

ST. MARY OF MAGDALA: ECCLESIOLOGICAL PROVOCATIONS

In preparing for this address, I reviewed CTSA presidential plenary addresses of the past twenty years and noticed that a frequently used genre has been that of “exhortation.” Often in a given year, a CTSA president has shared the fruits of his or her own theological scholarship, but in doing so used the opportunity to exhort the wider theological community to undertake work in a new area, or to recover some lost emphases that might help address contemporary concerns. While it is always tempting to address particular struggles or tensions we theologians are encountering at the present moment in the church, I want to suggest an area which I believe deserves more attention in our theological work, an area that may require a great deal of energy, commitment and long-term planning. Thus, the “exhortative” aspect of my presentation is a plea for greater collaboration among theologians and biblical scholars, particularly in terms of the scholarly work needed to promote the flourishing of the leadership of women and other subaltern groups in the church.

What I can offer in the brief space allotted to me here is merely a sketch of some fruitful pathways such collaboration might take. I want to focus on one particular area of current biblical research which I believe has important implications for ecclesiology, particularly an ecclesiology that is attentive to the living witness of the whole People of God and the role of theologians in serving the communion of the whole church.¹ In keeping with our convention theme of “All the Saints,”

¹Ideally, this collaboration would involve a “communicative” approach to theology, such as that envisioned by the Anglican-Roman Catholic International Commission (ARCIC II) in *The Gift of Authority: Authority in the Church III* (Toronto: Anglican Book Centre, 1999): “The people of God as a whole is the bearer of the living Tradition. In

the area of biblical research I would like to highlight is the recent deluge of scholarship on St. Mary of Magdala—or, as I will refer to her here, Mary Magdalene. In what follows I would like to do three things: first, I will give some background on how I became interested in Mary Magdalene and mention a few sub-texts which are operative in my presentation; second, I briefly review the history of this fascinating character and her place in our ecclesial imagination. This will involve: (1) a review the data we have for the “historical Mary Magdalene”; (2) a review of some possible explanations for her “eclipse” from our ecclesial memory; and (3) a brief overview of some of the most recent scholarship which has focused on apocryphal and Gnostic material concerning Mary Magdalene. Finally, as my title suggests, I will conclude by sketching in broad strokes several “provocations” that a recovery of a “Magdalene tradition,” or “Magdalene function,” might present for further research and conversation in ecclesiology.

I. THE DEVELOPMENT OF MY INTEREST IN MARY MAGDALENE

My interest in Mary Magdalene stems from graduate school days. In 1974, during my first year in the doctoral program at St. Michael’s in Toronto I read the ground-breaking study of the U.S. Lutheran/Roman Catholic Dialogue, *Peter in the New Testament* published by Paulist Press.² This book emerged from the national dialogue between Lutherans and Roman Catholics which began in 1965 under the sponsorship of the Lutheran World Federation and the National Conference of Catholic Bishops.

Begun in 1971, the book was intended to serve as a collaborative assessment which would prepare background for future ecumenical discussion of the role of the papacy in the universal church.³ Thus, it undertook a reassessment of the role

conclusions to *Peter in the New Testament*: “Simon (Cephas) was accorded an appearance of the risen Jesus, *probably the first appearance*.”⁵ The accompanying footnote read as follows: “In speaking of ‘first appearance’ here and elsewhere, we are thinking only of the appearances to those who would become official pro-

concerns the use of Scripture in systematic theology; the other pertains to the increasing specialization or “siloization” of our theological disciplines.⁹

Use of Scripture in Theology

My interest in the use of Scripture in systematic theology goes back almost thirty years to my graduate school days. As a student, I read David Kelsey’s work on *The Uses of Scripture in Protestant Theology*¹⁰ and was rather startled that he did not consider any Catholic theologians’ use of scripture. Perhaps, he judged the use of Scripture by Catholic theologians to be predetermined, dictated by the magisterium and necessarily supportive of the Catholic dogmatic tradition? Whatever his reason for not including them, I was particularly intrigued by Kelsey’s contention that a prior imaginative construal of the biblical texts is what influenced a systematic theologian’s use of Scripture—what he called a theological *discrimen*. My sense was that this was true for Catholic systematic theologians as well.¹¹

What Kelsey was getting at was that a theologian’s use of Scripture is determined not by the results of historical-critical study or some other form of critical biblical exegesis, but by what one considers to be the subject matter of theology: “the way in which he (*sic*) tries to catch up what Christianity is basically all about in a single, synoptic, imaginative judgment.”¹² It is this judgment that influences

⁹Vicki Casey, program director of Information Highways, used the word “siloization” in 2002 to describe the smokestack-like structures that promote “knowledge hoarding,” rather than “knowledge sharing and collaboration.” See *Information Today*, Vol 19 (May 2007) <http://www.infotoday.com/it/may02/dykstra.htm> Accessed June 11, 2011.

¹⁰David Kelsey, *The Uses of Scripture in Recent Theology* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1975). For a more recent discussion of the varieties of ways exegetes and theologians alike interpret biblical texts, how tradition is developed and handed on, and how a feminist biblical hermeneutic can function in the liberation of biblical texts from their own participation in the oppression of women and the transformation of the church, see Sandra M. Schneiders, *The Revelatory Text: Interpreting the New Testament as Sacred Scripture*, 2nd ed. (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1999).

¹¹The place of Scripture in Catholic theology is usually discussed in works dealing with theological method, especially in fundamental or foundational theology. For a “fundamental theological” approach, see Avery Dulles, *Craft of Theology: From Symbol to System*, New Expanded Edition (New York: Crossroad, 1995), 69-104; for a contrasting, foundational/hermeneutical theological approach, see, David Tracy, *The Analogical Imagination* (New York: Crossroad, 1981), especially “Part II: Interpreting the Christian Classic”; and Roger Haight, *Dynamics of Theology* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 2001), 89-126. I use “foundational” here in the sense used by Francis Schüssler Fiorenza in *Foundational Theology: Jesus and the Church* (New York: Crossroad, 1984).

¹²Kelsey, *The Uses of Scripture in Recent Theology*, 159; and, at 163: “. . . at the root of a theological position there is an imaginative act in which a theologian tries to catch up in a single metaphorical judgment the full complexity of God’s presence in, through, and

any appeal to Scripture which is used to bolster one's theological conclusions. This crucial decision is based not on a norm or a criterion within Scripture but on a decision the theologian makes prior to using Scripture. Such a decision is an "imaginative act" in which a *discrimen* is the basis for the theologian's construal of how Scripture is to be used. For Kelsey, the *discrimen* consists of two reciprocal coefficients: the mode in which the theologian understands God's presence among the faithful and the use of Scripture in the life of the Christian community.¹³

scholarship (and I would also include mainstream theological scholarship) continues to regard the political, ideological, and gendered readings of minority hermeneutics¹⁷ as “an unhealthy and troublesome intrusion into the discipline” seems to ring true to me.

Ultimately, my interest in exploring the implications a “Magdalene function” might have for ecclesiology is based on the conviction that collaboration among biblical scholars and systematic theologians would also address a growing concern expressed by ordinary believers, particularly the younger Catholics I teach, who are stymied by the present impasse regarding leadership roles for women in the Roman Catholic Church. Such collaboration could also contribute in an important way to ecumenical conversations which have broken down over the decisions of some churches to admit women to ordained ministries.

II. REVIEW OF RECENT MARY MAGDALENE SCHOLARSHIP

Jane Schaberg’s artful *The Resurrection of Mary Magdalen*¹⁸ is one of many recent accounts which attempts to explain how this first century disciple was transformed into the archetypal harlot of Christian sermonizing, legend, art, and film.¹⁹

¹⁷For Sugirtharajah, “minority hermeneutics” includes the interpretations of any minority communities who function within our disciplines as the “Other.” But he is critical of the discursive practices of some of these approaches and warns against conformity to any “simple-minded binarism” which tends to essentialize minority voices into caricatures. Since even “speaking from the margins” can become a position of power, “minority hermeneutics” also must be wary of its own resistance to self-criticism. See, Sugirtharajah, “The End of Biblical Studies?” 137-38.

¹⁸Jane Schaberg, *The Resurrection of Mary Magdalene: Legends, Apocrypha, and the Christian Testament* (New York: Continuum, 2002). An abbreviated version of this book, minus the scholarly apparatus and interlocations with Virginia Woolf, was published by Schaberg, with Melanie Johnson-Debaufre, as *Mary Magdalene Understood* (New York: Continuum, 2006). Despite its intriguing title (“Magdalene christianity”), I find Schaberg’s essay in the Festschrift for Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *On the Cutting Edge: The Study of Women in Biblical Worlds*, eds. Jane Schaberg, Alice Bach, and Esther Fuchs (New York: Continuum, 2004) to be less helpful for my interests.

¹⁹The number of scholarly articles and books on Mary Magdalene has reached such epic proportions that I can only mention a few of the most recent examples here: Esther A. De Boer, *The Mary Magdalene Cover-Up: The Sources Beyond the Myth*, trans. John Bowden (New York: Continuum, 2007); *idem*, *The Gospel of Mary: Beyond a Gnostic and a Biblical Mary Magdalene*. Journal for the Study of the New Testament, Supplemental Series 260 (New York: Continuum, 2004), *idem*, *Mary Magdalene: Beyond the Myth*. trans. John Bowden (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity International Press, 1997); *Mariam the Magdalen, and the Mother*, ed. Deirdre Good (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2005); Holly E. Hearon, *The Mary Magdalene Tradition: Witness and Counter-Witness in Early Christian Communities* (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 2004); Anne Graham Brock, *Mary Magdalene, the First Apostle: The Struggle for Authority*, Harvard Theological Studies

In spite of her importance to history and the gospel narrative one must agree with those scholars who remind us that is very little material in the New Testament which sheds light on the identity of Mary Magdalene.²³ For example, we do not know how she came to be called to follow Jesus (though we do not hear about any other woman's call for that matter)

. . . nor is there any discussion or teaching during the ministry of Jesus that involves her. She is only spoken to by the figure(s) at the empty tomb and by the risen Jesus. She speaks only to and of them, or about the empty tomb. Dialogues with her as an individual occur only in the Fourth Gospel. Outside of the gospels, she is mentioned by name nowhere else in the New Testament, even in 1 Cor. 15:5-8, which lists those to whom the risen Jesus has appeared. In Lk 24:34 the first appearance is to Peter; Jn 20:8 presents the Beloved Disciple as the first to believe. . . . [A]lready in the New Testament period her role was in the process of being diminished and distorted. Rivalry had reared its head.

condemned by New Testament or apocryphal writings, then we can be pretty sure that there most likely was a basis in the tradition for these practices.²⁵

In 1991 when Schaberg wrote her first article on Mary Magdalene she

manner. She had coveted with earthly eyes, but now through penitence these are consumed with tears. She displayed her hair to set off her face, but now her hair dries her tears. She had spoken proud things with her mouth, but in kissing the Lord's feet, she now planted her mouth on the Redeemer's feet. For every delight, therefore, she had had in herself, she now immolated herself. She turned the mass of her crimes to virtues, in order to serve God entirely in penance, for as much as she had wrongly held God in contempt.³⁶

It is clear that from here on in, Mary of Magdala is no longer the devoted disciple and apostle to the apostles. Rather, she becomes a model for women to repent "for their crimes of sexuality, vanity and bold speech."³⁷

The third possibility King suggests for this concatenation is that patriarchal exegesis wanted to discredit the legitimate possibility of women's leadership and thus invented the role of the repentant sinner in order "to counter an earlier and very powerful portrait of Mary as a visionary prophet, exemplary disciple and apostolic leader."³⁸ As Johnson's account which I referred to above indicates,³⁹ the Gnostic documents of Nag Hammadi, some of which date back as early as the second century, present a very different portrait of Mary Magdalene which is at odds with picturing her as the traditional repentant sinner.⁴⁰

³⁶Gregory the Great, *Homily 33*, cited in King, "Canonization and Marginalization," 30. See also, Susan Haskins, *Mary Magdalen: Myth and Metaphor* (New York: Harcourt Brace and Co., Riverhead Edition, 1995), 93.

³⁷King, "Canonization and Marginalization," 31.

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One sees this attempt at exclusion in Acts in particular, where according to King, Mary Magdalene's absence takes on a rather different appearance if one exercises a hermeneutic of suspicion. Rather than read Luke's silence as evidence that he did not consider Mary Magdalene important, King asks whether her omission is on purpose and if so, to what purpose?

It is especially ironic that Mary is not named in the scene where Peter calls for a replacement for Judas to be chosen as 'a witness to the resurrection'. Although the writer of Acts surely understands women to be present in the group of 120 persons Peter addresses, Peter's speech makes it clear that only men will be considered.⁴¹

Thus, King concludes that Mary's absence from the text was not an oversight but was a strategic attempt to exclude of women from positions of apostolic leadership. Because later Christian theologies supporting women's leadership became linked with the name of Mary of Magdala, excluding her operated to oppose these theologies. This is why feminist biblical scholarship insists on the necessity of

Hammadi texts, the work of PHEME PERKINS, François BOVON, Karen King, Antti Marjanen, Mary Thompson, Ann Graham Brock, and Mary Rose D'Angelo, among others, have contributed a great deal to our understanding of this material.⁴⁵ In recovering a “Magdalene function” it would also be important to review the Patristic sources who mention her, such as Hippolytus, Celsus, Origen, Tertullian, various Montanist inscriptions, John Chrysostom, Ambrose,

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IV. ECCLESIOLOGICAL PROVOCATIONS

*Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary*⁵⁰ gives the following definitions for "provocation":

1. the act of provoking: incitement; something that provokes, arouses, or stimulates; 2. "provocative": (adj). serving or tending to provoke, excite, or stimulate; 3. "provoke": v. fr. *pro* = forth and *vocare* – to call, arouse, stir; to incite to anger; incense. To call forth, evoke, to stir up purposely; induce, provide the needed stimulus for; 4. a. to arouse one into doing or feeling; to produce by so rousing a person; b. To irritate.

The provocations I suggest here are not meant to "irritate" or "incense" as much as they are intended to excite and stimulate our ecclesial imagination, especially with regard to a reconsidering the place of women in the church as disciples, prophets, and yes—apostles. Let me lift up five ecclesiological "provocations" which I see raised by efforts to recover a "Magdalene function."

1. The use of Scripture in theology

A first provocation concerns the place of biblical scholarship in ecclesiology. My presenting question in this address was to ask, "what would ecclesiology look like if we started with biblical materials which feature the witness of Mary of Magdala?" Could a "Magdalene function," similar to the "Petrine function" agreed upon so many years ago in ecumenical dialogue, be more fruitful in recognizing the prophetic and apostolic leadership roles of women in the church today?

As we have seen, recent biblical scholarship attests to an apostolic role given to Mary Magdalene within the canonical texts.⁵¹ Feminist hermeneutics of suspicion in particular sheds light on the suppression of women's leadership roles in the early church, even within the New Testament.⁵² When non-canonical materials are investigated employing a hermeneutic of remembrance, we find further evidence of material inspired by the memory of Mary Magdalene. This material

⁵⁰"Provocation," in Webster's *New Collegiate Dictionary* (Springfield, MA: G & C. Merriam Co., 1979).

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could achieve greater relevance for ecclesiology in recovering a “Magdalene function” if not only canonical texts, but the whole range of material, including apocryphal Gospels and even the legends which fueled popular beliefs about her would be critically re-considered, since all of them contribute to a long historical “tradition” about Mary Magdalene. I realize there are important implications to be considered here regarding theological method, particularly the use of non-canonical sources.

The boundaries of the canon have been challenged by biblical scholars as being “no more reliable a guide to the origins and development of the Jesus traditions than they are to the Jewish origins of Christianity.”⁵³ PHEME PERKINS reminded us over twenty-five years ago that “Restricting and narrowing the Bible as ‘canon’ according to some dogmatic synthesis so that it becomes a negative judgment against all other early Christian writing and expressions of faith is a dubious enterprise.”⁵⁴ Drawing on the work of Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, she continues,

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symbol of discipleship. Johnson writes that she has grown increasingly dissatisfied with the predominant emphasis on Mary as “the model of discipleship” because of its inability, given “Mary’s perfect response to grace, to name and account for sin in the life of the graced individual.” In an ecclesial context, it “whitewashes the sinfulness of the church of which there is such ample scandalous, public evidence.” As a symbol, Mary of Nazareth has functioned not only as a model of discipleship but as the “eternal feminine” or the “maternal face of God.” From a feminist perspective, this is a problematic theological anthropology. However, Johnson’s greatest dissatisfaction comes from “the fallout” of a symbolic Mary which affects “the flourishing of women in all the concreteness of their actual histories.”⁵⁷ When a woman is made into a symbol, her own reality is lost.

Johnson cites the example of Mary’s own Jewish identity which was eclipsed in traditional Mariology, but she also points to Mary Magdalene who has borne the brunt of becoming the symbolic female sinner/penitent. As with Miriam of Nazareth, any recovery of a “Magdalene function” will need to situate Mary of Magdala in the communion of saints, remembering her as a concrete human being.

3. Listening to and believing women

A striking element in the Mary Magdalene tradition recorded in the New Testament is that she and the other women who received the revelation that Jesus had been raised from the dead *were not believed*. This is brought out particularly by the tradition represented by the longer ending of Mark 16:11 and in Luke 24:11.⁶⁰ Such passages have long found resonance in the experience of women in the church, though the inability to receive a hearing applies to many marginalized groups, including the majority of lay people.

A provocation for ecclesiology emanating from a recognition of a “Magdalene function” would be the restoration of “synodality” at all levels in the church. Appeals for more representative, dialogical, and deliberative decision-making structures in the church are not just the agenda of church reform groups such as “Call to Action,” “We Are Church” or “Voice of the Faithful,” nor are they concerns that only apply to women. The point I make here is that retrieving a “Magdalene function” can be a catalyst for giving the testimony of lived experience a hearing in the church. But this dynamic of listening, hearing, believing and discerning can only take place within a *community of dialogue*.

Bradford Hinze, Paul Lakeland and others have reflected on the practices of dialogue that need to be restored in the church today.⁶¹ Obviously, this dialogue needs to include not only bishops and theologians, but also all those in the church whose experience needs to be discerned for the “sense of the faith” (*sensus fidei*): women, persons of color, homosexuals, married and divorced persons, the poor—all those whom Vatican II described as “the People of God.” Unfortunately, there seems to be much ambiguity about the official church’s commitment to dialogue in our current ecclesial climate.⁶²

⁶⁰From the New American Bible: “When he had risen, early on the first day of the week, he appeared first to Mary Magdalene, out of whom he had driven seven demons. She went and told his companions who were mourning and weeping. When they heard that he was alive and had been seen by her, they did not believe.” (Mk 16:9-11) and “Then they returned from the tomb and announced all these things to the eleven and to all the others. The women were Mary Magdalene, Joanna, and Mary the mother of James; the other who accompanied them also told this to the apostles, but their story seemed like non-sense and they did not believe them.” (Lk 24:9-11). Schüssler Fiorenza mentions that *Epistola Apostolorum*, an apocryphal writing of the 2nd century, also stresses the skepticism of the male disciples. See, *In Memory of Her*, 305. However, Luise Schottroff views these same sources as *not* intending that women are unworthy of belief, but as stressing the importance of women’s role in proclaiming the resurrection. See, *Let the Oppressed Go Free*, 103.

⁶¹Bradford Hinze, *Practices of Dialogue in the Roman Catholic Church: Aims and Obstacles, Lessons and Laments*. (New York: Continuum, 2006). See also, Paul Lakeland, *The Liberation of the Laity: In Search of an Accountable Church* (New York: Continuum, 2003).

⁶²As our convention gathers here this Pentecost morning, some 2,000 Catholics are meeting in Detroit for an “American Catholic Council.” Another group, “A Call to Holiness,”

Petrine function by all those who have authority, at their level of authority.”⁶⁶ If this is true, and if Mary of Magdala was an apostle, why cannot the ministry of “oversight” be shared by women?

Recent ecumenical discussions have stressed several dimensions of the ministry of oversight (*episkope*): the *personal* (i.e., according to a particular office, such as a bishop); the *collegial* (referring to a group, such as an episcopal conference or a region) and the *communal* (referring to all the baptized and operative at all levels of the church).⁶⁷ In principle, Vatican II affirmed such an expanded understanding of a communal dimension of *episkope* in its affien-le, sebp.9 Ofal

the role they played in the house churches of the early Christian communities. Several feminist scholars over the years have noted how the biblical texts which feature women's roles in the life of Jesus have been rendered invisible to Catholics because of the Lectionary selections.⁷⁵ Among the fifty-five proposals emanating from the 2008 Synod on "The Word of God in the Life and Mission of the Church," proposal #16 requested "an examination of the Roman lectionary be opened to see if the actual selection and ordering of the readings are truly adequate to the mission of the Church in this historic moment."⁷⁶ On September 30, 2010, Pope Benedict XVI issued the Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation, *Verbum Domini* and, although the lectionary was mentioned, he did not address this specific issue of passages which feature women.⁷⁷

V. CONCLUSION

The exegete Helmut Koester once wrote, "Interpretation of the bible is justified only if it is a source for political and religious renewal, or it is not worth the effort.... If the Bible has anything to do with justice and freedom, biblical scholarship must be able to question those very structures of power and expose their injustice and destructive potential."⁷⁸ Today, on the eve of the fiftieth anniversary of the Second Vatican Council, we witness the rise of forces doing their best to diminish the action of the Spirit in the church. In this presentation, I have ventured to exhort us as have presidents before, but in this case, toward greater

⁷⁵See, Marjorie Proctor-Smith, "Images of Women in the Lectionary," in *Women Invisible in Theology and Church*, Concilium, vol. 182, Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza and Mary Collins, eds., (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1985), 51-62; Regina Boisclair, "Amnesia in the Catholic Sunday Lectionary: Women—Silenced from the Memories of Salvation History," in *Women & Theology*, eds. Mary Ann Hinsdale and Phyllis H. Kaminski (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1995), 109-35; and Ruth Fox, O.S.B., "Women in the Bible and Lectionary," originally published in *Liturgy* 90 (1996), available online at:<http://www.futurechurch.org/watw/womeninbibleandlectionary.htm> Accessed July 6, 2011. Some Catholic women have developed their own lectionaries. See, for example, Miriam Therese Winters, *WomanWord: A Feminist Lectionary and Psalter* (New York: Crossroad, 199). The work of Sr. Christine Schenk and "FutureChurch" has been instrumental in encouraging a more inclusive lectionary as well as organizing the movement to celebrate the feast of Mary Magdalene on July 22nd as a means of promoting her importance in the church.

⁷⁶As reported by FutureChurch which conducted a postcard campaign resulting in 18,000 requests being sent to the synod: See, <http://futurechurch.org/newsletter/winter11/lectionaryadvocacycontinues.htm/> accessed July 6, 2011.

⁷⁷See http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_ben-xvi_exh_20100930_verbum-domini_en.html accessed July 11, 2011.

⁷⁸Helmut Koester, "Epilogue," ed. B.A. Pearson, *The Future of Early Christianity* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991), 475. Cited in Jane Schaberg, *The Resurrection of Mary Magdalene*, 15, n. 39.

collaboration with our colleagues in biblical studies, especially in enhancing a vision of church that is “good news” for the whole People of God. In doing so, I have suggested imagining a church that takes seriously a “Magdalene function” as well as a “Petrine function” in its organization. Naturally, such an exercise