

# Connections

A monthly letter calling the church to faithful new life

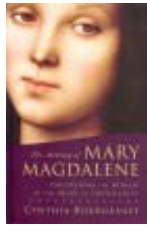
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## A story that churchgoers need to examine

I've recently read one of the most intriguing and inspiring books I've read in a long time. It's *The Meaning of Mary Magdalene: Discovering the Woman at the Heart of Christianity*, by Cynthia Bourgeault (Shambala, 2010).



Bourgeault is an Episcopal priest, a scholar, and a mystic. Parts of her way of seeing and describing what she sees, which one commentator calls "Christian intuitive wisdom," will leave some Christians wondering what she means, but those to whom her style does speak are likely to agree with another commentator who calls the book a spiritual masterpiece.

## The "master story" churches tell

Part of Bourgeault's message would be perfectly clear to most churchgoers but unfortunately is known to few. It matches what many other scholars have concluded, and it needs to be made widely known. That part is about what she calls the "master story" of today's western Christianity. As clearly and succinctly as I've ever read, she states that story and explains why we need to go beyond it.



"By the fourth century of Christianity," Bourgeault explains, "there was beginning to emerge a 'victor's circle,' which could claim for itself the status of 'orthodox.' ... This circle began to form itself around the emperor Constantine, who in 313, by a single edict, converted Christianity from a forbidden cult to the state religion and thereafter made it his pet project. The energy toward clarification, unification—and yes, imperial pomposity—emerged primarily from that quarter of the Christian world. By 325



## The task of our time



In a recent talk that you can listen to or read a transcript of [on the Internet](#), religious historian Karen Armstrong addresses what she sees as the religious task of our time: to build a global community where people of all religious persuasions can live together in harmony and respect.

Armstrong is constantly frustrated, she says, by seeing that religion keeps being one of the major sources of conflict and problems of our time. She finds this strange because each of the major faiths has at its core the ethic of compassion. "Every single one of them," she reminds us, "has developed its own version of the Golden Rule—never treat others as you would not like to be treated yourself—and has said that this is the test of spirituality." It is this, Armstrong sees every major religion declaring, that takes us beyond the prism of ego and selfishness and greed. It enables us to enter into our best selves and to enter the presence of the divine.



Yet now, Armstrong observes, "the religions which have this ethic right at the heart of their faith are seen to be the major cause of hatred and disdain and exclusion."

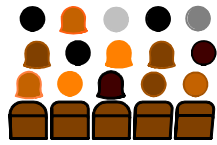
## Time for Christians to speak up

As I write, the news brings fresh evidence of this: the killing of nearly 100 people in Norway by a fundamentalist Christian. Hours before his deadly attacks, he published a 1500-page manifesto calling for Christians to rise up in a modern version of the Crusades. He stated his intention to kill not only Marxists and Muslims but also multiculturalists. This is not Christianity, but the world doesn't know that it isn't. Until more Christians openly disavow the fundamentalist claims that focus on excluding other people, and emphasize instead the compassionate behavior that true Christianity calls for, the world will keep getting a picture of Christianity that's the very opposite of what Jesus taught.



Like many others, Karen Armstrong warns us that we've become addicted to our dislikes and prejudices and pet hates but that we can no longer afford to keep feeding them. The stakes are now too high.

the church had its official creed, hammered out at the Council of Nicea in what is now southwestern Turkey and still in regular use by Christians today.”

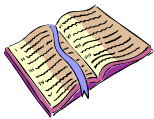


### A story that is in Christians' blood

It would still be another century and a half before an official “Bible” appeared, but a consensus as to what belonged in it was already beginning to take shape, Cynthia Bourgeault tells us. And as the church consolidated in these years and this part of the world, it had a story to tell. “You know that story, if you’ve been raised Christian,” Bourgeault reminds her readers. “It’s not only in the Bible; it’s in your blood, reinforced by the liturgy, the catechism, and the rich traditions of sacred art and iconography.”

### Only one point of view

Here’s how Bourgeault describes the story. “The basic plot is laid out in the book of Acts. It begins with the hushed silence of Jesus being taken up to heaven, followed by the fiery descent of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, which many Christians still celebrate as ‘the birthday of the church.’ The apostle Paul enters on the scene, at first a foe and then an indefatigable champion following his mystical encounter with Jesus on the road to Damascus. And then we watch as the disciples-now-apostles work out their differences and steadily spread the gospel—and the young church—to all the corners of the Holy Roman Empire.”



What Cynthia Bourgeault wants us to be aware of, however, is that running through this story are several powerful assumptions that reinforce a singular point of view about how the faith and practice of the early Christian church took shape. And what became the “master story” was only this one point of view. It is nowhere near the whole story.

### Supposedly an unbroken chain

The master story, Bourgeault explains, claims that an unbroken chain stretching from Jesus to the apostles and on to their successors in the church—elders, ministers, priests, and bishops—guaranteed the unity and uniformity



of Christian belief and practice. This supposedly unbroken chain is the basis of what the church still sees as “apostolic succession.” And when anyone has strayed from the uniformity it claims to represent, by abandoning the pure doctrine that Jesus is said to have revealed to his apostles, the story says it has been because the devil has sown weeds in the divine field.



Bourgeault wants us to be sure to notice, among other things, that by the time this master story emerged, the apostles had come to be seen as male only, despite the evidence of the scriptures to the contrary. And of course some of today’s churches still insist on the all-male version of the story.

### Overlooking what obviously doesn’t fit

“In the simplified version of this story that most Christians absorb through the skin,” Bourgeault explains, “Jesus came to earth to found a religion called Christianity, called his male-only disciples to be its apostles and priests, and gave them the sacrament of the Eucharist at the Last Supper.” And in this simplified version, obvious anomalies are overlooked—“why Mary Magdalene, who was specifically given the first apostolic charge by Jesus himself to announce the news of his resurrection, was not included among the apostles, and why Paul, who was not at the Last Supper and never met Jesus in his earthly life, was.”

But such is the power of blinders, Bourgeault observes, and most of today’s churchgoers still seem determined to keep those blinders firmly in place. Her fascinating book is an effort to remove them.

### A ticking time bomb

The master story so seamlessly became the filter through which Christians saw the world that for sixteen hundred years seeing it any other way was nearly impossible. “But the time bomb was already ticking,” Cynthia Bourgeault points out, “when in 1945 in the deserts of Egypt near Nag Hammadi, a large urn was discovered in a cave containing scrolls dating from the early days of Christianity.” They seemed to have been put there in the late fourth cen-



tury, probably in response to a bishop's having sent out a list of writings that is now seen as the earliest effort to declare a New Testament canon. "The scrolls," Bourgeault explains, "were a collection of sacred writings that had once been in use in early Christian communities but failed to make the cut amid tightening standards of orthodoxy."



From the translation and analysis that scholars have done in the years since the Nag Hammadi and other similar finds, some contents of newly found scrolls have proved to be among the earliest writings of the church. And the scholars who have examined them and studied the circumstances in which they were written and later hidden have now realized that winners and losers in the canonical sweepstakes were determined not by God's edict but by worldly politics.



"What we now call orthodoxy," explains Cynthia

Bourgeault, "came into being through the tug of war of opposing viewpoints around developing issues of Christian order and doctrine."

### A riot of pluralism

Losing views, including the one now called Gnosticism, came to be portrayed as the result of the devil's efforts. However, in Bourgeault's view, the real culprit all along has been not the losing viewpoints but the master story itself. "When one moves this sacred cow gently off the tracks," she finds, "the picture that emerges of the real origins of Christianity is far more fascinating and believable. Rather than an unadulterated 'pure doctrine' handed on serenely from apostle to apostle, early Chris-



tianity was a riot of pluralism." In the Christian communities, all different in ethnicity and temperament, "there were many local options, and the texts that circulated among these early outposts of Christians comprised an ongoing conversation rather than an unbroken monologue."

### A treasure trove of writings

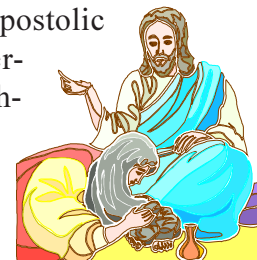
"The treasure trove of writings emerging out of Nag Hammadi and other recent finds," Cynthia



Bourgeault reports, "yields us up three very important new source materials for the study of Mary Magdalene: the Gospel of Thomas, the Gospel of Philip, and the Gospel of Mary Magdalene."

Bourgeault derives her book's inspiring portrait of Mary Magdalene and of what Bourgeault now sees as true Christianity from looking at these three in conjunction with the four New Testament gospels and the historical findings of recent decades.

What emerges, she tells her readers, differs from the master story in some very important ways. "Whereas in Acts the heroes are Peter and Paul, here it is Mary Magdalene who clearly emerges as winner of the apostolic triple crown: deepest understanding of the Master's teaching, best ability to live out what she understands, and an ongoing relationship with the Master in the visionary realms that makes her privy to teachings the other disciples know nothing about." Another important point reinforced by the more recently discovered gospels is that Jesus's inner circle of disciples included both men and women on an equal footing.



This issue, many back issues, a list of books I've written about, and more *Connections* information are available free from my web site, [www.connectionsonline.org](http://www.connectionsonline.org). To get *Connections* monthly by e-mail, let me know at [BCWendland@aol.com](mailto:BCWendland@aol.com). Please include your name, city, and state or country. To start getting *Connections* monthly by U.S. Mail, send me your name, address, and \$5 for the coming year's issues. For paper copies of any of the 18 years' back issues, send me \$5 for each year or any 12 issues.



I'm a lay United Methodist and neither a church employee nor a clergyman's wife. *Connections* is a one-person ministry that I do on my own initiative, speaking only for myself. Many readers make monetary contributions but I pay most of the cost myself. *Connections* goes to several thousand people in all U.S. states and some other countries—laity and clergy in more than a dozen denominations, and some nonchurchgoers. *Connections* is my effort to stimulate fresh thought and new insight about topics I feel Christians need to consider and churches need to address.

## The path that Jesus taught

What Bourgeault has discerned from her study is that Jesus “set his disciples upon the only known path to integral transformation: the slow and persistent overcoming of the ego through a lifelong practice of surrender and nonattachment.” The self-emptying that comes from that practice, she points out, is not renunciation that implies pushing away. It is “simply the willingness to let things come and go without grabbing on.” It is non-clinging. Bourgeault sees that the path that Jesus taught led from selfishness, fear, and narcissism to justice, compassion, and humility.



Bourgeault’s beautiful book almost lost me as she went further into the contemplative spirituality of Christian “wisdom” writings such as gospels that didn’t make it into the New Testament. But I’m well aware of how valuable such writings have been and can still be for many Christians, and I believe Cynthia Bourgeault does all of us a favor by making us aware from her analysis of these writings that we can’t merely take the master story at face value. We need to notice from the New Testament and learn from the findings of contemplative scholars like her, what important features have been left out of the story or mistakenly included in it.

*Barbara*



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## A story that churchgoers need to examine

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A true picture of Jesus, Cynthia Bourgeault emphasizes in her compelling book that I write about in this *Connections*, differs in important ways from the picture usually presented by what she calls “the master story” that has been firmly planted in most Christians’ blood.

One important difference is that the master story’s image of Jesus as a great high priest, which is preserved in many church windows and art works, had no basis in his life. “He eschewed the cultic, sacrificial dimensions of his Jewish faith,” Bourgeault observes, “and hung out, as the gospels themselves attest, as far away as possible from the temple precincts, with sinners and tax collectors, gentiles and women. The high priestly image is a reconstructed, intellectualized symbol coming from a male and sacerdotal [priestly] tradition.”

Yet especially in Christianity’s most impressive church buildings, this image is everywhere. “In basilica after basilica throughout Christendom,” Bourgeault points out, “whenever one passes beneath the tympanum of those great western doors or gazes up at the high altar to behold the image of the Christus Pancreator clad in great priestly or kingly robes (the two become easily intertwined), exercising his solitary dominion over all things, one is actually looking straight into the face of the dysfunction pressed so close to the heart of Christianity.”

