

## IN SEARCH OF THE SACRED PROSTITUTE

*The sacred prostitute or temple priestess was associated with the religions of the Great Mother Goddess in ancient times. She became a representation of the goddess in physical form and entered into sacred sexual rituals with the men who came to worship. I will investigate the early fertility Goddess Innana of ancient Mesopotamia and look at how the feminine was honoured and sexuality embraced. The advent of monotheism dramatically changed the role of women and sexuality and I shall look briefly at how the gods came to power and usurped the role of the goddess. This forever altered the way women were perceived through the eyes of the church, but evidence of the sacred feminine remains today. Mary Magdalene has been labeled the repentant whore by the Church for millennia. With all the exposure given to the sacred feminine by Dan Brown in the Da Vinci Code, she has suddenly become the latest pin-up girl for the Christian Faith. Was sacred prostitute a more relevant description and how does that translate into the divine feminine depiction she wears today?*



### Origins of goddess worship

It is believed by certain scholars and historians that from as far back as Paleolithic times, people experienced their surroundings, their heavens and earth and all forms of life as a manifestation of the Great Primordial Mother Goddess. Their crops were grown in cycle with the changing seasons and phases of the moon and both the abundance of the harvest and the winter frosts were all experienced as aspects of her changing face. Prehistoric artifacts including statues of fertility goddesses and painted feminine images in caves and on pots attest to the worship of the feminine mother principle across a great many cultures from Old Europe to the Indus Valley.

Archaeologists who discovered statues and rock carvings such as the Neolithic Venus of Willendorf and the Hohle Fells Venus propose that a Great Mother Goddess was worshipped as far back as 40,000 BCE. While the theory of Goddess worship prior to the Greek and Roman eras developed through various academic research over a period of 150 years, it must be noted

that there is no factual verification that the statues and evidence found, do indeed indicate a matriarchal earth based religion<sup>1</sup> and some scholars do not agree with this theory. Many others do.



The worship of the Goddess Innana can be traced to before the 4<sup>th</sup> millennium BCE. This area was known as the cradle of civilization and encompassed lands known as Sumeria, Assyria and Babylon. Innana was the Sumerian goddess of the moon and was known as Ishtar to the Babylonians and was one of the three great goddesses of the Bronze Age.

The practice of sacred sexual intercourse within the temples of Innana and Ishtar were important and common rituals in Mesopotamia and were understood to reinvigorate the land with divine fertile energy. The priestess' of the temple took the title of "Hierodule of Heaven"<sup>2</sup> which meant 'servant of the holy' and it was a great honour to make love within the precincts of the goddess.

To understand the sacredness of the sexual act, it must be seen in the context of a society which lived in close accord with nature. Qualls-Corbet<sup>3</sup> explains "*Desire and sexual response experienced as a regenerative power were recognized as a gift or a blessing from the divine. Man's and woman's sexual nature and their religious attitude were inseparable.*" The sex act was offered up to the goddess of love and fertility who in return bestowed her blessings of fertility and growth upon her petitioners. It is not difficult then to understand that the practice of sacred prostitution became a religious act of worship where sexuality and spirituality became one and the same.

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<sup>1</sup> Hutton, R. The Triumph of the Moon (p36-39)

<sup>2</sup> Marvally, P. Women of Wisdom (p9)

<sup>3</sup> Qualls-Corbet, N. The Sacred Prostitute (p30)

In Babylon there was a hierarchy of prostitutes from the high-ranking priestesses known by various names including *quedishtu*, *naditu* or *entu*, right down to the tavern or street whore called *harimtu*. Ishtar did not differentiate in bestowing her blessings and honoured the sexual act howsoever it be performed<sup>4</sup>. "Who will plough my vulva?" calls Inanna in the old hymns..."Who will water the holy lap?"<sup>5</sup> The power of the feminine, embodied in the sexuality of all women both made the earth grow and was a power for transformation

The 'sacred marriage' as performed in the New Year celebrations of Inanna and Dumuzi was known as *heiros gamos*. This sacred joining of the king with the high priestess of the temple became the ritual that ensured the fertility of the land and the power of the king to rule for the coming year. Starbird<sup>6</sup> notes how for millennia the 'sacred marriage' was the ancient ritual performed by numerous cultures across the Mediterranean region where the priestess of the temple came to embody the very essence of the Goddess in sexual union with those who came to pay for the privilege.

The temples of the goddess have provided for the sacred prostitute for more millennium than is known. The story of the legendary King Gilgamesh dates back to 7000BCE<sup>7</sup> and explains how the sacred prostitute tamed the hairy beast who was sent to rob the King, turning him into a civilized companion. The Greek historian Herodotus<sup>8</sup> writes in the 3<sup>rd</sup> century BCE of the Babylonian custom that compels every woman of the land once in her life to sit in the temple of the goddess of love and have intercourse with a stranger who must provide a payment for the temple. The practice is recorded to have taken place in Egypt, Lebanon, Greece and Rome and the commonly known vestal virgin was not a virgin at all, but rather devoted her life to become a "bride" in a ritual marriage in the temples of Hestia or Vesta.<sup>9</sup> A virgin was considered to be one who was married to no man, but who lived according to her own choices.

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<sup>4</sup> Cunningham, E. Sacred Prostitution: The Whore and the Holy One

<sup>5</sup> From "The Courtship of Inanna and Dumuzi" translated by Samuel Noah Kramer

<sup>6</sup> Starbird, M. Mary Magdalene – Bride in Exile (p 49)

<sup>7</sup> Ibid (p33)

<sup>8</sup> Ibid (p33)

<sup>9</sup> Ibid (p36)

## Sacred Sexuality in India

India has historically embraced a rich tradition of religion and divine sexuality and Hinduism has embraced a naturalistic and erotic attitude towards the behaviour of its gods and goddesses. The worship of the phallus or linga from early times developed into the God Shiva together with his consort the great mother or fertility goddesses known in modern times as Parvati, Durga and Kali. The stories of the ancient pantheon of the Hindu gods and goddesses can be found in the Upanishad (sacred texts) and the worship of the linga (phallus) and yoni (vagina) is derived from the sacred fertility acts which are common to many cultures.



The sacred prostitutes were known as devadasis or ‘god’s servants’ and were attached to the service of deities in Hindu temples. This practice continued from antiquity and only faded out in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century with the intervention of the appalled British. Girls were given to the temple from childhood and were married to the deity in a formal wedding ceremony, often being deflowered by the priest or made to sit upon a linga stone.<sup>10</sup>

Tantra evolved out of the yogic practices of the Buddhists and Hindus and was concerned with the raising of sexual energy within the body as a way of communion with the divine. In Tantra the most powerful energy is sexual and the sex organs symbolise cosmic powers within the linga and yoni. The serpent kundalini energy which sits dormant at the base of the spine is raised up through the chakra system to the heart and then out through the crown of the head enabling full body orgasm without intercourse nor emission of semen. The sexual union of the male and female represent the union of god and the soul (another form of sacred marriage) and becomes a means for achieving enlightened states.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Parrinder, G. Sexuality Morality *In the World’s Religions* (p27)

<sup>11</sup> Smoley, R & Kinney J *Hidden Wisdom* (p264)

## The birth of the masculine gods

The advent of the Bronze Age (3500 BCE to 1250BCE) saw an end to the peaceful, agrarian, communities who worshipped the universal mother concept. The discovery of bronze not only allowed for the creation of strong and flexible farming tools, but for powerful weapons of death and destruction. The relatively peaceful lands of Mesopotamia were soon invaded. Marvelly explains “*Invading migratory warriors – Aryan tribes from the steppe lands between the Dnieper and Volga rivers, north of the Black and Caspian Seas, as well as Semitic tribes from the Syro-Arabian desert – started to impose their own patriarchal customs*”<sup>12</sup>

This began to see the worship of the goddess and the peaceful agricultural based societies dissipate as men moved into defense roles and survival became the primary focus of daily lives. The ideas of men passing tests of endurance, strength and power, developed into notions of the ‘hero’ as the rest of the tribe began to worship and emulate these feats of bravery. The Mother Goddess began to lose her grip as the belief in death as a cycle of rebirth and renewal began to be replaced with a fearful finality of death meaning the end. Soon separate male sky gods began to emerge that acknowledged the masculine forces of war and discord that became associated with lightning, thunder, storm and fire.<sup>13</sup> The goddess and the sacred feminine and her connections with the cycles of the earth were replaced with the masculine principles of war and power and the subsequent worth of women themselves declined in the same way, to the point where they often became possessions of men.

Men also began to understand their part in procreation and believed that it was the male that created new life, the woman only being the receptacle for the growth. New laws emerged around this and with the advent of politics and commerce, the social order slowly changed. Cross culturalisation also occurred and the beliefs and practices of other lands and the worship of other gods also influenced the social structure. There were many factors involved, but eventually the shift from a matriarchal to a patriarchal society gradually took hold and man established the

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<sup>12</sup> Marvelly, P. Women of Wisdom (p2)

<sup>13</sup> Ibid (p2)

recognition of a supreme masculine sky god in his image, and the attitudes towards the feminine and the goddess of fertility and love changed forever.

*“Over time the temples of love gave way to the house of the Lord, radically displacing woman’s role in religious rites. In the worship of the goddess, as we have seen, sex was brought openly and with reverence to the very altar of the goddess. In her temple, men and woman came to find life and all that it had to offer in sensual pleasure and delight. But with the change in cultural values and institutionalization of monotheism and patriarchy, the individual came to the house of the Lord to prepare for death.”*

Qualls-Corbett<sup>14</sup>

### The sacred feminine in monotheism

The very basis of Christianity rests on the tenet that we are all born into original sin. Eve, the embodiment of all things sensual and seductive carries the enormous guilt of having been tempted by evil. By then enticing Adam, she committed the very first sin, having them both expelled from the Garden of Eden with the resultant downfall of mankind. Suddenly woman is no longer seen as divine, but a reminder of masculine physical desires which must be resisted at all costs. Women began to be associated with their sexual nature which must be degraded and suppressed. In order to reach pure spiritual joining with God the Father, denial of the physical was paramount and all association with the goddess or the divine feminine were assiduously censored by the church. Even the Virgin Mary as the lone figure of matriarchal redemption in the Catholic Church is an emasculated depiction of the goddess, devoid of any sensuality or fertility.

Whilst the goddess has generally been erased from the three main monotheistic religions of Christianity, Judaism and Islam, the sacred feminine has survived and can be found in historic and esoteric writings from early inception. She may not be as obvious as the sacred prostitute, but the divine feminine is found in the creation myths of most religions and her discovery is important to a modern reinterpretation of sacred texts.

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<sup>14</sup> Qualls-Corbett, N. The Sacred Prostitute (p42-43)



## Judaism

Judaism springs from the ancient Hebrew whose attitudes to sex and life in general were naturalistic and accepting of procreation as the continuing divine creation. Earlier Yahwistic writings of the Genesis creation myth saw both Adam and Eve created by God as ‘bone of my bone and flesh of my flesh’ and equal in the sight of the Lord. The story of the ‘Fall’, their disobedience and expulsion from Eden was not originally concerned with sexual temptation but rather disobedience. The divine command was not to eat from the ‘tree of knowledge of good and evil’ and the original sin was ‘rebellion against God’, nothing to do with Eve using her sexual wiles to tempt Adam. Their first sexual union did not even happen until they had actually left the Garden of Eden.<sup>15</sup>



The book of Proverbs explains how Wisdom (also known as Sophia) became the female companion of God that participated in the creation of all. ‘*The Lord possessed me in the beginning of his way, before his works of old ... I was beside him like a master workman, and I was daily his delight*’ (Prov 8.22). Wisdom became an instrument of creation, manifest in the physical. Later Rabbinical writings in the Torah and Zohar acknowledge Wisdom as the divine feminine principle and tell us about Solomon who fell in love with Wisdom’s beauty. Ochshorn<sup>16</sup> speaks of Wisdom’s abstract female personification that has little to do with women but like the Egyptian Goddess Maat, “*she becomes the very underpinning of earthly power, justice and order, a prime shaper of the history of*

<sup>15</sup> Parrinder, G. Sexuality Morality *In the World’s Religions* (p179)

<sup>16</sup> Ochshorn, J. Female Experience and the Nature of the Divine (159)

*Israel and she exists with God virtually from the beginning of time.*” Not something outlined in Genesis or what you get taught about in Sunday School.

### Kabbalah

The esoteric teachings of Judaism, known as the Kabbalah, openly use sexual language to describe the Shekhinah which is the feminine presence of God in the manifest universe. From God emanated ten Sefiroth, which were abstract entities, the last and tenth of these representing the indwelling presence of God in the universe. The sexual union of the Shekinah with God was known as the sacred union of King and Queen or the *Heiros Gamos*. This then became the procreative life force or the mystical marriage and it was written in the Zohar that Moses had intercourse with the Shekhinah on Mount Sinai.<sup>17</sup>

### Christianity

Of the three monotheistic religions, Christianity has the most stringent attitudes towards asceticism and denial of the flesh. The purpose of sexual intercourse was procreation and the entering into of any behaviour which may cause pleasure outside this act was deemed lustful and forbidden.

It appears though that the true origins of Christianity found in the teachings of Jesus the man held quite different attitudes towards women and sexuality. Jesus has amongst his closest companions women and prostitutes. He always taught a message of love and equality at a time and era when women were but chattels of their masculine relatives or husbands. It didn't take long though for the misogynistic attitudes of early Church Fathers such as Tertullian, Ireaneus and the Apostle Paul himself to distort the words and meanings of the original teachings.<sup>18</sup> Tertullian has some prominent views of the role of women:

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<sup>17</sup> Parrinder, G. Sexuality Morality *In the World's Religions* (p199)

<sup>18</sup> Marvally, P. Women of Wisdom (p71)



*“Every woman carries the curse of Eve. (“Every woman should be ....) walking about as Eve mourning and repentant, in order that by every garb of penitence she might the more fully expiate that which she derives from Eve,-the ignominy, I mean, of the first sin, and the odium (attaching to her as the cause) of human perdition.*

*“In pains and in anxieties dost thou bear (children), woman; and toward thine husband (is) thy inclination, and he lords it over thee.”*

*And do you not know that you are (each) an Eve? The sentence of God on this sex of yours lives in this age: the guilt must of necessity live too.”*

- *“You are the devil's gateway:*
- *you are the unsealer of that (forbidden) tree:*
- *you are the first deserter of the divine law:*
- *you are she who persuaded him (Adam) whom the devil was not valiant enough to attack.*
- *You destroyed so easily God's image, man.*
- *On account of your desert-that is, death-even the Son of God had to die.”*
- *“And do you think about adorning yourself over and above your tunics of skins?”<sup>19</sup>*

### *Mary Magdalene*

When we observe the historic unfolding of the Church's attitude and teachings surrounding Mary Magdalene, we are presented with much confusion regarding her identity and the role she played in the beginnings of the early Christian Church. There is uncertainty regarding which of the three Mary's referred to in the Gospels is the Magdalene, where she actually came from, and whether or not she was indeed a prostitute.

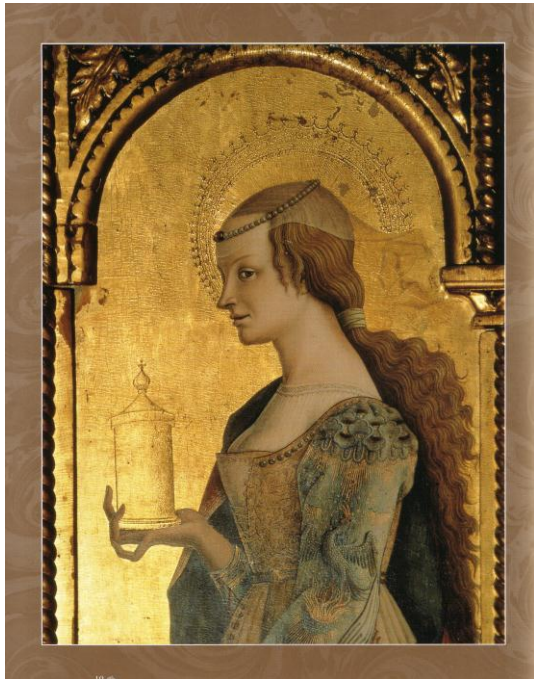
Pope Gregory the Great in 591 delivered a sermon which De Keijzer<sup>20</sup> explains, identified the three Marys in the New Testament with 'the women in the city, who was a sinner' thereby discounting any confusion and labeling Mary Magdalene forever as the 'penitent sinner'. This effectively cut off any ongoing discussion regarding the threatening role of women in the church

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<sup>19</sup> Tertullian, *De Cultu Feminarum*, Book 1, Chapter 1

<sup>20</sup> De Keijzer, A. *The Mary Magdalene Controversies* (p154)

and cast the dye for Catholic teachings until 1969. It was then that Pope John Paul II reversed his predecessor's missal and reinstated Mary Magdalene as central to the resurrection story, giving her authority as the first to see the risen Christ.<sup>21</sup>



Mary being cast in the role of repentant prostitute for so long, speaks of the Church's attempts to vilify the powerful sexual attributes that can be seen in the goddesses of the old religions. To Warner<sup>22</sup> "*The Magdalene assumed the original sins of Eve, and was brought into existence by the powerful undertow of misogyny in Christianity, which associates women with the dangers and degradation of the flesh.*" But like the goddesses of old, women and men related to the erotic feminine archetype being represented by the Magdalene and despite the attempts of the Christian fathers to repress and manipulate her image, she remained loved and revered. Qualls-

Corbet<sup>23</sup> reminds us that in our spiritual search we all seek an image of the feminine which relates to the sexual, erotic aspects of the goddess. Ancient man did not find an incompatibility with love of the erotic and spirituality, but the Church Fathers wished to negate the very elements necessary for the renewal of life.

It is only recently that a reinterpretation of various texts reveals that Mary Magdalene was indeed the consort and most favoured companion of Jesus. These recently discovered apocryphal writings from the Nag Hammadi library deliver up to us texts such as the Gospel of Mary Magdalene, the Sophia Pistis and the Gospels of Thomas and Philip which reveal insights into the role of women and Mary Magdalene herself, at the very nascent beginnings of Christianity. The Gospel of Philip speaks of Mary Magdalene:

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid (p155)

<sup>22</sup> Warner, M. Alone of all Her Sex: The Myth and the Cult of the Virgin Mary (p235)

<sup>23</sup> Qualls-Corbet, N. The Sacred Prostitute (p146)

*“The companion of the savior is Mary Magdalene. The savior loved her more than all the disciples, and he kissed her often on her mouth.*

*The other disciples ... said to him, “Why do you love her more than all of us?”*

*The savior answered and said to them, “Why do I not love you like her? If a blind person and one who can see are both in darkness, they are the same. When the light comes, one who can see will see the light, and the blind person will stay in darkness.”<sup>24</sup>*

Other Nag Hammadi texts paint a story and image of Mary Magdalene as a most favoured disciple of Jesus, one who had an innate understanding of the teachings being given, and who had an intimate relationship not only with the man, but with the wisdom that was being spoken. The Pistis Sophia records the conversation of the Risen Christ and the Magdalene on the morning after his ascension where she is called “a woman who knew All”. Lash<sup>25</sup> comments that the meeting of Jesus or “Christ” in his divine, superhuman aspect and the mortal woman was a joining of two equals, with the Magdalene representing the divine element in humanity as much as Jesus does. Qualls Corbet<sup>26</sup> speaks of her ability to act as a divine emissary, able to pass on his (Christ’s) message to the common people. *“Like the sacred prostitute, she mediated between the world of the divine and the world of humans.”*

The analogy can further be drawn between the Magdalene and the Kabbalistic Shekinah or the Old Testament Sophia or Wisdom. Mary represents the divine feminine energy joining with that of Christ in the act of creation, which can be termed the “Hieros Gamos” or the sacred marriage between God and Goddess which gave birth to a new era on the planet and a new religion known as Christianity. In a portrayal of the creation myths which underpin every religion and culture, why would the birth of Christianity be any different?

It appears that the Church fathers in casting Mary Magdalene as the repentant prostitute in an effort to undermine her role and the worth of all women in the burgeoning new religion, have done so oblivious to the power and kudos afforded to the sacred prostitutes of old. The Priestess

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<sup>24</sup> Meyer, M. The Gospels of Mary Magdalene (p49)

<sup>25</sup> Lash, J. Mary Magdalene – An Heretical Portrait *Secrets of Mary Magdalene* (p126)

<sup>26</sup> Qualls-Corbet, N. The Sacred Prostitute (p150)

of the temple was able to embody the pure essence of the Goddess as she entered into a sacred sexual exchange with her male counterpart in an act of creation.

The question of whether Mary Magdalene did indeed have a sexual relationship with Christ as portrayed in the movie the Da Vinci Code, will never be known for certain. What we can do is review the Nag Hamadi writings which reveal the important role Mary played as a disciple and favoured companion of Christ and then draw on the archetypes being played out between God and Goddess and the sacred joining of the divine masculine and feminine necessary for the creation myth of all religions.

## Conclusion

Sacred sexuality was once considered an honouring of the goddess and an act that mirrored the fecundity of nature. The masculine principle saw the demise of the earth based religions and made the sexual act something profane and disempowering to women. Monotheism may have promoted the worship of a masculine God, but the sacred feminine has never truly been eradicated. It has existed in esoteric and Gnostic writings and both women and men today are discovering evidence of the teachings of Jesus that acknowledged the feminine in early Christianity. While there is no hard evidence of a sexual relationship existing between Mary Magdalene and Christ, there are archetypes to be acknowledged surrounding the joining of the divine feminine and masculine principle in the sacred marriage or 'Hieros Gamos' necessary for the creation of all religions and which suggest this also occurred within the early Christian church.

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