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Mary Magdalene in a fresh light

The biblical figure is riding a new wave of interest, propelled by feminism, research and pop culture.

Mark I. Pinsky | Sentinel Staff Writer

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At least once a day, Frances Garcia checks a Mary Magdalene Web site, and most nights she spends at least an hour reading histories and commentaries about Jesus' devoted supporter and her contemporaries.

Mary Magdalene "is part of my life," says the University of Central Florida student. "She is what inspired me to know more about Christianity."

Jesus' devoted follower has been inspiring a lot of enthusiasm in recent years. Experts say a confluence of feminism, biblical research and pop culture has placed Mary Magdalene in the front rank of Jesus' first followers, at least for the moment.

"She's one hot commodity right now," says Marvin Meyer, professor of religion at Chapman University in Orange, Calif. "Mary Magdalene is everywhere."

Mary Magdalene is the subject of a boom in scholarly literature, with at least six new books suggesting roles for her that range from the 13th apostle to a goddess. In 2003, the American Bible Society in New York staged an exhibit of Mary Magdalene portraits.

This wave of academic interest has been propelled into the mainstream by popular fiction. Mary, Called Magdalene, a historical novel by Margaret George, became a best seller in 2002. The following year, The Da Vinci Code burst onto the scene. The fast-paced thriller claims that Mary Magdalene's role as Jesus' wife has been systematically suppressed.

With 6 million copies in print and a sale to Hollywood, The Da Vinci Code has sparked numerous Web sites and women's discussion groups. Jesus' devoted follower also has landed on the cover of both Time and Newsweek and on several national television specials. Mary Magdalene is featured in the Mel Gibson film, The Passion of the Christ. All of this attention points to a dramatic reappraisal of the biblical figure, who some charge has been marginalized and airbrushed from the story of early Christianity.

"Mary is very close to Jesus, trusted by Jesus, was one of the disciples," says Meyer, author of The Gospels of Mary: The Secret Tradition of Mary Magdalene, the Companion of Jesus. She was "not only in the inner circle, but maybe the most beloved of all the disciples of Jesus." According to the four Gospels of the New Testament, Mary Magdalene witnessed Jesus' crucifixion and his resurrection, rallying the depressed and disbelieving male disciples.

'MONUMENTAL STEP'

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For 1,500 years, Mary Magdalene was portrayed, in art and theology, as a prostitute whose life was transformed by Jesus' forgiveness. This was the result of an erroneous sermon preached in 591 by Pope Gregory the Great. The pontiff, misreading the Gospel of Luke, confused Mary Magdalene with another woman described as "sinful." His finding was reversed by the Vatican in 1969.

"That is a monumental step for the Church to actually admit there may have been a misinterpretation," says the Rev. Charlie Mitchell, pastor of St. Mary Magdalen Catholic Church in Altamonte Springs.

The parish is one of hundreds around the world named for Mary Magdalene, as are venerable colleges at Oxford and Cambridge universities in England. Mitchell, whose office is filled with artwork portraying the parish's namesake, uses Mary Magdalene's feast day of July 22 to remind church members of her "unique position in her relationship with the apostles."

Mary Magdalene "is a woman whose life has been completely distorted down through the ages -- for whatever reason," Mitchell says.

Several authors of recent works about Magdalene say they know the reasons.

The second-century Gospel of Mary Magdalene was found in the late 19th century by archaeologists but remained largely ignored and untranslated for 50 years. It is the only account named for a woman and offers a different view of Christianity -- one that describes an "interior spirituality," says Karen L. King, author of *The Gospel of Mary of Magdala: Jesus and the First Woman Apostle*.

In the Mary Magdalene account, "salvation is not something that comes from an external savior," says King. "One has to seek salvation within." Thus, the Magdalene Gospel depicts Jesus as a teacher rather than as a savior who dies to atone for humanity's sins.

Mary Magdalene's account is also the "strongest argument for women's leadership" in Christian writings, says King, professor of church history at Harvard Divinity School.

"It lets us hear an alternative voice," she says, in contrast with I Corinthians and I Timothy, which urge silence and submissiveness of women.

WORDS OF CAUTION

Because Mary Magdalene may have been a rival to the Apostle Peter, other Gospel accounts with favorable references to her may have been excluded by the male church leaders who compiled the New Testament, according to King and other scholars.

"Mary Magdalene was such an important person in the Jesus movement that the Gospels could not ignore her," says Meyer of Chapman University. "But the Gospel writers were on the side of the 12 guys, the male disciples."

Lynn Picknett, a British scholar, thinks she knows why Jesus' companion "has suddenly become the flavor of the month" among scholars and lay people.

"I think people are realizing now that the Bible did not arrive by e-mail from God, and that it's very much the work of man -- and man with his own agenda," says Picknett, author of *Mary Magdalene: Christianity's Hidden Goddess*.

"Mary Magdalene was a normally flawed human being who came from an ancient goddess-worshipping tradition," she says, "probably Egyptian. In certain rituals, such as the anointing of Jesus, she believed she became the goddess, while he became the chosen god."

Support for this expansive view of Mary Magdalene is not universal; some urge caution.

"You have scholars using the subject matter of Mary Magdalene for their own purposes," says Teresa Berger, associate professor of ecumenical theology at Duke University Divinity School. "It began with the feminist interest in women's history in the 1960s, including biblical women's history."

A CULTURAL 'VEIL'

There is more, of course, to Mary Magdalene's appeal.

"With Mary Magdalene there is something else going on culturally," says Berger. "It has to do with the veil over her relationship with Jesus, a suggestion of romantic love involved. Our culture is one that cannot imagine life without romance, love and sex."

Yet, she says, there is "very slim historical evidence" of Jesus and Mary Magdalene having a romantic relationship.

But that hasn't stopped the purveyors of popular culture from fictionally exploring the possibilities. Examples range from the Mary Magdalene married to Jesus in The Da Vinci Code, to the Jesus tortured by his attraction to Mary in Martin Scorsese's movie, The Last Temptation of Christ, which outraged many believers.

Jane Schaberg and others believe Mary Magdalene's sexuality, either as a prostitute or as partner of Jesus, has been used to distract attention from her role as a leader of early Christianity.

For Schaberg, the author of The Resurrection of Mary Magdalene: Legends, Apocrypha, and the Christian Testament, Magdalene was "a prophetic figure, a visionary, a leader" who provided through her ministry "an understanding of women's leadership."

Donna Esbensen, a member of St. Mary Magdalen in Altamonte Springs, agrees.

"Mary Magdalen stood out as the first disciple," she says. "When she encountered Jesus, she was totally changed, not just for a short time, and she changed all those she encountered."

Mark I. Pinsky can be reached at mpinsky@orlandosentinel.com or 407-420-5589.

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