

MAGDALENE CHRISTIANITY

*Enter  
the  
Roman  
Church*

HELEN MARTINEAU

Image by Rafael Ishkhanyan on Unsplash

## ENTER THE ROMAN CHURCH

### **Emperor Constantine lays down the law**

'It's a religion of women,' sneered the anti-Christian philosopher Celsus. Women did make up the bulk of early Christian congregations because of the relative freedom of expression.

According to her research into ancient texts, academic Karen King found that women's 'natural' (and inferior) identity as mothers and wives was perceived as distinct from their Christianity. From the latter came their authority because it was concerned with spiritual achievement. In Asia Minor in the late second century Montanist Christianity included women ordained as priests and bishops. The African bishop Cyprian wrote about a female prophet who celebrated the eucharist and performed baptisms. Most of the names of female prophets, teachers and healers have been lost to us.

Women retained leadership roles after gatherings moved from homes and the catacombs of Rome into dedicated buildings. But there was strong opposition to female ordination. Hippolytus writing in 215 CE declared that women should not receive the laying on of hands, that is priestly ordination – God made the twelve disciples male after all! Later in the third century Epiphanius in *Against Heresies* opposed the priesthood of women because Mary the mother of Jesus wasn't even entrusted with baptizing, so why would... so the arguments went on.

The church's quarrels and development took place in the face of periodic waves of persecution, with women among the martyrs until Christianity found favour with the Roman emperor Constantine in the early fourth century.

In 312 Constantine, then a general, marched on Rome. Maxentius the ruler there consulted the Sibylline Oracle who indicated that he would achieve what was necessary if he did battle outside the city walls. Rather than safely sitting out a siege by Constantine's much smaller army, which was the logic of war, Maxentius followed what he thought the oracle meant. In the Battle at the Milvian Bridge Constantine won because he took note of a dream – he would be victorious if he led his troops under the sign of the Christ. And this was what happened. Constantine was now officially Emperor of the Romans.

The modern statue below of Constantine the Great in York, England commemorates the place where in 306 CE he was declared Roman Emperor by his troops, although Maxentius still ruled in the capital Rome.



Constantine's mother Helena was a Christian and in 313 he declared that tolerance should extend to all Christ worshippers, thus ending three hundred years of struggle. Christian temples worthy of royal patronage were built. The Churches of the Holy Sepulchre and the Nativity in Jerusalem were two of the earliest, constructed in the late 320s.

In 325 Constantine summoned bishops from all over the empire to a council at Nicaea (no mention of women). His purpose was to resolve bitter differences between Christian groups and demand homogeneity for the religion he now approved of and saw as a means of unifying Rome's vast territories. The emperor made a dramatic entrance dressed in such unimaginable finery the awestruck men on the council made no objection when he imposed the model of the Roman Senate on the church. It meant women were officially excluded.

But Constantine's decree apparently did not take effect immediately. In an age of slow communication, and sometimes no communication, Christian communities across the empire would continue as usual – and women still led some.

Below is a painting of a fifth century woman Cerula in the San Gennaro catacomb, Naples – the liturgical gesture, the symbol over her head and open gospels suggest she was a bishop (and so permitted to read sacred texts).



But the always vulnerable role of the feminine in the religion would not fare well in Roman Christianity. Pope Leo 1, 'the Great', 440-461 (who is credited with persuading Atilla the Hun not to invade Rome) asserted the authority and superiority of the bishops of Rome based on their descent from Saint Peter.

The depiction of this descent was based on a materialistic interpretation of Matthew 16:15-18. Jesus says to Simon (not yet Peter), 'You are rock (*petros*) and on this rock (*petra*) I will build my church (*ekklesia*).' Yet this is a metaphysical statement. Simon has declared, through faith, that Jesus is the Christ, the divine anointed one. This is about a soul reality experienced by the disciple. Faith is inner surety, and is the beginning, the solid foundation and 'rock' on which the *ekklesia*, meaning 'the calling out' to walk the Christ Way, can be based. As the old song goes, 'Build on the rock and not upon the sand.'

There is no evidence that Peter was the first bishop of Rome and pope (from *papa*, 'father'). However, it is likely that any remaining female leaders were banned on Pope Leo's watch.

In the words of Karen King:

Every variety of ancient Christianity that advocated the legitimacy of women's leadership was eventually declared heretical, and evidence of women's early leadership roles was erased or suppressed.

— *Women in Ancient Christianity: The New Discoveries*. Frontline, April 1998; web post

### **A mystery disappears under the weight of structure**

There is a living truth in all pure teachings that are an aid to people seeking to know the meaning of spirit and to express the spiritual self. 'Christ' is not exclusive to any Christian church or to any group. It is a force that through Jesus came into our world of time and space and is active here now, available to all who choose to align with this spirit. My teacher Mario Schoenmaker emphasised this by alluding to two members of his secret esoteric fraternity – one in Turkey, a Sufi, the mystical stream of Islam, and a black American woman who remained within a fundamentalist church and quietly worked to open souls to the inner spirit.

There should be no division between those who say Christ and others who know this being by a different name. But religion can over-ride revelation. The word religion derives from the Latin *ligare*, to bind or tie (likewise ligament and ligature). And in the case of religions it is the means of tying people together in a common understanding, and through faith to bind people to the deity. In the religion of the Christ, the focus of the authority figures, all men, was to bind all that relates to the spiritual and divine realms into a manageable and controllable structure. The church establishment was born. Inevitably, as the church's institutional power settled in, belief and dogma became the means of consolidation. The formal hierarchical rule-based structure became the norm.

The church organization did serve as a protective umbrella beneath which mystically inclined men and women attained profound and personal experiences of the Christ spirit. There remains a wealth of inspired material down the centuries written by those in touch with inner Wisdom.

But the gospel message that was relayed from the hierarchy to the people skimmed the surface. This superficiality continues today and in a real sense the mystery of Christ in the world is yet to awaken. Here Harriet Barber puts herself in the place of Justin Martyr, Origen and other early theological fathers:

It's hard to imagine what [they] would make of contemporary Christianity. I suspect they would find the conservative evangelical variety unintelligible and would even be puzzled by 'mainline' Christianity. Why, they'd wonder, were these third millennium Christians so utterly indifferent to vital metaphysical questions? Why did they care about the historical accuracy of biblical narratives? Why

were they so interested in stories about the human Jesus and so little concerned about the metaphysics of the logos, which became incarnate? Why was their Christianity simplistic, prosaic, anti-intellectual and deadly dull?

—Harriet Barber, *Origen, Radical Scholar*; The Guardian Online, 10 June 2010

### **What the church did to Mary Magdalene**

The eastern and western churches developed differently and split in 1054. In the West the Roman Catholic church would become in the words of art historian E.H. Gombrich 'the church triumphant'. Over the centuries despite upheavals, revolutions and breakaway movements, the feminine has never been able to fully emerge and take hold of its rightful place.

In Catholic Ireland from the eighteenth century, Magdalen Houses were part of a larger structure of oppression by a patriarchal church. They were run, mostly by nuns (one of the rare places they could exert authority), as institutions for fallen women – prostitutes, unmarried mothers, even young women 'at risk' – and bastard children. Operating as laundries, these virtual prisons were managed like places of punishment. 'Ireland's shame' no longer exists; there has been an official apology for the suffering caused, and Ireland is much the better for the shift.

So why were such heinous asylums named after Mary Magdalene? Well, through Mary's repentance she became an example for every woman (so prone to sins of the flesh). These places were supposed to be about redeeming sinful women and girls.

It's stated in the Gospels of Mark and Luke that Jesus healed Mary of her 'seven demons'. Unfortunately, the false representation of those demons was the basis of her disgraceful belittling by Pope Gregory in the late sixth century. He had ensured the whole church knew about her vices.

Then healed of her 'sins' and repenting, this prostitute became a second Eve, compensating for the sin of the first Eve who succumbed to the serpent's temptation. We will delve into the meaning of these demons in Portal 3.

In the Renaissance many artists liked to portray her as the voluptuous temptress, with the addition of a suitably heavenwards glance. Sculptor Donatello moved in the opposite direction and depicted an archetypal penitent in his astonishing expressionistic Mary, haggard and grim faced, having foregone all her former fleshly delights. Yet she was made a saint for her troubles; churches were built in her name to house her relics and legends grew around her.



*Contrasting images of Mary Magdalene: painting by Leonardo da Vinci (with his pupil Giampietrino) and Donatello's dramatic sculpture*

So her divided image remained until the Protestant Reformation in the sixteenth century. Mary Magdalene didn't receive much honour under Protestantism when the worship of saints and the display of relics were definitely out. And you prayed to Jesus Christ or God only.

### **A new look at the Magdalene**

The Catholic church made idols of the man on the cross, plus the Virgin Mary, Mary Magdalene the repentant prostitute, and numerous other saints. Protestants cut out the saints to concentrate on the cross that dominates so many churches. Belief has become externalized: Jesus the good man who gave his life in dreadful suffering for us, and now he saves us, answers our prayers? Very far-fetched to the rational mind.

So what if we leave what religion believes and doesn't believe? We could explore in other areas what the archetypal figure of the Magdalene might mean for us. Next we will explore her symbols – a different way of unravelling the mystery of Mary Magdalene.