

## 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.<sup>1</sup> In keeping with our convention theme of “All the Saints,”

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<sup>1</sup>Ideally, 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 changing situations producing fresh challenges to the Gospel, the discernment, actualization and communication of the Word of God is the responsibility of the whole people of God. The Holy Spirit works through all the members of the community, using the gifts he gives to each for the good of all. Theologians in particular serve the communion of the whole Church by exploring whether and how new insights should be integrated into the stream of Tradition. In each community there is a mutual exchange, a give and take, in which bishops, clergy and lay people receive from and give to others within the whole body.” (no. 28, 23). Cited by Richard Gaillardetz and Catherine Clifford, “Re-Imagining the Ecclesial/Prophetic Vocation of the Theologian,” *CTSA Proceedings* 65 (2010), 56. For an introduction to “communicative theology” see Matthias Scharer and Bernd Jochen Hilberath, *The Practice of Communicative Theology: An Introduction to a New Theological Culture* (New York: Crossroad, 2008).

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.<sup>2</sup> 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.<sup>3</sup> Thus, it undertook a reassessment of the role of Peter in the New Testament, employing modern, critical biblical scholarship in order to ascertain what could be held in common by Catholics and Lutherans. In addition to the harmonious experience of mutual respect and openness in working together, perhaps the book’s greatest achievement was the tracing of a trajectory of the images of Peter in New Testament thought. The results, expressed in a subsequent dialogue publication, concluded that Lutherans and Catholics could agree that there was such a thing as a “Petrine function,” a particular form of ministry exercised by a person, officeholder, or local church with reference to the Church as a whole.<sup>4</sup> While this very laudable conclusion was instrumental in furthering ecumenical dialogue, what astonished me was this statement in the summary

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<sup>2</sup>Raymond E. Brown, Karl P. Donfried, John Reumann, eds. *Peter in the New Testament: A Collaborative Assessment by Protestant and Roman Catholic Scholars*, (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House and New York: Paulist Press, 1973).

<sup>3</sup>*Peter in the New Testament*, 157.

<sup>4</sup>Paul C. Empie and T. Austin Murphy, eds., *Papal Primacy and the Universal Church: Lutherans and Catholics in Dialogue V* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1974), 11, n. 4.

conclusions to *Peter in the New Testament*: “Simon (Cephas) was accorded an appearance of the risen Jesus, *probably the first appearance*.”<sup>5</sup> 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 proclaimers of the resurrection. We have not discussed the question of possible previous appearances to women followers of Jesus.”<sup>6</sup>

At that point, I said to myself, “What! What about Mary Magdalene? Wasn’t she the first witness to the resurrection?” Thus, I began to wonder, “what difference would it make if we were to take Mary Magdalene’s witness as our starting point for theological reflection on the charism of church leadership? What if we proposed and could agree upon such a thing as a ‘Magdalene function’? What would ecclesiology look like? What roles would be open to women in the church?”

Admittedly, in the mid-1970s this was just something of a reverie of mine. Recall that the very next year the first Woman’s Ordination Conference was held in Detroit and that the following year Paul VI issued *Inter Insignores*. Now, my purpose here is not to draw a trajectory from Mary Magdalene to women’s ordination. Of course, it would be anachronistic to declare that anyone in the New Testament was ordained. Rather, I want to suggest that biblical scholars and systematic theologians together might “mine” the significance of the Magdalene tradition (a tradition mentioned in all four Gospels and which has continued to exist in our ecclesial imagination for centuries), in a similar way that the Petrine texts were examined.<sup>7</sup> Indeed, the Magdalene tradition has caused many to question whether, without this “apostle to the apostles,”<sup>8</sup> would there be any “Christianity” at all?

So began my interest in Mary Magdalene. However, as I mentioned, two “subtexts” are operative in this consideration that are worth mentioning. One

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<sup>5</sup>*Peter in the New Testament*, 161. Emphasis mine.

<sup>6</sup>*Peter in the New Testament*, 161, n. 340. Interestingly, Mary Catherine Hilkert notes that the 1976 Vatican declaration *Inter Insignores* “recognizes that women were the first witnesses to the resurrection and the first charged by Jesus to announce the paschal message. . . . however the document distinguishes between women and ‘the apostles themselves’ and states that only the latter are ‘the official witnesses to the resurrection.’” See *Naming Grace: Preaching and the Sacramental Imagination* (New York: Continuum, 1997), 228, n. 7.

<sup>7</sup>I have in mind that this be done ecumenically.

<sup>8</sup>On the Patristic history of the title “apostle to the apostles” see Rosemarie Nurnberg, “*Apostolae Apostolorum*: Die Frauen am Grab als erste Zeuginnen der Auferstehung in der Väterexegese,” in *Stimuli: Exegese und Ihre Hermeneutik in Antike und Christentum*. Festschrift für Ernst Dassmann, eds. Geroge Schöllgen and Clemens Scholten, *Jahrbuch für Antike und Christentum, Ergänzungsband 23* (1996), 228-42. Susan Haskins also traces this history, including the evolutionary journey of how Mary Magdalene went from being “the herald of the New Life” to “the redeemed whore.” See her *Mary Magdalene: Myth and Metaphor* (New York: Riverhead Books, 1993), 55-94.

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

### *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*<sup>10</sup> 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.<sup>11</sup>

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.”<sup>12</sup> It is this judgment that influences

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<sup>9</sup>Vicki 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.

<sup>10</sup>David 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*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1999).

<sup>11</sup>The 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).

<sup>12</sup>Kelsey, *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.<sup>13</sup>

Using Hans Küng as a case study to investigate how Catholic systematic theologians use Scripture I attempted in my doctoral dissertation to develop a heuristic, a framework of perspectives, which, I argued, were almost always present in any Catholic theologian's use of Scripture.<sup>14</sup> These perspectives concerned: first, fundamental theological considerations (i.e., how Scripture functions as a norm in theology, the relationship of Scripture and Tradition, theological method, the role of the teaching authority of the magisterium, what constitutes "truth," etc.); second, what I called a "hermeneutical perspective," namely, how biblical texts are approached by the theologian, especially what governs the choices a theologian makes with regard to the results of biblical research. I also put forward the idea of a "socio-critical perspective" which served as an attempt to evaluate the effects a theologian's use of Scripture might have, whether intended or not, when taken up by others to argue for certain social or political practices. For example, in Küng's Christology his use of Scripture was based primarily on determining the "consensus of exegetes" who employed historical-critical exegesis in order to get back to the "original event." For Küng, this was the major way one could have access to the Jesus of history (who always must be the source, norm and criterion for Christian faith). However, this approach resulted in a Christology in which Jesus, who according to Küng was "neither a political revolutionary, nor someone who endorsed the status quo" became a "neutral Jesus."<sup>15</sup> Although this was not what Küng might have intended, the effect was that *On Being a Christian*

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over-against the activities comprising the church's common life and which, in turn, both provides the *discrimen* against which the theology criticizes the church's current forms of speech and life, and determines the peculiar 'shape' of the 'position.'"

<sup>13</sup>Kelsey insists that his use of the *discrimen* does not forfeit the church's claim that Scripture is "normative" for theology. However, it is not Scripture's content that is normative but the "patterns" in the biblical texts that function "normatively" for the theologian. See *The Uses of Scripture*, 193.

<sup>14</sup>Mary Ann Hinsdale, "Hans Küng's Use of Scripture: Fundamental Theological, Hermeneutical, and Socio-Critical Perspectives" (PhD diss., University of St. Michael's College, 1984).

<sup>15</sup>See the section "The Social Context" in Hans Küng, *On Being a Christian* (New York: Doubleday, 1984), 177-213. See also, the critical comments voiced by: Gregory Baum, "Küng and Capitalism," *Queens Quarterly* 85 (1978-79), 650-53; Dorothee Sölle, "Hans Küng und die neue Mitte," *Merkur* 28 (1974):1187-91; Johann Baptist Metz, *Faith*

could be cited very effectively by right-wing Central American dictators who opposed the interpretations of Jesus voiced by liberation theologians and progressive church authorities.

*'Siloization' of Theological Disciplines*

A second "sub-text" operating in my interest in exploring the Mary of Magdala traditions has to do with the increasing compartmentalization and specialization that has come to characterize biblical studies and theology. Many have recently objected that both biblical studies and theology have ceased to address the real needs of people. R. S. Sugirtharajah for example has lamented this trend particularly as it has developed in biblical studies:

What strikes one immediately about contemporary biblical studies as practiced in Western academies is that it is dull, mechanical, repetitive, cliquish and totally out of touch with the issues people face. The discipline has become so atomized that Pauline experts and Synoptic specialists carry on their work as if they inhabited separate universes. Biblical studies has turned itself into an increasingly specialized activity.<sup>16</sup>

Sugirtharajah acknowledges that on the one hand increased specialization has resulted in a scrupulous engagement with texts, theories, and hermeneutical concerns (sometimes attracting money in the process!); on the other hand, this specialization has resulted in "over-professionalization," such that the results of scholarship make sense only to a small group of specialists with similar interests. Moreover, the highly technical and abstruse theoretical nature of much exegetical writing has meant that the field is more and more confined to people with "secluded and esoteric interests" and is probably "the only discipline that has fellow biblical scholars as its sole audience and whose literary output is restricted to the peer group, with a view to impressing them." (134)

Sugirtharajah further laments the reluctance and shyness on the part of practitioners to tease out the wider theological and religious implications of their work. The result is that "the tenuous link that has long existed between academy and church has become even more precarious" so that "our work goes largely unread but also, and far worse, that it goes unnoticed." As examples, he cites exegetical work done on religious pluralism and gay and lesbian questions as having had "no impact on current church thinking." (134) Although one might disagree as to the extent of his charges, Sugirtharajah's main point, that mainstream biblical

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*in History and Society*, 79, n 5; and Nicholas Lash, "Reflections on On Being a Christian, *Month* 10 (1977), 88-92.

<sup>16</sup>R. S. Sugirtharajah, "The End of Biblical Studies?" in *Toward a New Heaven and a New Earth: Essays in Honor of Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza*, ed. Fernando F. Segovia, (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 2003), 133. Further citations from this essay will be referred to by page number within the text.

scholarship (and I would also include mainstream theological scholarship) continues to regard the political, ideological, and gendered readings of minority hermeneutics<sup>17</sup> 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*<sup>18</sup> 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.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>17</sup>For 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.

<sup>18</sup>Jane 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.

<sup>19</sup>The 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

Schaberg creatively uses the lens of Virginia Woolf to carry through her engagement with the history and images of Mary Magdalene. She begins by sharing what we can know about the place from which Mary presumably originated, Migdal. Schaberg has taken her students there in search of “whatever might be found,” but all that was there was an overgrown and untended site, one which contrasted sharply with the attention given to Peter’s house which was being excavated in Capernaum just a few kilometers away.

Schaberg reminds us that “according to all four New Testament gospels, Mary Magdalene is a primary witness for the fundamental data of the early Christian faith.”<sup>20</sup> She is a prominent Jewish disciple of Jesus, whose name indicates that she came from the town of Magdala (Migdal) on the western shore of the Sea of Galilee, just north of Tiberias. She is said to have participated in the ministry of Jesus of Nazareth, stood by the cross at his execution and burial, discovered the empty tomb, and was commissioned to tell the other disciples that Jesus had been raised from the dead.<sup>21</sup> According to the accounts of Mt 28:9-10, Jn 20:14-18 and Mk 16:9 (the Markan Appendix), she was *the first* to receive a resurrection appearance.<sup>22</sup>

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51 (Cambridge, MA: The President and Fellows of Harvard College, 2003); Karen L. King, *The Gospel of Mary of Magdala: Jesus and the First Woman Apostle* (Santa Rosa, CA: Polebridge Press, 2003); Carolyn Osiek, “Mary 3” [Mary Magdalene] in *Women in Scripture*, eds. Carol Meyers, Toni Craven, and Ross. S. Kraemer (Grand Rapids, MI, and Cambridge, UK: Erdmanns, 2001), 120-23; Ingrid Maisch, *Mary Magdalene: The Image of a Woman Through the Centuries*, trans. Linda M. Maloney (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1998); Mary Rose D’Angelo, “Reconstructing ‘Real’ Women in Gospel Literature: The Case of Mary Magdalene,” in *Women & Christian Origins*, eds. Ross Shepard Kraemer and Mary Rose D’Angelo (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 105-28. Pamela Thimmes has reviewed Mary Magdalene research through 1996 in “Memory and Re-Vision: Mary Magdalene Research Since 1975,” *Currents in Research* 6 (1998), 193-226 and Harold Attridge provides extensive treatment in “Don’t Be Touching Me’: Recent Feminist Scholarship on Mary Magdalene,” in *A Feminist Companion to John*, vol. II, ed. Amy-Jill Levine (New York: Sheffield Academic Press, 2003), 140-66.

<sup>20</sup>Jane Schaberg, “Thinking Back Through Mary Magdalene,” in *A Feminist Companion to John*, vol. II, 175. Originally published in *Continuum* 1 (1991), 71-90.

<sup>21</sup>Schaberg, “Thinking Back Through Mary Magdalene,” 175.

<sup>22</sup>The question of whether Mary Magdalene was “the first” is regarded as unsolvable by Mary Rose D’Angelo who thinks it “best to simply acknowledge multiple traditions”: (1) the tradition known to Paul in 1 Cor. 15, that Cephas was the first; (2) the tradition reflected in both John 20:14-18 and Matthew 28:9-10, which assumes Mary Magdalene was first; and (3) Luke’s tradition in Luke 24:34 which claims Simon (who may not be the same person as “Simon Peter”) as first. See, D’Angelo’s “‘I have seen the Lord’: Mary Magdalen as Visionary, Early Christian Prophecy, and the Context of John 20:14-18,” in *Mariam, the Magdalen, and the Mother*, 105. D’Angelo concludes that the question of who was “first” was unimportant among the earliest believers and even by the time of Paul, its

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.<sup>23</sup> 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.<sup>24</sup>

So, there goes any hope of finding a Magdalene function, right? Well, I think not. As Schaberg and others have pointed out there is gender bias both in composition and interpretation of texts. Without even referring to Mary of Magdala, scholars such as Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, Elsa Tamez, and others draw our attention to the fact that if women's authoritative speaking, prophecy, leadership, teaching is

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answer was far from certain. See, idem, "Re-Reading Resurrection, *Toronto Journal of Theology* 16 (2000), 121. Susanne Ruschmann argues for the historical plausibility that Mary Magdalene was the first to see the risen Christ despite her omission in 1 Cor 15: 5-8. See her *Maria von Magdala im Johannesevangelium: Jungerin, Zeugin, Lebensbotin* (Münster: Aschendorff, 2002).

<sup>23</sup>Mary Rose D'Angelo articulates the difficulties in "Reconstructing 'Real' Women From Gospel Literature: The Case of Mary Magdalene," 105-28. Bart Ehrman's cleverly titled *Peter, Paul and Mary Magdalene* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006) also reminds us that there are merely thirteen mentions of Mary Magdalene in the entire New Testament.

<sup>24</sup>Schaberg, "Thinking Back through Mary Magdalene," 176. Sandra Schneiders formulates a very interesting hypothesis concerning the Beloved Disciple and Mary Magdalen which, while not positing an actual identity between the two, does see the Johannine community softening (probably for the sake of acceptance by "the Great Church") the autonomy/superiority of the Beloved Disciple in relation to Simon Peter as well as the pre-eminent role of Mary Magdalene "as the foundational apostolic witness of the community." According to Schneiders, the Fourth Gospel's redactor "tried to assure that neither the challenge to the Great Church's understanding of Petrine primacy nor the ecclesial leadership of women, both of which had Gnostic potential, worked against the intention of Jesus that the witness of the Beloved Disciple should remain until Jesus comes (cf. 21:22) through the word of the "woman bearing witness. . . ." Thus, Schneiders views the Beloved Disciple as a kind of "prism" who refracts the ideal of discipleship; s/he is a textual paradigm derived from other typical (but real) Joahannine representative figures, among whom is Mary Magdalene. See Sandra M. Schneiders, *Written That You May Believe: Encountering Jesus in the Fourth Gospel* (New York: Crossroad, 1999), 232.

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.<sup>25</sup>

In 1991 when Schaberg wrote her first article on Mary Magdalene she lamented that then there was as yet no full-scale scholarly work that focused on what we do know about Mary Magdalene. Now, twenty years later we have a veritable gold mine of scholarship. Of particular interest is the work that has been done on the depictions of Mary Magdalene in the Fourth Gospel and in the non-canonical texts.<sup>26</sup> The study of Mary Magdalene in this literature has become a hermeneutical key in the re-reading of important aspects of the New Testament documents. Material about Mary Magdalene is being examined in light of new evidence about the roles of women in Greco-Roman Judaism,<sup>27</sup> early Christianity and Gnosticism,<sup>28</sup> and in numerous comparative

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<sup>25</sup>The classic argument for this position was stated by Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza in *In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins* (New York: Crossroad, 1983). In one of her most recent books on biblical hermeneutics, Schüssler Fiorenza stresses the importance of learning “how to ‘discern the spirits’ at work in biblical texts and to identify their life-giving or death-dealing functions in different contexts.” See *Wisdom Ways: Introducing Feminist Biblical Interpretation* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 2001). For an application of Schüssler Fiorenza’s approach to texts concerning biblical women in general and Mary Magdalene in particular, see Karen A. Barta, “Biblical Interpretation and Women’s Experience,” in *Prophetic Witness: Catholic Women’s Strategies for Reform*, ed. Colleen M. Griffith (New York: Crossroad, 2009), 36-45. Elsa Tamez demonstrates how feminist biblical hermeneutics is able to reconstruct the situation behind patriarchal texts and unmask injustice in her *Struggles for Power in Early Christianity: A Study of the First Letter to Timothy*, trans Gloria Kinsler (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 2007).

<sup>26</sup>For Johannine studies, see Susanne Ruschmann, *Maria von Magdala im Johannesevangelium* and Sandra M. Schneiders, “Touching the Risen Jesus: Mary Magdalene and Thomas the Twin in John 20,” *CTSA Proceedings* 60 (2005), 13-35. For research on Mary Magdalene in non-canonical texts, see Francois Bovon, “Mary Magdalen’s Paschal Privilege,” in *New Testament Traditions and Apocryphal Narratives*, trans. Jane Haapiseva-Hunter (Allison Park, PA: Pickwick Publications, 1995), 147-54, 228-35 [orig. French: “Le Privilège pascal de Marie-Madeleine,” *New Testament Studies* 30 (1984), 50-62] and the more recent study by Antti Marjanen, *The Woman Jesus Loved: Mary Magdalene in the Nag Hammadi Library and Related Documents* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1996). See also the work of De Boer, Brock, King and Maisch mentioned in n. 19 above.

<sup>27</sup>See, for example, Ross Shepard Kraemer, *Her Share of the Blessings: Women’s Religions among Pagans, Jew, and Christians in the Greco-Roman World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992); Bernadette Brooten, *Women Leaders in the Ancient Synagogue* (Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1982); Margaret Y. MacDonald, *Early Christian Women and Pagan Opinion* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

<sup>28</sup>For example, PHEME PERKINS, *Gnosticism and the New Testament* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993); idem, “Gospels from the Second and Third Centuries,” in *Introduction to the Synoptic Gospels* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2007), 254-93; Karen L. King, *What Is Gnosticism?* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003).

studies which take into account the sexual politics of the Bible and Christian history.<sup>29</sup>

In exhorting systematic theologians not to abandon the Bible and pleading for greater collaboration among theologians and biblical scholars (and vice-versa), I am not suggesting that there have been no considerations of Mary Magdalene scholarship by systematic theologians. However, they have been too few and far between. Two examples of Catholic systematic theologians who immediately come to mind are Mary Catherine Hilkert and Elizabeth Johnson. Hilkert notes the striking parallels between the experience of women today who feel called to preach and the biblical accounts of women like Mary Magdalene who were commissioned to “announce the truth of their experience of the crucified and risen one.”<sup>30</sup> Likewise, Elizabeth Johnson has pointed to the role of Mary Magdalene in terms of women’s leadership in the church in both *Friends of God and Prophets*<sup>31</sup> and *Truly Our Sister*.<sup>32</sup> In the latter book, she notes how feminist scholars have consulted second and third-century apocryphal gospels which took figures from Jesus’ ministry and placed them in situations reflective of the later church. Thus, she summarizes from *The Gospel of Mary*:

The scene opens with Mary Magdalene encouraging the disheartened, terrified male disciples by preaching to them what the risen Lord had taught her. In anger, Peter interrupts asking, ‘Did he really speak privately with a woman and not openly to us? Are we to turn about and all listen to her? Did he prefer her to us?’ Troubled at this disparagement of her witness and faithful relationship to Christ, Mary responds, ‘My brother Peter, what do you think? Do you think I thought this up by myself in my heart or that I am lying about the Savior?’ At this point Levi breaks in to mediate the dispute: ‘Peter, you have always been hot-tempered. Now I see you contending against the woman like the adversaries. But if the Savior made her

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<sup>29</sup>In addition to nearly all the works mentioned in n. 19 above, see Anne Jensen, trans. O.C. Dean Jr., *God’s Self-Confident Daughters* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996) and F. Scott Spencer, *Dancing Girls, Loose Ladies and Women of the Cloth* (New York: Continuum, 2004).

<sup>30</sup>See Mary Catherine Hilkert, Chapter Nine: “Women Preaching the Gospel” in *Naming Grace*, 144-65.

<sup>31</sup>Elizabeth A. Johnson, *Friends of God and Prophets: A Feminist Theological Reading of the Communion of the Saints* (New York: Continuum, 1998), 146-50.

<sup>32</sup>Elizabeth A. Johnson, *Truly Our Sister: A Theology of Mary in the Communion of the Saints* (New York: Continuum, 2003), 297-304. Certainly other theologians have also addressed Mary Magdalene. My interest here is especially those who have addressed the implications of recent biblical research on Mary Magdalene for systematic theology, especially ecclesiology. Protestant authors who have drawn attention to biblical research on Mary Magdalene and suggested its theological implications include Elisabeth Moltmann-Wendel, *The Women Around Jesus*, trans. John Bowden (New York: Crossroad, 1982), 61-90 and Luise Schottroff, *Let the Oppressed Go Free: Feminist Perspectives on the New Testament*, trans. Annemarie S. Kidder (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1993), 168-94.

worthy, who are you, indeed to reject her? Surely the Lord knew her very well. That is why he loved her more than us.<sup>33</sup>

Johnson describes feminist biblical scholarship as “detective work” which attempts to piece together bits of evidence in order to understand the growing conflict over women’s ministry which took place during this period of the early church. She concludes, “Slowly, such scholarship is restoring the historical picture of women’s leadership in the early church and the ensuing struggle to defeat it.”<sup>34</sup>

### III. HOW THE MARY MAGDALENE TRADITION BECAME ECLIPSED

Karen King, an expert on the apocryphal *Gospel of Mary* presents a nice summary of possible reasons for how we have come to have a simultaneous canonization of Mary Magdalene as a prominent disciple, prophet and apostle, while still maintaining her marginalization as a prostitute.<sup>35</sup> The first reason suggests that perhaps it is simply a matter of misguided exegesis which confused Mary of Magdala with Mary of Bethany. Both anoint Jesus: Mary of Bethany, in preparation for his burial (Cf. Jn 12:1-8) and the unnamed sinner woman in Lk 7:36-50 who washes Jesus feet with her tears and dries them with her hair. It then becomes an easy step to identify Mary Magdalene with the unnamed adulteress in Jn 8:1-11. Thus, Mary “the disciple” becomes “Mary the whore.” One might say this is simply confusion brought about by “too many Marys” to keep straight (i.e., Mary the Mother of Jesus; Mary the wife of Clopas, who was Jesus’ aunt; Mary the mother of James the younger and Joses; and of course, “the other Mary.”) But, as King notes, the Eastern Orthodox churches never made this mistake. And even in the West, such connections were made rather late.

By the sixth century however, we have another interpretation for the eclipse. Pope Gregory the Great identified Mary Magdalene with the sinner woman in Luke and John in one of his homilies which, according to King, “drew a moral conclusion that would dominate the imagination of the West”:

She whom Luke calls the sinful woman, whom John calls Mary, we believe to be the Mary from whom seven devils were ejected according to Mark. And what did these seven devils signify, if not all the vices? . . . It is clear, brothers, that the woman previously used the unguent to perfume her flesh in forbidden acts. What she therefore displayed more scandalously, she was now offering to God in a more praiseworthy

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<sup>33</sup>Elizabeth A. Johnson, *Truly Our Sister*, 302.

<sup>34</sup>Elizabeth A. Johnson, *Truly Our Sister*, 302.

<sup>35</sup>Karen King, “Canonization and Marginalization: Mary of Magdala,” in *Women’s Sacred Scriptures*, Concilium 1998/3, eds. Kowk Pui-Lan and Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1998), 29-36. I draw on this article for much of the material presented here.

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.<sup>36</sup>

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."<sup>37</sup>

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."<sup>38</sup> As Johnson's account which I referred to above indicates,<sup>39</sup> 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.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>36</sup>Gregory 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.

<sup>37</sup>King, "Canonization and Marginalization," 31.

<sup>38</sup>King, "Canonization and Marginalization," 31. PHEME PERKINS thinks this explanation is exaggerated. In her review of several of the most recent works on Mary Magdalene (Ann Graham Brock's *Mary Magdalene, the First Apostle*; Holly Hearon's *The Mary Magdalene Tradition* and King's *The Gospel of Mary Magdala*), she writes, "Despite the almost universal tendency to treat the second- and third-century materials as evidence that the authors of the canonical Gospels ruthlessly suppressed traditions about Mary Magdalene, the truth may be simpler: the canonical Gospels preserve all the early traditions. With his superb eye for giving voice to female disciples, such as the Samaritan woman and Martha and Mary, the Fourth Evangelist tells the story of Mary Magdalene's encounter with Jesus outside the empty tomb. Without that detail, gnostic Christians of the second century would never have cast her as the enlightened companion of the Savior. In short, the later traditions about her reflect a growth in women's spiritual independence and imagination, not the fact that she was erased from the first-century record." See, PHEME PERKINS, "The Search for Mary Magdalene, First Apostle," *Christian Century* 123 (May 16, 2006), 29.

<sup>39</sup>See n. 33.

<sup>40</sup>See the extended treatment of the Nag Hammadi materials on Mary Magdalene discussed by Antti Marjanen in *The Woman Jesus Loved: Mary Magdalene in the Nag Hammadi Library and Related Documents*. Karen King's work on *The Gospel of Mary*, a work linked with the name of Mary of Magdala, is just one example of many feminist scholars who have pointed this out.

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.<sup>41</sup>

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 problematizing the canon in undertaking historical reconstruction and theological reflection on the roles of women in early Christianity.<sup>42</sup>

We can appreciate some sense of the motives to discredit the Mary Magdalene tradition by recalling the plight of the French humanist Jacques Lefèvre d'Étaples, who in 1517 published a critique of the traditionally understood Magdalene, *De Maria Magdalene et triduo Christi Disceptatio*.<sup>43</sup> Although he was not the first to realize that the church had conflated three Marys, Lefèvre pointed this out as a deception. Within three years, fifteen major treatises had been written on the controversy. Lefèvre was censured by the theological faculty of the Sorbonne and his works placed on the Index. The issue was raised again in the seventeenth century and serious debate continued until the end of the nineteenth century. Today all three major branches of Christianity (Roman Catholicism, Protestantism, and Orthodoxy) do distinguish between Mary Magdalene, Mary of Bethany and the sinner/penitent woman in Luke 7:36-50.

Regrettably, it is beyond the scope of my presentation to review in detail the myriad examples of apocryphal literature which feature Mary Magdalene. François Bovon and Mary Thompson have provided concise summaries of the major apocryphal texts<sup>44</sup> such as *Dialogue of the Savior*, *The Sophia of Jesus Christ*, and *The Gospel of Philip*. Since the discovery and translation of the Nag

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<sup>41</sup>King, "Canonization and Marginalization," 33.

<sup>42</sup>King, "Canonization and Marginalization," 34-35.

<sup>43</sup>For a comprehensive treatment of Lefèvre's work and a translation of *De Maria Magdalene*, see Sheila M. Porrer, *Jacques Lefèvre D'Étaples and The Three Maries Debates* (Genève: Librairie Droz S.A., 2009).

<sup>44</sup>Bovon, "Mary Magdalene's Paschal Privilege," 150-53; Mary R. Thompson, *Mary of Magdala*, 96-108; The most recent and detailed account is Antii Marjanen mentioned above, n. 26.

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.<sup>45</sup> 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, Augustine, as well as the numerous legends which have proliferated from the first through the seventeenth century. Fortunately, much of this material has been helpfully classified by David Mycoff,<sup>46</sup> building on the work of Victor Saxer.<sup>47</sup>

From the tenth century through the Reformation, the Magdalene literature burgeoned. Stress on her role as apostle as well as penitent was common in twelfth and thirteenth century hagiography and exegesis. But by the time of the Reformation, the attribution of her apostleship had all but disappeared and she was no longer typically associated with preaching and evangelization. Almost exclusively in the West, she had become the figure of penitence. In the East, the predominant legend was that Mary Magdalene spent her last days in Ephesus, perhaps engaged to John the Evangelist. In the West, the Provençal legend predominated in its most fully developed form in the thirteenth century collection of saints' lives known as the "Golden Legend" by Jacobus de Voragine (d. 1298).<sup>48</sup> In this account Mary of Magdala is the sister of Martha and Lazarus, all of whom were children of wealthy parents. Despite their non-canonical or legendary character, such disparate sources are important for the role they play in constituting a "tradition." Although, it is impossible, as Mary R. Thompson observes, "to trace a straight line of descent from the gospel portrait of Mary of Magdala, through the extravagant portrayal of her in the Middle Ages to the model of penitence that has pervaded her image until the present. . . . there is an observable trajectory which demonstrates general patterns of development in devotion surrounding this woman who dominates large areas of church history and popular devotion."<sup>49</sup> Thus, in discerning whether we can speak of any sort of trajectory or "Magdalene function" which might function theologically, it is important not to neglect the sources which have fueled the ecclesial imagination and devotion to her.

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<sup>45</sup>See the works mention in notes 19, 23, 23, 26, 28 above.

<sup>46</sup>David Mycoff, Part One of *A Critical Edition of the Legend of Mary Magdalene from Caxton's Golden Legend of 1483* (Salzburg: Universität Salzburg, 1985).

<sup>47</sup>Victor Saxer, *Le culte de marie Madeleine en Occident des origins à lapin du moyen age*, 2 vols. (Paris: Auxerre, 1959).

<sup>48</sup>The most recent English translation is the *Golden Legend*, trans. William Granger Ryan, 2 vols. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993). The entry on Mary Magdalene can be found in vol. 1, 374-83.

<sup>49</sup>Mary R. Thompson, *Mary of Magdala: Apostle and Leader*. New York: Paulist Press, 1995), 2.

## IV. ECCLESIOLOGICAL PROVOCATIONS

*Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary*<sup>50</sup> 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.<sup>51</sup> 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.<sup>52</sup> 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

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

<sup>51</sup>Mary Magdalene is often called "apostle to the apostle." Though the phrase was attributed collectively to the women at the tomb by Jerome and other church fathers, the title as applied to Mary Magdalene alone was first used by Abelard. A question that is often raised is whether the designation of "apostle" must include the "founding" of a Christian community, or whether it simply means having witnessed an appearance of the risen Jesus.

<sup>52</sup>For example, the critical studies which have unmasked Luke's gospel as a "gospel for women" are now well known: Elizabeth Tetlow, *Women and Ministry in the new Testament* (New York: Paulist Press, 1980); Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her*, 161; Mary Rose D'Angelo, "(Re)Presentations of Women in the Gospel of Matthew and Luke-Acts," in *Women & Christian Origins*, 180-191.

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.”<sup>53</sup> 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.”<sup>54</sup> Drawing on the work of Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, she continues,

Revelation, finally, is not ‘in the text’ to be extracted as some eternal pattern but is discovered by Biblical people in their concrete circumstances and struggles to become a ‘faith-ful’ community, especially in the communities of the poor and women suffering and seeking a way toward human dignity.<sup>55</sup>

This would not be the first time that weight has been given to “devotional history” in the process of developing doctrine.<sup>56</sup> Again, ecumenical collaboration and dialogue among biblical scholars, historians of early Christianity and systematic theologians is essential for investigating this complex material.

## 2. Mary Magdalene as symbolic figure?

In promoting a “Magdalene function” I am “provoked”—perhaps “prodded” is a better word—by an insight Elizabeth Johnson expressed in *Truly Our Sister* where she traces her own evolution of thought with regard to viewing Miriam of Nazareth as a

<sup>53</sup>PHEME PERKINS, “The New Testament—The Church’s Book,” *CTSA Proceedings* 40 (1985), 43.

<sup>54</sup>PHEME PERKINS, “The New Testament,” 50.

<sup>55</sup>PHEME PERKINS, “The New Testament,” 51. PERKINS cites Schüssler Fiorenza’s *Bread Not Stone: The Challenge of Feminist Biblical Interpretation* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1984), 140.

<sup>56</sup>I am thinking here of the way in which the dogma of the Immaculate Conception developed. Although opposed by many theologians throughout history, including even Thomas Aquinas, the strength of popular devotion (some scholars would add socio-political factors, as well) played a key role in the definition by Pius IX in 1864. For a brief history, see Vincent Wiseman, O.P., “History of the Dogma of the Immaculate Conception,” <http://campus.udayton.edu/mary/resources/kimmac.html> accessed July 10, 2011. Consideration of such material in formulating the “Magdalene tradition” needs to be carried out cautiously, however, lest they be carried to the kind of excess that marked Mariology.

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.”<sup>57</sup> 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. Thus, my provocation asks, “would making Mary of Magdala into a new kind of symbol for women’s leadership in the church inhibit any women from flourishing in all the concreteness of their actual histories?” I am reminded of Margaret Farley’s caution that

Feminists must approach scripture, and every other source of religious faith and practice, with hermeneutical principles that not only render the sources accessible to feminist consciousness but more and more inaccessible for the harmful aims of sexism. . . . We need religious symbols whose power is a power of access to reality. . . .<sup>58</sup>

In lifting up the true story of Mary Magdalene, it surely will be necessary to keep on telling the story of how her memory has been distorted. I agree with Johnson that “women’s practices of memory” are like “outflying sparks” which emerge from “an explosion of contemporary feminist historical scholarship that is working to retell, reassess, and reclaim the critical memory of women’s victories and defeats as a vital part of the Christian tradition.”<sup>59</sup> If one is to speak of “sin” in connection with Mary Magdalene, it seems to me that it should be in terms of “the sin of the church” which for centuries has rendered this fiction. Thus, recovering even the distorted Mary Magdalene memories for ecclesiological discourse might provide an examination of conscience for a “sinful church” which has for so long symbolized this woman as the sinner/penitent.

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<sup>57</sup>Elisabeth Johnson, *Truly Our Sister*, 99-100.

<sup>58</sup>Margaret A. Farley, “Feminist Consciousness and the Interpretation of Scripture,” in *Feminist Interpretation of the Bible*, ed. Letty Russel (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1985), 51.

<sup>59</sup>Elisabeth A. Johnson, *Friends of God and Prophets*, 159.

### 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.<sup>60</sup> 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.<sup>61</sup> 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.<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>60</sup>From 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 2<sup>nd</sup> 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.

<sup>61</sup>Bradford 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).

<sup>62</sup>As 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,”

#### 4. Widening our understanding of *episkope*

A fourth provocation that recognizing a “Magdalene function” entails is the possibility of accepting a wider understanding of the concept of *episkope*.<sup>63</sup> This term refers to the ministry of “oversight,” and frequently has been narrowly understood as referring only to the ministry of the *episcopacy*. However, as postconciliar Roman Catholic ecclesiology and official ecumenical dialogues have made clear, “the charism of oversight” need not be confined only to the papacy or the hierarchy. Just as apostolicity is a mark belonging to the *whole* church, so too, *episkope* may be exercised in a variety of ways.<sup>64</sup>

Some years ago in *Freeing Theology*, Mary Hines wrote, “Ecclesiology is perhaps the most difficult area of systematic theology to treat from a feminist perspective within the Roman Catholic tradition.”<sup>65</sup> Why? Because the hierarchy is all male. Even though we have Mary, the mother of Jesus, and a host of female disciples, apostles, prophets and saints, they are all derivative: they may *inspire*, but may not *govern*. Yet, in the early 1970s, in the context of the Lutheran/Roman Catholic discussions on papal primacy which first sparked my interest in this subject, George Tavadar argued that assignment of the Petrine function (understood as an exercise of *episkope*) to one special office or officer is a dubious enterprise if it can be proved that the exercises of this function are historically variable. “In principle,” Tavadar wrote, “the Petrine concern should be shared by all the faithful: the

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endorsed by Detroit’s Archbishop Allen Vigneron, is holding a counter-assembly at the same time. Sadly, the lack of truly representative synodal structures in the church seems to perpetuate such polarization.

<sup>63</sup>A classic text is Raymond E. Brown, “*Episkope* and *Episkopos*: The New Testament Evidence,” *Theological Studies* 41 (1980), 322-38.

<sup>64</sup>See John J. Burkhard, *Apostolicity—then and now: An Ecumenical Church in a Postmodern World* (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 2004), 211-250.

<sup>65</sup>Mary Hines, “Community for Liberation: Church,” in Catherine Mowry LaCugna, ed., *Freeing Theology: The Essentials of Theology in Feminist Perspective* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1993), 161. Despite these difficulties women theologians continue to formulate ecclesiology from feminist perspectives. See, for example, Letty Russell, *Church in the Round: Feminist Interpretation of the Church* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1993); Natalie K. Watson, *Introducing Feminist Ecclesiology* (Cleveland: The Pilgrim Press, 2002) and, although not strictly a developed ecclesiology, the essays in Elizabeth A. Johnson, ed., *The Church Women Want: Catholic Women in Dialogue* (New York: Crossroad, 2002). Richard McBrien surveys the contributions of feminist theologians to Catholic ecclesiology, in *The Church: The Evolution of Catholicism* (New York: HarperCollins, 2008), 337-45 and Elizabeth Groppe, Rosemary Carbine and Susan Abraham each contribute essays devoted to “Ecclesiology” in Susan Abraham and Elena Procaro-Foley, eds., *Frontiers of Catholic Feminist Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2009), 153-213. Their essays are followed by a roundtable discussion by Jeannine Hill Fletcher, Laura M. Taylor and Elena Procaro-Foley in which they attempt to “re-think ecclesiology” from a feminist perspective.

Petrine function by all those who have authority, at their level of authority.”<sup>66</sup> 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).<sup>67</sup> In principle, Vatican II affirmed such an expanded understanding of a communal dimension of *episkope* in its affirmation of co-responsibility, especially “the recovery of the sacramental foundation of episcopal authority and collegiality, and the baptismal mandate of all members of the church to participate fully and actively in the Spirit anointed offices of Christ and the realization of the identify and the pastoral mission of the Church.”<sup>68</sup> Unfortunately, the revised Latin Code of Canon Law issued in 1983 determined that structures which could encourage such a communal exercise of *episkope* (i.e., parish pastoral councils, diocesan synods, presbyteral councils and the international synod of bishops) could only be consultative and not decision-making. In Brad Hinze’s view the “consultative-only” canons of the 1983 Code

... symbolize the compromise reached at Vatican II between a hierarchical ecclesiology that had reached its zenith in the second half of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and the new affirmations of shared responsibility in the Church. ... The Council attained widespread consensus on the theological foundations for shared responsibility in the Church, but was unable in the time allotted to work out their implications in relation to the long-standing practices of a hierarchical ecclesiology.<sup>69</sup>

The result, according to Hinze, is the juxtaposition of two ecclesiological trajectories which are not fully integrated.

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<sup>66</sup>George H. Tavard, “What is the Petrine Function?” In *Papal Primacy and the Universal Church*, 212.

<sup>67</sup>For an extended discussion on how the ministry of oversight has been addressed by the Faith and Order Commission of the WCC, see Bradford Hinze, “Are Councils and Synods Decision-Making? A Roman Catholic Conundrum in Ecumenical Perspective,” in *Receiving ‘The Nature and Mission of the Church’: Ecclesial Reality and Ecumenical Horizons for the Twenty-First Century*, eds. Paul M. Collins and Michael A. Fahey (London: T & T Clark, 2008), 69-84. Drawing on the work of ecumenical theologian Mary Tanner, Hinze discusses the shifts which have taken place concerning this concept from *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry* (1982) to *The Nature and the Mission of the Church* (2005). See also, Mary Tanner, “A Case for Re-Form: Personal, Collegial and Communal,” in *Travelling with Resilience: Essays for Alastair Haggart*, ed. Elizabeth Templeton (Edinburgh: Scottish Episcopal Church, 2002), 103-19.

<sup>68</sup>Hinze, “Are Councils and Synods Decision-Making?” 70.

<sup>69</sup>Hinze, “Are Councils and Synods Decision-Making?” 70.

Canonists have also recognized this dilemma.<sup>70</sup> James Coriden makes a cogent presentation<sup>71</sup> which addresses an abundance of historical precedents for lay exercise of the power of governance as well as the theological bases for their exercise of authority. Furthermore, he judges the current canonical restriction of canon 129 as “purely and merely positive ecclesiastical law, not an intrinsic limitation or one based on ‘divine law.’”<sup>72</sup> Coriden explains that Vatican II’s teaching that bishops receive their governing function from their episcopal consecration (*Lumen Gentium*, 21) caused some canonical theorists to assert that only the ordained could hold and exercise governance in the church. Other canonists, however, maintained that the sacrament of orders is not the exclusive source for the power of governance and that there was room for the exercise of governance by laypersons. Thus, Coriden argues that based upon current practice, historical examples, and conciliar themes, “it is hard to envision any mandatory limitation on lay exercise of the power of governance, short of that immediately attached to the episcopal office.”<sup>73</sup> Noting that “actual practice in the Church often runs ahead of its juridical norms,” he then proposes changes to eight relevant canons that “would clear the canonical path so that qualified lay persons could possess the power of governance as well as exercise it.”<sup>74</sup>

### 5. Reform of the Lectionary

A final ecclesiological provocation I would like to raise concerns the reform of the Lectionary. Here especially is a place where the worshipping community could become cognizant of Mary Magdalene’s multi-faceted role in the Gospels and hear about many other women disciples who participated in the *basilea* movement and

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<sup>70</sup>John Beal has summarized the debate among canonists in “The Exercise of the Power of Governance by Lay People: State of the Question,” *The Jurist* 55 (1995), 1-92. See also, John Huels’ discussion in “The Power of Governance and Its Exercise by Lay Persons,” *Studia Canonica* 35 (2001), 59-96.

<sup>71</sup>James Coriden, “Lay Persons and the Power of Governance,” *The Jurist* 55 (1999), 335-47.

<sup>72</sup>James Coriden, “Lay Persons and the Power of Governance,” 338.

<sup>73</sup>James Coriden, “Lay Persons and the Power of Governance,” 344. Phyllis Zagano has addressed the issue of women and governance in the church in “The Question of Governance and Ministry for Women,” *Theological Studies* 68 (2007), 348-67. She takes up Benedict XVI’s response to a query raised by an Italian priest in the diocese of Rome concerning the inclusion of women in ministry and governance of the church and uses it as a platform to argue that ordaining women to the diaconate would be a way to allow women governing authority in the church. While Zagano is aware of the debate between two schools of canonical theory during the revision of the 1983 Code, unlike Coriden, she does not seem (in my reading at least), to entertain the possibility of any change taking place in Canon 129. The provocation flowing from the recovery of a “Magdalene function” is that ultimately, I would want to see both strategies implemented; however, Coriden’s seems to be one more easily accomplished at the moment.

<sup>74</sup>James Coriden, “Lay Persons and the Power of Governance,” 345-47.

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.<sup>75</sup> 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."<sup>76</sup> 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.<sup>77</sup>

## 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."<sup>78</sup> 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

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<sup>75</sup>See, 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.

<sup>76</sup>As 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.

<sup>77</sup>See [http://www.vatican.va/holy\\_father/benedict\\_xvi/apost\\_exhortations/documents/hf\\_ben-xvi\\_exh\\_20100930\\_verbum-domini\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_ben-xvi_exh_20100930_verbum-domini_en.html) accessed July 11, 2011.

<sup>78</sup>Helmut 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 raises provocations—ones that I am sure could profit from further research, discussion and collegial correction (which I would sincerely welcome). Nevertheless, my hope is that we are prodded to continue to pray and think imaginatively about a future in which both biblical scholars and theologians, along with the whole People of God, might respond to the outpouring of the Spirit in yet another “new Pentecost.”<sup>79</sup>

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<sup>79</sup>On this Feast of Pentecost in the year 2011 I am reminded of the exhortation of Blessed John XXIII in convoking the Second Vatican Council. See, *Humane Salutis*, December 25, 1961, in *The Documents of Vatican II*, gen. ed., Walter M. Abbot, S.J., trans. Ed. Joseph Gallagher (New York: Guild Press, 1966), 703-08.