



The Meaning of Mary Magdalene: Discovering the Woman at the Heart of Christianity

Cynthia Bourgeault

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Mary Magdalene is one of the most influential symbols in the history of Christianity—yet, if you look in the Bible, you'll find only a handful of verses that speak of her. How did she become such a compelling saint in the face of such paltry evidence? In her effort to answer that question, Cynthia Bourgeault examines the Bible, church tradition, art, legend, and newly discovered texts to see what's there. She then applies her own reasoning and intuition, informed by the wisdom of the ages-old Christian contemplative tradition. What emerges is a radical view of Mary Magdalene as Jesus's most important disciple, the one he considered to understand his teaching best. That teaching was characterized by a nondualistic approach to the world and by a deep understanding of the value of the feminine. Cynthia shows how an understanding of Mary Magdalene can revitalize contemporary Christianity, how Christians and others can, through her, find their way to Jesus's original teachings and apply them to their modern lives.

The Meaning of Mary Magdalene: Discovering the Woman at the Heart of Christianity **Details**

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Jenn Cavanaugh says

This book is written inside out. And not in a satisfyingly chiasmic sense. The astute scriptural observations and compelling connections are relegated to the opening chapters and appendices when they belonged at the heart of Bourgeault's apologetic. She begins by beautifully delineating the way of Jesus as "the path of conscious love," cites the pluralism of the early church and the impediments the West began constructing on it, then she herself veers off into defending someone else's so-called "Fifth Way," scampering around to locate the best Buddhist term for it, stopping off for a few insufficient moments to not quite rehabilitate the term "gnostic" or the Cathars, etc. Later chapters reference energy fields and Eliot more than the canonical gospels or even her own logic. Bourgeault makes many good points - among them that the Da Vinci Code touched on something readers instinctively felt Christianity had lost - but that would have been better relocated to an appendix rather than scattered throughout in the space that should have been devoted to articulating her assumptions and making her main points more credible. Even when she does so (after the book is effectively over), the author occasionally falls afoul of some of the overly literal tendencies she deplores elsewhere, e.g. that John's literary narratives of Jesus's progressive interactions with the Marys/ the woman constitutes some hidden proof of her being the same historical person. Ultimately there's some excellent source material here, some superlative scholarship, some profound insights, and some gorgeous grounds for meditation, but some of the intuitive leaps from insufficiently established assumptions will turn-off rather than entice the reader who is not already sympathetic to the cult of Mary Magdalene.

Angela says

Loved the idea of Mary Magdalene holding/embodying/demonstrating Christ in relationship. Nicely done. Minor quibble: please scrub the manuscript of cliches!

Gaylene says

Reawaken to the power of the imaginal. This book is about a more esoteric relationship with a living soul of Jesus.

The first part of the book starts off very slowly and carefully but at the end of the book all caution is cast to the wind. The author begins talking about experiencing Jesus as the people did who first were there when the resurrection took place.

"They experienced Jesus as present; alive, palpable, vibrantly connected; their experience was that the walls between the realms are paper thin and that our embodiment is no obstacle to the full and intimate participation in relationship with Jesus here and now. The kingdom of heaven is not later, it is lighter; it exists right here, right beneath our noses, in a more subtle but expansive presence that is ours the moment we move beyond our egoically generated space time continuum and directly encounter the Source. From this imaginal plane of reality, reality floods back into our own world and fills us with grace, presence and

creativity. Here we discover God is not only for us, but with us."

Kasey Jueds says

I would give this book six stars if I could--this despite the fact that I couldn't really get on board with one of the chapters (the second-to-last one, about Mary Magdalene's possible sojourn in France). It's the most moving, surprising, courageous book about Christianity--maybe even about religion and spirituality in general--I think I've ever read. Cynthia Bourgeault is both smart and heartfelt, as well as unafraid to say what she thinks, no matter how many people she may offend or unsettle (and though I don't know much about institutional Christianity, I imagine there are many folks who consider themselves Christian who'd find themselves somewhere on the scale from startled to appalled by this book). I don't feel like I can do the ideas here justice--I don't want to dumb them down or turn them into cliches--and anyway, plenty of reviewers have written about the book's content. I just have a feeling I will be thinking about and processing this book for a long time.

Erik Graff says

Taking off from Holy Blood, Holy Grail and The Da Vinci Code this appropriation of Mary of Magdala represents yet another ideosyncratic attempt to make the bible and the Christian tradition relevant to the concerns of its author and others like her. To my taste, however, there is too much hermeneutic of the wishful thinking sort here, not enough scholarship. Tying together such late texts as the Gospels of Philip and Mary with the earlier canonicals is too much of a stretch for me. A case can be made for the Gospel of Thomas as having deep historical roots, but no case is made for Philip or Mary.

Post script: One of the reasons I disliked this book and the theology of love it propounds is that I don't believe we can, most of us, depend on that emotion. While it is all well and good that erotic love can, if present, be sublimated or otherwise turned to the good, too often that energy is simply not present. For me the ethical concern has always been about identifying the good and practicing it even when one has no desire to do so.

Jennifer says

What if Jesus was married, and what if he was married to Mary Magdalene. This book is what that marriage might have been like. Cynthia Bourgeault uses canonized and un-canonized scripture to present here theory. Not only is the book an easy read by the information is presented clearly. It gives a person a lot to think about.

Lisa says

Okay, so I'm not even halfway through this but it's pretty darn incredible. My mom gave this to me for

mother's day with an inscription stating it was one of the most exciting books on theology she has ever read. I wholeheartedly agree. This is a VERY progressive book on Christian spirituality and if you tend to think only conservatively, it might be upsetting. It might even upset other progressives. But man-oh-man, this woman is a gifted scholar and intuitive writer. She presents her argument, step by step, layer by layer, leaving little out. She uses scholarly language, but not in a way so erudite it is difficult to follow along. In fact, she also utilizes many commonly understood phrases and idioms that make her writing and argument more accessible. I've gotten so much out of this already and I can't wait to see how the rest unfolds.

Paul Curd says

Cynthia Bourgeault has provided one of the most valid frames of reference to begin to leverage a more deeply profound and contextual understanding of the philosopher's stone found at the heart of the story surrounding Jesus.

Terena Scott says

Beautifully written. Grounded in research. Knowledgeable author. I learned a great deal about Christianity, the message of Jesus, as well as Mary Magdalene.

Karen Floyd says

Not sure what to think of this. Early on much of what she is saying about Mary Magdalene makes good sense, but as she gets further into the book she seems to go from speculation to declaring something as true without any pause. The historian in me was horrified by the statement that Mary Magdalene must have gone to France because there is such a strong folk memory of her being there. There's a strong folk memory of the King Arthur stories, too. But I am trying to reserve judgement until I have read other authors on the subject.

The jury is still out.

Cathy says

i can't give this stars
if you are interested in Mary Magdalene this is a well researched and documented book by a trustworthy author
i would recommend it

Linda says

This book far exceeded my expectations! It took me into a breadth of academic research undertaken in the last couple of decades and with the added dimension of calling on spiritual experience throughout the ages. Truly enlightening and inspiring.

Kristen says

I bought this as "research" for Nanowrimo next month. What I didn't expect was for it to affirm my personal take on Magdalene and her significance in early Christianity: that focusing on whether or not she and Jesus were actually married and/or had sex is totally missing the point. The author is an Episcopal priest, and while she does explore unorthodox ideas, she uses church canon as her starting point for evidence to support her thesis.

If you're curious about the idea of Mary Magdalene having a real, legitimate place in orthodox Christianity without wanting to buy into a lot of The DaVinci Code-based hype, this is a good place to start. And it was just published this year, 2010, so it's pretty well up-to-date.

Kitt says

My current interest in Mary Magdala comes as I work on a creative writing piece centered on one of Jesus's disciples. Doing this work has led me to rethinking my personal theology. Recently an idea that combines some of my past transliminal experiences with this evolving personal theology is emerging through the work, but I haven't been able to understand it. After my church did a sermon series on the gnostic gospels and our minister cited *The Meaning of Mary Magdala*, I checked out this book from the local library. *The Meaning of Mary Magdala* helped me make meaning of transliminal experiences in the context of my faith tradition and in keeping with scriptural readings and did so in a way that can guide me into living more fully into my religious and spiritual convictions.

This is a dense and strange topic and being neither a scholar nor clergy could have been more of a challenge to understanding the book, but Bourgeault organizes her book in a logical and accessible format. She starts by showing evidence through church-canonical and universal scriptures that Mary Magdalena was a significant apostle of Jesus's inner circle of disciples. After clearing up how the church suppressed the role of woman, she goes on to present an argument that it is possible that Jesus and Mary were in personal relationship with each other. She approached this topic gently and with a balanced perspective that leads the reader to understand that a romantic/sexual relationship between Mary and Jesus is one possibility, but is careful to focus the exploration and what the evidence clearly shows we can learn from how they did relate regardless of the context of form of their relationship.

After finding ground in understanding Mary and Jesus as close companions in ministry Bourgeault gracefully provides evidence to support the idea in that they may have been companions through spiritual realms and/or transliminal experiences. Bourgeault skillfully presents this theory in a friendly and accessible manner. There is no point in my reading in which the writing feels too "spiritual woo-hoo" to follow. What I found useful is that doesn't stop with bringing forth the idea of transliminal experiences and transcending spiritual realms but explores what can be learned and applied from the experiences she described. She goes on to explore the idea of Mary as Intuitive wisdom and shows how Mary is a guide towards living in a fully conscious and loving way.

As a Christian person who has experience and accompanied people through extreme states of consciousness, I found her analysis to be fascinating. It gives me language for an emerging personal theological understanding that brings context to several different life experiences as well as possible material for the fiction book I am writing. Best of all the insight from this book presents information that can help me live

more fully into my faith. I enjoyed reading it. I will likely re-read it many times and anticipate with each re-reading I will gain further insights.

Mary Gail O'Dea says

This is scholarly yet readable and captivating biography/theology of Mary Magdalene. The contemporary biblical scholarship is coalescing around Mary Magdalene as indeed Jesus' beloved, but not in the tabloid, Da Vinci Code way. Rather, they reached a level of spiritual, emotional, psychological, and perhaps physical intimacy that helped both of them live into the next realm. She, the First Apostle, was indeed the bearer of his "progeny" -- probably not a child, but rather the spirit of his teachings and of his beings. She lives on within the Wisdom tradition, available us to today as a spirit bearer and source of the deepest Wisdom. Bourgeault, a contemplative Episcopal priest, contemplative, biblical scholar, and theologian places the Gospels of Phillip, Thomas, Peter, and Mary MAGdalene on the same plane of authenticity and truth as Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John and illustrates how they must be read as a whole. Beautiful!
