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Chapter 4

Gender, Sexuality and Religious Critique among Mary Magdalene Pilgrims in Southern France

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In the summer of 2004 I accompanied a group of Catalan and Spanish women on their pilgrimage, following 'the path of Mary Magdalene' in the south of France.[1] The trip was part of the activities of Goddess Wood, an informal women's organization founded in Barcelona in 2002 by an Argentinian woman named Dana. All the pilgrims on this trip had grown up in Catholic families but had gradually distanced themselves from Catholicism and embraced what they described as 'Goddess spirituality' or 'feminine spirituality', and they saw Mary Magdalene as a female equivalent to Jesus, a priestess of the 'pre-Christian Goddess'. La Sainte-Baume, the mountainous cave where, according to Christian legend, the saint had lived out the remainder of her life, was for them an important 'power place', rich in healing energy. Disappointment, then, was not something the pilgrims expected. Speaking in her sincere and spontaneous way, Estrella, one of the committed members of Goddess Wood, described her reaction to La Sainte-Baume: 'You enter the cave, and the first thing you see there is the Christ. Mary Magdalene is at the bottom of the cave, in the dark, there at the bottom.' For Estrella, the cave was a sacred place to venerate the Feminine and Mother Earth and she did not like the fact that a Catholic church had been built into its walls. Referring to the cave as 'the womb of Mother Earth', Estrella added: 'I got very angry there, the female space was being violated in its energy!' Especially during the mass celebrated inside the cave, Estrella felt '[an] anger that came from the guts, not from the head'. From Estrella's perspective, the Church had appropriated and monopolized access to the cave in rape-like terms: like Mary Magdalene's statues in the cave, women had been forced into compromising positions throughout Western history. In Estrella's description there were clear parallels between the way in which the 'patriarchal values' inherent in Christianity had been introduced into the cave and the way in which the Church dominated women's bodies and sexuality, as, for example, when women's bodies and especially wombs are described as impure and dangerous.

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[1] This text is based on my dissertation and sections of it form part of chapters 3 and 5 of Fedele 2012.

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Estrella's theories and her lifelong relationship with Christianity in many ways mirrored those of many female pilgrims I met during my fieldwork. In her mid-thirties, having grown up during the Franco regime in a conservative Catalan Catholic family that made her feel constantly that 'being a woman, she had to obey', Estrella had begun to distance herself from Christianity because she felt that the Church did not recognize the sacrality of the feminine and did not grant equal rights to women and men.

This chapter focuses on the kinds of corrections such pilgrims want to make to the Christian pantheon – in particular, their suggestions for alternative meanings in relation to gender – by examining their approach to the cave of La Sainte-Baume. The cave is a particularly useful starting point because it represents for the Magdalene pilgrims I accompanied the two meta-empirical beings they most want to contact on their journey: Mary Magdalene and Mother Earth. The link between the cave and Mary Magdalene is a legendary one, as the saint is believed to have spent the latter part of her life there. But as is clear from Estrella's example, the link between the cave and Mother Earth is more metaphorical – partly drawing on Jungian psychology, the pilgrims shared the New Age and Neopagan idea that caves represent an entrance into the womb of Mother Earth.

La Sainte-Baume is a mountain ridge partly covered by a thick wood, which attracts Catholic as well as alternative pilgrims but also tourists and local wanderers (Fedele 2009). The cave, which is situated on a spot where the white rock of the mountain meets the forest, is now home to a church (which has been built right into the walls of the cave) and a Dominican convent, located at the cave's entrance. La Sainte-Baume was an important pilgrimage place in the Middle Ages and is today a major site for those making alternative sacred journeys on old European pilgrimage routes related to Mary Magdalene.

The duality that the site represents – traditional Catholicism and alternative spiritualities – figures in the pilgrims' conceptualization of the cave, which in turn reveals their critique of Christianity, especially Catholicism, both generally identified simply as 'the Church'. Rituals performed inside the cave also reveal different ideas about female corporeality and sexuality that the pilgrims acquire or proclaim throughout the course of their journey. The ways in which pilgrims with Christian backgrounds use the cave to establish contact with the divine also offers insight into the religious diversity of Europe – diversity not only between Christians, Muslims, Hindus and so on but also within Christianity itself, as Protestants, Catholics and New Agers relate to old shrines and religious figures in different, albeit more or less orthodox, ways (cf. Coleman and Elsner 1998, Egan 2011, Gemzöe, this volume).

Following Elisabeth Claverie's approach in her analysis of French pilgrimages to Medjugorje (2003: 51–105), I believe that social actors are not simply passive receptors of ideas and practices but are equipped to engage with and to critique reality: before accepting beliefs and rules, the pilgrims challenge them. Claverie speaks of a '*mise à l'épreuve*', a process of 'putting [something] to the test'. For this reason I was particularly interested in the way pilgrims related to certain theories

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and ideas and the processes that led to their acceptance or refusal of certain ideas in establishing a personal set of theories and ritual practices.

During my fieldwork from 2002 to 2005 I accompanied three organized pilgrimage groups as well as several independent Catalan and Spanish pilgrims on their spiritual journeys, looking for Mary Magdalene and the Sacred Feminine. Participant observation, as well as formal and informal interviews, allowed me to pay particular attention to pilgrims' life stories and the ways in which they described their families' religious backgrounds as well as their own processes of gradually distancing themselves from the teachings they had received in childhood. I also stayed in touch with pilgrims after their journeys, to see whether there were significant changes related specifically to their pilgrimage experience.

Like Estrella, who had rejected her family's rules and values (which she described as male-centred and disempowering), the women and men I joined on their various journeys over these three years contested previous codes of femininity related to their Christian, primarily Catholic, upbringing; yet through their ritual practices they were able to redefine these codes and propose different notions of gender and sexuality. This redefinition also implied a process of ritual healing whereby pilgrims came to terms with traumas they had experienced within the Church or with physical, psychological wounds related to their sexuality. That there was often some relationship between a person's sexuality and her perception of the pilgrimage was clear after initial interviews, so whenever possible I tried to learn more about each female pilgrim's relationships to her own reproductive cycle and her sexual life in general. I conducted most of the interviews after the pilgrimage; only in a few cases did the pilgrims feel ready to speak about their experiences during the trip. These conversations soon revealed cases of sexual abuse and incest, as well as feelings of guilt or shame related to sexuality, as to these past experiences. However, during and after the pilgrimage many of these same pilgrims spoke about the positive effects certain rituals or the pilgrimage as a whole had on them, helping to heal psychological or physical traumas.

Through analysis of the pilgrims' discourses and personal as well as collective rituals performed on site, I argue that in this context pilgrimage becomes a critical journey wherein pilgrims consciously engage in a process of deconstructing patriarchal concepts and reappropriating through ritual practice shrines they deem as having been 'stolen' and monopolized by the Church. For the pilgrims shrines such as La Sainte-Baume are power places that belonged to pre-Christian and matriarchal European ancestors well before the sites became Christianized. The feelings of attraction and repulsion the pilgrims feel towards Christian figures, rituals and places are thus critically related to issues of gender and sexuality. In turn, both of these issues become intertwined in the pilgrims' construction of Mary Magdalene as the personification of the sacred feminine and the cave of La Sainte-Baume as the entrance to the womb of Mother Earth.

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Mary Magdalene, from Repentant Sinner to Priestess of the Goddess

In 2003 I joined an Italian group of three men and ten women between the ages of 35 and 53, and a 2-year-old boy, who went along with us as well. These pilgrims were all from middle- and lower-middle-class Catholic families and almost everyone had attended Catholic private schools; most had also been to university. The leader of the group, Celso Bambi, an Italian naturopath in his late forties, had a Jungian background.

Dana's exclusively female group, which I joined in the summer of 2004, consisted of 24 women between the ages of 24 and 55. Of all three pilgrimages, this was the least expensive: the women brought food from home, slept in shared rooms and even camped on the beach. Compared to the other two groups these Catalan and Spanish women were also younger on average, had a lower income level and were less well educated, but like the Italian pilgrims most of these women had attended convent schools in their youth.

In 2005 I travelled with a group of three men and 11 women (two British and 12 American) led by Roger Woolger, an internationally active past-life therapist, Jungian analyst and the author of several books. This group was the oldest (age-wise), wealthiest and the best educated, ranging in age from 50 to 73, all with university degrees. Unlike their Italian and Iberian counterparts who had travelled by car and slept in inexpensive hotels or hostels, Woolger's pilgrims slept in 3- or 4-star hotels and travelled from place to place on their own tour bus.

For most of the pilgrims La Sainte-Baume was the central place along the pilgrimage related to Mary Magdalene (Fedele 2009). The other two places especially related to the Magdalene and visited by all pilgrims were the nearby town of Saint-Maximin-en-Provence and the coastal village of Les-Saintes-Maries-de-la-Mer in the Camargue (Badone 2008, Dubisch 2009). The Magdalene's association with this region is well known; according to a Christian legend recollected by Jacobus de Voragine in his *Golden Legend* (c. 1260) shortly after the crucifixion of Christ, a group of Christians arrived in Gaul on a boat with neither oars or sails: Mary Magdalene, Maria Jacobé and Maria Salomé all disembarked together with Lazarus, Maximin and others, and the place where they landed would thereafter be called Les-Saintes-Maries-de-la-Mer, the Holy Marys of the Sea. After the conversion of Provence, Mary Magdalene retired to a cave (later identified as La Sainte-Baume) where she lived and fasted for 30 years, during which time angels lifted her up to heaven seven times per day, to receive heavenly food. After her death she was buried in Saint-Maximin-en-Provence, where her relics are conserved today.

From the earliest days of Christianity Mary Magdalene has been a controversial figure, made and remade into different Magdalenes throughout the centuries by Christians, lay and clergy both (Maisch 1996, Haskins 1993, Jansen 2000). The four canonical gospels – Matthew, Mark, Luke and John – give no information about her age or physical attributes, nor do they associate her with a male figure, the way most biblical females are. The gospel story introducing Mary Magdalene

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says that Jesus casts seven demons out of her, after which she becomes one of his followers; after remaining at Jesus' side during the crucifixion she sees the resurrected Christ and is the first person to announce the resurrection to the other disciples. But from the first centuries onwards Christian authors confused Mary Magdalene with other female figures in the gospels. In the sixth century Pope Gregory the Great created official confusion (591) when he declared that Mary Magdalene, the sinner in Luke's account (Luke 7: 37–8) and Mary of Bethany (John 11: 1–2 and 12: 1–3) were one and the same. Through this 'audacious but not capricious piece of exegesis' (Jansen 2000: 33) the first apostle became one and the same with the sister of Martha and Lazarus and the repentant sinner saved by Jesus. This conflation was made easier by the fact that both these women anoint Jesus in different episodes. In 1969 the Vatican officially rejected Gregory the Great's interpretation. Nevertheless most Catholics, lay and clergy, continue to ignore the saint's change of status and revere her still as a female model of sin, repentance and redemption through Christ.

The idea that the Magdalene may have been Jesus' companion is also popular, and can be traced back to the gospel of Philip (Jansen 2000) – a notion that has fired the imagination of theologians, philosophers and writers throughout the centuries. In the 1980s the bestseller *The Holy Blood and the Holy Grail* (Baigent, Leigh and Lincoln 1996/1982) brought this theory back to the spotlight by presenting the Magdalene as Jesus' wife and the mother of his children (Fedele 2008); more recently the theory gained worldwide popularity with Dan Brown's international bestseller, *The Da Vinci Code* (2003).

The pilgrims I travelled with felt a special link with Mary Magdalene as well, but their identification with her was because they felt that, like them, she had been wounded in her femininity and sexuality by the Church, which had transformed the 'female equivalent of Jesus' into a prostitute. The pilgrims' Magdalene represented the possibility of attaining spiritual elevation without renouncing the body, and, in fact, attaining such elevation through the body by practising sacred sexuality. Indeed, all three pilgrimage leaders described Mary Magdalene as a 'priestess of the Goddess' who knows the secrets of 'sacred sexuality'. In private practice both Celso and Dana led workshops about sacred sexuality and taught techniques to enhance sexual pleasure and overcome the patriarchal legacy of shame and guilt; the main goal of these workshops is to harness the sexual energy derived from union with a partner for spiritual elevation and personal empowerment. Some of the pilgrims had attended these workshops, some had read books about related theories and others heard about the principles of sacred sexuality during the pilgrimage. By contrast the Catholic faith's teachings that sex is legitimized only when contained within marriage and when it leads to motherhood reduce the female lover to a sinner. For the pilgrims, then, restoring the Magdalene's importance and dignity, presenting her as Jesus' partner and equal, represented the awakening of a new, liberating and more balanced view of the divine.

Apart from these theories about the importance and healing power of Mary Magdalene, the pilgrims in all three groups also shared the basics of a spirituality

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coloured by two main features: the use of an energy discourse and the importance of ritual creativity. All the Magdalene pilgrims I accompanied described the world in terms of an all-pervading life force they identified as 'energy'. Through the rituals they created they would be able to live out their spirituality; in other words, the existence of energy through which divine forces manifest themselves in the phenomenological world could and should be contacted on a physical level, via ritual.

Similar to American and British Neopagans the pilgrims also traced their spiritual roots to the pre-Christian and supposedly matriarchal religions and societies of their ancestors (Hutton 1999, Luhrmann 1989, Magliocco 2001, 2004, Pike 2001, Salomonsen 2002), although they did not describe themselves as Pagans. Like Neopagans, however, the pilgrims were concerned about the preservation of Mother Earth, the protection of indigenous wisdom and the desire for a more gender-equal, ecological and spiritual way of life.

Apart from the places related directly to Mary Magdalene, the pilgrims I accompanied also visited shrines holding dark Madonna statues, which they considered particularly powerful gateways to access 'Mother Earth's' power. 'Black Madonna' sites visited en route included Rocamadour, Chartres, Le Puy-en-Velay and Saint-Victor in Marseille, many of which were important French pilgrimage shrines in the past, while others formed part of the Camino de Santiago (cf. Gemzöe and Chemin, this volume). The leaders of each group often described these places as important centres of European Catholicism. In fact, in the leaders' discourses Europe emerged as a heartland of Christianity, which meant that these popular shrines doubled as centres of the Church's 'patriarchal' theories and practices. Reappropriating these places to their matriarchal and pre-Christian roots would therefore help to revitalize the pagan practices of the pilgrims' European ancestors. The pilgrims felt that these major European power places should not be monopolized by one particular religious tradition but made accessible to everyone so that each person could celebrate rituals according to her or his own religious allegiances or spiritual inclinations.

At La Sainte-Baume the pilgrims from all three groups used different strategies to test the effects of the cave, tapping into its energy and trying to connect with Mary Magdalene, but the outcome of these tests did not yield the same results for all. Pilgrims with a Catholic background tended to accept more easily the fact that the cave had been made into a church where Dominican friars celebrated mass each day; nevertheless the pilgrims all shared what can only be described as a gendered critique of Christianity. In fact, this figured in their reasons for joining the pilgrimage: most of the pilgrims referred to a quest for the 'Feminine' or a desire to harmonize the masculine and feminine sides of themselves. Pilgrims held that Western women have 'lost contact with their feminine essence', a loss attributed to the principles of patriarchal society, which undermines women's power and autonomy, and to the consequences of the sexual revolution in the sixties that led ambitious women to adopt masculine ways. For these same reasons women had also lost contact with nature's rhythms and with the nourishing energy of Mother Earth.

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Both Celso and Dana described the mountain of La Sainte-Baume as a sacred place crisscrossed with powerful energies and explained that religious specialists from earlier, pre-Christian societies such as the Celts had recognized the healing power of this area and considered the surrounding forest sacred. Just as with other such power places around the world, it was easier to connect here with the spirits of nature, in effect to receive the healing energy of the trees and rocks. Dana and Celso also made eclectic use of so-called shamanic techniques from South America during their pilgrimages (Fedele 2009); Celso's pilgrims, especially, used these techniques to receive nurturing energy from the surrounding world and to release heavy, potentially harmful energy back to Mother Earth.

This healing cycle of receptivity and release can be seen in one case, in particular, which exemplifies the pilgrims' wounds, the function of Mary Magdalene as a 'wounded healer' and the way in which this wounding ostensibly related to the Church's teachings about sexuality and the female body. Margot was a poet and storyteller from Roger's group who had just turned 50. Her Irish mother had given birth to her in a convent, described by Margot as the 'Scottish equivalent to a Magdalene house', and she had then been adopted by a conservative Catholic family. Margot always felt a strong connection with Mary Magdalene and this link developed gradually throughout her life:

> It was around the time of my own puberty that I realized that my mother had been an unmarried woman, so in that sense she was seen as a 'fallen woman'. There were lots of attitudes around 'bad blood' for me as an adopted baby. I might turn out bad like my mother. Later on, I myself had a child outside of marriage. So my sense of Her [Mary Magdalene] grew as I did. In those days I associated Her with the woman who was stoned, the scorned one, later as the chosen one. And for myself also, I was a chosen one. I was a baby who was given away, but also chosen. So that sense of Magdalene as the scorned woman and the chosen one was very poignant for me. As I grew up, I reclaimed my sexuality and my right to have a child outside of marriage; to live my sexuality unbound by convention. I guess I've always been mystical and had a deep interest in the sacred and the sense that a woman could experience both her sexuality and her divine ecstasy in the same way. (2 October 2005)

When Margot had a child out of marriage and raised that child as a single parent her own parents only gradually came to accept the baby. Like Estrella and Margot, many other pilgrims felt criticized by their parents whenever they wanted to live out their sexuality or lead their lives as independent women. For these pilgrims their situation was not unique but shared with other women – and men – who had been brought up in a Western society still strongly influenced by the Church's patriarchal values. These pilgrimages and the healing rituals the pilgrims were able to perform expressed a gender-centred critique of this entire contemporary situation. In these rituals they established a connection with Mary Magdalene, a wounded healer who cured the sexual wounds she herself had experienced and successfully overcome.

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Marking the Cave with Blood

The humid cave of La Sainte-Baume was described by many of Celso's and Dana's pilgrims as the symbol of their own mother's womb, a place of nurturing and of birth – an ideal space to commune with Mother Earth, from which everything had derived and to which everything would return. Like the Goddess who gave life but also took it away (Luhrmann 2001) the cave was a place of birth and death, reminding some pilgrims of their own mortality and the fact that dying would return them to the earth. Through their descriptions of the cave and the forest, Dana and Celso transformed a traditional Christian pilgrimage site into a power place related to the Sacred Feminine. They used Christian terms and figures but attributed new meanings to them, creating a kind of grammar that allowed the pilgrims to relate to La Sainte-Baume in ways they felt comfortable with. Implicit in these alternative descriptions was a critique of the patriarchal principles they considered inherent to the Christian worldview. This kind of critique became particularly evident in the rituals the Italians created: for example, the offering of menstrual blood.

The evening before the visit to the cave Celso had asked if any women in the group were having their period. Susanna, an executive secretary from Rome in her forties, said she was and added that she was suffering from severe menstrual pain. Celso then told her to put some of her menstrual blood on a paper tissue and to bring it the following day. The next morning Susanna had a high fever, which she attributed to the stress of the journey and the copious amounts of blood she was losing due to fibromas in her womb. To lower the fever Celso and Gianmichele, another naturopath in the group, administered plant extracts, and Susanna was able to make her way slowly up to the cave together with the other pilgrims. There Celso instructed her to leave her menstrual blood at a place of her choosing inside the cave, as an offering of her innermost female essence to Mother Earth on behalf of the whole group. Susanna offered her blood beside the altar where the Holy Sacrament was conserved and later told me that she was deeply moved while leaving 'this part of her':

> These are these strong emotions, you know. I had never done anything like that … I studied the Gnostics, and the gnosis considers menstruation as a high moment of femininity, of the woman. They do not see it at all as a time when the woman should be mistreated or put aside. You know all the common sayings, that menstruating women should not touch flowers because they will die etc., none of that is true … So, remembering these things [from the Gnostic group Susanna had attended in her twenties], it seemed normal to me to make this kind of gesture [offering up her blood]. It would never have occurred to me to do it, but I was already prepared to have Celso tell me that I could offer a part of myself. Moreover, it is a beautiful part of me, it is absolutely not a dirty part. I was already prepared, because I knew that, as women, we are already elevated during this time. So it was a mixture of things. I cannot describe it to you, but I remember that I began to weep. (8 April 2005)

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Susanna's account inverts popular beliefs about menstruation in Mediterranean Catholic countries: for her, menstruation and menstrual blood are not impure; on the contrary they indicate a state of particular power in women (Buckley and Gottlieb 1988). She also believed the blood offered up could heal. These beliefs reflect the pilgrims' general interest in the Gnostics, as well as the Cathars and the Templars, as historical authorities (Fedele 2008). Celso put Susanna's observations in a broader perspective, and his explanations are a good example of the way in which the leaders and pilgrims both constructed their critique of patriarchy by combining information from different arenas of knowledge:

> In the Judaeo-Christian culture and, above all, in the Hebrew culture, menstrual blood was [considered] impure … And this idea of the menstrual period as a time of impurity later passed over also to Christian culture … Today [it is important] for a woman to recognize that during the menstrual period one is more sensitive. That same menstrual period that has been seen as the time of hysteria, you see? But hysteria is [the consequence of] the negation of this sensitivity and [the negation] of the great creativity that takes place during menstruation. The period also fosters the ability to see things from a different perspective, because everything changes on a biological level. Moreover the blood has an extraordinarily therapeutic power; it can cure many kinds of diseases. (16 February 2006)

This passage, which makes clear that Celso thought it was important for men as well as women to recognize and accept the 'therapeutic' power of menstrual blood, also implies that such an offering could instil healing energy in both men and women. At the same time by using their menstrual blood, women could become aware of their capacity as healers and the healing capacity of the blood they spontaneously, and routinely, produced.

By marking the cave with what they saw as 'sacred female blood', the pilgrims criticized the patriarchal conceptualization and domination of the female body and of sexuality. Through this ritual the group also left their spiritual as well as physical imprint on the interior of the cave by establishing a blood link not only with Mother Earth but also with Mary Magdalene, who had lived in the cave. For the pilgrims both these female divinities had been wounded by attitudes related to the patriarchal domination of the Feminine. Mary Magdalene had been reduced to a sinner and prostitute and Mother Earth was constantly harmed by humanity's domination of nature and constant exploitation of the planet's resources. By re-establishing the lost connection with Mother Earth and more broadly with the Feminine essence the Magdalene represented, pilgrims felt they were able to perceive themselves again as part of, rather than separate from, Mother Earth.

On a symbolic level it was as if Susanna had returned her menstrual blood to the place it had first originated, the Earth's own womb. In this way she ritually manifested the link the Neopagan worldview makes between Mother Earth's body and the human – especially, female – body. Susanna's reconnection with

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the Feminine she felt she had lost by living in a patriarchal society was done by marking the cave with an eminently feminine fluid, menstrual blood. In turn the understanding was that this healing process would benefit not only Susanna but also the entire group, because it implied a reconceptualization of menstrual blood in particular and of femininity in general.

By contrast Dana's group made a collective offering of menstrual blood in the forest of La Sainte-Baume but they made no collective energy connections or performed any such rituals inside the cave. Unlike the Italian group they did not offer up their blood in the cave's interior, although they also wanted to use menstrual blood to re-establish an ancient alliance with Mother Earth, an alliance that would in turn strengthen their self-esteem and their powers as women. Although members of the third group of pilgrims did not participate in any such rituals, they too concurred that social change could begin only in the individual and that if more and more women healed their relations with their menstrual cycle and experienced this physical processes as something sacred, this could become an important catalyst.

'We Have to Reclaim this Place!'

The Spanish and Catalan group spent an entire afternoon at the cave, where each pilgrim was free to find a personalized way of relating to the energies of the cave and of creating an intimate relationship with Mary Magdalene and Mother Earth. Most women appeared to like the cave and did not seem disturbed by its Catholic imagery; they sat in front of certain statues of Mary Magdalene, lit candles, sat on the ground to feel Mother Earth's strength or prayed silently.

While Dana's pilgrims were visiting the cave, a group of French Catholic pilgrims were attending a mass celebrated by the priest who accompanied them, and some of Dana's pilgrims, including Dana and Clara, the ritual specialist of the group, stayed to participate. Others waited outside the cave, eating, chatting and reading the Goddess tarot for one another. When Dana and Clara emerged from the cave, Clara enthusiastically described the ritualistic precision of the priest, who had celebrated the mass using a pre-Vatican II model, never showing his shoulders to the altar. Commenting on Clara's appreciation of the priest's ritual precision, Estrella said:

> I saw that the guy was moving the energy in an impeccable way, but I did not like the goal he had in doing this. And I saw all the bosses [meaning Clara and Dana] sitting there in the first row and thought: We have to get out, to rebel! We have been sitting for centuries there on the front bench! This hurts our matrix! [*daña a nuestra matriz*] (18 September 2005)

Estrella's outpouring is another example of some female pilgrims' feelings about the intrusion of the Church into places they felt to be particularly related to

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feminine energy and the Goddess. Estrella described the emotional response she felt in her body, particularly the lower part of her body, the guts and womb. In fact she seemed to perceive the cave in a clearly physical way, referring to it as the womb – in Spanish, the word *matriz* is sometimes used to mean 'uterus' – of Mother Earth that was being 'violated in its energy'. According to Estrella the male priests not only violated this sacred female space but the womb of every woman: these men who represented the Church were still doing to women what they had done physically throughout the centuries, declaring women's sexuality impure and dangerous, burning them as witches and characterizing the Magdalene as a prostitute and sinner. Estrella perceived all this as gender-specific violence to her own body and, in particular, the part that is female *par excellence*, the uterus.

Here again in this critique the body emerges as a privileged locus to perceive the efficacy of ritualization and its outcomes.

Mary Magdalene's Smile

The mountain of La Sainte-Baume was in effect an arena where pilgrims could creatively combine the elements of the landscape and the shrine to experience a meta-empirical dimension of reality, or to receive healing (Coleman and Elsner 1998, Eade and Sallnow 1991, Fedele 2009). Even so the pilgrims had to struggle to bypass the barrier posed by the 'Catholic layer' of their psyches and to recover their sacred places and their 'own' Mary Magdalene. And yet the Italian pilgrims felt quite at ease inside the cave and in the presence of the Dominican friars. The tone was slightly different in Dana's group, however, where some pilgrims explicitly expressed their refusal to accept the Catholic imagery. But as a whole both these groups freely engaged in the creative use of Christian images and concepts. Although critical towards the patriarchal ideology they perceived as inherent to Christianity Dana and Celso had themselves developed a creative relationship with Christian and especially Catholic rituals and places; both leaders tended to convey their approach to their pilgrims by inviting them to find new ways of interpreting and accessing the 'energetic potential' of Christian elements.

Roger Woolger, leader of the English-speaking group I accompanied in the autumn of 2005, had a different approach, which reflected his psychoanalytic approach to religious phenomena (Fedele 2012). Whereas Celso's group spent an entire day visiting the mountain and Dana's pilgrims celebrated their rituals during a three-day stay, Roger had calculated that the pilgrims would need an hour to get to the site and back and half an hour to visit the cave. Roger's pilgrims missed the wild part of the forest with its huge trees and rocks and saw instead the more civilized, Christianized side of the place. No spirits, sacred trees or rocks were mentioned as the pilgrims trod the gravel path with Christian chapels on either side, depicting different moments of the Gregorian Magdalene's life. Roger's pilgrims did not seem particularly impressed by the cave either and only a few lit candles, lingered with

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their eyes closed at one of the Magdalene statues or prayed in silence. Two of them, though, secretly left something in a spot of their choosing, inside the cave.

Outside the cave and on the way back down several pilgrims did criticize the Church and its treatment of Mary Magdalene as a repentant sinner instead of an important apostle. Many had read or heard from Roger about Susan Haskins' *Mary Magdalene: Myth and Metaphor* (1993) in which the art historian denounced the way Christian exegetes had remade the first apostle into a prostitute.

Significantly, many of these pilgrims, a number with predominantly Protestant backgrounds (and whose travel leader, Roger, had a less than enthusiastic approach to the cave), nonetheless reported experiences similar to those reported by Dana's and Celso's groups. Margot, the Scottish poet and storywriter from Roger's group, told me that she had not expected there to be a church inside the cave but something more 'wild'. She concluded that the Church often 'appropriated places like this'. Most of the pilgrims reported some discomfort at being in the middle of 'all these repentant Magdalenes, crosses and relics'. They maintained that they did not feel the Magdalene had ever lived there and that they had not experienced particularly strong feelings in the cave. Roger's group was particularly critical of Catholicism's prohibition against women being priests and were angry about what Christian exegetes 'had done to Mary Magdalene'. Raised in mainly Protestant environments, these pilgrims were not used to Catholic imagery with its pathos and tragedy. Distracted by the marble statues, they barely mentioned the beauty of the cave. The two in the group with Catholic backgrounds, Margot and Leonard, did like the cave. On hearing the reactions of the other pilgrims, Margot observed:

> In the cave it was very interesting; you know it felt like there were layers. You know the layer of the monks who venerate maybe a very different Magdalene, more about the biblical fallen woman, and yes, somewhere there was a really deep ancient energy in the cave as well, and it felt like in a sense she was the cave, you know, the cave itself, the earth. You are the earth itself, you are inside the mother there. (2 October 2005)

Margot identified with some layers of the cave and not with others. The 'biblical fallen woman' who pertained to the Catholic Church did not speak to her, but there was another, more 'ancient' layer of Mother Earth where she could feel the connection with the Magdalene. In Margot's terms it seemed as though certain pilgrims were able to connect with the more ancient layer, feeling the Magdalene's energy and entering Mother Earth's body, whereas others felt blocked at the more recent level, which is still dominated by Catholic images and ideas.

Confused by all the statues inside the cave, Margot and her British friend Katrina finally discovered a Magdalene who was smiling, half hidden. Katrina observed: 'There was a very interesting statue of Mary [Magdalene]. For me, it was almost as if she had a slight smile on her face. It did speak to me.' Katrina's background was Methodist and yet she and Margot both interpreted the smile in similar ways. For Margot, this Magdalene did conform to the repentant sinner

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version imposed by Catholicism but also hinted at something more ancient and subversive. Katrina, likewise, spoke of both a present layer and a past layer, 'the Magdalene that was' and 'the Magdalene that is now'.

On the whole pilgrims in Roger's group seemed to have a more distanced and even ironic attitude towards religion. Helped by Roger's playful and flexible attitude towards the pilgrimage experience they also highlighted the more mundane aspects of the trip such as the good food and wine and the shopping opportunities, and it is important to note that, similarly to Simon Coleman's ironic pilgrims visiting Walsingham in England (Coleman and Elsner 1998, Coleman 2009), the irony and scepticism in Roger's group did not imply a lack of engagement in the pilgrimage experience (Coleman 2009: 31).

Conclusions

As the above accounts show, even if pilgrims hailed from different countries and their leaders had different approaches, their discourses, ritual practices and commentaries had important points in common. Sharing the assumptions of the '*sociologie de la critique*', the sociology of criticism or pragmatic sociology (Boltanski 2011/2009, Boltanski and Chiappello 1999: 73–6, Claverie 1990), I do not consider social actors – in this case, pilgrims – passive victims of the Christian milieu in which they were raised nor of the spirituality they went on to embrace. In different phases of their lives these pilgrims took the Christian principles they had received from their families, put them to the test, as it were, and found them wanting; especially in terms of gender and sexuality, these pilgrims felt that the Church did not offer useful models and references for their lives. Books and workshops had, however, helped them grow and develop their own critical approach towards Christianity; along the way they discovered that certain Christian figures and places still spoke to them and allowed them to commune with the divine. Not satisfied with the pre-Christian gods and goddesses venerated by British and American Neopagans, the pilgrims used their tours to create a 'new' and 'corrected' Christian pantheon composed of entities such as Mother Earth but also traditional Christian saints. With the help of their leaders these pilgrims abandoned the orthodox concepts (although not the orthodox terms) of their Christian educational upbringing and created their own Mary Magdalene. The divinities they venerated were in opposition to the 'old' and 'limiting' pantheon offered by the Church, but as a comparison of the three groups' visits shows, pilgrims were willing to test the power of their divinities as well as their leaders' choices of certain power places and the supposed healing powers attributed to such sites.

Studies about pilgrimage to Christian shrines have established that even if these journeys may appear to be inscribed in a precise religious tradition the pilgrims' practices often differ from the orthodox uses and interpretations of the sites (Eade and Sallnow 1991, Claverie 2003, Hermkens, Jansen and Notermans 2009). Unlike Catholic pilgrims visiting Lourdes (Notermans, this volume) or

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Medjugorje (Claverie 2003), Mary Magdalene pilgrims visiting French shrines did not identify themselves as Catholics and their practices were therefore even more explicitly critical, with a focus on reclaiming the 'true' Magdalene from a distorted history of misappropriation. With their journeys the pilgrims aimed to deconstruct the orthodox meaning of the visited shrines and to attribute to them a different, corrected significance. Pilgrimage emerges in this context as a doubly critical journey: critical because it represents a way of expressing disapproval on a religious, political and social level but also because it constitutes an important moment in the pilgrims' own private construction of a worldview that is independent of that espoused by the Church.

In the process of critique inherent in these pilgrimages, the female body and particularly its reproductive cycle were of crucial importance. Transforming the cave from a place of repentance and self-denial into the regenerating and healing womb of Mother Earth, the pilgrims rejected the Church's assumptions about the body (and especially the female body) as a place of sin. Celebrating their own rituals inside the cave they opposed the Church's appropriation of this and other power places and affirmed the sacrality not only of Mother Earth's womb but also of the female womb in general. By referring to a pre-Christian European past, the pilgrims also criticized the much-debated Judaeo-Christian roots of Europe and their enduring influence on European conceptualizations of gender and sexuality.

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