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## **Transcript of: “Nevertheless, She Persisted: Women’s Religio-Political Witness for Love and Justice”**

**Presented on July 19, 2019 by  
Rosemary Carbine**

### **Prof. Jane Regan:**

Now it's my honor to introduce today's presenter. Dr. Rosemary Carbine is currently an associate professor of religious studies at Whittier College in California. She trained as a systematic theologian, and specializes in historical and constructive Christian theology, with a focus on comparative, feminist, womanist, and Latinx/ mujerista theologies, theological anthropology, public and political theologies, and teaching and learning in theology and religion. She is especially interested in women's liberation theologies with respect to the US Christian social movements and practices.

After earning her MA and PhD in theology from the University of Chicago Divinity School, Dr. Carbine completed a post-doctoral fellowship in public theology at the Center for the Study of Religion at Princeton University. She has taught at St. Mary's College in South Bend and then at the College of the Holy Cross in Worcester-- I think some of you know her from there-- during which time she won grants from the Wabash Center, which is a center that emphasizes teaching within the areas of religious studies, and was selected as a research assistant in the Women's Studies and Religion Program at Harvard Divinity School. And that very much laid the foundation for her subsequent scholarly work.

Dr. Carbine is the co-editor of three books for which she's also been a contributing author, namely: *The Gift of Theology* from Fortress Press in 2015, *Theological Perspectives for Life, Liberty, and Pursuit of Happiness* from Palgrave MacMillan in 2013, and *Women Wisdom and Witness* in Liturgical Press-- I'm sorry, 2012. In addition, she has published numerous essays and scholarly collections, including *Theologies of Failure* with Cascade Books in 2019; *Planetary Solidarity* with Fortress Press in 2017; *Awake to the Moment: An Introduction to Theology* in Westminster, John Knox Press in 2016; *Questioning the Human* from Fordham University Press in 2014; *Frontiers in Catholic Feminist Theology* from Fortress Press in 2009; *Prophetic Women* from Crossroads 2009, and *Cross-Examination* from Fortress Press in 2006.

Her scholarly articles have also appeared in peer-reviewed journals such as Harvard Theological Review, Journal of Academic Study of Religion, Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion, Journal of the American Academy of Religion, and Teaching Theology and Religion. Her scholarship has elaborated a feminist public theology that reclaims Vatican II's approach to the role of the Church in the modern world and simultaneously redresses common clerical and patriarchal assumptions about the agents and activities of US public Catholics.

Dr. Carbine has generously served in various professional societies. She's been an active member and nearly annual presenter in the American Academy for Religion and the Catholic Theology Society of America. She has co-chaired AAR's Feminist Theory and Religious Reflection Group. And in CTSA, she served as co-convenor and convenor, respectively, of the Women's Consultation on Constructive Theology and the topic session on Theological Anthropology.

Currently, Dr. Carbine is an editorial team member for the international journal *Critical Theology*. She is a board member of the Feminist Studies and Religion Forum, and sits on the Theology and Learning Committee and serves on the Women and Religion Unit steering committee, both in the AAR. So with all of that and the much work that she's done, without any further ado, please join me in welcoming Dr. Rosemary Carbine speaking on "Nevertheless, She Persisted."

### **Dr. Rosemary Carbine:**

Thank you, Jane, for that warm welcome. I also want to thank Melinda Donovan and then Jane for handling all the arrangements. I want to thank my colleagues in the BCSTM and in the Theology Department with whom I've worked over the years. And of course, to Rita, I want to thank you for sponsoring this annual event. It's really good to be with you all for this festive occasion, hopefully, a solemnity soon.

I'm so honored to stand among the women witnesses in the communion of saints who delivered the prior lectures in this series, and constructed, according to Carolyn Osiek and Francine Cardman, different portraits of the Magdalene. Past talks in this series have engaged with aesthetic, archaeological, biblical, contemplative, ecclesiological historical, liturgical, mystical, pastoral, and practical studies of Mary Magdalene as a prism through which to critically question and reconsider women's limited roles in the Church and to advocate for more egalitarian inclusive fully participatory understandings of Church leadership, in particular, and of the Church in general to reflect the diverse people of God.

So today I'm in conversation with but I'm going beyond these past lectures and these past studies. In my talk today, I'm exploring theological and ecclesiastical issues by resourcing the Magdalene's praxis of prophetic public witness and ministry for fresh insights into women's religious and political roles or women's ways of doing public theology. And this my case study will come from the interfaith intercultural movement, The Revolutionary Love Project.

So first, I will offer some critical and constructive theological reflections on Mary by tethering together feminist New Testament studies, including the Gospel of Mary, with Eastern Catholic liturgical traditions in order to illuminate Mary's prophetic witness as a praxis of world making-- that is, imagining and incarnated the world-- otherwise, then imperial and other kinds of violence. The Magdalene's witness functions as one potent theological symbol for women's audacious ways of doing public and political theology today. That is, of generating alternative possible futures of love and justice.

Second, I will describe the theological and political praxis of the Revolutionary Love Project, which is an emerging US social justice movement as embodying this praxis of world making. Otherwise, then the violence that characterizes our times-- gender and sexual violence, xenophobia, hate crimes, and white nationalist movements-- that predominate in our day. Pointing out some unexpected but provocative parallels between Mary Magdalene and the Revolutionary Love Project, I will engage feminist and womanist theology to elaborate on love as a theopolitical ethic of justice based on the Love Project's notion of love as seeing no stranger, as tending personal and social political wounds, and as birthing a new future.

So first, Mary Magdalene-- on your handout, you'll see that there are some of the slides replicated from the presentation today. And we're going to start with Mary Magdalene, who she is not *via negativa*. Feminist scholarship within the ever-growing field of Magdalene studies-- or what I call Magdaleneology-- recovers Mary's praxis of theological and prophetic witness *via negativa*. As Sandra Schneiders remarked in this series in her lecture, the Madeline's personal identity and religious roles are quote "historically confused, theologically contorted, and ecclesiastically manipulated and prostituted" unquote. So thus, a feminist hermeneutics of suspicion needs to critically name who and what Mary Magdalene is not to dispel false misrepresentations and to clarify her personal and religious identity roles and relationships.

Feminist, biblical, and theological studies disentangle Mary Magdalene from other notable women in the gospels important in their own right-- the unnamed woman with the alabaster jar at Simon the leper's dinner party in Bethany, who anoints Jesus's head in Mark and Matthew; the unnamed repentant sinner at Simon the Pharisee's dinner party who wept on and washes Jesus feet with her tears and oil and then dries them with her hair, and whom Jesus forgives due to her great love-- that's in Luke-- and Mary of Bethany at the festive dinner after Lazarus's resurrection, who anoints Jesus's feet with oil and dries them with her hair in John-- all of which seemingly symbolize Jesus's burial. She's even conflated with the unnamed adulterous woman saved by Jesus from stoning in John. In his renowned Easter homily 33 in the late 6th century, Pope Gregory the Great assembled and blended all of these women into a theological mosaic to signify-- that is, to ingrain, interpret, reify, even ossify-- Mary Magdalene in the Western Christian theological imagination as the previously Spirit-possessed and now radically reformed, yet ever repentant sexual sinner. Albeit for pastoral purposes and politically tumultuous times, Gregory's homily equates Mary seven demons with the totality of vices.

And important for our talk today, our time together today, he describes Mary's repentance from bold speech in ways that negate her prophetic witness. Quote "She had spoken proudly with her mouth, but in kissing the Lord's feet, she fixed it-- her mouth-- to the footsteps of her redeemer" end quote. Mary Magdalene cannot be reduced to the archetypal repentant sexual sinner, and she cannot be used as an imitative model of silent, submissive, servile women disciples. Perhaps this papal theological signification of the Magdalene aimed to undermine or in theologically sideline and suppress the institutional Church condemned, but then very popular, extracanonical Gospel of Mary.

This gospel reveals and recounts, in Karen King's analysis, early internal Church conflicts over women's leadership, especially gendered rivalry for early Church leadership. This gospel was written in Greek in the second century CE. It's circulated in the third century CE, and it persisted in Egyptian Coptic into the fifth century CE-- interesting that his sermon comes around that same time. The Gospel of Mary depicts Mary Magdalene in a christological role.

Immediately after the Savior commissions the disciples to preach the Good News and then departs, she greets them. She assuages and consoles them with peace, and then instructs the other disciples at Peter's request, by explaining secret teachings that she received from Jesus. This grants her equal or perhaps superior spiritual and salvific knowledge to the others.

Peter then contends with Mary for legitimate community leadership. He and Andrew together question both her teachings and her relationship with Jesus. Peter challenged and outright even denied her personal experiences of Jesus's resurrection and her prophetic commissioned by the risen Jesus to publicly preach and teach the Gospel-- that is, to see here and be empowered to share her witness.

This is recounted in the Gospel of Mary chapter 6-- as on your handout there-- and also chapter 10. This extracanonical gospel tradition of the Magdalene Petrine rivalry correlates with other biblical traditions of other rivalries between different apostles. So, for example, Peter's prominence as we know is portrayed among groups of

men as disciples, variously described as the 12 or the 70 who are involved in Jesus's ministry, in identifying Jesus as the Messiah, and even in the leadership of the Jerusalem Church.

But yet as Sandra Schneiders has elaborated, the biblical gospel accounts about Peter's leadership also feature Jesus repeatedly correcting Peter's leadership style of hierarchical exclusionary power over others. He often chastises Peter for his false primacy, for his superiority, his insularity, and instead models for Peter how to enact servant leadership, not to judge or exclude others, but to welcome everyone, to wash each other's feet, and so on. Moreover, in John, Peter's leadership is downplayed. He takes second place to the Beloved Disciple at the Last Supper, in the race to the empty tomb, and in recognizing the post-resurrection Jesus.

So this Magdalene Petrine rivalry that we see in the Gospel of Mary echoes these other scriptural precedents, and these rivalries record, as Elaine Pagels observes, rivalries between different competing Christian groups such as Petrine or Johannine Christians, or Petrine and Magdalene Christians, who are revering these particular apostles as their figurative leaders. So aside from the Dominican Order of Preachers, which heralds the Magdalene as an exemplary charismatic model and aside from southern French legend that also reveres her preaching, the predominant portrait of Mary Magdalene in the Western Christian tradition as the perpetual, penitent woman is frequently reiterated in religious and popular literature, legend, and the art. But, of course, it obscures and defaces Mary's visionary and prophetic witness, which must be recovered and restored *via positiva*-- through a feminist hermeneutics of remembrance, which we have done or which we've begun by looking at the Gospel of Mary.

Black Catholic womanist theologian Diana Hayes leverages the notion of subversive memory, which, quote, "contradicts the assumed reality and presents a paradoxical perspective" end quote. And she does this in order to retell a predominantly white history of US Christianity, so that it reclaims and integrates the rich diversity of US black Catholic history, culture, and religious experience, which is too long, marginalized and dismissed, or even whitewashed, in an often Protestantized field of American religion and also in the at times limited hermeneutic circle of Catholic theology. Inspired by Alice Walker's definition, Hayes's womanist theology challenges predominant race, gender, class, sexual, and religious stereotypes of black women who are often ostracized as quote "outsiders within various communities, including Christianity." As Hayes argues quote, "black Catholic women can bring to the forefront of womanist dialogue images of black women that contradict the dominant perspective-- women such as Hagar, abused and misused by both her master and mistress, yet taught by God how to survive in the wilderness, as African-American women had to do for centuries in this land."

And then she goes on to say, "and let us not forget the two Marys-- the Mother of God, who had the courage and audacity to say yes to God that shattered all of human history, and Mary Magdalene, the Apostle to the apostles. As she was honored in the early Church, the first to see the risen lord rather than the fallen and lowly woman whom Jesus had to save from stoning" unquote.

So drawing on Hayes's approach to subversive memory, which means remembering Mary Magdalene as a woman of color, a feminist hermeneutics of remembrance also needs to actively retell the sub-alter, multi-dimensional stories, vision, and praxis of Mary Magdalene. That is, we need to remember Mary Magdalene in Christian history and tradition by examining particularly salient scenes in biblical and extracanonical gospels, which as I will show resonate and reverberate with some contemporary scholarly, liturgical, and popular contexts, as well as powerful contemporary US faith-based social movements. Mentioned 13 times in the New Testament, Mary leads almost every gospel list of prominent women disciples who followed Jesus's itinerant ministry, except for John 19 which lists his mother first among the women who stood at the cross.

As Amy-Jill Levine argues, Mary epitomized multiple options for first century Jewish women. She enjoyed economic savvy and autonomy, freedom of time and travel, and the ability to appear and speak in public at a time when women's public witness was denigrated and debased-- not so different today. We're going to talk about that later.

Identified with the seaside fishing town of Magdalena, or Migdal, on the western side of the Sea of Galilee and not by patriarchal relations, which likely signals her independent status and her break with her home and family to join the Jesus movement, Mary was healed and liberated from spirit or demon possession in Jesus' ministry of exorcism. Subsequently, she with other Galilean and Julian women disciples, like Joanna, Susanna, Martha, and Mary of Bethany, and quote "many others unnamed", but still mentioned. All of them financially patronized, supported, and in other ways backed as well as participated, in the Jesus movement and its teaching, preaching, healing, and table fellowship ministries out of their own resources. And that's recounted in Luke 8 and Luke 10.

In both Roman and Eastern Catholic Churches, Mary is portrayed as a model, prominent disciple, prophet, visionary, leader, and is renowned as the Apostle to or of the apostles as a result of her primary witness to and preaching about the resurrection in Mark, Matthew, and John. Mary Rose D'Angelo and Barbara Reid have noted Luke's limits on women's roles in the resurrection story. The women do not encounter the risen Jesus and are not commissioned by him to announce the resurrection to the disciples in Luke 24.

Nonetheless, the gospels agree that Mary accompany Jesus throughout the Paschal events. She witnessed his crucifixion, his death and burial. She waited and watched at the tomb with other myrrh-bearing women who vary in each gospel's telling to anoint Jesus's body. She encountered the empty tomb in the predawn hours, primarily eyewitnessed and was commissioned to prophetically proclaim Jesus's resurrection and his future ministry in Galilee, not only once but in an ongoing way.

Even in Luke's telling, which downplays her commission, says that she repeated it to all the rest. So not only once, but in an ongoing way. She attended Passover as well as Pentecost gatherings with other disciples, and thus was empowered and vilified by the spirit to preach the gospel. As Barbara Reid observes, prophetic witness, especially but not only by women, is typically rejected. Even Jesus was kicked out of the Nazareth synagogue and driven out of town and threatened with death for prophetic preaching.

Also in Luke's telling, Mary and the women are terrified at the empty tomb, but are encouraged by the angels to remember Jesus's preaching and ministry. The angels announced the resurrection to the women, and the women in turn preach the resurrection to the disciples. Mary gives the good news to the disciples but in Luke's and also Mark's telling, her continued prophetic witness, which makes significant theological and christological claims, is doubted and dismissed by them as an idle tale in Mark 16 and in Luke 24.

Moreover, Mary's rejected as a suitable apostolic replacement for Judas, among the 120 persons who appear in Acts 1, although she fulfilled the requisite criteria of personal confession of an experiential encounter with the risen Jesus-- that is, to continue to give prophetic witness to the gospel. So in both the extra canonical Gospel of Mary and in Luke, the Good News is delivered by Mary, but incites controversy. It is contested and must be patriotically confirmed by Peter, who is amazed upon seeing the empty tomb and only later receives an appearance of the risen Jesus.

In John's telling, Mary's persistent prophetic witness is still not believed. Peter and the Beloved Disciple competitively raised to the tomb to confirm the resurrection, and only the Beloved Disciple is reported to see and believe. But they don't see the risen Jesus. The narrative then shifts.

Mary stays and mourns at the tomb alone after Peter and the beloved disciple abruptly left, almost as quickly as they fled the scene of Jesus's arresting crucifixion. She encounters two angels in the empty tomb and a supposed gardener, both of whom she audaciously asks for the body of Jesus, to presumably anoint and then rebury. And then she sees and greets the risen Jesus himself, who offers her a better alternative future plan. She recognizes the risen Jesus through her tears when he calls her name.

So in this brief moment of tearful reunion and joyful recognition, Jesus gives Mary, in my view, a twofold commission. One, not to hold or cling to him since he can no longer be localized or circumscribed as the risen Jesus of Nazareth, but is now radically universally present as the cosmic Christ, and second, to boldly go and then tell, to proclaim the Good News to the disciples, not just to the disciples, but to the world. Part of Mary's ministry then involves globalizing the Good News. I have seen the Lord to the whole people of God, which strengthens the other disciples for their future encounter with the risen Jesus and for their new post-Easter ministries among and with all nations.

Mary functions here as a prophetic leader to the early Christian community because, as black Catholic womanist theologians claim, God makes a way out of no way for her. God encourages her toward new ways of seeing, of envisioning, and empowering and even enacting a new life with new future possibilities.

The 23 Eastern Catholic Churches in communion with Rome uphold this very powerful portrait of Mary's prophetic witness. As a Catholic feminist theologian, I inhabit and struggle to survive, negotiate, and thrive at the intersections of creative tension, that is critical engagement with yet creative appropriation of both Roman and Eastern Catholic traditions in the United States. I am a cradle born and raised member of the Byzantium Catholic Church in America, specifically Carpatho-Rusyn Ruthenian, and I was socialized throughout my education in a biritual way in both Roman and Byzantine Catholic Churches.

As you can see here, the Byzantine Catholic Church in the United States consists of an archeparchy led by an archbishop in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, three other eparchies led by bishops in Passaic, New Jersey; Parma, Ohio; and Phoenix, Arizona; along with a seminary of St. Cyril and Methodius in Pittsburgh. So because of this background, I'm equally liturgically and theologically accustomed to statues or icons, holy water and incense, instrumental or acapella music, notions of salvation as justification or transfiguration, and so on. However, I'm also equally liturgical and theologically alienated in both traditions by egalitarian ideals that get implemented in exclusive theologies and practices.

Byzantine Catholics revere Mary's praxis of resurrection witness and gospel proclamation during the Holy Saturday vigil service, which is called the Resurrection Matins or Matins of the Resurrection. This service occurs without epistle, gospel reading, sermon, or Eucharist, and it consists primarily of the celebrants the cantor, the choir, and the people initially participating in a procession that recalls the myrrh-bearing women's journey to wait at the tomb, and then singing acapella the canon or liturgical poem of Saint John Damascene from the 8th century as well as chanting some psalms-- specifically, the praises from psalms 148 through 150. And all of this is interspersed with litanies and hymns.

So I want to share with you some excerpts from Damascene's canon in the Resurrection Matins, which emphasize the theologically significant role of Magdalene's prophetic witness. So on your handout, you have the excerpts in your text, and I want to play them for you. So first, we have the hymn after ode 3, which recounts the myrrh-bearing women's activities.

(SINGING) "the women with Mary before the dawn found the stone rolled away from the tomb, and they heard the angel say: "What do you seek among the dead, as a mortal, the One who abides in everlasting light? Behold, the

linen of burial. Go in haste and proclaim to the world that, having conquered Death, the Lord is risen; for he is the Son of God, the Savior of all.

And now I want to play for you an excerpt from the stanza in ode 7-- I just want to warn you. At the beginning, I have to adjust the volume, so there may be a blast of "Christ is Risen." We know that. We're in that post-Easter time, so we already knew that. But just bear with me. I need to find the excerpt. So just bear with me.

Christ has risen from--

OK, so it wasn't that bad.

(SINGING) Pious women ran in tears to you, O Christ, bringing myrrh to you as dead; but instead, they adored you in joy as the the living God and announced your mystical Passover to your disciples.

OK, so whether received from the angel or the risen Jesus, Mary fulfills this prophetic commission by saying to the other disciples, "I have seen the Lord." In the resurrection mountains, Byzantine Catholics are cast in that same Magdalene role and continue her commission by repeatedly singing "Christ is Risen" throughout the service. The Resurrection Matins also include praises based on the psalms and hymns called the Paschal Stichera. During the Stichera, the people akin to the Magdalene first venerate the cross, the gospel book, and the icon of the resurrection.

And then they announce the Good News in multiple languages per Pentecost. So as they approach the celebrant and he greets them, Christ is risen, they respond, indeed, he is risen. And depending on the custom of the Church and its demographics, this call and response can be done in Slavonic, Greek, Arabic, Slovak, Hungarian, Romanian, and even Spanish. Some of the Stichera specifically recall the Magdalene Commission and the people's role in continuing it. So I want to play you two excerpts from the Paschal Stichera, which you also have written on your handout.

(SINGING) O women, be the heralds of good news and tell of the vision and say to Zion: "Accept the good news of joy from us the news that Christ has risen." Exult and celebrate and rejoice, O Jerusalem, seeing Christ the King, coming from the tomb like the bridegroom.

And then one last excerpt-- just bear with me.

So let the wicked perish at the presence of God-- Pasch so delightful, Pasch of the Lord is the Pasch--- most honored Pasch now dawned on us. It is the Pasch! Therefore, let us joyfully embrace one another. O Passover, save us from sorrow;

for Christ has shone forth from the tomb as from a bridal chamber, and filled the women with joy by saying: "Announce the good news to my apostles!

So in her talk last year, Francine Cardman examined Mary Magdalene in different Western and Eastern Christian historical, cultural, and liturgical context as a lightning rod for understanding those particular times and places, contextual, and pastoral needs. At the advent of the 21st century, Diane Apostolos-Cappadona suggested that interest in the Magdalene resurged in the aftermath of the 9/11 terror attacks in the US because loved ones lacked a body to mourn and bury, and instead faced an empty tomb but yet hoped like the Magdalene for affirmation of new life. In our own time, aside from the Magdalene's popularity and cultural pious and ecclesial imaginaries, disrupting in dismantling the Magdalene traditions negative effective history, *via negativa*, continues in the liturgy,



in the arts, including film, and in antisexual violence movements, all to restore *via positiva* to the Magdalene's image and consequently enhance women's status.

So liturgically, we've just done the work of recovering Eastern Catholic traditions of the resurrection mountains. We're working today-- 50 years after Pope Paul VI in 1969-- changed the liturgical Lectionary readings about Mary Magdalene from the unnamed penitent woman in Luke to Mary's witness of the resurrection in John. So 50 years later, in 2019, resurgent interest in Mary Magdalene occurs in our day, and demonstrates an intersection of a newly released film with the #MeToo movement.

In 2019, Focus Films released *Mary Magdalene*, which you see here, the film poster, which rehabilitates Mary's image as the misrepresented penitent sex worker, which has predominated in Christian theology, devotion, legend, art, literature, drama, and other films. In this film, Mary is rightly portrayed as the Apostle to one of the apostles. She's involved in what *The Guardian's* review of the film calls quote "a platonic apostlemance with Jesus" unquote.

[LAUGHTER]

If it was Peter, it might be a bromance. And if the Beloved Disciple, may be a transgender person, and is cast as a primary witness to the important events and major purpose of his ministry, death, and resurrection. In a revisionist twist, the film's screenwriter stylize Mary as an unmarried midwife who's considered "mad" because she rejects marriage and prays alongside men in the synagogue. Her father and brothers punitively subject her to a failed midnight seaside exorcism ritual to rid her of her so-called demon of resistance to patriarchal family and religious norms and practices. She encounters Jesus after barely surviving this violent ritual, she's baptized by him, and then leaves her family to follow him. In another feminist twist, the film was distributed by the Weinstein Company--

[LAUGHTER]

--which as we know was bankrupted and sold as a result of Harvey Weinstein's three decades of sexual harassment, assault, and abuse and allegedly 100 of aspiring actresses, journalists, and models that reignited the #MeToo movement, in addition to civil and class action lawsuits as well as criminal investigations and charges against Weinstein and he will be tried in September of 2019.

[APPLAUSE]

Now as previously mentioned, Mary's prophetic witness to the resurrection and to the ongoing post-Easter Jesus movement ministries is recorded in the biblical and extracanonical gospels as disbelieved and as dismissed as nonsense. It's in Mark 16, Luke 24 and even in the Gospel of Mary. Likewise, the #MeToo movement created by civil rights and anti-sexual violence activists Tarana Burke in 2006, and not by Alyssa Milano in 2017.

This movement reemerged in 2017 because #MeToo lifts up women's and all survivors testimonies because survivors of all genders are still discounted and disregarded. Exactly one year after Weinstein's disgraced downfall due to countless survivors' testimonies, Dr. Christine Blasey Ford of Palo Alto University and Stanford University demonstrated personal and political courage to publicly testify before the US Senate Judiciary Committee about her accusations of sexual assault against then US Supreme Court nominee Brett Kavanaugh.

Despite her compelling testimony of traumatic events from the early 1980s, Justice Kavanaugh was narrowly confirmed to the US Supreme Court. He sits on the high court alongside another fellow Catholic, Justice Clarence Thomas. Nearly three decades ago, in 1991, Professor Anita Hill of Brandeis University-- then a University of



Oklahoma law professor-- testified during the US Senate Judiciary Committee hearing for Justice Thomas about her allegations of sexual harassment against him.

The Kavanaugh hearings that were recently held recalled the Thomas hearings with a senate committee that feigned an understanding of sensitivity to sexual violence but instead interrogated and grilled survivors about credibility, about their allegations, and sometimes really surprising and shocking graphic detail-- excuse me-- detail and their lack of reporting. Both hearings, as Professor Hill observed, chose a politics of expedient-- of an expedient end rather than a fully transparent process with an independent third-party investigation.

When women prophetically announced good news and denounce bad news, they are disbelieved. Nevertheless, they persist. Moreover, when women stand in solidarity for racial, gender, sexual, and social justice and for broad civil and human rights, they are interrupted, rebuked, silenced, and politically disenfranchised as noncitizens and even as nonpersons, sometimes through chants like "Lock her up!" or as unfortunately recently, "Send her back." Nevertheless, they persist. On February 7, 2017, Senator Elizabeth Warren incorporated into her speech on the US Senate floor a 1986 letter and statement from Coretta Scott King in order to oppose Attorney General nominee Senator Jeff Sessions. Senate Majority leader Mitch McConnell interrupted her speech, citing a Senate rule about inappropriate speech that impugns another senator.

In her exchange with McConnell, Warren protested the exclusion of Coretta Scott King's words and witness and testimony from the Senate's deliberative debate. McConnell said, quote, "She was warned she was given an explanation. Nevertheless, she persisted," end quote. So after Warren was silenced and barred from participating during the rest of the sessions debate on the Senate floor, Warren finished her speech, including Coretta's letter and statement outside the Senate on Facebook.

Warren's savvy strategy created an alternative space for more inclusive and just political conversation to continue as well as galvanized further racial and gender solidarity, not only about women's political participation and leadership, but more so about civil and human rights. Warren critically and creatively innovatively turned a rebuke into a feminist rallying cry. Nevertheless, she persisted. So where do we see the Magdalene tradition of prophetic public witness carried on continued persisting dynamically in our day?

[APPLAUSE]

According to Sandra Schneiders and Mary Ann Hinsdale, Mary Magdalene's ecclesial leadership and ministry is not limited to her, but creates a biblical and historical tradition for those who continue to embody the Magdalene tradition of preaching the Good News for the purpose of the well-being and flourishing, not only of the whole body of Christ, but for the whole people of God. So the rest of my talk today will build on these theological insights about Mary Magdalene's prophetic witness, *via positiva* and paved new paths for women doing public and political theology today, especially by tending to those social movements like Nuns on the Bus but also the Revolutionary Love Project that offer an alternative possible future beyond our presently oppressive status quo. So a few words about what it means to do public theology are in order.

Public theology religiously vivifies our political dialogue and deliberative debate and even our decision making about pressing issues that impact US common life and that enhance human dignity and rights, justice, and the common good.

In the US Catholic context, women's religio-political witness operates in a very highly contested sight of who and what counts as the authoritative agents and practices of US public Catholicism. Catholic public theology is often

equated with institutional church leaders or their spokespersons who make statements about the so-called non-negotiable beginning and end of life issues for Catholic voters. We've all heard this.

This was emphasized since 2004 in the US presidential election, and has been amplified since 2012 in the US Conference of Catholic Bishops in their sponsorship of the Annual Fortnight for Freedom, which was recently renamed Religious Freedom Week. In this context, women are disregarded as public theologians for christological reasons. Women are barred from imitating and reading signifying Christ in episcopal leadership positions. So they are excluded from public ministry, and therefore, from doing public theology.

By contrast, Vatican II's Constitution on the Church in the Modern World associates the Church's faith-based public engagement with realizing the already present, but always ever coming, eschatological reign of God. That is the good society of love, justice, and peace. This constitution identifies the Church's public role as a critical advocate for broad social justice agendas and issues that seeks to subvert injustice and inequality along gender, race, class, social, political, and even religious and international lines.

So to enact this agenda, the constitution calls for emulating the prophetic life ministry of Jesus. Living out a political kind of discipleship based on Jesus's prophetic life work for the Kingdom of God serves as a theological touchstone for women to reclaim their baptismal and religio-political rights to faith-based activism for justice in the US public sphere. US Catholic sisters social and ecological justice ministries have stood at the forefront, excuse me, of such prophetic praxis. Prophetic praxis often entails nonviolent, grassroots collective action that contests the prevalent sociopolitical order, and that also attempts to educate about and partly actualize an alternative possibility to it by forging solidarity with marginalized peoples, and thereby edging us toward a more inclusive and transformative and just quality of life.

In my prior scholarship, I have highlighted the sisters' political praxis, especially Nuns-- NETWORK's Nuns On the Bus roadtrips as a refreshing resource for a constructive feminist public theology. The Nuns On the Bus Tours through 2018 illustrate the prophetic political praxis of US Catholic women, firmly founded on Catholic theological commitments to solidarity, the option for the poor, and the common good. The Nuns activism prophetically witnesses to an alternative political reality.

The tours reimagine and recreate a more interdependent, interconnected sense of community, and thereby generate, or bring to birth, possibilities for renewed common life amid a deeply divided US body politic. Indeed, in 2016, the tour was titled Mending the Gaps.

Birthing a new world resists both Catholic magisterial anthropologies, which essentialize and politicize women's biophysical abilities to give birth, as well as traditionalist political ideologies, which domesticize and thereby disqualify women as citizens of the public sphere, and instead portray their interests as aligned solely with the non-political, or private sphere, that is, with the reproduction of future citizens. Rather than concede to these patriarchal theologies and politics, birthing metaphors can be reclaimed for their religious and political salience. Birthing metaphors need not be trapped in and need not entrap women in a reductive view of reproductivity.

For example, biblical texts describe all creation groaning in travail, in childbirth, for fulfillment. That is for a just and peaceful society in Romans 8. So together with creation and the cosmos, all are called to play a part in actively creating, generating, or birthing a new society.

So from this feminist and now Magdalene-inspired perspective, creativity broadens, deepens, and democratizes public theology. Women are enabled to reclaim their right to do public theology through their religious and political

prophetic praxis of creating communities of justice and peace. In scriptural and prophetic traditions, God remembers. That is, God sees and hears and acts for the well-being and eventual liberation of the oppressed.

According to Dianne Bergant, the needs of the people determine through whom God works, often therefore, in unconventional means and methods. Prophets are perennially needed to edge our seemingly intransigent racist, global capitalist, heterosexist and patriarchal religious and political institutions toward more loving, just, and right relationships, especially with multiply minoritized, marginalized, and disenfranchised peoples. The encounter between Jesus and the Samaritan woman in John 4, which is cited by NETWORK's executive director Sister Simone Campbell, can model women's innovative and prophetic intercultural and interreligious religious and political engagement that moves towards such just and right relationships.

As a multiply disadvantaged foreign woman with a complex sexual history, hailing from a minoritized religious community and cultural background, the unnamed Samaritan woman transgresses all of these social and cultural, religious, gender, and sexual borders, and she addresses Jesus's basic needs by drawing him some water from Jacob's well. Alone in public at the well, their conversation progresses, as Mary Catherine Hilkert describes, from reflections about personal identity and differing, at times, divisive religious practices, to even a theological debate about where the presence of God can be found.

She then announces the good news of God's presence in Jesus to her Samaritan neighbors, who also see and believe through her witness. So like the Samaritan woman, or excuse me, like Mary Magdalene, the Samaritan woman is energized by this encounter to prophetically testify to what she has seen and heard and is empowered to act upon it to change other people's lives.

Women's public and religio-political engagement taps into a shared human capacity for creativity. And women's approaches to public theology stress prophetic and solidarity-based praxis, which opens up a whole new theological vista for us, a new theopolitical imagination for our activism, especially in interreligious and intercultural ways. Doing public theology interreligiously takes place in contemporary social movements, like the Revolutionary Love Project.

Mary Magdalene's prophetic witness gives fresh insights into a feminist public theology of love and justice, with implications for the role and purpose of religion in US public life. The Magdalene's witness in predawn places between death and new life accentuates that we live in liminal times, in times between an oppressive present and an alternative, more just future, and in the spaces between seemingly perennially polarized groups. These interstitial times and spaces offer us opportunities for new perspectives and movements to arise, especially, but not only articulated by, marginalized peoples.

In my view, the Revolutionary Love Project exemplifies women's faith-based public engagement for prophetic world making. That is, the fusion of religion and politics to first, denounce and criticize an unjust US public life on the one hand and secondly, to announce and actualize, that means, imagine and partly incarnate, begin to envision, begin to en flesh an alternative, more just liberative world, on the other hand. Witnessing to a more just common life takes place not only in single leaders, but in whole social movements that induce through their praxis the birth pangs of the reign of God, which we've discussed from Romans 8.

Valerie Kaur stands out among contemporary religious leaders in the US public square involved in such prophetic work. Kaur is a Sikh activist, award-winning documentary filmmaker, and civil rights lawyer, who partnered with communities of color-- Sikh, Muslim, black, Latinx, LGBTQ, and indigenous peoples since the 9/11 terrorist attacks and since the November 2016 US presidential election, all to oppose the rise in Islamophobic and white nationalist

hate crimes. Emerging from this solidarity work, Kaur launched the Revolutionary Love Project, which I will refer to hereafter as RLP, in 2016. It is housed at the University of Southern California's Office of Religious Life.

RLP sponsored a multi-nationwide together tour-- a multi city, excuse me-- nationwide Together tour before the 2016 US presidential election, which emphasized love as a public ethic. After the election, Kaur collaborated with many movement leaders to host a watch night service at the historic AME Church in Washington DC on New Year's Eve, in which millions nationwide participated, as well as coordinated a fast, multi-faith, prayer gathering, and a march on inauguration day in 2017.

Also in 2017, RLP sponsored 100 film screenings, workshops, and keynotes for college students, and lobbied congressional leaders to oppose multiple versions of the US Muslim travel ban, which recalled the US Supreme Court's Korematsu decision that justified Japanese-American incarceration in World War II. RLP also opposed many other discriminatory immigration and refugee policies, such as racial profiling and surveillance, special registries, detention and family deportations-- excuse me, family separation, deportation, and border walls.

After the mass shootings of Sikhs in a gurdwara in Oak Creek, Wisconsin, African-American Christians in Mother Emanuel AME Church in Charleston, Jews at the Tree of Life Synagogue in Pittsburgh, and Muslims at Christchurch, New Zealand, mosques, RLP stood on the front lines, echoing the Magdalene's witness. In my view, quote, "Through our tears, we must act swiftly." Unquote.

RLP's activities through 2020 span books, curricula, courses, media, podcasts, film, even TV, including an Emmy award-winning episode on Sikhs in America for CNN's United Shades of America, an annual conference for more than 300 grassroots leaders, and a Sikh women leaders retreat. They are involved also in grassroots non-violent direct action campaigns. RLP co-sponsored a solidarity rally with the Poor People's Campaign in June of 2018. Over 200 dialogues about practicing revolutionary love, as well as 2,000 Vote Together gatherings during the US congressional midterm elections in fall of 2018.

Kaur herself organized with 32 diverse women leaders the Third Annual Women's March on Washington in January of 2019. All of these activities aim to oppose intersectional injustices of racism, poverty, militarism, sexism, and ecological devastation that manifest in our day in the rollback of voting rights, women's rights, immigrant rights, health care, and climate change policies. Most importantly, these activities embody love as a public ethic that births a new future.

Kaur delivered a highly acclaimed TED Talk during the TED women gathering in New Orleans, Louisiana in November 2017, which elaborated a feminist love ethic titled, "Three Lessons of Revolutionary Love in a Time of Rage," this one million plus viewed talk also informed Kaur's address to the 2018 Parliament of the World's Religions. In the PWR address, she reiterated this ethic's three main practices of love of others, opponents, and ourselves to over 8,000 attendees, whom she described as quote, "Midwives tasked with birthing a new future for all of us, who labor for justice with and through love together, who can begin to deliver the world we dream," excuse me, "a world that is multiracial, multicultural, multi-faith, and rooted in revolutionary love." End quote.

Since its inception, RLP has joined with over 550 organizations annually on Valentine's Day to reach 14 million plus people, both personally and virtually, to reclaim love as a public ethic. RLP partnered with more than 50 organizations for the most recent V Day activities in February of 2019, including NETWORK, Clue, and other interfaith and faith-based groups to articulate its three practices in a declaration of revolutionary love. And I want to share with you that declaration in the form of a video.

[VIDEO PLAYBACK]

- We pledge to rise up.
- In revolutionary love.
- In revolutionary love.
- In revolutionary love.
- We declare our love for all who are in harm's way.
- We declare our love for all of those that are in harm's way.
- Our humanity binds us together.
- And we vow to fight for a world where all of us can flourish.
- We declare love even for our opponent.
- We vow to fight.
- We vow to fight.
- We vow to fight, not with violence or vitriol.
- But by challenging the cultures and institutions that promote hate.
- We declare love for ourselves.
- We will protect our capacity for joy.
- We will rise and dance.
- We choose to see this darkness not as the darkness of the tomb--
- But the darkness of the womb.
- We will breathe and push through the pain of this era.
- To birth a new future.
- To birth a new future.
- Join me.
- Join us.
- Join us.

- Join us.

- Join us.

- Join us.

[END PLAYBACK]

[APPLAUSE]

So both of Kaur's talks examine this three-pronged feminist ethic of love and its practices, which she described at the Parliament of World Religions as quote, "a human birthright, a kind of labor that all of us are capable of" quote, unquote, to advance and enhance a more just world for all. Kaur states in her TED talk, quote, "Revolutionary love is the choice to enter into labor for others who do not look like us, for our opponents who hurt us, and for ourselves. Love must be practiced in all three directions to be revolutionary." End quote.

So first, love for others entails a praxis, Kaur says, of seeing no stranger. Listening to other stories in humility and in wonder enables us to see no stranger, to challenge the stereotypes which distort our vision of quote, "Black as criminal, brown as illegal, of queer and trans as immoral, of indigenous peoples as savage, and of women and girls as property." End quote. And to ultimately stand in solidarity with others, to labor with others through vigils and marches and other forms of political participation and engagement.

In my view, seeing no stranger, as Kaur claims, a part of me I do not yet know, evokes a new theological anthropology or religious understanding of the human person, not as a ruggedly independent individual, but as someone inherently interrelated in and with all communities, both of our origin and our affinity, including solidarity with the Earth community. Second, love for opponents necessitates, Kaur says, a practice of tending the wound. Tending the wound in others, even enemies, entails moral and political pragmatic practices. It reveals oppressive systems and structures which normalize and radicalize harm, as well as erode the capability to love.

Beyond resisting and replacing bad political actors and policies, birthing a new, just world begins by tending personal and sociopolitical wounds, by challenging and remaking those intersectional systems and structures of injustice that collide and collude in all of us and in our world to decreate, to undo all of our belonging and flourishing. Third, love for ourselves is characterized by the practice, Kaur says, of breathe and push. Love for others and oppressors require self-love. Kaur states, quote, "To love our own flesh" end quote, "to make our own flourishing matter." End quote.

Self-love takes place in community, in order to fully embrace ourselves and push through these hostile times together. Practicing self-love inspired Kaur to release, in spring of 2019, a meditation app with four tracks titled Breathe and Push, that stress connections between self-care, breathing together, and community care, pushing together for change. Kaur states that, quote, "The labor for justice will be so much harder, so much longer, and so much more painful, and not just for the next few years, but for decades to come." End quote.

Nevertheless, like the Magdalene, Kaur, in both her talks, offers encouragement to persevere, to persist in these seemingly bleak times. Quote, "What if this darkness in the world is not the darkness of the tomb, but the darkness of the womb? What if our future, our America is not dead, but is a country, a nation still waiting to be born? What if a new world is waiting to be born?"

What if the story of America is one long labor? What if this is our nation's, our time of great transition? The midwife tells us to breathe and then to push, because if we don't push, we will die. If we don't breathe, we will die. If we don't push now, our nation will die."

And then she goes on. "Tonight, we will breathe. Tomorrow, we will labor. Revolutionary love requires that we breathe and push through the fire." End quote.

Although Kaur outlined this feminist love ethic by drawing on Sikh theology of love and the writings of black feminist bell hooks and others, the RLP unexpectedly parallels what I have outlined here as the Magdalene tradition, as a basis for women's ways of doing public theology. First, Mary watched and waited at Jesus's tomb, to anoint His buried body, to attend His bodily wounds, inflicted by imperial indignities and injustices of Roman crucifixion.

Black Catholic feminist theologian M. Shawn Copeland, in her book *Enfleshing Freedom*, articulates a political Christology, in which the body of the crucified Jesus refracts the wounds inflicted on marginalized peoples by contemporary empires. Opposition and otherness based on dominant and subordinate relations along race, gender, class, religious, sexual, and many other marks of our differences, are all used to justify assault, conquest, occupation, detention, torture, incarceration, sexual shame, and abuse, and even execution.

Prophetic social movements identify and tend these wounds in order to effect social justice and change. Moreover, secondly, Mary experienced multiple turnings or conversions to new ways of seeing. From the grief and loss of the empty tomb, to then seeing, through her tears and with new eyes, no stranger, no gardener, but the risen Jesus. And ultimately, as I outlined my understanding of the twofold commission that Jesus gives the Magdalene, to ultimately see beyond Jesus to take what she has seen and heard and to prophetically proclaim the Good News repeatedly to all, even the whole world.

Seeing no stranger creates new visions of life giving communities that, as Shawn Copeland states, quote, "Reorder us, remember us, restore us, and make us one, not only in the body of Christ, but also in the US body politic." Third and finally, self-love and communal solidarity occur together, as illustrated by Kaur's questions in her PWR address. Quote, "How are you breathing today?"

Who are you breathing with? With the ones you love, with the earth and sea and sky, with some of the ancestors at your back? Can you breathe in order to remember all that is beautiful and good and worth fighting for?" End quote.

In deeply distressing times, Mary also regrouped with the women disciples in the Jesus movement. They waited, grieved, organized, and mobilized their ongoing witness together. That is, their self-love empowered them to envision, preach about, and realize new life in post-Easter ministries.

So in sum, the Magdalene tradition continues in women's prophetic witness and practice, in contemporary US faith-based social movements, whether the Nuns On the Bus or the Revolutionary Love Project, movements that begin to birth a world that supports and safeguards civil and human rights for all people of all genders, races, ethnicities, classes, orientations, abilities, and religions. A concluding, reflective exercise inspired by the RLP will aid all of us here today to do the community building, the world making, of a feminist public theology. That is, to begin to imagine and incarnate, to begin to envision and en flesh a more just world, not just for our own flourishing, but for the flourishing of all.

So as Valerie Kaur guides us, quote, "Close your eyes. Can you feel it? What does it feel like in your body to live in that future?"



How would your life be different? How would it change the lives of the people that you love? If we can inhabit this vision in our minds and in our bodies, then we can birth it." End quote. Thank you so much.