



WORK BY TITIAN: *Noli me tangere*, showing Mary of Magdala meeting the risen Christ, hangs in the National Gallery in London.

# LURE OF THE

BY ELIZABETH HANLY  
Special to The Herald

Hundreds of years before Christianity or even Judaism took root in the Middle East, the region was awash in sacred stories. One of the most enduring tells of a goddess ever searching for her god. He is lost, he is broken, even dead. She is tireless, fearless in her grief and finally instrumental in his resurrection.

Sound vaguely familiar?

The Roman Catholic Church long taught that a certain woman, a sinner with lovely hair, was present at the crucifixion. Later, when those men close to Christ had

Branded for centuries as a harlot, yet revered as the first to see the risen Christ, the enigmatic Mary of Magdala has a curious hold on popular culture

scattered, it was this same woman — one described as “fearless in her grief” — who went to his tomb, becoming the first disciple to recognize the risen Lord.

There isn't a lot of information on her in the Christian gospels. Still, everybody agrees it was this woman, the Magdalene, who was the sole witness to the single most important event in Christianity. More legends have grown up around Mary Magdalene than any other figure in Christian history, with the exception of Jesus himself. One might well ask why.

• TURN TO MAGDALENE, 4E

# MAGDALENE



## RELIGION/FAMILY

## RELIGION

## Magdalene: The feminine gospel story

\* MAGDALENE, FROM IE

To take a look at one of the most persistent of the legends, there's no need to go farther than the current best-seller, *The Da Vinci Code* (Doubleday, \$24.95). The Magdalene is at the center of this blockbuster, now in its 28th week in the top 10 (stop here if you don't want the ending spoiled).

Its author, Dan Brown, borrowing substantially from other sources, posits that Mary of Magdala was nothing less than the bride of Christ.

The novel, like the legend, describes a woman on the run from the killers of her husband, a woman with a dark-skinned daughter to protect. She travels to Egypt and eventually to France — to Provence. Curiously, this is an area that has always been full of shrines to the Black Madonna, the one known to the ancients as Isis. South Florida psychoanalyst Dr. Rick Overman describes her as "the womb of creation." It is this Madonna who searches endlessly, finding and losing the body of her lover, her god, again and again.

For more than 12 years, Jungian psychoanalyst Nancy Qualls-Corbett has been leading the curious and the devoted to Provence. "There is no way of proving that the story of the nuptials is true," she says. "A more important question may be why the psyche continues to bring up these stories, and why they are coming up now?"

"Whether or not they are true literally, they are certainly true psychologically. In the long history of religion, Christianity has been one of few faiths where there is no divine union — no eternal embrace between male and female. Spirit in Christianity has been stripped of the sensual."

The Gospel of Luke does talk of an unnamed sinful woman so seized by the radiance of a man that she vows to anoint him with perfumes, no matter their cost. In Luke's story of the anointing, the woman wet Jesus' feet with her tears, and wiped them with her hair, kissed his feet and anointed them with the ointment.

This story is the only mention in the four gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke and John) of a sensuous moment in the life of Christ. Yet according to 1,400 years of Catholic Church teachings, this sinful woman was the same Mary Magdalene who was asked by Christ to deliver the "good news" of the resurrection to



FROM LUKE: The Flemish painter Peter Paul Rubens imagined the story of a woman who wet Jesus' feet with her tears.

the other apostles.

Still, as Margaret Starbird writes in her book, *The Woman with the Alabaster Jar*, "We have the paradigm of a perpetual bachelor son and a virgin mother as our ideal of holiness."

Meanwhile, there's this curious shadow, this other woman who keeps popping up in our fiction and film.

Giotto, Botticelli and Picasso have tried to capture her image in their art. For a time in the 18th century, so did any number of court artists, as it was then all the rage to have one's mistress pose as the Magdalene. A century later, destitute young girls, many of them living in the charity schools named for the Magdalene, were posing semi-nude — willingly or not — as images of the Magdalene crossed over into smut.

In church tradition, the Magdalene often appears dressed in red fabric, her hair long and loose.

"For over a decade, such a figure has been coming up more and more frequently in the dreams of my analysts," says Sylvia Brinton Perera, a New York-based Jungian analyst of interna-



## LEARN MORE

- The Center of Jungian Study in South Florida and the Department of Counselor Education at FAU are hosting a continuing education seminar by Dr. Marion Woodman on "The new feminine paradigm" Dec. 12-13 at the Live Oak Pavilion on the Boca Raton campus, 777 Glades Rd., Boca Raton. Contact [cjung.sfl@yahoo.com](mailto:cjung.sfl@yahoo.com) or call 954-525-4682. For those who register before Nov. 15, cost is \$125, \$75 for seniors and students.

- For a link that lists all the various Black Madonnas, go to [www.udayton.edu/mary/resources/blackm/blackm03.html](http://www.udayton.edu/mary/resources/blackm/blackm03.html).

- To read the surviving text of the Gnostic Gospel of Mary, go to [www.gnosis.org/library/marygosp.htm](http://www.gnosis.org/library/marygosp.htm).

- For a helpful comparison of the four Gospel accounts of "A Woman's Anointing of Jesus," go to [www.bibletexts.com/terms/anointing.htm](http://www.bibletexts.com/terms/anointing.htm).

HERALD STAFF

mental reputation.

What do we know for sure of the Magdalene? The gospels refer to a certain Mary from Magdala, a town of some commercial import. Jesus performed an exorcism on her, freeing her of seven demons. In today's lingo, she may have been suffering from depression or another psychiatric

disorder. Her description as someone "fearless in her grief" as she witnesses her Christ's death may then take on a particular poignancy. In any case, there was never any indication that this Mary was a prostitute.

Late in the sixth century, as the Church continued to organize and codify its beliefs,

is so popular because it reflects a growing movement in the church," says Father Robert Vallee, a professor of theology at St. John Vianney College Seminary in West Miami-Dade. "The church as an institution may be changing from the ground up."

Psychoanalyst Sylvia Briton Perera talks of the Magdalene not as the figure behind *The Da Vinci Code*, but as she appears in historian Elaine Pagels' best-seller *Beyond Belief* and in her earlier book, *The Gnostic Gospels*. This work of scholarship includes the Magdalene's own gospel, one not included in the Christian Bible and found buried along with other so-called Gnostic gospels at Nag Hammadi, Egypt, in 1947.

This Magdalene urges a direct knowing of the Christ, "a trust in experience, both sensed and super-sensed" as psychologist Perera puts it, rather than the more conventional dogmatic approach.

"So much is in flux these days," says Marion Woodman, a respected Jungian analyst. "Our dogmas and institutions are dying. Small wonder that a figure like the Magdalene is surfacing in dreams and in fiction."

"Our culture has overemphasized the masculine for so long, while the feminine has lain buried," says the Rev. Dr. Donna Schaper, senior pastor at Coral Gables Congregational Church. "These are not abstract ideas. Look at where power and war have brought us. We have need of a new paradigm."

Dori Cameron, a physiotherapist who has lectured on the Magdalene at Unity by the Bay church, describes "feeling cheated, somehow truncated as a woman and a Christian before finding the Magdalene, the Black Madonna."

"We are made of matter," continues analyst Marion Woodman. "Spirit cannot exist without matter. We are getting to the point where life itself can't go on if we don't begin to recognize matter as sacred. The Magdalene is an exquisite expression of that."

Maybe Pope Gregory was right all along. Maybe she who first witnessed the risen Christ needed to be a woman reaching out to touch her god. Maybe the Magdalene always carried more than the promise of redemption from sin. Perhaps she carried the redemption of what has always been our wounded flesh.

Elizabeth Hanly is working on a book that deals with feminine spirituality.

Pope Gregory decided to merge Mary of Magdala with two other women from the gospels: the unnamed prostitute whom Luke says anointed Jesus' feet; and Mary, the sister of Lazarus. Church theologians speculate that Gregory was looking for a way to bring the promise of forgiveness home to the people. The whore become witness to the holiest of holies was a powerful image.

By 1969, the papacy was eager to clear all this up. The Magdalene was one woman among several in the gospels, it explained. And this one was no hooker. "Some of my students are disappointed to find out," says Dr. Veronica Koperski, who heads Barry University's graduate theological program. "Others are relieved. As one put it, 'I wouldn't have wanted my name besmirched for 1,400 years.'"

Perhaps not incidentally, this revision took place as the role of women within the Roman Catholic Church was being re-examined, as women sought a greater role in the church.

"Maybe *The Da Vinci Code*