

The love story at the heart of Christian theology

Maureen Daly | May. 12, 2011

THE MEANING OF MARY MAGDALENE: DISCOVERING THE WOMAN AT THE HEART OF CHRISTIANITY

By Cynthia Bourgeault

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“Why France?” was the first chapter I turned to when I picked up Cynthia Bourgeault’s new treatment of Mary Magdalene. I was indulging a nearly forgotten girlhood fascination with medieval France, the land of troubadours and walled castle towns. I looked to see if my fairy-tale France was part of the story.

Bourgeault did not disappoint. She begins her serious study, *The Meaning of Mary Magdalene*, in a fairy-tale setting: at the basilica of St. Mary Magdalene “high on an escarpment crowning the medieval walled city of Vezelay, France.” Vezelay, an important medieval pilgrimage site because it claimed to house the remains of Mary Magdalene, today houses the newly founded order “Fraternités Monastiques de Jerusalem.” It was this community’s Good Friday liturgy in 2005 that made Bourgeault reread scripture and see Mary Magdalene in a new way. She asks her readers to do the same.

Why France? Because, Bourgeault says, “while it cannot be proven that she actually did live in France, the conviction that she did so is an indelible part of the French cultural memory.” She sees the influence of Mary Magdalene in courtly love, in the reviled Cathars, the “monastic love mysticism” of Bernard of Clairvaux, Taizé chants, and Teilhard de Chardin’s vision of the sacred heart of Jesus as the driving force of cosmic evolution.



The first third of the book can be read as a biography of Mary Magdalene. The

author strings together Mary Magdalene’s appearances in the four canonical Gospels and in the Gnostic gospels of Thomas, Philip and Mary Magdalene -- working from a new translation of all three -- to create a coherent life story.

In this compressed form, it is striking how often Mary Magdalene appears in the canon. The four Gospels name her as witness to the crucifixion, burial and resurrection of Jesus. In Luke and Mark she is named as the woman healed of demonic possession. Bourgeault also contends that it was Mary Magdalene who anointed the feet of Jesus, a story found in all four canonical Gospels. Here Bourgeault enters speculation, but offers strong justifications. She then looks at what the Gnostic gospels can add to this story.

Treating the Gnostic sources as equally valid to complete Magdalene's portrait, Bourgeault enters into unorthodox territory. I am not qualified to defend or attack her commentary, but I can say that her work makes sense of what would otherwise be disjointed fragments. She spends 40 pages retelling the Gospel of Mary Magdalene and filling in the gaps between the four dialogues of this text.

She sees three elements of the Gnostic gospels that are distinct from the canonical texts: First, "Jesus' inner circle of disciples includes both men and women on an equal footing." Second, Mary Magdalene is the "first among apostles" because she is the one who best understands Jesus' message. Third, Mary Magdalene is in a special relationship with Jesus in a way that "appears to entail an erotic component."

Who is Bourgeault? She is an Episcopal priest, a retreat leader, and author of seven books on centering prayer, chanting the psalms, and Christian spiritual life.

Although a hermit contemplative, she travels and lectures widely. She is associated with the Aspen Wisdom School in Colorado, the Contemplative Society in Victoria, British Columbia, the Collegeville Institute for Ecumenical and Cultural Research at St. John's Abbey in Minnesota, and New Camaldoli Hermitage in Big Sur, Calif.

Bourgeault says that she wore many hats in writing this book. I found her voice changing not just from chapter to chapter but from paragraph to paragraph. To enter Mary Magdalene's world, Bourgeault "relied in equal measure on scholarly study, contemplative prayer, and the lived experience of my own heart." This last element speaks loudest in part three, where she expounds on the power of the romantic love relationship. Moving from scholarly citations to passionately held beliefs and lived convictions, her arguments are multifaceted, and difficult to summarize or contest. How can one argue with someone else's experience of love?

She acknowledges that to the reader it may seem that she is making "wildly intuitive leaps." And it does. Still, I think this work is well worth reading for the interesting speculations she raises. Some may seem exotic, others timeworn, but I think Bourgeault's smorgasbord of ideas brings new elements to the Christian conversation.

Bourgeault has three goals in this book. First, "to repair the damage caused by a heavy-handedly patriarchal (and at times flat-out misogynist) ecclesiastical tradition and reclaim Mary Magdalene's legitimate role as a teacher and apostle."

Second, to examine the "emotionally charged question of a possible love relationship between Jesus and Mary Magdalene." She concludes that "such a relationship most likely did exist and is in fact at the heart of the Christian transformational path." She sees this love as having a "healing and generative energy."

Her third goal is to examine "how this healing has unfolded, and continues to unfold, in the Christian West through the largely unacknowledged infusions of Mary Magdalene's presence." Bourgeault wants to make the case that "the faithfulness of their two hearts resonating across time and space forms a particular kind of energy channel through which divine compassion pours itself forth as wisdom and creativity."

The second and third parts of the book deal with Mary Magdalene's role as the beloved of Jesus and Bourgeault's conviction that Christianity must understand and champion a path of "conscious love." She goes

so far as to say that Jesus learned about abundant, self-emptying love through his relationship with Mary Magdalene. Bourgeault sees a love story at the heart of Christian theology, a story that calls for a ?responsible revisioning of human sexuality and feminine wisdom.? It is the path of conscious love that is ?the true progeny of Mary Magdalene and Jesus? a love that is ?visionary, transformative, inclusive and ubiquitously creative.?

?The church,? she says, ?is waiting in the garden for the encounter that will change our institutional hearts.?

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