

*Protecting the Priceless Earth:  
Lessons from the Magdalene Stories*

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## **Abstract**

David Suzuki, a leading Canadian environmentalist, asserts that the Earth and its biodiversity is a priceless treasure that should be protected.<sup>1</sup> Despite the growing evidence of impending ecological crisis, the path to a sustainable ecological future is unclear. Western religions, philosophies, and cultural media identify masculine traits and values as cultural ideals. Yet women's experience of suffering differently qualifies women as experts.<sup>2</sup> Thus, this paper draws insight from David Suzuki, Asian women, Orthodox thought, and ecofeminism to develop a connection between the Gospel Lesson of the Rich Person<sup>3</sup> and the related stories of Mary Magdalene<sup>4</sup> to illustrate how authoritative hegemony has divided the Spirit and her Story into parts.

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<sup>1</sup> The work of Suzuki (2002, 1997) is touched upon to establish the key elements of the ecological crisis and to briefly identify the religious connection to his environmental philosophy.

<sup>2</sup> See Merchant (1980), Lorentzen and Eaton (2006), and McFague (2001).

<sup>3</sup> See Matthew 19: 16-30, Mark 10: 17-27, and Luke 18: 18-30

<sup>4</sup> See Schaberg (2002) and Starbird (1993).

# Protecting the Priceless Earth: Lessons from the Magdalene Stories

## Introduction

David Suzuki, a leading Canadian environmentalist, asserts that the Earth and its biodiversity is a priceless treasure that should be protected (2002; 1997). Despite the gathering evidence of impending ecological crisis, the path to a sustainable ecological future is unclear. Both Christian and non-Christian ecofeminists claim that the domination of the Earth and the domination of women are connected. Western religions, philosophies, and cultural media identify masculine traits and values as cultural ideals, making it seem natural for men to rule as the experts. Yet when ecological problems arise, women often suffer more hardship than men (Lorentzen and Eaton 2006). Thus, women's experience of suffering differently qualifies women as experts in finding sustainable solutions (Lorentzen and Eaton 2006; Merchant 1980; McFague 2001). With this insight, those seeking guidance from Christian teachings can turn to the Gospel Lesson of the Rich Person <sup>1</sup> to see how the ideals of perfection, subordination, and lust for heavenly treasure have contributed to the domination of nature and women. The primary objective of this paper is to develop the connection between this Gospel Lesson and the related stories of Mary Magdalene, affirming that she is the Woman who anointed Jesus with her rich perfume, and the Rich Person who refused to sell her earthly treasure (Schaberg 2002; Starbird

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<sup>1</sup> See Matthew 19: 16-30, Mark 10: 17-27, and Luke 18: 18-30

1993). This paper concludes that the Magdalene Stories exemplify how the Spirit's Story has been demonized and divided into parts, promoting colonialism and the domination of all indigenous spirits.

## **The Work of David Suzuki**

Aboriginal people have often maintained that we humans are the Earth. They claim that we and everything else in creation have been made from four sacred elements: water, air, fire, and earth (Suzuki 1999, 8). Yet scientists have dismissed this sacred truth as merely a metaphor, until now. David Suzuki says that this truth can be demonstrated to be a scientific reality (Suzuki 2002, 22).

We are made from water. More than half of our weight is water; we evolved from water, and we spend nine months in water before we are born (Suzuki 2002, 22, 32). Born out of water, with the first breath, every new infant must transform themselves to survive. "Air lives in us" and we in it (Suzuki 2002, 49). Air is a physical substance that envelopes us and resides in every tissue and cell in our body. With each breath, we draw the atmosphere into our lungs and put it to use. We have been especially designed for this function, and this function is so crucial that the total control of our breath has not been given over to our brain (Suzuki 1999, 32). Every time we exhale, air exits our nose and goes up our neighbour's nose, and every day we absorb atoms from the air that were once part of other living creatures such as birds, trees, snakes, or worms. Air is the Earth's breath. The longer we live, the greater the probability that we will absorb atoms that were once part of Jesus Christ or some other beloved ancestor (Suzuki 1999, 38).

We are also fire because fire is energy, and energy is what makes all life possible. Energy is stored sunlight, and all the energy we need to do the things that we do comes indirectly

from the Sun through photosynthesis (Suzuki 2002, 23). The by product of photosynthesis is oxygen, the combustible necessity for fire and for human life (Suzuki 2002, 3). We humans are also earth because almost everything we eat comes from the soil. We are like giant “compost heaps” for the remains of plants and animals. Without life there would be no soil. Soil is a matrix of sand, silt, and clay enriched with organic matter from decaying plants and animals (Suzuki 2002, 23-24).

Water, air, sunlight, and soil are sacred elements. They are fundamental and essential for our biological well being. They create the conditions necessary for our survival (Suzuki 2002, 89). We ought to regard them as priceless treasures, and fiercely protect them regardless of the cost (Suzuki 2002, 23). Not only do these elements sustain us, but they also connect us to all those who are presently alive or who have ever lived. Every life and every death contributes to their composition (Suzuki 2002, 23).

Adam is the first man named in the Bible. The name Adam comes from the Hebrew word *adama*, which means “soil” or “earth.” Eve is the first woman named. Her name comes from the Hebrew word *hava*, which means “living.” Therefore, according to Suzuki, Adam and Eve together make a living eternal statement. They articulate the connection that all life comes from the “living soil” (1999, 76).

For many indigenous peoples and a great number of subsistence farmers, the land is not merely soil. It is their “ground of being” (Suzuki 1999, 104). The Earth is their source of inspiration, identity, history and meaning, and the foundation of life itself. Ancient nomadic peoples believed they had the right to use the land for their own benefit as long as they protected it and preserved it for future generations (Suzuki 1999, 78). Today wealthy technologically advanced nations are exploiting the Earth’s resources at an unprecedented rate.

## **Dominion**

Despite alarming evidence of climate change, soil erosion, land degradation, and the need to protect the earth to ensure the survival of humanity, how we achieve the goal of a sustainable ecological future is still being debated. The biblical mandate given to humanity in the first chapter of Genesis established humans in the garden and commanded them to subdue it and rule over it (Bandow 1992, 57). Historically, this mandate has given men the authority, the dominion, and the ownership of the Earth and its rich resources, which has led to horrific outcomes exacerbated by racism, sexism, classism, colonialism, neo-colonialism, and globalisation—especially for Third World nations (Gnanadason 2003; Kyung 1990).

Ecological theologians now say dominion of the Earth was never God's intent. Rather, citing the second chapter of Genesis, ecological theologians say God intended humanity to till the Garden and to watch over it. Therefore, humans are not to think of the Earth as their property (Fink 1998). They are to think of the Earth as God's property because the commandment to till the Garden and watch over it implicitly gives ownership of the land to God, not humanity. Humans merely hold the land in trust for the Divine (Fink 1998). Other Christians are wary of this new shift in thinking (Bandow 1992). Many third world countries are struggling to develop themselves economically, and many people are converting to Christianity (Phiri and Maxwell 2007). An ecological theological justification could be used to exploit and control their labour and capital, and prevent them from owning such things as an extended family home, a car, or a garden (Bandow 1992; Gnanadason 2003; Phiri and Maxwell 2007).

## **Korean Insight**

The domination of women and earth-centred worship, and by extension indigenous peoples and the earth's resources, has exacerbated the suffering of Koreans who have a long

history of abuse by those seeking to colonize and to control them and their natural resources. Asian Women have borne the brunt of this suffering. From birth to death, Asian women have not only fought colonialism, they have fought, and continue to fight, “death-wishes” from male-domination. Asian women are taught to please their husbands by praying before the conception of their child for a son, and then after the safe delivery of the desired male baby, all the family’s resources are directed to keep the male safe, healthy and well-educated. Asian mothers know from direct lived experience that, should the conception of a female occur and should she survive to adulthood, her body, her desires, and her life will be controlled and exploited to ensure the success of male family members (Kyung1990, 38; 91-96).

It is no wonder that many Asian women feel disempowered by male interpretations of Mary the mother of Jesus. Historically and culturally, Mary has been deemed a perfect woman because, as a virgin, she conceived the most perfect male baby ever. Some Asian women have countered this ideal. For them, Mary is an exemplary model of what it means to be a liberated person, someone who is not dominated and whose response to God is creative. They have reinterpreted virginity to mean someone who is autonomous and assert that “two thousand years of male interpretation of Mary” have not succeeded in quelling their rebellious nature (Kyung 1990, 76-77, 112). In spite of male dominated religious teaching, they have superficially obeyed the Church’s teaching while worshiping the mother-God in their “kitchens, wells, fields, and mountains” (Kyung 1990, 112). Korean theologian, Chung Hyun Kyung calls this practice, “women’s popular religiosity” (1990, 112). She also asserts that this religiosity could be called “a cosmic religion, because it revolves around the rhythm of the cosmos, the here and now on the earth,” and unlike male dominated meta-cosmic religions, it does not strive to obtain a perfect spiritual reality beyond an inferior, immoral material world (Kyung 1990, 112).

Many Asian women see Jesus Christ on a symbolic level as Jesus the “Woman Messiah” because of the way Christ identifies with the wounded and those who suffer (Kyung 1990, 38; 91-96). Korean women are among the poorest of the poor and describe themselves as being full of “Han” (Kyung 1990, 23). Korean theologian, Chung Hyun Kyung in an invocation of the Holy Spirit at the 7<sup>th</sup> Assembly of the World Council of Churches describes Korea as being the “land of spirits full of Han.” She is quoted as saying:

Han is anger. Han is resentment. Han is bitterness. Han is grief. Han is broken-heartedness and the raw energy for struggle for liberation. In my tradition people who were killed or died unjustly became wandering spirits, the Han-ridden spirits...seeking the chance to make the wrong right...These Hanridden spirits in our people's history have been agents through which the Holy Spirit has spoken her compassion and wisdom for life...For me the image of the Holy Spirit comes from the image of Kuan In.... She is venerated as goddess of compassion and wisdom by East Asian women's popular religiosity. She is a bodhisativa, an enlightened being. She can go into Nirvana any time she wants to...Her compassion for all suffering living beings makes her stay in this world...until the whole universe, people, trees, birds, mountains, air, water, become enlightened...Perhaps this might also be a feminine image of the Christ (Tucker 1992, 236).

## **Orthodox Thought**

Leonid Kishkovsky, an ecumenical officer in the Orthodox Church in America and then-president of the National Council of Churches responded to Kyung’s Seventh Assembly

invocation. He voiced the concern and fear of many delegates attending the Assembly who thought Kyung's intermingling of the seven Han spirits with the Holy Spirit would dilute the Trinitarian definition of the Holy Spirit (Tucker 1992). Theoretically, the Spirit has always been defined as both the *Spirit of God* and the *Spirit of creation*. As the Spirit of God, the Spirit is both the reciprocal power between the first and second persons of the Trinity and the redemptive power within human beings. As the Spirit of creation, the Spirit has been defined as the breath of God who indwells and sustains the cosmos. In practice, however, the Spirit defined as the breath of God has been down-played despite an abundance of biblical imagery equating the Spirit with natural creations such as Dove, Water, Fire, and Wind (Wallace 2000, 58). To these natural images, Hebrew testament scholars add "Wisdom Woman" to the images of the Holy Spirit because the Hebrew wisdom writers believed and wrote about wisdom as if she was a woman who would reveal herself, her sacred wisdom, to the "man" who entered into a relationship with her and loved her (Rae 2000, 73-74).

For Greek Orthodox scholar, John Chryssavgis, the Holy Spirit is the unique iconographer of the Word of God, and Creation is an icon, a living eternal image engraved by the Holy Spirit who reveals the present reality while revealing the promise of the future (2000, 91). The Spirit is also the air that we breathe, and as such, the "Spirit brings out the 'sacramentality' of nature and bestows on it the fragrance of resurrection" (Chryssavgis 2000, 91).

The Orthodox fathers concur with the teaching of St. Athanasius that "God became human that humanity might be deified" (Chryssavgis 2000, 91). According to John Garvey, an Orthodox believer drawing upon the insight of St. Athanasius and the lesson of the Rich Man according to Matthew's Gospel (who did not sell all his possessions and follow Jesus [take up the cross]), Jesus is divine by nature, but humanity is not (1995, 8). Jesus was born with divine

privilege and humanity was not. Humanity only becomes divine by adoption (Garvey 1995, 8). So Garvey agrees with what St. Paul's letter to the Philippians conveys: everyone who seeks to be divine must put on the "mind of Christ" because Christ did not count equality with God as "a thing to be grasped." Rather, he emptied himself (Philippians 2: 5-7; Garvey 1995, 8). Therefore, Garvey makes these comments about richness and wealth and the religious ideal of humility.

“[R]ichness in the form of possessions in this context is a metaphor, and more than a metaphor. To be rich is not only to have more than you need, it is to hold on to that which makes you secure... It is entirely natural for you to fear the loss of all this, and it seems foolhardy to think of abandoning it all, in the hope that God will take care of you... [Yet] whether we choose to give it up or not [is immaterial]. It will all be taken from us anyway. When Jesus says take up your cross, the implication is that the cross will be there whether we take it up or not. We will be crucified in any event... Riches represent the attempt we make never to come to this moment... The person who holds on to any self image, any sense of personal importance, or is pleased to be a CEO, a bishop or a well-regarded poet, is holding on to a kind of wealth.” (1995, 8)

## **Indian Insight**

One's self image is a form of wealth. A CEO, a bishop, or a renowned poet has social capital. It is difficult to hold onto this social capital in a competitive and political world characterized by dominance, violence, and a lack of personal regard for the integrity of one's neighbour and one's self. An Indian legend and a legendary mountain called Thadagathi illustrate how difficult it is to keep a good self image within an ideology that supports and promotes the conquering and the dominating of the other. For the Dalit people of India, Mount

Thadagathi serves as a majestic icon revealing how they lost their self respect, their indigenous spirituality, and the productivity of their land.

Thadagathi was once a beautiful queen. Black-skinned and ‘ugly,’ according to the standards of the invading white-skinned culture, she was regarded as a “demon”. One day, when Lord Rama was hunting and passing through Thadagathi’s land, Thadhagathi asserted her authority. She asked Lord Rama to stop hunting the game pasturing in her land. This angered and embarrassed Rama. He could not have his noble privilege to hunt for food or sport openly challenged by a woman; especially one his culture considered demonic and repugnant to look at. So in order to hang onto his good self image, his authority, and his privilege, he killed and demonized the spirit of Queen Thadhagathi, assigning the Dalit people she ruled to the low status of “untouchable” in the Indian caste structure (Gnanadason 2003, 74-76).

In modern day India, a Dalit woman by the name of Muniyamma inherited an acre of land. Even though this land could not sustain her and her family of five, it supplied her with enough food to feed them. The land was sacred to Muniyamma. It had belonged to her family for generations and had been part of her dowry. Nagappa, her husband, worked as an office clerk to supplement the family’s income and to earn enough money to purchase alcohol. Her spiritual connection to her land gave her a sense of pride and her life meaning. Her family was one of the few Dalit families who owned land in a small village, not far from Bangalore. When an economic boom transformed Bangalore into an Indian version of “Silicon Valley,” land became outrageously expensive and villagers sold their lands. Muniyamma resisted the temptation to sell hers, but due to a lack of support from her alcoholic husband, she gave in to the pressure from her extended family and sold. Muniyamma now lives in a small house in a poor urban

neighbourhood with no land, no garden to till and watch over, and no room for her extended family (Gnanadason 2003, 74).

## **The Gospel Lesson of the Rich Person/ Ruler**

Keeping the story of Muniyamma and Thadagathi in mind, we turn to the Gospel Lesson of the Rich Young Man. Note that the rich man, the person, and in Luke's Gospel, the rich ruler, (Lk 18: 18-30) has traditionally been translated as male, but there is historical reason to suggest that the ruler or the person, was female.

...a person ran up to him and fell on her knees before him. "Good teacher," she asked, "what must I do to inherit eternal life?" "Why do you call me good? Jesus answered. "No one is good—except God alone. You know the commandments: Do not murder, do not commit adultery, do not steal, do not give false testimony, do not defraud, honor your father and mother." "Teacher," she declared, "all these I have kept since I was a child." Jesus looked at her and loved her. "One thing you lack," he said. "Go, sell what you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me." At this the person's face fell. She went away sad, because she had great wealth (Based upon Mk 10: 17-27 NIV).

Orthodox believer John Garvey, drawing insight from 4<sup>th</sup> century Athanasius, concurs with the popular religious North American interpretation of the Rich Person lesson (1995, 8). The rich person's material wealth is preventing them from recognizing Jesus as God and following his teaching (Galli 2006, 18). People simply cannot love God and their material possessions. "The man who trusts in himself and in his possession can never be saved." (Barclay

1975, 248) However, drawing insight from the Legend of Thadagathi, there is another earth-centred possibility.

A rich woman well aware of the Hebrew Creation story and obedient to the Law of Moses (Ex 32: 12-13) since her youth would believe that God had promised the Land to the ancestors of the Great Patriarchs and Matriarchs forever. Thus, she would value the land dearly and know that her future would depend upon it.

In the Rich Person's story, the rich person begins by asking: "Good Teacher, what can I do to inherit eternal life?" and then Jesus asks: "Why do you call me good?" Jesus then adds: "No one is good but God alone." Insight from the Hebrew Creation story confirms that God is good. It also confirms that God created humanity in the image and likeness of God, male and female and that "God saw all that God had made and declared that *it* was very good." (Genesis 1: 26-30) *It* is the all. The all is heaven and earth and the living biodiversity that heaven and earth contain.

Insight from the Genesis Story suggests that Jesus would be aware of the goodness of God and every person and creature that God creates in God's own image. Thus what follows should be examined with this insight. Jesus says: You know the commandments...then the Rich Person admits that she has kept these commandments since she was a child. Jesus looks at her and loves her. Then he says "One thing you lack," "Go, sell everything you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me." It seems like cultural arrogance to assume that the Woman lacked direction; that she needed to follow the Good Teacher's commandment to go and sell everything in order to achieve eternal life.

If the Rich Person lacked a good conscience or direction, she would have acquiesced to the command of Jesus. She would have given up control of her property to the market place. She

would have sold all she possessed for cash and resolved her own conscience and the problem of the poor of her generation by giving them money. Moreover, if she was greedy and lacked self-control, she would have given in to the temptation of obtaining even more goodness than she already had to obtain more treasure in heaven. In the process, she would have abandoned her earthly treasure, the right to control it, and the divine responsibility to pass on her earthly inheritance to the next generation, with the expectation that Jesus, a man who loved her, would provide for her and bestow upon her abundant treasure in heaven. She did not do that. Rather, she chose to keep her earthly treasure. She made this choice even though it caused her to suffer a great loss, the loss of her immediate happiness and the present companionship of Jesus who loved her. She went away sad, “with a fallen face,” demonstrating and reinforcing the teaching that in order to achieve eternal life our earthly resources must be protected at all cost. She lacked the choice to sell her great wealth. She had no choice, and neither do we. We cannot exploit all our priceless earthly resources and expect to inherit eternal life.

### **Ecological Insight**

David Suzuki says that eternal life is impossible without the rich land that we have inherited from our mother and our father. In order for rich and poor human beings to realize and achieve life ever after on earth, rich and poor alike must cling to and sustain our priceless ecosystem which nourishes humanity. We must believe that eternal life is possible here on earth (2002, 89). We also need to be aware of the danger we face if we do not restore the sacred balance. It is not enough to believe in the power of the resurrection. We must also have a “fascination” for future possibilities (Berry 2006, 17).

North American theologian Sallie McFague says that Christians believe that Jesus’ death and resurrection confirms that God conquers evil and gives eternal life. Through Jesus’

sacrificial death, Jesus achieves forgiveness for all humanity's sins; through Jesus' resurrection, humanity is assured of eternal life. Because Jesus Christ is the second person of the trinity—wholly God and wholly human—He can redeem all Creation (McFague 2001, 157).

According to McFague, limiting our worship to the second person of the Trinity is bad theology (2001, 159). It fails to convey the truth that God is always with humanity and the entire Cosmos. If God incarnates only in Jesus, then we need not see God in the face of the poor or in the remains of a devastated forest. Nor need we feel any responsibility for their survival (McFague 2001, 159). David Suzuki says that the whole web of life is interconnected and survives through diversity and loving relationships (2002, 89, 113). We need to protect the biodiverse sustaining power that is integral to life on Earth. If we fail to do so, we risk killing all humanity. With humanity's extinction, the Earth will most likely regenerate and so will the great majority of other life forms (Suzuki 2002, 91).

## **Lessons from the Magdalene Stories**

When the crucifixion threatened to destroy Jesus' continued existence on earth, a rich person anointed Jesus' feet with some very expensive perfume that she had saved for the day of Jesus' burial. She was criticized by the disciples. They thought her perfume should have been sold and the money given to the poor. Catholic theology has linked this anointing that took place at Bethany (Mt 26; Mk 14; Jn 12) with the anointing story of a sinner woman (Lk 7) to create a diverse, rich profile of Mary Magdalene (Lk 8: 2; Lk 7: 40-50). This profile equates Mary of Bethany with Mary Magdalene. Protestants and Orthodox Christians have historically criticized the Roman Catholic view that Mary of Bethany and the "Sinner Woman" were Mary Magdalene, asserting that "the identity of Mary with Mary Magdalene is a mere conjecture supported by no

direct evidence.”<sup>2</sup> Yet this profile has persisted and was acknowledged by Protestant ministers such as William Barclay (1975, 265) until 1978. In 1978, Roman Catholicism and Protestantism, officially agreed with Eastern Orthodoxy and declared that these three women are different (Schaberg 2002, 70-74).

Modern scholars find the linking of Mary Magdalene with the “Sinner Woman” of Luke 7 problematic because it has given rise to the interpretation that the Sinner Woman, and by extension Mary Magdalene, was a woman of ill-repute, a prostitute, without any justification from the text itself or reliable historical documentation (Schaberg 2002, 70-74). Linking the Marys is also problematic because there is no historical or unequivocal proof that Mary Magdalene was Mary of Bethany. Modern scholars contend that Mary was a common name and that Mary called Magdalene was called Magdalene to differentiate her, from Mary of Bethany, as the Mary who came from Magdala (Schaberg 2002, 66-67).

The Modern Mary Magdalene has been redeemed. She is no longer a sinner. However, she is no longer the Woman with the Alabaster Jar, and so today Mary Magdalene is no longer venerated as an important saint, a preacher, or the apostle to the apostles. She has been reinstated as simply one of many followers of Jesus (Schaberg 2002, 99). Opposing viewpoints persist. They insist that Mary Magdalene was more than a follower and that she was the Woman who anointed Jesus (Schaberg 2002, 101). Margaret Starbird and Bishop John Shelby Spong assert that Mary Magdalene was Mary of Bethany, but in light of evidence from the Gnostic Gospels, insist that she and Jesus were married (Starbird 1993, 27). For Spong, the idea of a romantic relationship outside marriage between Mary Magdalene and Jesus is too scandalous. It would violate the historical Church’s understanding of Jesus as being Holy and free of sin

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<sup>2</sup> *The Catholic Encyclopedia Online*, s.v. “Mary Magdalen,” (by Hugh T. Pope. Transcribed by Paul T. Crowley), <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/009761a.htm> (accessed November 21, 2007).

(Schaberg 2002, 101; Spong 1992, 189). It would overturn the Church's assumptions of morality, and throw the ascetic ideal of celibacy into question (Spong 1992, 188, 189, 198). Thus, modern scholars like the scholars of the second century, see little value in establishing Mary as a wife or lover (Schaberg 2002, 102; Spong 1992, 207).

Modern scholarship has been heavily influenced by the scientific method that assumes that creation can be separated into parts and that factual information can be extracted from the environmental context and rearranged and tested for validity according to a set of accepted rules and standards (Merchant, 1980, 290). With the rise of modern science in the sixteenth century came Francis Bacon's scientific program advocating human dominion over nature for the advancement of science and human learning through the control of nature for the improvement of the human condition. Bacon explained the monstrosities and malfunctions of nature with female imagery reinforcing and extending this dominion to men over women, by describing these anomalies in light of classical Greek philosophy as being the result of "matter acting perversely, like a common harlot." (Merchant 1980, 164-171) The image of nature as a submissive and mindless female to be subdivided into parts to be examined legitimized the exploitation of natural resources (Merchant 1980, 189).

Modern scholarship has also been under pressure from Protestants who are offended by the linking of Mary of Bethany with Luke's "Sinner Woman"<sup>3</sup> and have as stated above, officially taken the Greek view that Mary Magdalene, Mary of Bethany, and the "Sinner Woman" are three different women in order to venerate Mary Magdalene as one of Jesus' many followers liberated from sin.

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

The Traditional Catholic argument claims that “the series of events” surrounding the identity of Mary “forms a consistent whole” and unites all three women as one woman who was an adulterer who sought pardon for her sin and, so pardoned, was immediately afterwards described as “Mary Madalen out of whom seven devils were gone forth,” and then shortly after described as “sitting at the Lord’s feet...” hearing His words.”<sup>4</sup> Whereas the Traditional Catholic argument sees this sequence of events as natural, the modern scholarly argument has completely discarded it.

The connection between Mary Magdalene and the Rich Person has not been explored or added to the Magdalene stories. This lack of exploration is not surprising because Modern scholars have rejected the traditional Roman Catholic argument advocating that a series of events can form a consistent whole. Thus, modern scholars do not equate Mary Magdalene with the Woman with the Alabaster Jar criticized for not selling her rich perfume. Traditional scholars who still equate Mary of Bethany with the Magdalene and the sin of adultery have not explored this connection either because the Rich Person says that she has not committed adultery. This paper affirms the Roman Catholic argument that advocates the connection between Mary Magdalene, Mary of Bethany, and the Woman of the Alabaster Jar in Luke 7 because to separate them seems mechanistic and unnatural, and it seems too unlikely that three women (two of which share the same first name) could demonstrate the same extravagant love for the same man in almost identical circumstances and be three entirely different women. Therefore, this paper affirms, the Roman Catholic view that all three women are Mary Magdalene, the Woman with the Alabaster Jar. But this paper does question the Roman Catholic assumption that the woman who was touching him in Luke 7: 39 was an adulterer. The Greek word used for sinner in Luke 7

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

is “hamartōlos”<sup>5</sup> and this word does not infer adultery or sexual sin (Marshall 1975, 193). It is the same word used to describe the sin of Jesus when the teachers of the Law accuse Jesus of being a sinner: for failing to keep the Sabbath (Jhn 9: 16; Jhn 9: 24; Marshall, 1975, 299).

If scholars insist that the sinner woman of Luke 7 was guilty of committing adultery, they should note that in Mark 10: 12, five verses before the Lesson of the Rich Person at Mark 10: 17, Jesus states that a woman divorcing her husband is guilty of committing adultery. In Matthew’s Gospel, Jesus is quoted as saying “I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lust has already committed adultery with her in his heart.” (Mt. 5: 27) So it is very possible that the Rich Person was guilty of adultery as narrowly defined by Jesus, but not by the liberal standards of her day or of the Rich Person herself. We cannot know for certain. But the Rich Person declares that she has observed the five commandments that the Teacher cites in Mark 10: 19, including adultery. Thus, it does appear that Mark has organized his Gospel to illustrate Jesus speaking to his point about adultery made 7 verses earlier at verse 12. So it is possible that the Rich Woman or Jesus himself is challenging the interpretation of adultery with the Woman’s declaration that she is not guilty of adultery, especially if we concede that the woman who anointed him in Luke 7 was guilty of adultery as defined by Mark 10: 12 and Matthew 5: 27.

On the other hand, even if we do not concede that the woman with the rich jar of perfume of Luke 7 was guilty of adultery, a link can still be established with Luke 7 and the Rich Person Lesson. Jesus told his followers in Luke 7, that the woman who anointed him with the very expensive perfume loved him so much because he had forgiven her many sins. Failure to observe any one or all of the commandments ***not*** cited by Jesus in Mark 10 on a regular basis

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<sup>5</sup> James Strong, *The New Strong's Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible: Easy-to-Read Print, Words of Christ Emphasized, Fan-Tap Thumb-Index Reference System, Greek and Hebrew Dictionaries, Strong's Numbering System.* (Nashville, Tenn.: T. Nelson Publishers, 1996)

would have made her a sinner in the eyes of a strict Teacher of the Law. The Woman with the Alabaster Jar in Luke 7 equated with the Rich Woman of Mark 10 could have sinned often by failing to observe the Sabbath or by worshipping other gods.

This paper affirms that Mary Magdalene, the Anointing Sinner Woman, Mary of Bethany, and the Rich Person are the same person, and adds that the profile of Mary Magdalene is made even richer because of the subject being discussed and demonstrated by the juxtaposition of her with Mary of Bethany, the Sinner Woman, and the Rich Person. The Rich person asks the question. How can I inherit eternal life? The Rich Woman called Mary by Jesus at Bethany and again outside the tomb, called Mary Magdalene by John the Gospel writer, and given no name by Luke in chapter 7 underscores how the inheritance of eternal life depends upon the safeguarding of our earthly resources and those whose richest resources include the ability to give and receive love and forgiveness.

The Magdalene and her rich perfume represent a very rich creation. Creation is a diverse entity full of what Korean women call “Han.” We are connected to one another for all eternity by Creation’s four priceless elements, Water, Earth, Fire and Air that we have inherited. Yet without the rich fragrant air of the earth that fills our lungs and permeates our skins we will die. The Magdalene’s rich fragrant perfume that filled Jesus’ lungs and anointed his body, in preparation for his burial, should be treated as an icon. This vivid picture of a woman with unbound hair, carrying an alabaster jar full of costly perfume, anointing Jesus with her perfume and her tears, and filling the room with the odour of this act serves to bring out the “sacramentality” of creation and reveals the “fragrance of resurrection,” as Chrysavvgis says, revealing the present reality while revealing the promise of the future (2000, 91).

The Magdalene's fragrance, like the sweet fragrance of the Earth that accompanies us, accompanied Jesus in life, in death, and in the life beyond death. According to environmental science, mammals and some fish have been especially endowed with lungs. With each breath, their bodies draw the atmosphere into the moist delicate membranes of their lungs and put it to use. The human body has been especially designed for this function, and this function is so crucial that total conscious control of its breath has never been given over to its brain. The fresh sweet fragrance of the Earth is a composite of the Earth's biodiversity including human diversity that renews and keeps the Earth fresh and rich with the odours of life (Suzuki 2002, 89). The Rich Woman refused to sell her rich perfume and give the money to the poor, and she refused to give total conscious control of her own spirit, to follow Jesus, the Logos of God.

### **The Magdalene and the Gardener**

Every Easter, Christians celebrate the ritual of Jesus' Resurrection. In the Gospel of John's Resurrection account, Mary Magdalene is the Woman weeping outside the tomb. Through her tears, she supposes that Jesus is the Gardener. Popular Christology dismisses this supposition and uses it to reinforce the idea that even though the Magdalene accompanied Jesus to the Cross, she lacked faith in Jesus' words and, therefore, did not recognize him at first. Tradition asserts that she was weeping because her life was dark and demon possessed; even though he had delivered her from the power of Satan, she lacked faith in his words and his promise to rise again after three days. William Barclay says:

Tradition has always had it that Mary was a scarlet sinner; whom Jesus reclaimed and forgave and purified...Mary had sinned much and love was all she had to bring ...the simple and the poignant fact is that she could not see him through her tears. Her whole conversation with the person she thought to be the gardener

shows her love...She could not recognize Jesus because she insisted on facing in the wrong direction. She could not take her eyes off the tomb and so had her back to him (1975, 265-269).

This male dominated interpretation demonizes Mary. It implies that the demons or negative emotions and spirits that she possessed were unjustified and something that needed curing. Rather than justifiable emotions that she possessed, stemming from centuries of oppression and domination, that needed to be heard by a community of faith, not just one privileged male person. Modern scholarship trying to reclaim her from her demon possessed state and to purify her from the “scarlet woman” image, separates her from the anointing woman, and thereby limits her connection to other texts, such as the Rich Ruler, that can challenge the Biblical authoritative position on the definition of morality and the definition of the Holy Spirit. Remember what Lord Rama did to Queen Thadhagathi when she challenged his authority. He killed her and demonized all her descendents, colonizing them and making them social outcasts and polluters. Remember how Suzuki said that Adam and Eve make an eternal statement. This eternal statement is what we should expect to happen here. We should not see the followers of a Lord killing or demonizing the spirituality or authority of a Queen, a female ruler who challenged their Lord. We should see a man and a woman in dialogue, actualizing an eternal statement.

No evidence suggests that the Magdalene did not trust and have faith in the words of Jesus. Jesus said his father was the gardener (Jn 15: 1 NIV). Jesus also said that the Father and he were one (Jn 10: 30 NIV). In the English translation of John’s Resurrection account, the editors have taken the Greek text and punctuated it and chosen English words that glorify Jesus at the Magdalene’s expense. However, let’s consider the unpunctuated Greek interlinear text.

The Magdalene responds to a question posed to her by two angels. Half way through verse 13, the Magdalene replies:

They took the Lord of me and I know not where they put him these things saying she turned back and beholds Jesus standing and knew not that Jesus it is says to her Jesus Woman why weepest thou whom seekest thou that one thinking that the gardener it is says to him Lord if thou didst carry him tell me where thou didst put him and I him will take says to her Jesus Mary turning that one says to him in Hebrew Rabboni which is said Teacher says to her Jesus not me touch for not yet have I ascended to the Father but go thou to the brothers of me and tell them I ascend to the Father of me and Father of you and God of me and God of you (Marshall and Nestle 1975, 337).

Here's the Greek interlinear text, punctuated and edited to glorify both Jesus and the Magdalene:

they took the Lord of me and I know not where they put [my lordly body] these things saying, she turned back and beholds Jesus standing and knew not that Jesus it is. Says to her: Jesus Woman, why weepest thou? Whom seekest thou? That one thinking that the gardener it is, says to him: Lord if thou didst carry [my lordly body away] tell me were thou didst put [my body] and I [my body] will take. Says to her: Jesus Mary! Turning that one says to him in Hebrew: Rabboni which is said Teacher. Says to her: Jesus, not me touch; for not yet have I ascended to the Father. But go thou to the brothers of me and tell them I ascend to

the Father of me and Father of you and God of me and God of you (Based upon Marshall and Nestle 1975, 337).

The text says she is looking for the “Lord of me and I know not where they put him.” It would be awkward to repeat “the Lord of me.” It would be grammatically incorrect to say “her.” So editors insert the male pronoun “him” and editors and readers assume that the Magdalene was looking for the body of Jesus because the text also says “she beholds Jesus standing and knows not that Jesus it is.” However, the surrounding text suggests she is looking for something that has been taken from her. Moreover, Jesus is the name the disciples used for their teacher. Mary is not one of the twelve disciples. She knows their teacher and recognizes him in a completely different way. She knows and acknowledges him as being one with his father, the Gardener. She also acknowledges his power and authority in a formal way. She says. “Lord, if you have taken [this Lordly body away from me] and put [this body] somewhere, tell me and I will take [this body].” Biased male-dominated reasoning and interpretation makes us think that what she is looking for is the person standing in front of her. However, as the latter part of the passage reveals, the person she is looking for is the incarnation of Jesus that she herself can personally claim as her own. She’s looking for her own divine authoritative body to govern and teach.

As the Greek text without male editorial bias reveals, the Man the Magdalene supposes to be the Gardener and calls Lord, calls Mary Jesus, not once but three times. He calls her Jesus Woman, Jesus Mary and Jesus. But she still needs a faithful body of followers to love her and enter into a relationship with her. She like Chung Hyun Kyung’s venerated goddess “Kuan In,” is full of compassion for all suffering living beings. She is weeping because the whole

universe—people, trees, birds, mountains, air, and water—still suffer under the domination of humanity and cannot enter into a relationship with her.

In the passage we just read, Jesus protects the Magdalene's Divine Incarnation and keeps it Holy. He tells her not to touch him. In this way, he cannot be accused of transferring his powerful touch, his teaching and wisdom, to her. He answers her questions: "Where is my Lord's body?" "Where is my incarnation?" by sending her to his brothers in the name they have given him. There she, in the name of Jesus without being taught by him, breathes on them and tells them to receive the Holy Spirit (John 20: 21). As the Disciples take in Her Breath, they are reborn. They, like newborn infants, transform themselves with their first sacred breath (Suzuki 2002, 49).

## **Concluding Insight**

Modern scholarship, in an attempt to redress the demonizing of Mary Magdalene and in an attempt to unify the Church Fathers of the west with the east, has disconnected the anointing stories and made it extremely difficult to realize that the Magdalene's story is the Spirit's story. The insight from Asian women, Roman Catholic tradition, Orthodox thought, and ecology illustrates how male hegemony has acquired wealth, has demonized spirits seeking justice or challenging moral privilege or authority, has removed women from ruling positions, and has down-played the Holy Spirit's role. The Gospel Lesson of the Rich Ruler and Mary Magdalene's encounters with Jesus has been ignored because the Gospel has been interpreted and edited to support and protect a male dominated theology that focuses all our attention on Jesus as the Son of God, the second person of the Trinity, down-playing Mary Magdalene as the female Jesus, the Holy Spirit, the third person of the Trinity.

Mary Magdalene's encounters with Jesus and her identification of Jesus as a Gardener in a graveyard are powerful icons. They serve to remind us of what is necessary for eternal life and also serve to warn us of what will happen should we continue to dominate and exploit our neighbour. Should we continue to dominate the Earth and exploit its rich biodiversity; the Earth will become our graveyard. Without the Earth's rich biodiversity and sweet perfume there will be no resurrection of the dead. In order to keep the Earth from becoming a wasteland, we must restore the Sacred Balance to our Earth communities. We can do this by lifting up Jesus the Holy Spirit, the Breath of God—the third person of the Trinity. We also need to be aware of the ecological crisis we face should we fail to restore this balance, and we need to believe that a just and wonderful future on earth is possible. We need faith in ourselves and our neighbour. But we need self control. Had the Rich Woman sold everything to follow a divinely privileged man, who loved her, she would never have realized her own unique incarnation as the Holy Spirit. She would have lost control of her Breath. She knew the one thing that she lacked—for eternal life. It was not more goodness or treasure stored up in heaven. It was the choice to sell all her rich earthly resources.

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