

MARY MAGDALENE: APOSTLE TO THE APOSTLES

By Nick Gier

Blessed Mary [Magdalene], you whom I shall complete with all the mysteries on high, speak openly, for you are one whose heart is set on heaven's kingdom more than all your brothers.

--Jesus in *Faith Wisdom*

In the past Mary Magdalene has been wrongly depicted as a repentant whore and now, even though at least they have made an "honest woman" of her, she is still a sexual being rather than a spiritual leader.

--Ann G. Brock

[Mrs. Jesus] is too confining a role for this deeply spiritual, independent woman who embodies the essence of the sacred feminine principle.

--Dan Burnstein

Legends have it that after that first Easter, Mary Magdalene boarded a boat that eventually landed in France in AD 42, where she continued her Christian ministry. Mary was one of the most remarkable women in the Bible. She is described as an independent woman, who "provided for [Jesus and the disciples] out of [her] means" (Lk. 8:2-3).

St. Augustine, one of the greatest orthodox theologians, called her the "apostle to the apostles," and many medieval theologians followed Augustine in granting Mary this exalted title. After all, Paul defined apostleship as any person who had seen the risen Christ (1 Cor. 9:1).

Hippolytus, an early bishop of Rome, set the stage for female apostleship: "Christ himself came to them so that the women would be apostles of Christ and by their obedience rectify the sin of the ancient Eve." The sexist twist at the end is regrettable, very similar to the Jains of India, who explain the existence of a great female saint as the result of making up for great sins in her past.

It took two millennia for the Catholic Church to dispose of the long standing myth that Mary Magdalene was a prostitute. In 1969 the Church indirectly removed the stain of her alleged sins by assigning new scriptural readings for her saint's day on July 22.

Passages from the erotic Song of Songs are no longer read, and the passage from Luke 7:37-38 about "a woman from the city, who was a sinner" is also deleted. Catholics now read the poignant passages from the Book of John (20:1-2, 11-18), in which Mary is the first to see and talk with the risen Christ.

There are now some Bible scholars who propose that Mary may have been author of John, Christians' most popular gospel. Perhaps the only truth in *The Davinci Code* is the claim that the apostle from Magdala was indeed Jesus' most beloved disciple, and by virtue of this the founder of Christianity. Furthermore, there are some remarkable similarities between Leonardo's painting of Mary and the figure that has always been taken to be John on the left of Jesus in Leonardo's *Last Supper*.

The story of Magdalene as a prostitute was the result of mistakenly identifying Magdalene with Mary of Bethany (John 12:1) and an unknown woman "who was a sinner" (Luke 7:37-38), both of whom took oil and bathed Jesus' feet with their hair. Interestingly enough, the Eastern Orthodox Church never made this identification, so Magdalene the Whore was never a part of their tradition. Indeed, they have her preaching in Rome, even before the emperor himself.

This conflation of New Testament women was made official in a famous sermon by Pope Gregory I in 591, and was imprinted in millions of Christian minds with paintings of the penitent Mary Magdalene with loose red hair carrying an alabaster jar of ointment. The legends of Mary in Southern France have her clothed in nothing but body-length hair, as she mediates in a cave and ascends into heaven each day to receive sacred food.

Gregory's claim that Mary had "turned the mass of her crimes to virtues," echoing the story of the Jain female saint above, presents to all Christians, as Susan Haskins explains, "the redeemed whore and Christianity's model of repentance, a manageable, controllable figure, and effective weapon and instrument of propaganda against her own sex."

In the Jewish tradition anointing someone with oil is a ritual for making that person a messiah (an "anointed one"), and the priests of Israel and even King Cyrus were messiahs (Is. 45:1). So perhaps it is Luke's unnamed woman who officially makes Jesus the Messiah. In Matthew's account of this story, the woman is not a sinner, and Jesus praises her by predicting that "wherever this gospel is preached in the whole world, what she has done will be told in memory of her" (26:13).

Matthew and John see the woman's anointment not as messiahship but as preparation of Jesus' body for burial, an equally important sacred ritual. Bruce Chilton, professor of religion at Bard College, observes that anointing with oil was a priestess's job in the ancient Near East, and it is not surprising that New Testament women play this significant role.

As Mary Magdalene was rushing to the tomb on Easter morning, she was carrying oil and herbs for the preparation of Jesus' body. Professor Chilton proposes that Mary had three roles as a religious leader: she anointed with oil, she exorcized demons, and she had visions.

Consistent with the Gnostic's rejection of a bodily resurrection and consistent with Paul's vision of Christ on the road to Damascus, Mary may have had a vision of a disembodied Christ. Contrary to Jesus' invitation for Thomas to touch his wounds, Jesus warns Mary that she should not touch him (Jn. 20:17).

This was not proof that, as the Church implied, that Christ did want a physical relationship with Mary; rather, it is more obviously the case, at least for Gnostic Christians, that Jesus did not have a body to touch. The Gnostic Gospel of Mary makes it clear that Magdalene saw Jesus only in her "mind." This is also the gospel that claims that Jesus gave Mary secret teaching that the other disciples did not have.

Women in the early church played significant roles. Single women traveled and preached with Paul as equals; and Priscilla, who was later martyred and canonized, had a church in her home. John Mark's mother also hosted some of the earliest Christian worship in her home. In her book *When Women Were Priests*, Karen Torjesen offers strong evidence that women officiated at the Eucharist in these early Christian services.

Returning to Mary Magdalene, we need to address the question of why so many women and men are now identifying so fervently with her. Diane Apostolos-Cappadona may have the answer: "[Mary] was an independent woman . . . she didn't need a child, she didn't need a husband. . . . She becomes the preacher, the missionary, the evangelist, the healer, the miracle worker. . . . These are the things that attract people to her."

As we celebrate Easter this year, let's think of Mary Magdalene, a woman of means and spiritual achievement, the first witness to the Resurrection, and the apostle to the apostles.

Nick Gier taught religion and philosophy at the University of Idaho for 31 years. Much of the material for this column was drawn from Dean Burstein and Arne J. de Keijzer, eds., *Secrets of Mary Magdalene* (NY: CDS Books, 2006).

