

Liberation Theology and Sexuality

Edited by

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Chapter 6

The Prostitutes Also Go into the Kingdom of God: A Queer Reading of Mary of Magdala¹

Martín Hugo Córdova Quero

Truly I tell you, the tax collectors and the prostitutes are going into the kingdom of God ahead of you.

Jesus (Gospel of Matthew 21:31)

On In/Decent Theology/ies

Normal. Correct. Honest. Saint. Orthodox ... Labels of decency.

Abnormal. Incorrect. Dishonest. Sinner. Heterodox ... Labels of indecency.

All of them are binaries; *positive/negative* oppositions that queer theorists call ‘the *either/or* thinking’.² Theology has historically invested huge amounts of energy into fitting the *decent* patterns of societies (supported by the so-called *orthodoxy*) and condemning those that are considered *indecent* (related to those classified as *heterodox*). But the result is almost always fractured discourses that remain unresolved. Mary of Magdala is one of those *unresolved fractures* in the decent discourse of Christianity. As with many human beings³ around the world, in past or present times, she has been historically trapped in binary thinking. She is *either* sinner *or* saint; *either* decent *or* indecent. Binary thinking does not allow for further alternatives.

What underlies those binaries is the abstract ideal of *normalcy*, which also privileges a particular conception of the body, setting up the *differen(ce)t* as *deviant*.⁴ Historically, the Enlightenment developed the concept of *normalcy* through which some *Western* societies have been privileged as *the* measure of normalcy, giving meaning to reality, colonizing and labelling all other cultures and societies.⁵ Sexuality, as well as all other dimensions of human life, has suffered the consequences of this notion of normalcy. Mary of Magdala has usually been seen through these lenses. The process of *normalization* is based on several facets: *labelling, dehumanizing, demonizing,*

*exoticizing, stigmatizing,*⁶ and *silencing.*⁷ Michel Foucault calls this *the normalizing gaze.*⁸

What is at the base of this process of normalization is a hetero-patriarchal binary thinking that sets humanity within a masculine/feminine straight sexuality (*good*), while all other experiences and practices of sexuality (*bad*) are to be condemned in order to maintain its *hegemony.*⁹ In this way the notions of *decency* and *indecent* control the behaviour of human beings in society.

As historically in the case of Mary of Magdala, experiences seen as deviant need to either disappear or be normalized. Language – spoken and unspoken as well as body language – is an important instrument for the process of normalization. Bodies are the *geography* where this normalization is tested by predominant heterosexuality in society.¹⁰ Religion is not far away from this process since it is also based on language. Furthermore, this makes evident that every *theology* is, in fact, *ideology*; ultimately there is no such thing as *innocent theology*. Every theology represents an ideology that permeates its paradigm and its hermeneutical circle, moulding its productions. Language also defines *identities*. Therefore, an *indecent/queer* theology is not innocent at all. It stands for subversiveness in recovering a *body-paradigm* that denounces the incoherencies and the decencies of traditional/classical theology. This implies the disruption of oppressive grammars, which have inscribed bodies in accordance with ideologies that delegitimize gender and the performance of sexualities.¹¹ The implication is to abandon the idea of fixed identities and to consider beings as performances of *be/coming.*¹² Mary has been trapped also in the dynamics of fixed identities. She has been imprisoned.

In her book *Indecent Theology: Sexual Perversions in Gender and Theology*, Marcella Althaus-Reid recovers the issue of language and *subjectivity* in relation to power and uses an original image to find a solution: *women's theology without underwear*. Althaus-Reid relates language to the production of narratives and discourses that are the paradigms for social constructions and which regulate performances of human beings in society, whether sexually, economically or politically. She connects these human productions with the discourses and images we have produced about God, Christ and the Virgin Mary. The main distortion of these narratives and discourses should be done at the level of sexuality and economics; theology has to accept this challenge. This is the core of Althaus-Reid's *Indecent Theology*, as she herself expresses:

[This] paradigm is an indecent paradigm, because it undresses and uncovers sexuality and economy at the same time. Not only do we need an Indecent Theology which can reach the core of theological constructions, insofar as they are rooted in sexual constructions, for the sake of understanding our sexuality, we also need it because theological truths are currencies dispensed and acquired in theological economic markets.¹³

The case for an indecent/queer reading of Mary of Magdala allows us to see different aspects of this personage. Up until now she is trapped in decent readings from binary thinking, which commodify power at the intersections of economic, social and political arenas. We need to *undress* those readings in order to denounce their mechanisms of submission functioning at those intersections.¹⁴ To move beyond the binary thinking is an act of resistance as well as an act of liberation to open up spaces for be/coming.¹⁵ The subversion in this process of uncovering comes from recovering the body and sexuality as two important core elements in a fully Christological/Incarnational theology. In the end, what every reading about Mary of Magdala evidences is the denial of body and sexuality in order to impose on her a normalization that could make her decent.

It is a fact that in reading after reading, Mary of Magdala still remains a mysterious woman. From portrayals in apostolic times and early Christianity, in Scriptures and traditions, through medieval piety and artistic representations in shrines, paintings and plays,¹⁶ up to contemporary portraits in films and literature,¹⁷ she remains a fascinating mystery. I here attempt to dig into that mystery to unveil alternatives to classical readings on Mary, especially since her life has been deliberately occluded and censored throughout the centuries by male-stream Bible reading.¹⁸ The classical Christian tradition and the heterodox writings offer us different pictures of her. Modern feminist readings have brought the issue back as a subject of research, yet certain matters remain unresolved. Although, since the advent of feminist readings, more attention has been drawn to Mary, who really is she? Are the feminist attempts to make her a decent woman another game of hetero-patriarchalism? Jesus said that prostitutes would be amongst the first to enter the Kingdom of God. Could this be applied to her? Can she still remain a saint if she actually was engaged in prostitution?

This chapter, then, seeks to undress these issues of decency/indecency and sainthood/sinfulness/prostitution gathered around the personage of Mary of Magdala. It also emphasizes the thesis offered by Althaus-Reid that every theology needs a sexual deconstruction in order to uncover assumptions of in/decentcy.¹⁹ In this respect, some tools provided by queer theory are useful. In exploring the personage Mary of Magdala from this standpoint, I shall attempt to show how sexuality plays an important part in such a mysterious character. Of course, in queering either past events or personages, we also risk looking at them through anachronic lenses.²⁰ Nonetheless, we need to take the risk in order to unpack the significance of Mary for the Christian faith.

In Search of the Historical Mary

As a mysterious character, Mary of Magdala has always motivated the imagination of popular cultures as well as enlightened scholars. In his recent book *The Da Vinci Code*,²¹ Dan Brown posits a creative plot to introduce her

to modern times: she was the wife of Jesus. Apart from this shocking statement of Brown's creativity, the book also includes murders and conspiracies as well as secret codes, which are clues to find and solve the last mystery of this suspense novel. The astonishing secret, revealed at the end of the book, is related to the last location of the body of Mary of Magdala as well as two millennia of documents that prove the data about her marriage to Jesus and her pregnancy with the heir of Jesus. In the course of the story Harvard symbologist Robert Langdon and French cryptologist Sophie Neveu decipher the information left by the Louvre Museum's curator Jacques Sauniere, who wrote the initial information on his body before being murdered.

The story evolves over centuries of careful dedication to protecting the secret of Mary of Magdala carried on by a secret society of medieval knights called 'the Knight Templars'. The task of the society has been to transfer the body of Mary to France and guarantee their secret until it can be unveiled on the Last Day. Therefore, she stands as the icon for the truth about Jesus and the whole of Christianity. Due to this, the Vatican and Opus Dei conspire not to let that secret be unveiled. Furthermore, they represent orthodox Christianity that fights against pagan cults that worship the Goddess, the feminine deity of nature, of whom Mary is the icon.

Beyond the cobbling together of historical data with theories from biblical and theological research, the value of Brown's story is to provoke the artistic imagination to preserve the mysterious halo around Mary. *The Da Vinci Code* became a bestseller while also arousing suspicion in some people that the information contained in the book could actually be true. We still need to remember the subtitle of the book: *A Novel*. That is precisely what the whole book is, a novel written in a way that can easily be taken as true. Nonetheless, key to the story's success is the clever mix of scholarly research with imagination. But it still does not help answer the question: *Who was Mary of Magdala?* I fear that there is no single answer. Through two millennia, the meagre amount of information that we possess about her has been edited several times, interpreted through different lenses and filtered with particular motifs.

Can we know something about the historical Mary by looking at her place of origin? She is known in the Gospels with the toponym (place name) of her provenance: Magdala. Several scholars have tried to learn more details about this city. The research of Carmen Bernabe Ubieta,²² Marianne Sawicki²³ and Richard A. Horsley²⁴ help us in this section to do so.

Magdala is known in ancient literature by several names: Dalmanutha,²⁵ Magdal Sebayah, Magdal Nunnyah, Magadan²⁶ and Taricheae.²⁷ From recent research we know that this city was at the shore of Gennesaret Lake, about four miles north of Tiberias.²⁸ It was the centre of reunion for rebel Jews in times of occupation under the Roman Empire and a centre for Hasmonean leaders. It was also victim of the most ruthless slaughter and enslavement of thousands of people by Cassius' occupation in 52 BCE.²⁹

Being a Judean was the same as being Hasmonean, a sociopolitic and religious group. The Hasmoneans held political and economic hegemony over the Southern Temple-state. About a century before Jesus' time they imposed that hegemony over the northern territories, taking over Galilee by force from the Seleucid Empire.³⁰ Judeans were not Galileans. Besides, Hasmoneans were nationalists and against Roman occupation; they were opposed to Herodians, who collaborated with the Roman Empire.

The city was on the route for exchange of products between Rome and its colonized territories³¹ and was more important in this capacity than Capernaum. Its economy was based on fishing and agriculture. The excavations of Franciscan archeologists V. Corbo and S. Loffreda between 1971 and 1978 have shown the wealthy state of this city, due to its trade of products with other cities. Some scholars estimate its population at about 15,000 or even 25,000 inhabitants, while others prefer to estimate it as fewer than 10,000 because major cities like Sepphoris and Tiberias (two rival royal capitals) would probably have had a combined population of 15,000.³² Magdala's society was made up mainly of wealthy peasants and landowners, a fact criticized by rabbinic teachers, who saw this as a relaxation of religious commitments. These teachers also saw wealth as the cause of the city's destruction in the third century CE.

Magdala/Taricheae, as well as cities like Sepphoris and Tiberias, were 'typical Hellenistic-Roman urban institutions that made a city a *polis*: courts, theater, palace, colonnaded streets, city walls, markets, archives, bank, amphitheater, aqueduct, stadium'.³³

Given this context, Mary's wealth could have come from different sources. There is no doubt that Mary supported economically the ministry of Jesus, but there is no evidence in the Gospels to tell us where her wealth came from. The Gospel of Luke explains:

... [The women were] Mary, called Magdalene, from whom seven demons had gone out, and Joanna, the wife of Herod's steward Chuza, and Susanna, and many others, who provided for them [Jesus and his disciples] out of their resources.³⁴

In this verse, the Lukan community tells us about the importance of the economic contribution of these women who supported Jesus and all his disciples. They also offer to us a list of wealthy women. The fact that in this list, as well as other lists, Mary of Magdala is mentioned, and always in the first place, indicates her social importance.³⁵

These are the only conclusions we can arrive at by looking at her place of origin and the biblical data together with the information uncovered by modern scholarship. Therefore, what we can say about the historical Mary remains in the territory of academic speculation. A similar process occurs with what I identify as the three portrayals of Mary of Magdala.

Three Different Portrayals of Mary of Magdala

From Sinner to Saint: The Classical Christian Tradition

Traditional theology has portrayed Mary of Magdala as a prostitute, a repented sinner saved by Jesus. Then she appears as the crying woman at the feet of Jesus. Her sinful past was rapidly left aside in order to make a decent and subordinate woman, given the impossibility of erasing her importance for the early Christian communities. We do not know exactly when this became a tradition. According to feminist theologian Mary Thompson, whose research I will follow in this section, the composite of Mary of Magdala with the sinful woman³⁶ was already in place by the fourth century and was fully developed in the sixth century. The first datum can be traced as early as the writing of Ephraim the Syrian (306–373 CE) especially if the phrase, ‘Mary, called Magdalene, from whom seven demons had gone out’,³⁷ is interpreted as a sinful condition.³⁸ Ephraim says:

Mary by the oil showed forth the mystery of his mortality, who by his teaching mortified the concupiscence of her flesh. Thus, the sinful woman by the flood of her tears in full assurance was rewarded with remission of sins from beside his feet...³⁹

Later, Gregory the Great (540–640 CE) enhanced this line of interpretation, completing a more elaborate picture of the sinner Mary. Thompson quotes:

[Mary of Magdala,] [w]ho, at this time with the other Mary, saw the Lord after his resurrection, and drawing near, embraced his feet. Lord, I ask, what hands are these that grasp your feet before my eyes? That woman, who was a sinner in society; those hands, which were stained with evil have touched his feet who is at the Father’s right hand above the angels. Let us consider, if we can, what might be the very heart of that heavenly devotion, and the woman who had been immersed in the depth of the abyss, through her own fault, was so cleansed through grace in a flight of love.⁴⁰

In this quotation Thompson sees the definite debasement for the ongoing classical Christian tradition about Mary in Western Christianity. Neither Thompson nor other feminist theologians can indicate if that was a new argument developed by patristic authors or if they have echoed a tradition already present in popular Christianity, perhaps even originating from apostolic times. The lack of sources in this respect does not allow us to solve this tension. What has reached our times is this notion of Mary, the sinful woman understood as a *prostitute*. Remembered as the crying woman, she became an archetype for those who repent and seek salvation in Jesus.

Therefore, Mary became a decent woman by rejecting her life understood in relation to prostitution. This normalization of Mary from her *sinful* life

into *sainthood* is understood in Christianity as *metanoia* (conversion). In the background, it implies the co-option of Greco-Roman cultures by Judeo-Christian morality. But historians tell us about a contrasting picture between Greco-Roman and Judeo-Christian moralities in relation to prostitution.

In Greece, and later in the Roman Empire, prostitution was a valid institution whose place in society was even legally sanctioned. Judaism, and later Christianity, saw prostitution as an evil condition, morally regrettable. Of course, even in Greece and Rome women prostitutes were different from wives, but the difference was related to their function within the organization of society: it was not a moral distinction. A fact to remember is that modern notions on prostitution, as well as wifehood, cannot be applied anachronistically to Greek or Roman societies. In Roman culture, women in general were considered as unequal to men until the first century CE, when a new morality arose giving wives a status of equality to men in the marriage contract. In other words, women were still unequal but, because of their marriage, were *granted* the privilege to participate in equal status with their husbands,⁴¹ who held the power to do so. Wives conducted some business with the permission of their husbands and, when widowed, they could continue with the business only if the will of their late husbands sanctioned this.

We need to recall that Judeo-Christian morality had not yet permeated the Roman Empire, a situation that would not occur until Christianity became the official religion. Concubines also had a role in Roman society. A man of social status, then, had a variety of contacts with women; a *wife* to procreate children and obtain legal heirs for his patrimony; *concubines* living in the same house, with whom he would also have children; and he would finally enjoy the pleasures of sexuality with *prostitutes*⁴² and *slaves* (both female and male). Prostitutes were very important in the entertainment of parties and banquets. A nobleman would contract them to recite poetry, play the flute and even to discuss philosophy with male guests.⁴³ These women were clever and with some education; some even came from noble families themselves.⁴⁴ While some prostitutes became famous through their participation in the political life of Roman society,⁴⁵ others enjoyed a wealthy lifestyle without the tutelage of a man.

Given this context, Mary, in a city such as Magdala in the midst of the Roman Empire trade network, could have inherited her patrimony either as the widow of an important trader or from working as a prostitute, which was perfectly acceptable in Roman society. Therefore, the question that still remains is: *What if Mary of Magdala was in fact a former prostitute?* Can she still be the first and main witness of the resurrection? It is suspicious that early Christian tradition was able to defeat the strong leadership of Mary by pointing to a moral issue read in a narrow Judeo-Christian view. That reading disempowered her as an apostle, giving her a place seen as appropriate to women: the crying figure pleading for salvation. What underlies this move is an increasing understanding of sexual renunciation as a way to participate in

the new life as a Christian. This is at the bottom of the classical Christian understanding of Mary. She leaves a life dedicated to the exercise of human sexuality and dedicates herself completely to the service of Jesus as a new woman, overcoming corporeal needs. She is accepted into the company of the Kingdom by disembodiment. Thus it was that, as in the case of Mary the mother of Jesus, she became a model for all Christian women. Whether historical or not, Mary's past in prostitution made her vulnerable to a different bondage after her *conversion*: she was required to be controlled and normalized as a decent woman. Surely through that discursive technology she would become an icon for all Christian women.

What is important to acknowledge is that, in its origins, this understanding came just at the same time that Roman society was changing to a new paradigm of morality and ethics, very similar to Stoic and Christian traditions.⁴⁶ The understanding of Mary in the sixth century would not be possible without this development in the history of Roman culture and society, as well as its interrelation with the increasing status of Christianity. Christian theologians used her as an icon to fight social customs deeply rooted in Greek and Roman societies. By proposing her conversion, Mary came to a life of *holiness* that embraced a strong *sexual discipline*. In doing this the classical Christian tradition, paradoxically, came closer to the patterns of sexual renunciation and denial of the body required by heterodox writings.

From Sinful Woman to Virtuous Leader: Heterodox Writings

Though heterodox writings offer differing visions of Mary of Magdala, it is possible to define a profile distinct from that presented in the classical Christian tradition. If the traditional Mary is the crying woman pleading for mercy at the feet of Jesus, the heterodox traditions portray her as a virtuous leader and apostle, especially in the Gnostic writings.⁴⁷ Her image in the heterodox writings is also underlined by two main understandings of the submission of body and sexuality basically coming from two distinct Gnostic groups: a) an implicit sexual renunciation, manifested especially in the case of the Encratites;⁴⁸ and b) the absorption of the female into the masculine, especially as manifested in Valentinian circles.⁴⁹ Although too much effort has been expended either to avoid or to overemphasize the romantic liaison between Mary of Magdala and Jesus, the two understandings previously mentioned are the main – but not the only – manifestations of heterodox movements.

The *Gospel of Mary* suggests that Mary of Magdala had received from Jesus teachings that the rest of the disciples had not. The Gospel is a dialogue between some of the disciples (Peter, Andrew and Levi) and Mary of Magdala. The tension between Mary of Magdala and Peter is as notorious as that found in the heterodox writings. After challenging the validity of Mary's teachings, Peter is confronted by Levi, who defends Mary. He says:

Peter you have always been hot tempered. Now I see you contending against the woman like the adversaries. But if the Savior made her worthy, who are you indeed to reject her? Surely the Savior knows her very well. That is why He loved her more than us. Rather let us be ashamed and put on the perfect Man [*andros*], and separate as He commanded us and preach the gospel, not laying down any other rule or other law beyond what the Savior said.⁵⁰

It is clear in this quotation that Mary of Magdala is very important among the apostles, especially since she teaches them the words of Jesus. Now she was seen as a leader through basically embracing the understandings of sexuality that the heterodox communities were also following. I will follow Brown for this section.

Sexual renunciation: undoing the works of women According to Brown, the Encratites⁵¹ saw sexuality as something negative. They believed that the victory of Christ over death could be complete when sexuality has ceased.⁵² The major expression of halting sexuality was to remain single and to avoid procreation. The phrase ‘to stop the works of women’, or stopping procreation, illustrates the ideas of the Encratites of bringing the ‘present age’ to an end. To cease in procreating would stop the course of humanity. This was seen as the possibility to bring the age of Christ or Kingdom to manifestation.⁵³

The *Dialog of the Savior* reflects this idea:

The Lord said, ‘Pray in the place where there is no woman.’

Matthew said, ‘Pray in the place where there is no woman,’ he tells us, meaning ‘*Destroy the works of womanhood, not because there is any other manner of birth, but because they will cease giving birth.*’

Mary said, ‘They will never be obliterated.’

The Lord said, ‘Who knows that they will not dissolve and . . . [2 lines missing]?’

Judas said to Matthew, ‘*The works of womanhood will dissolve [. . .] the governors will [. . .]. Thus will we become prepared for them.*’⁵⁴

In this quotation all the problematic about body and sexuality in the Encratite theology was summed up. The author is right, there is no other way of giving birth than through the womb of woman. But in order to procreate, the action is necessary, which, for the Encratites, enforced the bondage of Christianity to this present age and delayed the coming of the age of Christ.

The solution was to cease sexual activity, to renounce it in order to attain salvation. Clement of Alexandria invoked the same idea in the words of Jesus according to the Encratites: ‘They say that the Savior himself said: “I came to undo the works of women,” meaning by this “female,” sexual desire, and by “work,” birth and corruption of death.’⁵⁵

Regarding the *Dialog of the Savior* and analysing the case of Mary of Magdala in relation to sexuality, Elaine Pagels summarizes:

[...] [T]he target is not woman, but the power of sexuality ... Mary Magdalene, praised as 'the woman who knew the All,' stands among three disciples who receive Jesus' commands. She, along with Judas and Matthew rejects the 'works of femaleness' that is, apparently, the activities of intercourse and procreation.⁵⁶

Here lay the most important triumph of Encratite theology, to put this idea in the mouth of Jesus and of Mary of Magdala. That is the most powerful legitimation. For Mary, it implied the co-option into a system that denied not only her sexuality but also her body.

Absorption of the female into the male: the androgynous The second understanding about the submission of the body and sexuality comes from the absorption of the female into the male. In these writings women enter a process through which they become *virtuous*. The Gospel of Thomas is notorious regarding this. Peter is regretting that Mary is present among the apostles because she is a woman. Jesus defends her by replying to Peter:

Simon Peter said to them, 'Let Mary leave us, for women are not worthy of life.' Jesus said, 'I myself shall lead her *in order to make her male, so that she too may become a living spirit resembling you males*. For every woman who will make herself male will enter the Kingdom of Heaven.'⁵⁷

The term 'virtuous' has in its root in *vir* [male]. To say that a woman has to be made male is a way to affirm that that woman has transcended the limits of her sex.⁵⁸ Diana Rocco Tedesco explains that from the first to the fifth centuries this *vir* implicitly carried the notion of *virilization* of women. According to historians and theologians, the Gospel of Thomas is not saying *masculinization* but virilization, that is returning and transcending her own sex in order to return to the *androgynous*.⁵⁹ What is judged to be bad is the dualism, the separation between men and women; the ideal is the return to the androgynous being, which is possible through the process of virilization. The kingdom of dualism and separation was not good; it was necessary to reunite the opposites.⁶⁰ The female has to be absorbed by the male and, in that process, both become one, a one that is androgynous.

If Rocco Tedesco is correct and the virilization, or *androgynization*, of women and men is a way to escape dualism, it could be possible to see this process as a way of blurring the distinction between them and opening up a space for fluidity in human sexuality. Nonetheless, the line between the co-option of the female by the male, and normalizing the female in the image of an androgynous being that resembles very much the male, is very labile.

What is important to remember is that in the heterodox writings, Mary appears as the apostle among the apostles, almost resembling Jesus. Why does she almost always appear as the counterpart of the male Jesus or of the male apostles? Rocco Tedesco offers an answer to this. She brings in the

concept of *sizigia*,⁶¹ or partnership, coming from Valentinian philosophy, in order to explain why Mary is brought into these writings in relation to Jesus, especially through the seeking of deep knowledge. Complementarity with Jesus is at the basis of the election of Mary of Magdala.⁶² It cannot be denied that a relationship between her and Jesus of Nazareth already existed. According to the Gospels, she was part of the group of women who supported Jesus in his ministry and she was among the women who visited the empty tomb on the day of Jesus' resurrection. She was an important personage in the Gospels. Because of that relationship, heterodox theologians were led to see the position with different eyes: the functions of the androgyne archetype were underlined in order to transcend the separation between Mary (female) and Jesus (male), to reach the full knowledge of the divine through their relationship, which is the emergence of the androgynous. Brown accords with this when he states that:

Gnostic circles treasured those incidents in the Gospels that had described the close relations of Christ with the women of His circle, and most especially Mary Magdalen [*sic.*] For a second-century writer, such anecdotes were an image of the sweet and irresistible absorption of the woman, the perpetual inferior other, into her guiding principle, the male.⁶³

Filoramo, in his explanation of the androgyne archetype, argues similarly in relation to the Divine: the 'contemplation of the male principle in the "female" mirror'.⁶⁴ At the same time, Filoramo concludes that this process is a result of patriarchalist mentality:

The female function is essentially generative, and generation inevitably means a progressive ontological impoverishment. Therefore the female element is the cause, however indirect, of the creation of the world and of humankind. By itself, however, it is incapable of aspiring to the heights. The process of salvation, in this sense, is essentially male; a process, as it were, of masculinization. The final equilibrium re-established in the bosom of the archetypal Androgyne will therefore be an equilibrium in which the male is destined to triumph. Indeed, this was inevitable in a society still profoundly patriarchal, which had not experienced the boldness of modern feminism.⁶⁵

Therefore, according to this statement, the salvation of Mary of Magdala is based on a maleness act; she is, as every woman in the eyes of Valentinian theology, destined to be absorbed by maleness in order to reach the perfect state of androgyny.

In summary, underlying both understandings is what queer theory denounces as the mechanisms of decency, intent on denying the body and sexuality. Mary, praised as a prominent leader, had to scarify her sexuality in order to be counted as the main apostle among the apostles. Disembodying herself even more by renouncing her gender, she was normalized.

Paradoxically, some centuries later, feminist readings will require the same from Mary in order to free her from hetero-patriarchal bondage.

From Indecent to Decent: The Feminist Reading

Feminist theologians also deny Mary of Magdala's body and her sexuality. They completely reject her sinful past ascribed to her by classical Christian tradition. Instead, they bring forward the possible connection of Mary with the trade between the rich inhabitants of Magdala and other cities in the Roman Empire. Furthermore, feminist theologians state that Mary's ancestry should be sought within the Hasmonean leaders in the community of Magdala. In this sense, the economic and social independence of this woman is verified by the fact that the Gospels portray Mary as known by her city of origin and not by any man who ruled over her, for example as Joanna the wife of Chuza or Mary the wife of Clopas. If Mary was a trader in Mediterranean society in the times of Jesus,⁶⁶ her ability for leadership should be well recognized by the Christian community. This socioeconomic status would allow her – as well as other aristocratic women who followed Jesus – to protect him from rivals as well as support his ministry economically. As has previously been mentioned, the Gospel of Luke offers this datum as the important aspect of Mary among the disciples who follow Jesus.

In following this line of thought offered by feminist readings, the traditional understanding of Mary as a converted prostitute fails and becomes unsustainable, although some of the explanations that feminist scholars argue in order to overcome this interpretation fall short in apprehending its complexity.⁶⁷ The fact that the classical Christian tradition still considers as Mary nothing other than a repentant prostitute obscures and occludes the fact that she could have been recognized as a prominent disciple and leader of the early Christian community. According to feminist theologians, the vision of Mary as a prostitute was the male projection over her rather than the Gospels' message. The Gospel of John reveals another understanding of her. John pays attention to her as the first witness of the resurrection, especially in the pericope of 20:11–18 known as *The Christophany to Mary of Magdala*.

Nonetheless, what feminist theologians clearly avoid is the sexual aspect of Mary. The negotiations of power and sexuality lead to a very uneven result: in order to be recognized as an apostle, the personage Mary of Magdala has to sacrifice her sexuality. The recognition from feminist theologians of her as a female leader does not necessarily mean that she is *sexualized* as a leader. Furthermore, it is possible to do a feminist reading of her in a way that is completely functional along the hetero-patriarchal matrix. Again, at the basis of this process language remains as a very important mechanism in producing this gap; what is *said* and what is *not-being-said* because of the former *saying* moulds identities and affects gender and performances of sexuality. Mary is the best example in this respect because, while some feminist theologians

emphasize her as apostle, leader, prophet, or pastor, they end up denying her sexuality by imposing onto her those categories traditionally understood as characteristic of male offices. In other words, in making her perfectly suitable to male structures, she becomes an icon for all women and men to fit suitably into hetero-patriarchal understandings of performances, whether these might be ecclesiastical ministry or gender and sexuality. This has indeed non-innocent consequences: in gaining a status of equality for Mary in the midst of a male world implies the need to disembody and desexualize the female Mary. Paradoxically, she is saved as a servant of God by being *assumed* (co-opted) by maleness. In this sense, this type of feminist reading functions in ways astonishingly similar to those of the heterodox readings of nineteen centuries ago. If this is the case, we need to acknowledge that some feminist readings have already internalized hetero-patriarchalism and have begun to operate in that matrix, reinforcing and reiterating its mandates.⁶⁸

The Gospel of John seems to value Mary in a prominent way. The placing of Mary as the first witness of the risen Christ situates her as the main leader in the disciples' band after the departure of Jesus. This is also present in verses 1–2 where John tells us about Mary alone visiting the tomb. She is usually mentioned as a member of a group of women who went to the tomb of Jesus to anoint him on the first day of the week and found it empty. But, in the Gospel of John, only Mary of Magdala goes to the tomb and discovers it empty. This is a notorious difference with the Synoptic Gospels and anticipates the theological construction of the pericope of 11–18 related to the whole purpose of the Gospel: seeking and discovering a Christ who is raised.

John's is the only Gospel that conveys a personal Christophany to Mary, and tells us about it in a narrative that reconstructs Old Testament narratives. It is a literary and theological reconstruction especially of the Song of Songs 3:1–4. If this is true, the Christophany of Mary allows us to read it from a sexual perspective, a fact that most feminist readings set aside.⁶⁹ It is also evident that the way John tells us about the episodes has something to do with the way that early Christian communities have discovered the risen Christ.

From all the narratives about the Christophanies, the one related to Mary is the most important. Why is the witness of the risen Christ so important for the Christian tradition? Perhaps Saint Paul, who wrote his letters some time before the oral traditions of the Gospels were written down, gives us a clue: 'If Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is vain, and your faith also is vain.'⁷⁰ Therefore, Mary is responsible, in John's Gospel tradition, for the credibility of the whole of the Christian faith.

Nonetheless, in reading the Christophany to Mary from a sexual perspective, our analysis becomes difficult for Christianity, and this applies also to some feminist readings, because it implies the consideration of human erotic feelings present between Jesus and Mary. In some Gnostic Gospels, such as the Gospel of Mary, and the Gospel of Philip, this line of interpretation could be found.⁷¹ The orthodox party in the Church of the

second century condemned those interpretations openly, but it never disappeared in heterodox interpretations at different times throughout Christian history. Althaus-Reid is, perhaps, one of the first theologians to recognize this openly. Using her category of *indecent theology*, we might wonder, for example, if a queer person could save humanity, or even, if the person who saves humanity – Jesus – could be a queer person as well? This question is at the core of our analysis, because traditional theology is willing to recognize the full humanity of Jesus but not to sexualize that humanity. The topic becomes even more difficult if we go further with the argument and ask what would happen if Mary were a lesbian, or Jesus bisexual, or transgender or intersexual. Can Jesus, the Trinity, or Mary the Virgin, embrace those genders and sexual experiences? Furthermore, what if in fact Mary of Magdala was a prostitute? Is she then less of a witness of the risen Christ? Certainly, as we have seen earlier in this article, she was destined for normalization in order to subordinate her to the power of Peter, and later, to the orthodox party.

We can agree with feminist theologians that the main value of this Christophanic event resides in the fact that Mary is the first witness of that event, in other words, she can corroborate that the core of the Gospel is true. But we also need to acknowledge that if the pericope of John 20:11–18 functions as a *midrash* of Song of Songs 4:1–4, then sexuality unavoidably comes on board as one of the primary layers of the text. By denying or occluding this element, both classical Christian tradition and feminist readings function according to the same pattern, making Mary a decent woman. On the one hand, the classical Christian tradition erased the notion of Mary of Magdala as the first witness of the resurrection and transferred that privilege to Peter, who then became the first apostle among the apostles. For her the classical Christian tradition reserved the place of a repentant sinner woman who cries at the feet of Jesus for her salvation. In becoming decent, she was relegated to a subordinate position. On the other hand, by denying her attributed past or a sexual reading of the Christophany of John's Gospel, some feminist readings inscribed Mary in a patriarchal pattern of normality that is acceptable to traditional Christian morality. In other words, through these decent readings, she has been perfectly co-opted by hetero-patriarchalism and in return she has recovered the recognition of her leadership. But, still remaining subordinate, she thus continues to be an icon for hetero-patriarchal oppression.

On Saints and Prostitutes

What does all this information about Mary of Magdala mean in the context of Argentina? Her case is symptomatic of the daily life experience of millions of human beings in Argentina, as well as in Latin America and the rest of the world. She functions as an archetype for binary thinking which labels and

classifies human beings. As already noted, language used to label human beings is tied to mechanisms of oppression. It reiterates the matrix of heteropatriarchal oppression. Therefore, the binary *saint/prostitute* is still present overtly and covertly in different technologies of discourse. These technologies of discourse set up politics that condition the very existence of human beings, whether through legal systems or through cultural/societal traditions. Theology is part of this process. As we have seen in the case of Mary, the basic process was to deny her body and sexuality in order to co-opt her as an archetype for decency, an understanding that could be used as a model to keep women in *her place* – that is, subordinate to males. Nonetheless, the ideology behind those theological understandings has not been overcome, and it continues to affect the lives of human beings.

In/decency is a dangerous binary still reiterated in Argentina. It represents the way through which Argentinean *machos* see women. A decent woman is the one who is mother, sister or wife; an indecent woman is one who does not embrace these categories of decency. As we know, Argentina is a mainly Roman Catholic country. The presence of other Christian confessions (mainstream and evangelical Protestant, Anglican/Episcopal, and Orthodox) as well as other religions (Buddhism, Islam, Judaism and Hinduism, among others) is represented among the population, but the majority still remain in the hands of Roman Catholicism.

When it comes to sexuality, we find that prostitution has been a prominent issue in Argentina since the times of the foundation of the country.⁷² Christianity and other religions in Argentina have been witnesses of this social situation, but they have never worried about the causes of it. There are no official pronouncements by churches, nor are there demonstrations or movements to collect signatures for a change in legislation which could help people who are involved in prostitution, not least those who against their will have been drawn into becoming slaves in this growing market. Rather, there has been a concentration on moral statements, condemning women and men to become outcasts subject to double oppression, socioeconomic and religious. In relation to women, this double condemnation has also been used to keep them under patriarchal control, forcing them to marry in order to be considered *respectable*, something that we have already seen in the case of Mary of Magdala.⁷³ Looking back to history in Argentina, it is clear that the binary of in/decency embraced the categories prostitute and wife, something that is still in place today. In this respect Donna J. Guy says:

Argentina[’s] laws . . . focused upon prostitutes and wives. As women whose sexual practices and relationships represented each other’s antithesis, these two groups jointly defined the parameters of female citizenship in modern Argentina. Prostitutes determined the limits of socially-acceptable female sexual behavior so that self-identified female prostitutes lost the right to move freely within cities, work without medical inspection, and live wherever they pleased. In contrast wives,

by law and religion sworn to remain sexually faithful, enjoyed all those privileges taken from prostitutes though they still suffered other civil restrictions.⁷⁴

In other words, the lives of prostitutes vanished under moral codes, and this still happens today.

Some years ago I was appointed by an ecumenical organization to act as its representative on a commission run by the Government of the City of Buenos Aires for the World AIDS Day commemoration. The task of the commission was to plan activities, including the distribution of red ribbons to government and religious organizations, as well as NGOs (non-governmental organizations). Specifically, we were to create a triptych signed by the organizations working on the topic. We gathered several times for discussions regarding the activities, and we designated a special task force for the basic redaction of the triptych. We had a plenary session for the discussion of the draft. We got to the point regarding the use of condoms, when a woman raised her hand and told us that the police of the City of Buenos Aires were incarcerating women and accusing them of being prostitutes if they found condoms in their purses. That denunciation made me feel very concerned about the situation of these women, and I asked the plenary session to include a paragraph in the document that explicitly stated that the use and possession of condoms was not a *privilege* but a *tool* that a person has for the protection of their own health. The woman looked at me in surprise, and then she asked which organization I represented. I told her that it was an ecumenical/religious organization. I asked her who she was and which organization she was representing. To my surprise, she replied, 'I am the president of the National Union of Sex Workers of Argentina,⁷⁵ and I never thought that churches were interested in our well-being.' I think that this struck me more than my previous reply to her. It was surprising for her that a religious person like myself would be worried about sex workers and their health or safety. But I was surprised that she was shocked because she never thought that the churches would be interested in her as a *person* beyond what she did for a living.

Reflecting on the example above, we need to look at the categorization of these women. The National Union of Sex Workers of Argentina (AMMAR) was aided since its foundation by the pastoral work of an ordained female minister and a female lay-leader from a Protestant church who worked in solidarity with them, despite the critiques and retaliations from their denomination. AMMAR was also recognized as a member of the Argentine Workers Unions Confederation (CTA),⁷⁶ and they have an office at CTA headquarters. Churches did not recognize their pastoral work. Instead, they tried to ex-communicate those female leaders for responding with love and commitment to those who needed help in the midst of their struggles, the prostitutes.

The story about the use of condoms and these prostitutes provides evidence of the need for a theology that stands up when people feel like outcasts, not

only from society but also from Christianity. We need a theology that is not afraid of *indecencies*. We are not talking about acknowledging prostitution when it makes human beings objects and colonizes their lives. Even members of AMMAR struggle to make the broader society understand this.⁷⁷ The striking aspect of this story is the unwillingness of the churches to recognize the image of the Trinitarian God in somebody who has been led into prostitution by social and economic realities or conditions. It is possible to advocate the case of poor people, even fight their cause within some churches, but when it comes to discussing these difficult issues, the silence in most churches in Argentina is suspiciously deafening. As in the case of Mary of Magdala, it is difficult for prostitutes in Argentina to find a place in the normalized discourse of traditional Christianity.

At the same time, despite the fact that two actively Christian women were working closely with AMMAR as a result of their gospel response to human beings, the story shows that Argentinian churches are far from *disrupting* and *distorting* of the order established by hetero-patriarchalism. This is not only present in the canonical and internal regulations of the Christian churches as *institutions*, but also shows how dependent those churches are on prejudices already present both in the broader secular culture and in the legal system.

The action of embracing different experiences of gender and performances of sexualities situates us in a liminal space, a space of marginalization as well as resistance. As with the term 'queer', originally used as a degrading word, now been recovered as a word of resistance, a counter-language is needed to resist and distort the order of traditional/decent theology/ies. The radical philosopher, bell hooks, relates language and spatiality to recover the margins as a place for resistance against colonization:

Understanding marginality as a position and place of resistance is crucial for oppressed, exploited, colonized people. If we only view the margin as a sign marking despair, a deep nihilism penetrates in a destructive way the very ground of our being. It is there in that space of collective despair that one's creativity, one's imagination is at risk, there that one's mind is fully colonized, there that the freedom one longs for is lost. Truly the mind that resists colonization struggles for freedom of expression. The struggle may not even begin with the colonizer; it may begin within one's segregated, colonized community and family. So I want to note that I am not trying to romantically re-inscribe the notion of that space of marginality where the oppressed live apart from their oppressors as 'pure.' I want to say that these margins have been both sites of repression and sites of resistance. And since we are well able to name the nature of that repression, we know better the margin as a site of deprivation. We are more silent when it comes to speaking of the margin as a site of resistance. We are more often silenced when it comes to speaking of the margin as a site of resistance.⁷⁸

This position of marginality as a space of resistance is determined by language. As I have previously said, language is a very important instrument

for colonial hetero-patriarchalism in maintaining its hegemony, mainly through the process of labelling. Labels degrade differences in gender and performances of sexualities. Sometimes those experiences are lived not only through the psychological violence that the process of labelling encourages, but also through physical violence. These words set up boundaries as well as building binaries (as well as providing the foundation in society for oppressive laws and cultural and religious practices) that confine people's sexual experiences in strongly policed categories. The results are categories that function within the logic of the *either/or* binary thought such as *good/bad*, *right/wrong* and *correct/incorrect*. In mapping different sexual orientations as positive/negative binaries, there is no room for those elements that do not fit into the binaries. The result is either exclusion or *normalization*, as has been historically the case of Mary of Magdala. Real people in Argentina – prostitutes, single mothers, GLBTIQ folks, non-*machista* males – face the same destiny every day.

As I have said before, the process of labelling acts in different guises, *silencing* being one of the most insidious ways, since it makes people *invisible*. For centuries, because of her *sinful past*, Mary of Magdala was silenced as the witness of the risen Christ. In the same way, today's Christianity seeks to silence people with experiences of gender and performances of sexualities that do not fit into the normalized understanding of the body and sexuality as regulated by Christian morality. The result is that there are people in many churches who are invisible and oppressed. They are told to keep silent about their rights and needs, in society as well as in the churches. But it is not only people with different gender or different performances of sexualities who have been made invisible, ordinary, decent women who speak out against the oppression they have experienced go unheard, especially when they are told by clergy to go back to their abusive husbands and maintain a marriage that enslaves them. And beyond this we have not even begun to comment on how many children are not baptized because the sin of their mothers is to be a single parent or a prostitute, as if the child should be condemned in the same way that her/his mother is condemned by hetero-patriarchal Christian morality. It is that morality that has co-opted a particular interpretation of Mary of Magdala and Mary the mother of the Lord in order to rule over people, especially women.

Therefore Mary has been historically used not only as an icon for pleading mercy at the feet of Jesus, but at the same time, as a model of subordination for everyone who defies the dictums of traditional Christian morality. They have to either accommodate themselves to an order created by Christianity and moral codes based on particular interpretations of the teachings of Jesus or leave the communities of faith to live as spiritual outcasts. Normalization, usually read as *conversion*, has created situations of oppression and occlusion by imposing on the shoulders of people whose sexuality differs from the dictums of classical theology a way of life that is exogenous to them.

Conclusion

By examining the case of Mary of Magdala, I have attempted to show how the body and sexuality have played an important part in the denial of her leadership as well as her historical function as an icon for decency and normalization of people. The search for the historical Mary is an enterprise hard to achieve due to centuries of occlusion towards her persona. What we can say about her, based on biblical or archaeological data, is minimal and skewed by the lenses through which that reading is made. Therefore the different understandings of Mary are based on academic speculation. By examining the three – but not exclusive – understandings of Mary, we saw how her body and sexuality have been denied over the centuries in order to replace them with a character that functions for different purposes. Paradoxically, those readings carry the assumption of Mary as a modelling instrument for normalization/oppression of people. As I have explored in the last section of this article, this affects the life of people today in Argentinian society.

Language has played an important role in this process, enhancing and reiterating the oppression of people at different levels. A counter-language that could transform those oppressions into real and concrete freedom is necessary in Latin American theology/ies. This would involve going back to the roots of Latin America Liberation Theology, according to which the task of theology is ‘to transform the world’.⁷⁹ Perhaps this transformation should begin by embracing God in creational reality beyond our logics of normalization and oppression. Boff sees the core of this in the action of the Trinity as the ‘inspiration for human society’.⁸⁰ Argentinean society is learning to embrace diversity, but churches are making the process harder, based on a fear of abandoning a morality that has oppressed people for centuries. Christian churches should re-explore their theology/ies and embrace new horizons in the same spirit that Jesus embraced the wholeness of human beings.

Gustavo Gutiérrez points to this when affirming that the *utopia* of building community as a just communion of sisters and brothers becomes the goal for the transformation of the world in doing justice through economic, social and political liberation.⁸¹ In order to achieve part of this utopia, the recovery of the person of Mary of Magdala as a counter-icon could be a means by which Christianity could embrace people whose gender and performances of sexualities disrupt and distort the assumptions of normalization carried out through centuries by classical theology. In doing this, Latin American Liberation Theology/ies would move towards the recovery of a truly Incarnational theology. A dialogue with indecent/queer theology/ies is extremely necessary. The path that lies before us is to liberate Mary from the prison of oppressive hetero-patriarchal readings. In this way it would be possible for her witness to become guidance towards freedom for those in Argentinean society who are outcasts and excluded because of their gender or

performances of sexuality. In doing this we will walk towards the encounter of the new life fully manifested in the risen Christ.

Notes

- 1 I am very grateful to Gary Smith for editing early drafts of this paper. Also the Rev. Dr Charles Buck, Dr Ibrahim Abdurrahman Farajaje, Cristina Conti, Dr Althaus-Reid, Dr Diana Rocco Tedesco and Thom Longino for their support.
- 2 Queer theorists denounce, ‘the *either/or* thinking’ or ‘binary thinking’ as the *inner logic* of the heterosexual system. (See Althaus-Reid (2000), 13.) Ibrahim Abdurrahman Farajaje goes beyond the gender binary – heterosexuality/homosexuality – and explores the intersections of gender, class and ethnicity where binary thinking also plays an important role. Therefore, he points out: ‘Now either-or thinking erases millions and millions of people. It sets up mixed-heritage or multiracial people to have to make the choice to identify with only one group as opposed to being able to define ourselves as we choose, acknowledging our place within the people-of-color communities. So now some mixed-heritage people begin to challenge a purely black-or-white way of seeing race’ (Farajaje, 2000: 17). Sexuality is but one of the multiple layers where the *either/or* thinking expresses.
- 3 I will use the terms *humanity* and *human beings* not in the sense of women and men in the biological sense, but in the variety of experiences of sexuality and gender performances: heterosexuals, bisexuals, gays, lesbians, transgender, and intersex people. To make this list also presents us with a big problem: the *liberal list* or the process of naming the *differences* and making of those *differences* a list of categories. This carries the risk of marginalizing people that do not fit into those new categories. Being conscious of this risk, I believe that it is important to take into account this effort of queer theory to demystify the binary women/men as well as the *liberal list*. Therefore, this list, as well as the acronym GLBTTQI, is provisional.
- 4 In this regard, L. Davis points out that the notion of *deviancy* comes from Sir Francis Galton who made some revisions to the notion of *normalcy* as an statistical (Davis, 1997: 17). He also offers a history of this notion of body *normalcy*. He recognizes that Adolphe Quetelet (1796–1847), a French statistician, is considered the father of modern conception on *norm* or *average*. He developed this concept after his application of the astronomic ‘law of error’ to ‘the distribution of human features such as height and weight’. From his studies, he developed the idea of the *average man* [*l’homme moyen*] as the abstract human through which the middle way of life of all humanity have to be measured by. Furthermore, it was desirable to become like this ‘average man.’ (See *ibid.*, 11–12.)
- 5 The Eurocentric understanding of humanity, sexuality and gender performances that has colonized different cultures marks this. *Eurocentricism* is a process through which Europe labelled itself as *civilization*, and the rest of the world was labelled as *barbaric*. Ella Shohat and Robert Stam say, ‘Eurocentrism sanitizes Western history while patronizing and even demonizing the non-West; it thinks of itself in terms of its noblest achievements – science, progress, humanism – but of

the non-West in terms of its deficiencies, real or imagined' (Shohat and Stam, 1995: 3). When we look at the past whether events or personages like Mary of Magdala, this constitutes part of the lenses through which our reading of that past is made. Queer theory seeks to *disrupt* those readings by using new tools in order to develop new readings.

- 6 For a detailed analysis of normalization as the stigmatization of deviancy, see the book of Goffman (1986).
- 7 *Silencing* is a way of not recognizing *the other/s* as individual/s and, therefore, to make them *invisible*. In his book *Outspeak*, S. O'Connell analyses this topic of language and violence taking into account the work of Paul Ricoeur, Judith Butler, Jacques Derrida and Emmanuel Levinas, among others. O'Connell chooses to read language as violence in order to resist its oppression (O'Connell, 2001: 148). The combination of language and power carries out the seeds of all sorts of violence when the interlocutor is disqualified as such. *Authoritarianism* is the most common form, but not the only one. Experiences of beating and rape are, in some cases, the continuation of verbal offences. But there are other kinds of violence like the privation of food or shelter, or even the lack of job or friendly/familial relationships. In order to be treated as *equal*, one needs to *be recognized as equal*. This implies a grade of respect necessary to recognize *the other/s* as individual/s and not as object/s (which the process of labelling does), as mere abstractions.
- 8 Michel Foucault in *Discipline and Punish* analyses the idea of this *normalizing gaze* as follows: 'In short, the art of punishing, in the régime of disciplinary power, is aimed neither at expiation, nor even precisely repression. It brings five quite distinct operations into play: [1] it refers individual actions to a whole that is at once a field of comparison, a space of differentiation and the principle of a rule to be followed. [2] It differentiates individuals from one another, in terms of the following overall rule: that the rule be made to function as a minimal threshold, as an average to be respected or as an optimum towards which one must move. [3] It measures in quantitative terms and hierarchizes in terms of value the abilities, the level, the "nature" of individuals. [4] It introduces, through this "value-giving" measure, the constraint of a conformity that must be achieved. [5] Lastly, it traces the limit that will define difference in relation to all other differences, the external frontier of the abnormal (the "shameful" class of the Ecole Militaire). The perpetual penalty that traverses all points and supervises every instant in the disciplinary institutions compares, differentiates, hierarchizes, homogenizes, excludes. In short, it normalizes' (Foucault, 1977: 182–183).
- 9 The contribution of Gayle Rubin regarding this *good/bad* binary of sexuality is very important. She denounces a whole sexual value system determined by the supremacy of white middle-class heterosexuality (Rubin, 1993: 13–14).
- 10 Butler described this as follows: '[...] neither grammar nor style are politically neutral. Learning the rules that govern intelligible speech is an inculcation into normalized language, where the price of not conforming is the loss of intelligibility itself' (Butler, 1999: xviii).
- 11 Butler points out: 'If gender itself is naturalized through grammatical norms, as Monique Wittig has argued, then the alteration of gender at the most fundamental epistemic level will be conducted, in part, through contesting the grammar in which gender is given' (Butler, 1999: xix).

- 12 I take this idea from the work of Judith Butler, especially in her work *The Psychic Life of Power*. There she analyses the connection between language and its power to name and fixed identities that get *ad-eternum* connecting to whoever formerly pronounced the naming of that identity (Butler, 1997: 110–111).
- 13 Cf. Althaus-Reid (2000), p. 19.
- 14 I take this notion from Ibrahim Abdurrahman Farajaje when he speaks about class, gender and ethnicity: ‘Queer-in-intersection is where we acknowledge that race and class and gender and sexuality and spirituality and embodiment are not monolithic, distinct categories, where we as queers can see notions of race that must include an understanding of the elements of class, gender, sexuality, geography, embodiment, spirituality, that go into the shaping of notions of race, how race and gender and sexuality and geography and embodiment and spirituality go into the shaping of notions of class, how race and sexuality and geography and embodiment and spirituality are factors and facets of the shaping of gender’ (Farajaje, 2000: 20–21).
- 15 In this respect, Farajaje points out: ‘One of the greatest acts of resistance and decolonization is to move beyond binary thinking, race and gender, invested with particular meanings, are categories created by human beings – men, to be specific – to support and reinforce economic and social power’ (ibid., 17).
- 16 One of the most famous plays about Mary of Magdala is Digby’s *Mary Magdalene*. Theresa Coletti offers an exhaustive analysis of this play in relation to its medieval context. See Coletti (2001), pp. 337–378.
- 17 See Norman Jewison’s *Jesus Christ Superstar* (1973) or Martin Scorsese’s *The Last Temptation of Christ* (1988).
- 18 The fact that Mary of Magdala is the first witness of the risen Christ cannot be ignored. Perhaps the Apostle Paul makes the most remarkable and earliest occlusion of her as the first witness of the risen Christ in the way he describes the events of the resurrection: ‘... he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve. Then he appeared to more than five hundred brothers at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have died. Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles. Last of all ... he appeared also to me’ (1 Co. 15:5–8). There is neither mention of Mary of Magdala nor of any other woman among the company of Jesus in St. Paul’s description. Schüssler Fiorenza affirms that the purpose behind this occlusion of women by St. Paul is necessary to justify not only the ‘male chain of authority’ but also his own apostolic tradition (Schüssler Fiorenza, 1999: 122–123). Nonetheless, Schüssler Fiorenza affirms that the basic problem regarding the resurrection is not related to traditions related to geography, but the classification of ‘canonical and extra-canonical texts’ should be done ‘in terms to female and male witness traditions of the resurrection’ (ibid., 124).
- 19 ‘The consequences of an analysis of sexual constructions carry important implications in any contextual theology. Basically they destabilise [*sic.*] the sexual foundations of economic and political theories and unveil the sexual ideology of systematic (even liberationist) theology’ (Althaus-Reid, 2000: 7).
- 20 Jonathan Goldberg has noticed this in his work on *Queering the Renaissance* and in explaining this notion of risk, he points out: ‘Indeed, to follow Foucault à la lettre, the Renaissance comes before the regimes of sexuality, and to speak of sexuality in the period is a misnomer. This is indeed the case if sexuality is taken as a marker of identity, definitional or a core of the person [...] can be found in the texts at hand. *Yet this does not mean that the anachronism of speaking of*

sexuality in the Renaissance is not to be risked, especially if the failure to invoke sexuality means acting as if texts of the period can always be explained in other terms, and in ways in which anything like sex disappears . . . ' (Goldberg, 1994: 5–6. italics mine).

- 21 Brown (2003).
- 22 Bernabe Ubieta (1994).
- 23 Sewicki (2000).
- 24 Horsley (1996).
- 25 See Mk 8:10.
- 26 See Mt. 15:39.
- 27 The Greek word *Tarixēiai* is used to describe factories for salting fish, or for pickling, salting, or otherwise preserving any food. Josephus calls the city by this name (see Sewicki, 192, note 23). This makes evident the interconnection between Magdala and the fishing economy of Galilee. On this see Hanson (1997), pp. 99–111.
- 28 For further geographical and archeological data on this topic, see 'Magdala'. Available at: <http://www.ourfatherlutheran.net/biblehomelands/galilee/magdala.htm>.
- 29 See Horsley (1996), p. 117.
- 30 See Sewicki (2000), pp. 183–184.
- 31 Horsley points out: 'The hypothesis of extensive international trade between Galilee and other areas of the Roman empire supports the claim that Galileans would not have been so isolated and backward economically and culturally as had previously been suggested by outsiders, from the early rabbis to romantic Western European writers such as Renan' (Horsley 1996: 67).
- 32 *Ibid.*, pp. 44–45.
- 33 *Ibid.* The author also quotes two other works: Overman (1988), pp. 160–168; and Edwards (1998), pp. 169–182.
- 34 '*haitines diēkonoun autois ek tōn huparchontōn autais*' (Lk. 8:2–3).
- 35 Mary is mentioned only in the crucifixion, burial and resurrection narratives. Apart from those narratives and the list in Lk. 8:1–2, she is not mentioned in other passages. The fact she is mentioned previous to Joanna suggests 'Mary of Magdala was a person of greater importance in the early church than Joanna, wife of Herod's steward' (Thompson, 1995: 50).
- 36 Mk. 14:3–9; Mt. 26:6–13.
- 37 Lk. 8:2.
- 38 Thompson (1995), p. 14.
- 39 Saint Ephraim the Syrian. 'Homily on Our Lord' [#47] in Schaff and Wace (1983), pp. 326–327; quoted by Thompson (1995), p. 14.
- 40 Gregory the Great. 'Homiliarum Evangelii' in Migne, *Patrologiae Latina* (Parisus, 1844) Vol. 76. 2.23.76; quoted by Thompson (1995), p. 15. (Translation by M. Thompson.)
- 41 Paul Veyne explains that under this new morality or new code, the status of married women changed. Based on Stoic tradition and Ovidian concept of *Amicitia* [friendship] women were invited through marriage to a relationship of friendship with their husbands. We need to notice that friendship played a very important role in Roman society. (See Veyne, 1992: 42–43.)
- 42 There were strict rules for enjoying the pleasure of sex and sexuality. Noble men in Greece and Rome had to fulfil expectations coming from their understanding

of body and sexuality rigorously controlled by the dictums of society. As a nobleman has to learn to exercise control over women, slaves, properties and lower classes, he also has to learn how to control his own body. (See Brown, 1988: 9, 11.)

- 43 While for Greco-Roman society this is mainly a description of an accepted and even welcomed custom, for patristic writers is a denunciation of a condemnable act. Saint Gregory of Nazianzus wrote a letter that in fact is an excursus where he apologizes for not attending the wedding banquet of Olympia. In that letter, St Gregory praises the marriage of Olympia but *criticizes* the contract of prostitutes to entertain at Christian weddings. (See Gregory of Nazianzus. *Ep. Ad Olympiae*, in Teja, 1986: 147–151.) In *On Vainglory and the Education of Children*, Saint John Chrysostom advises Christians not to continue with such a custom, especially since children should not see nude women in those parties, a fact that implies how much the social custom was still part of Christianity. (See St John Chrysostom (1977) *De inani gloria et de educandis liberis*, 78, 88.)
- 44 Petronius Arbiter in his *Satyricon* quotes a paragraph from Tacitus that illustrates this: ‘*For Visitilia, born of a family of praetorian rank, had publicly notified before the aediles, a permit for fornication [= prostitution], according to the usage that prevailed among our fathers, who supposed that sufficient punishment for unchaste women resided in the very nature of their calling.*’ (See Petronius Arbiter. *Satyricon*. Translated by W. C. Firebaugh. Available at: http://ancienthistory.about.com/library/bl/bl_prostitutionnotes.htm. Italics mine.)
- 45 In Greek history, the case of Aspasia is notorious. She was a prostitute and later became Pericles’ companion and main counsellor. There were two types of prostitutes in Athens: (a) In the upper classes there were the *hetairai*, prostitutes with the social and intellectual skills necessary to entertain upper-class men at the symposiums, and (b) *pornai*, slave prostitutes who did not have these skills and entertained men from the lower classes. Aspasia was a *hetairai*. (See Jill Kleinman. ‘The representation of prostitutes versus respectable women on ancient Greek vases’, available at: <http://ancienthistory.about.com/gi/dynamic/offsite.htm?site=http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/classes/JKp.html>.) When Pericles died, she took his place in the political arena. Centuries later, in the midst of Christian Roman Empire, we find another example: Empress Theodora, wife of Justinian I. She was born in Constantinople in 497 CE and reigned from 527 to 548 CE. (See J. Irmischer. ‘Teodora’, in Di Berardino, 1998: 2069.) She was in her youth a striptease dancer who performed at the public theatre in Constantinople (Brown, 1989: 245). The case of Empress Theodora is rare because she also converted to Christianity and protected the monks of Syria. According to John of Ephesus, she was remembered among the monks as ‘Theodora, she of the brothel’ (John of Ephesus, *Lives of the Eastern Saints* 12: *Patrologia Orientalis* 17:189; quoted by Brown, 1988: 431). Both examples show how prostitutes were present in Greek and Roman societies, and how hard it was for Christianity to displace them from that social recognition.
- 46 They share common concepts, but we need to remember that stereotyping them is not helpful to understand their particularities. Veyne points out regarding matrimonial concepts: ‘Clearly we must not argue in terms of stereotypes and imagine a conflict between pagan and Christian morality. The real cleavage lay elsewhere: between a morality of matrimonial duties and an internalized morality of the couple. The latter, which originated somewhere in the heart of pagan

- culture, was commonplace by A.D. 100, shared by both pagan culture and Christians under the Stoic influence' (Veyne, 1992: 47). Brown goes further and explains: 'It is important to note at the outset the crucial difference between the widespread morality adopted by the Christians and the codes of behavior current among the civic elites. Much of what is claimed as distinctively "Christian" in the morality of the early churches was in reality the distinctive morality of a different segment of Roman society from those we know from the literature of the wellborn. It was a morality of the socially vulnerable' (Brown, 1992: 260–261).
- 47 We need to keep in mind that the Gnostic movement was a movement for elites and at the borders of main Christianity, that is, the arising orthodoxy in formation in the second century CE. Gnostics had to leave Rome and Alexandria, or remain underground to survive the increasing intolerance of orthodox Christianity. The Gnostic groups are never massive but small in number, usually women and men gathered around a leader or teacher who resembles the place of Jesus and his followers: '*The teacher relived among them the role of Christ and His disciples.* Here was "a guide, restful and leisurely." Like Christ, he unfolded an account of the origins of the world and of nature of the soul that brought intellectual certainty and moral purpose to all who heard it' (Brown, 1988: 106; italics mine).
- 48 See *ibid.*, Chapter 4.
- 49 *Ibid.*, Chapter 5.
- 50 *Gospel of Mary* 9:6b-9. [Available at: <http://www.gnosis.org/library/mary-gosp.htm>.]
- 51 The term *encratites* comes from the Greek *enkrateia* which means *continence*. It is a form of radical ascetism that developed especially in Marcion's movement. According to scholars, it is doubtful to think that there existed a group with this name because it refers to behaviours and ideas that nurtured different movements. This kind of ascetism prohibited marriage and procreation as well as promoting abstinence from meat and wine. (See F. Bolgiana. 'Encratismo', in Di Berardino, 1998: 711–712.)
- 52 See Brown (1988), p. 84.
- 53 *Ibid.*, p. 85.
- 54 *The Dialog of the Savior*, translated by Stephen Emmel. (Selection made from James M. Robinson (ed.), *The Nag Hammadi Library*, revised edition. San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1990. Available at: <http://www.gnosis.org/naghamm/dialog.html>.)
- 55 Clement of Alexandria. *Strom.* III.6:63. (J. E. L. Oulton and H. E. Chadwick. *Alexandrian Christianity*. (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1954); quoted by Brown, 1988: 85.)
- 56 Pagels (1979), pp. 66–67.
- 57 *Gospel of Thomas*, 114. ('The Gospel of Thomas', translated by Thomas O. Lambdin, in Robinson, 1977: 130; italics mine.)
- 58 According to the medical information of that time, women was a failure of nature, and thus, inferior to males. In the words of Aristotle, '[...] a woman is so to say a sterile man, [...] a woman, so to say, is a mutilated man; menstruations are sperm, but an impure sperm' (quoted by Rouselle, 1989: 45). What is astonishing is that heterodox writings, without denying the inferiority of women and the requirement to be assimilated to maleness, also allowed Mary of Magdala to be recognized as a prominent leader, especially since in most of the heterodox

writing, she is the one to close the discussions or to offer final responses. Even more, among certain Gnostic groups like Montanism, an active group of women embraced the leadership of the movement.

- 59 This is evident not only in the Gnostic groups but also in orthodox Christianity. The case of Saint Thecla is profound in this sense: 'Thecla begins as a "regular" engaged young woman from Iconium and end up being an anchoress transvested as a man with her hair cut in order to emphasize more, if possible, her vocation of overcoming her female condition' (Rocco Tedesco, 2002: 21). The case of Perpetua is more notorious since she became *mulier virilis* on her way to martyrdom; she had a vision before her combat where she saw herself transformed into a male gladiator. (See *ibid.*, 26.)
- 60 Giovanni Filoramo explains: 'The symbolism of the androgyne, so widespread in the history of religions and found alive in ancient mythological thought also by virtue of the particular good fortune enjoyed by the Platonic androgyne, tends to express as its most general content the concept of *coniunctio oppositorum*, or joining the opposites, to embody the conquest of all duality in an image that for the most part is constructed on a sexual paradox, by denying sex itself or affirming the wealth and fruitfulness of a full sexual life' (Filoramo, 1991: 61).
- 61 The Valentinian divine *Pleroma* is formed of 30 aeons in partners (*sizigiai*). The first four partners are the most important and form the primal *ogdoada*, from which the rest of the aeons are formed. The unity of both elements of the *sizygia* is presented as the model of unity (C. Gianoto. 'Valentin Gnostico', in Di Bernardino 1998: 2173–2174).
- 62 Rocco Tedesco (2002), p. 27.
- 63 Brown (1988), p. 113.
- 64 'The spiritual self-fertilization of the archetypical Androgyne is also represented, in a favourite theme of ancient thought, as contemplation of the male principle in the female "mirror" that constitutes its vital and emotional dimension' (Filoramo, 1991: 62).
- 65 *Ibid.*, p. 177.
- 66 See Sewicki (2000), p. 193.
- 67 I disagree with Benedicta Ward in this regard. In her book *Harlots of the Desert*, she argues: 'Mary Magdalene, for the evangelists and for the Fathers, is not just a historical character or characters; she is the new Eve, the first sign of the reversal of the fall of Adam. She is also, because of her great love, the woman in the Song of Songs, and she is, for the same reason, the Church as well as the individual soul redeemed from sin' (Ward, 1987: 14). Furthermore, she concludes: 'I suggest that her identification as a prostitute lies deeper, in the imagery of sin throughout the whole of the scriptures. Mary Magdalene takes to herself the image of unfaithful Israel, so graphically described by the prophets as a prostitute in relation to God. This image transferred by the New Testament writers to the whole of humanity in the new covenant and therefore each soul in sin can be described as a prostitute, as unfaithful to the covenant of love between God and man. It is in this profoundly illuminating sense that Mary of Magdala assumes the character of a prostitute, not because lust is a specially [*sic.*] terrible sin but because she is all sinners insofar as all sin is unfaithfulness to the covenant of love. Just as the sin of Eve was described as lust because that image best describes the disobedience of the Fall. So the sins of Mary of Magdala were seen as prostitution; that is, unfaithfulness to the love which is the name of God' (*ibid.*, 14–15).

Unfortunately, Mary of Magdala never was associated with Eve as an archetype. Since early writings in Christianity, especially in the letters of Saint Paul, who wrote before the writing of the Gospels, Mary the mother of Jesus has been associated with Eve. Despite the fact that Mary of Magdala in fact turned to be an icon for those who repent, she never occupied the place that was assigned to Mary, the Virgin.

- 68 This notion of internalization comes from the works of Hegel in relation to the dialectics of master and slave, taking by authors such as Fanon (1963), Freire (1981) and Butler, among many others. In this respect, Butler points out: ‘Feminist critique ought to explore the totalizing claims of a masculinist signifying economy, but also remain self-critical with respect to the totalizing gestures of feminism. The effort to identify the enemy as singular in form is *a reverse-discourse that uncritically mimics the strategy of the oppressor* instead of offering a different set of terms’ (Butler, 1999: 19; italics mine).
- 69 For example, although Sandra Schneiders identifies the connection between the Gospel of John and the Song of Songs, she suggests that at the time of the writing of the fourth Gospel, the Song of Songs was understood as a ‘covenant’ between Israel and Yahweh (Schneiders, 1996: 161).
- 70 1 Cor. 15:14.
- 71 For the texts of this passages of the Gnostic Gospels, see Ricci (1994), pp. 147–148.
- 72 An excellent historical survey on this topic can be found in the article of Guy (1992), pp. 201–17.
- 73 The role of wives was defined by Biale-Massé in a study made at the beginning of the nineteenth century, where he expresses: ‘Woman’s mission, as far as each sex has a part in the perpetuation of the species, is maternity, and the raising and education of children; in women’s wombs lie the strength and greatness of nations . . . Among us there are marriages that have six or eight children; twelve or more are not rare, and up to twenty children born of one mother, and cases are known of twenty-five children in one home. Let us not snatch this crown of glory from the Argentine woman’s brow’ (Juan Biale-Massé. *El Estado de las Clases Obreras Argentinas a Comienzos de Siglo*; (Córdoba: Universidad Nacional de Córdoba, 1968), p. 426; quoted by Salessi (1995), pp. 52–3; translation by Salessi).
- 74 Guy (1992), p. 204.
- 75 AMMAR stands for *Asociación Mujeres Meretrices de Argentina*. (Available at: <http://www.ammar.org.ar/historia.htm>)
- 76 CTA stands for *Central de los Trabajadores Argentinos*. The CTA is a union formed in 1992 based on three principles: direct affiliation, direct democracy and political autonomy. (Available at: <http://www.cta.org.ar/institucional/institucional.shtml>)
- 77 In this respect, AMMAR states: ‘In the 10 years of our organization, little by little we have begun to demonstrate to a part of society that we exist. Our struggle is doubly hard: we have to achieve a change in the conscience of the people and the governments in office. Concerning the people, so that they do not see us as “the girls easy life” [*“las chicas de vida fácil”*] and so that they can understand that our life is hard and that we are not promoting sexual work. We do not choose, but rather we opt for this form of earning life. Our bigger achievement would be that never a woman would have to be forced into this profession. Concerning our governments, our main struggle is that once and for all they stop using repressive

- politics and criminalizing us, since the only thing they achieve is that many of us have to resort to pimps, who say they “protect us.” In fact, this establishes a net of corruption that we are forced to obey in order to be able to work without being incarcerated and mistreated by the police.’ (Available at: <http://www.ammar.org.ar/futuro.html>)
- 78 bell hooks (1990), pp. 150–51.
- 79 This is based on Marx’s ‘Eleventh Thesis on Feuerbach’, ‘The philosophers have only interpreted the world in various ways; the point is to change it’ (Marx, 1976: 5).
- 80 ‘Trinitarian communion is a source of inspiration rather than of criticism of the social sphere. Christians committed to social change based on the needs of majorities; above all, see tri-unity as their permanent utopia’ (Boff, 1988: 151).
- 81 ‘The historical project, the utopia of liberation as the creation of a new social consciousness and as a social appropriation not only of the means of production, but also of the political process, and, definitively, of freedom, is the proper arena for the cultural revolution. That is to say, it is the arena of the permanent creation of a new person in a different society characterized by solidarity. Therefore, that creation is the place of encounter between political liberation and the communion of all persons with God, a communion which passes through liberation from sin, the ultimate root of all injustice, all dispossession, all divisions among persons. Faith proclaims that the human fellowship which is sought through the abolition of exploitation of some by others is something possible, that efforts to bring it about are not in vain, that God calls us to it and assures us of its complete fulfillment, and that what is definitive reality is being constructed within what is provisional . . . If utopia gives a human face to economic, social, and political liberation, this human face – in the light of the gospel – reveals God. If doing justice leads to the knowledge of God, finding God in turn requires a commitment to doing justice’ (Nickoloff, 1996: 205).

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