causality) of its own. Tillich's dilemma is even more complex; he can see the problem but subverts the accomplishment of the remedy. Tillich proposes that "ontological reason can be defined as the structure of the mind which enables it to *grasp and to shape reality*"<sup>45</sup> Daly calls this the "hairy claw" view

of ontological reason." Her point is that reality itself is reduced to that which can be grasped. It is rendered thereby a passive recipient of "reason's" unsolicited attentions. <sup>46</sup> But this actually makes reality into nothing for itself, and in fact, nothing for the would-be philosopher-theologian.

In identifying this flaw of liberal theology, Daly has touched bottom.

The God of liberalism is nothing, a vacuum left by the splitting of reality into two halves, one of which presumes to dominate the other, but which in fact is characterized primarily by its own alienation. For liberalism, God is not death, God is nothing.

For Daly, Goddess is definitely not nothing. She is not limited even to the Goddess as Great Mother. "Fixation upon the Great Mother to the exclusion of the myriad other possibilities for Naming transcendence can fix women into

foreground categories that block encounters with the inexhaustible Other, stopping the Metamorphic process." <sup>47</sup> That is to say, the divine in Daly's work is not a substitution of female terms for a male transcendent deity nor is the divine reduced to Nature per se. The entire model for divine-human relationship has changed. Limiting the divine to a label instead of understanding the spiraling of metaphoric encounter with shifting images of radical otherness is a symptom, in Daly's view, of "the Standstill Society, the Stagnation."<sup>48</sup> She gives a profound glimpse into what it would mean to actually live in the physical world and in the imagination and not abandon the physical world for an abstractionist human consciousness.

Yet I want to go on to say that Daly also shares some characteristics with Kaufman and Tillich that undermine her commitment to the reintegration of the nature-history split. I get a clue to this in her use of the term *pure* in the title

*Pure Lust*. The journey of *Pure Lust* is a movement, a spiral, through "Metamorphospheres" of Wild Weird women who are purified in the real of Fire from the Plastic and Potted Passions and Virtues and are able to break out of these spheres and get in touch with Natural Grace. It is a movement of purification.

It is significant to me that Daly has drawn on Alice Walker's book, *The Color Purple*, to illustrate the movement toward the inexhaustible other.<sup>49</sup>

The philosopher (Daly) reads to a student from Walker's book:

Don't look like nothing, she [Shug] say. It ain't a picture show. It ain't something you can look at apart from anything else, including yourself. I believe God is everything, say Shug. . . . She say, My first step away from the old white man was trees. Then air. Then birds. Then other people. But one day when I was sitting quiet and feeling like a motherless child, which I was, it come to me: that feeling of being part of everything, not separate at all.<sup>50</sup>

Daly continues, "Hearing these words, our Nag-Gnostic philosopher and Novice Nag must feel essentially in accord with Shug and Celie."<sup>51</sup> Daly adds

in a note, however, "It is essential to point out that Shug Avery and Celie are in no way responsible for the interpretations of their conversations and behavior presented in this section. I have assumed the Nag-Gnostic prerogative of having Nagging thoughts about them and expressing these. Any Nags especially Shug and Celie-are, of course, free to disagree."<sup>52</sup>

What I read Daly as saying, however, is that in the realm of purity all differences dissolve. Contrast to her words what Delores Hines has to say about the differences between black and white women's reality.

We are told that apples and oranges are the same, when we can see that they are not. You cannot easily substitute one for the other in a recipe. Their odors are different. They appeal to people differently. Even a blind person can tell them apart. Yet, a steady stream of rhetoric is aimed at convincing Black women how much alike their lives, experiences, wishes and decisions are to those of our stepsisters.<sup>53</sup>

Kaufman has his own movement of purification. In his volume *An Essay on Theological Method*, Kaufman presents a schema (also operative in *Theology for a Nuclear Age*) of theological analysis that proceeds in three moments. The first moment is "pure phenomenological description," an "attempt to put the varieties of contemporary experience together into a concept of the world as a whole." The second stage is the imposition of the God concept constructed as "the human significance of the ultimate reality." Then comes the third moment, in which "the works of artist and physicists, social workers and philosophers, historians and economists, urban experts and students of the 'third world,' spokespersons for the problems of blacks, women, and other groups, must all be taken into account."<sup>54</sup> After the entire schema is constructed as "pure," then the messy masses are fit in. Granted Kaufman claims that these moments cannot "be taken up in simple, serial order."<sup>55</sup> But in the following paragraph he imagines a theologian embarking on moment 3 who is "grounded" in moments 1 and 2. If these are not serial, their presentation and subsequent function certainly appear that way.

In this sense both Daly and Kaufman regard the concrete, material alienation of women, blacks, "and other groups" to be of import in theological construction, but only in a tertiary sense.

#### THE SURVIVAL OF THE ANCESTORS, SELF, AND GOD

Audre Lorde commented at a panel on The Personal and the Political at the Second Sex Conference, October 19, 1979, that

Black panelists' observation about the effects of relative powerlessness and the differences of relationship between black women and men from white

women and men illustrate some of our unique problems as black feminists. If white American feminist theory need not deal with the differences between us, and the resulting differences in aspects of our oppressions, then what do you do with the fact that the women who clean your houses and tend your children while you attend conferences on feminist theory are, for the most part, poor and third world women? What is the theory behind racist feminism?<sup>56</sup>

Simply put, there are women who have no access to any of the spheres Daly describes because of their economic, social, and racial location. There is no reintegration of nature-history without the confrontation of the vast differences in women's historical conditions and a *methodological* shift in light of that difference. We cannot go "Leaping with Wanderlust"<sup>57</sup> over poverty, over racism, over real history.

Our survival and that of God depends on knowing this. "Survival is not an academic skill," as Audre Lord has written.<sup>58</sup> As an academic, and here I speak for myself, I don't know what I need to know about surviving. The irony of writing about this lack of knowledge is not lost on me. But this I do know. Contact with the voices of historical difference and a confrontation with them *as* different is as crucial to our survival and God's as is the reintegration with nature.

In one of her early novels, *Meridian*, writer Alice Walker explores the spiritual truth to her conviction that connection to the heritage of black women is the source of creativity in life and the well-spring of change. Meridian, the chief character, seeks her identity through the legacy left her by other southern black women. Meridian believes in the sacredness and continuity of life, the African spirituality of animism, "the spirit that inhabits all life."<sup>59</sup> Meridian discovers, against impossible odds, the forces in a perverted and distorted racist society that inhibit the natural growth of the living organism toward freedom. She learns that "the respect she owed her life was to continue, against whatever obstacles, to live it, and not to give up any particle of it without a fight to the death, preferably not her own. And that this existence extended beyond herself to those around her because, in fact, the years in America had created them One Life."<sup>60</sup>

*The Color Purple* can be seen as not only encompassing the themes of Walker's earlier works, but taking them past the tension of longing after resolution to a conclusion. Like her other novels, this is the story of one southern black family and the oppression black women experience in their relationships with black men. She examines subjects of incest and lesbian relationships. In loving Shug, Celie, the main character, who has been sexually abused by her father and physically abused by her husband, comes to value herself and life. Celie has managed not only to survive but to prevail against all odds. The strength she finds is in the solidarity of women who, in choosing

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freedom for themselves, also permit those around them, both female and male, to find the freedom that is the natural state of human life.

Many have remarked not only on the unusual content of *The Color Purple* but on its unusual style. It is written in the form of letters, to God and from one sister to the other. Letters were one of the few forms of self-expression allowed to a black woman. In adopting this style, Walker herself is claiming allegiance to the generations of women who had no other choice but to express themselves in this form. Walker has also found quilt making to be this same vehicle for the expression of the creativity of the self, for black women were allowed no other artistic outlet.

Black women such as Walker, Zora Neale Hurston, and Toni Morrison, among many others, have used religious imagery, and specifically Christian biblical imagery, to frame their literary works. But the answer to the question of who God is for the black woman writer permits no simple contrast between modes of Christian belief and African spiritualities. What was said of Emily Dickinson can be said of these writers as well: they use the Christian idiom much more than they permit it to use them. It is closer to the major theme of these writers to say that God becomes the black woman protagonist in both suffering and healing. Early in *Meridian* another character says of her, "she thinks *she's* God."

The novel *Meridian* is based not only on the conviction of life itself as sacred, but also on the dilemma of suffering and death giving birth to life. *Meridian*, in its exploration of nonviolent resistance after it has become unfashionable, pursues the notion that unless the struggle is taken on by those who wish to change society, even to the death, they will defeat their own revolution. That which they seek to destroy in society will resurrect itself in their own psyches. And similarly that which they defeat in themselves can become liberating for the community. It may be more accurate to say that it is Life that is divine and that the self-conscious, self-loving black woman who allies herself with life can embody its divinity.

In *The Salt Eaters*, a novel by Toni Cade Bambara, the narrative opens with the question, "Are you sure, sweetheart, that you want to be well?"-the words uttered by Minnie Ransom, the faith healer cum therapist in the Southwest Community Infirmary.<sup>62</sup> The infirmary, one of the unusual features of Claybourne, Georgia, is the facility to which Velma Henry, to whom the question of wellness is addressed, has been taken. Velma, the tireless worker on good causes of the neighborhood, has just attempted suicide.

As Minnie's voice intones its question of wanting to be well, Velma's fractured consciousness allows scenes to drift in and out. Her "soul goes gathering" <sup>63</sup> remembering what it's been like

being called in on five-minute notice after all the interesting decisions had been made, called in out of personal loyalty and expected to break her hump pulling off what the men had decided was crucial for community good ... being snatched at by childish, unmannish hands.... Like taking on entirely too much: drugs, prisons, alcohol, the schools, rape, battered women, abused children ... the nuclear power issue ...

Velma's healing takes place when she remembers and enters in spirit a place where time fuses the dead, the living, and the unborn, and "Isis lifted the veil"; where the spirits of African religions like Shango preside over the rites of transformation, and Ogun challenges chaos and forges transition; where Obatala shapes creation, Damballah ensures continuity and renewal, and Anancy becomes a medium for the shapes of Brer Rabbit, Brer Bear, Brer Fox, Brer Terrapin, and Signifyin' Monkey; where the griot member of all humankind is reincarnated as the conjure woman, High John, John Henry, the Flying African, Stagolee, the Preacher, the blues singer, the jazz makers; where the sorcerers of African-American literary heritage from the eighteenth century until the present assemble as the Master Minds of global experience. For Bambara, time is a fusion of the ancestors and the future. When the community forgets that, and enters into the linear progression of Western society with its crisis upon crisis: drugs, prisons, alcohol, the schools, rape, battered women, abused children, nuclear war... they are broken and can no longer heal either themselves or their world.<sup>65</sup>

For these black women writers, survival depends both on claiming the earth as divine and on claiming a non-Western understanding of history. Mary Daly has pointed out the vacuum at the heart of white, Protestant liberal theology. Yet she and other white feminists who understand the significance of claiming the earth and bodily process in divinity need to hear the difference race makes. From black women writers, I hear that history is to be taken as the location of struggle, of survival, of life and death.

Yes, the survival of God is the survival of nature: the earth and all its splendors, including-but not limited to-human beings. Surely the wanton destruction of the basis of life would be an irreparable rending of the worship relationship that is the content of religion's use of the term God. But survival is not mere persistence in being, nor is it the ideal of progressive material success as defined in the West. God and her survival are threatened both by the other-worldly spirituality of nuclear fundamentalists that makes this earth of penultimate concern *and* by their companion capitalist materiality that measures all life for its monetary values. Survival is the fullness of life, the solidarity between the ancestry of the planet and the race to come. And you can't find that vision in Plato or his heirs.