

Looking for Mary Magdalene: Alternative Pilgrimage and Ritual Creativity at Catholic Shrines in France

Oxford Ritual Studies 8

Anna Fedele

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ZUSAMMENFASSUNG

Anna Fedele ist eine italienische Ethnografin, die unter ‚neuheidnischen‘ Menschen arbeitet, welche sich zur Person der Maria Magdalena hingezogen fühlen. In dieser umfassenden Studie erforscht sie die Glaubensüberzeugungen, Gefühle und Erfahrungen von Pilgern, welche die Stätten mit Altären von Maria Magdalena besuchen. Alle Interviewteilnehmer hatten sich ablehnend zum christlichen Glauben geäußert, entweder weil sie persönliche Ablehnung erlebt oder Schwierigkeiten mit einem patriarchalischen Glauben hatten, der ihrer Ansicht nach Frauen und/oder ‚das Feminine‘ zurückwies. Das Buch befasst sich mit Anliegen, die interessant sein dürften für Missionswissenschaftler und Verfasser von Kirchenliturgie oder von neuen Anbetungsritualen.

SUMMARY

Anna Fedele is an Italian ethnographer working amongst ‘Neo-pagan’ people drawn to the figure of Mary Magdalene. In this comprehensive study, she explores the beliefs, feelings and experiences of pilgrims visiting Marian shrines. All of those interviewed had rejected Christianity, either because of perceived personal rejection, or difficulties in the patriarchal expression of faith, which they saw as rejecting women and/or ‘the feminine’. The book raises interesting issues for missiologists and those within the Church writing liturgy or devising new rituals for worship.

RÉSUMÉ

Anna Fedele est une ethnologue italienne qui s'intéresse aux « néo-païens » attirés par la figure de Marie de Magdala. Dans cette étude fournie, elle examine les croyances, les sentiments et les expériences des pèlerins qui visitent les sanctuaires dédiés à Marie de Magdala. Toutes les personnes qu'elle a interrogées ont rejeté le christianisme, soit parce qu'elles se sont senties personnellement rejetées, soit parce qu'elles ne pouvaient pas accepter les expressions patriarcales de la foi et voyaient celle-ci comme rejetant les femmes ou « le féminin ». Ce livre soulève des questions intéressantes pour les missiologues ou pour ceux qui, au sein de l'Église, rédigent des liturgies ou élaborent de nouveaux rituels pour le culte.

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Anna Fedele is an Italian ethnographer who has spent much of the last decade examining the spiritual practices of a group far outside orthodox Christianity. In this book she describes the motivation, rituals and expe-

riences of three separate groups of pilgrims who are interested in the figure of Mary Magdalene. For native English speakers, her phraseology sometimes seems a little odd, and occasionally incorrect, but this does not detract from the quality of her study.

Whilst declining the term ‘New Age’ as defining their groups, each offered syncretistic beliefs drawn from anthropological, psychological, religious and esoteric sources, which she refers to as ‘Neo-Pagan’. This included influence by sources ranging from ‘*The Da Vinci Code*’ and its fore-runners, through to purported indigenous Latin or Central American religious practices. The majority of pilgrims interviewed or observed were Southern European women, predominantly from Catholic backgrounds, although there were men involved in two of the groups and one group consisted of American and British pilgrims.

Although their Christian heritage shaped the way the groups designed their new rituals (marking menarche or menopause, making offerings to goddesses or Mother Earth), many or all of the pilgrims had rejected Christianity, primarily because of their personal experiences of its patriarchal expression in their own cultures. As a Northern European Baptist, I found it hard to reconcile some of the descriptions of Southern European Catholic Christianity with my own understanding and experience of the Gospel and organised Church.

As an observer, Fedele is very good at maintaining her academic, neutral status, even when involved in a ritual or rite. She gives clear descriptions of the rituals themselves and through reported interviews draws out similarities and differences in the feelings and experiences of the pilgrims, even sometimes, within the same event. Several times, she reiterates that for the participants the exact nature of a ritual was not important, nor the purported historical roots of the ritual; what was valued most highly was the *effectiveness* of the ritual. Indeed, in her follow-up interviews, the report Fedele makes of the changes wrought internally and externally amongst the pilgrims is very dramatic. Many of the pilgrims went home and relatively quickly introduced major changes to their lifestyle, including moving home, changing jobs and ending relationships. One might indeed say that the pilgrimages were effective in motivating change.

This may be challenging to more orthodox Christians; whilst recognising that every person is made in the image of God and therefore has a spiritual life, how are we to explain spiritual experiences that make real differences to lives amongst those actively rejecting the Judaeo-Christian theology of God and pro-actively seeking to embrace the Feminine/Goddess/Mother Earth/Light Energy? One missiological method used by Christians historically has been to invite people from another faith to ‘try’ Christian prayer and practices, suggesting that the Truth behind them is revealed by their effectiveness. Fedele’s report would appear to fatally undermine that approach.

Another challenge to the Church would be how

the gospel is presented and lived out. If these pilgrims (particularly, but not inclusively, the women) reject Christianity because they perceive it as patriarchal and rejecting or actively covering up the Feminine, despite our Holy Book clearly telling us that in Christ 'there is no male and female', how are we to change? Many of the pilgrims had experienced personal rejection by the church, or vicariously through family members. Some had been abused by active church members, others felt condemned because of their sexual practices.

All felt drawn to the figure of Mary Magdalene – who they perceived as sexually liberated, a female equivalent of Christ or as an embodiment of the goddess/Feminine – especially as her role within the Catholic Church has been difficult. At an early stage, the Church conflated most of the Gospel 'Marys' into one figure, which they labelled as Mary Magdalene. Thus she was seen as a demon-possessed prostitute liberated by Jesus from both her possession and prostitution after coming to him in repentance. She was also accepted as the first wit-

ness to the resurrection, but not accepted as an apostle to the apostles. In the twentieth century, the 'Marys' were disentangled and the Catholic Church admitted its mistake. Whilst some theologians, like David Brown, explore positively the theological development made possible by this imagined conflation, the pilgrims Fedele observed saw it as a devaluing and abuse of each individual 'Mary', reflecting a wider rejection of women by the Church. In light of recent decisions by the Anglican Communion in England and Wales, and the ongoing rejection of women in priesthood by both Catholic and Orthodox churches, the perception of misogyny within the church may be hard to counter, but must be.

This book is aimed more at anthropologists and ethnographers than theologians. However, for mis-
siologists and those involved in writing new liturgy or devising new rituals, there is much food for thought and reflection.

Sarah Bingham
Worthing, England

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