

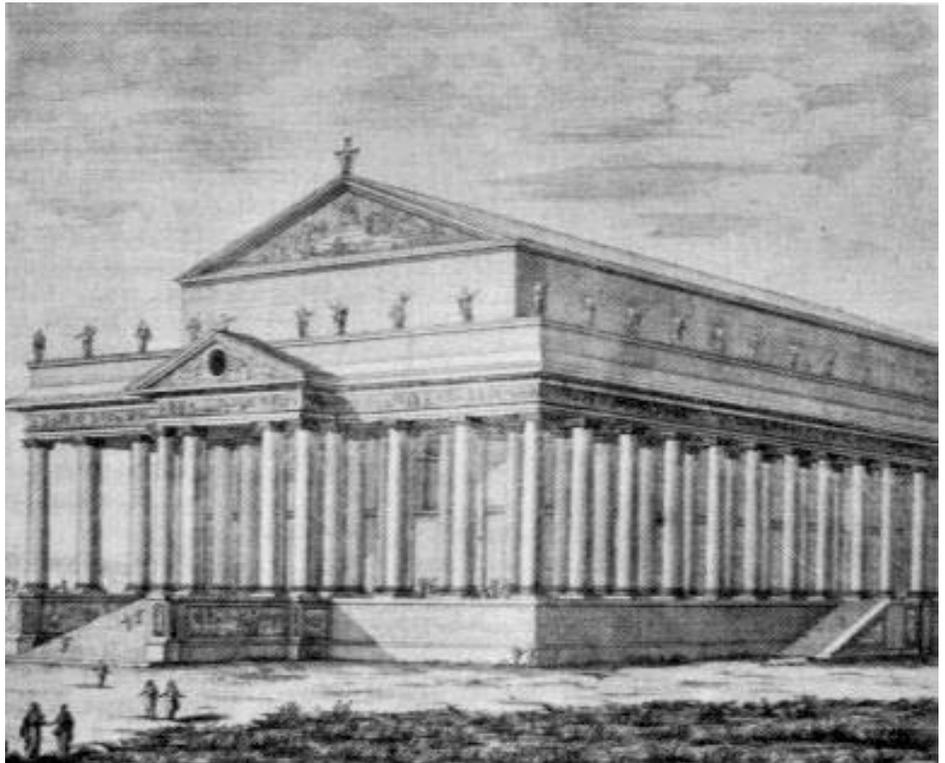
Truth Behind the Bestseller

Goddess Scholar Offers A Prelude to *The Da Vinci Code*

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Theologian Carol P. Christ holds a Ph.D. from Yale University and is a former professor at San Jose State University, as well as the San Francisco based California Institute for Integral Studies. She is the author of the acclaimed *Rebirth of the Goddess*, and currently directs the Ariadne Institute, which provides women with a chance to visit Crete and learn more about the ancient goddess culture of the Minoan Age. She lives in Greece.

CityEdition: What makes you think there was a universal religion of the Goddess in the centuries before the Bible was written, and that very culturally sophisti-



The Temple to Artemis, one of the seven wonders of the ancient world.

cated communities flourished in the Near East?

Christ: Of course, this is a big area of scholarly controversy right now. Some people believe that we've always been warlike and patriarchal and lived in societies where there was domination and control by powerful males, and warfare and so on. But I do believe there was a pre-patriarchal era in Europe. Maria Gimbutas calls it Old Europe. I also believe an analogous situation existed in many parts of the world.

I think that part of what has inspired people about *The Da Vinci Code* is the notion of some type of a divine feminine and possible female leadership in early Christianity. I think people are also entranced by the idea that religion hasn't told us everything that's true. Of course, the idea that sexuality can be affirmative in religion is also attractive to people as well.

CityEdition: If things were going so well during the Neolithic Age, how did the situation for those goddess-based cultures deteriorate so quickly?

Christ: I think there's a combination of things. Such as, if you were thinking that Mother Nature was abundant and that the powers of transformation would continue and then you were faced with a massive plague or tidal wave or drought, you might start to lose your faith in the abundance and forgiveness of Mother Earth. I think if society's has got larger, more complex - especially in places where agriculture could be spread out over large fertile plains... I think then you can have agriculture becoming controlled by individuals, which would be men, because they're the ones that can leave the home. And I don't discount warfare.

That leaves aside the question why did people become warlike.

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But we certainly know from our own culture in the Americas that more highly armed Europeans were able to overthrow, decimate - whatever word you want to use - commit genocide against more peaceful Native American cultures that had settled the land first.

I think probably in Europe that the people who did come down (to the Near East) were probably the Indo-European speaking people, perhaps from the Black Sea and the Russian Steppes. These would have been nomadic people. They were living in a harsher climate to begin with, and first they domesticated the horse for its milk and then they learned to ride it.

It seems that they did come down from Europe with bronze, and then later iron weapons. I've seen a recreation of this on television in Jacob Bronowski's *Ascent of Man...* And the people in the city didn't have the same weapons and they didn't have any horses so they couldn't get up on a horse and approach these warriors, and they couldn't run away. So I think they [the conquerors] could have done a great deal of devastation quite quickly.

CityEdition: Jumping ahead in time now a few millennia, do you think Mary Magdalene played a much larger role in the birth of Christianity than we've been led to believe?

Christ: Yes I do. Biblical scholars like Karen King... who are still within the Christian tradition, are telling us that if we read between the lines of the New Testament, and also take account of the gospels that were not put into the bible - and many of those gospels were used by early Christian groups during the first

several centuries of Christianity - it appears to me historically quite plausible if not absolutely true that Mary Magdalene was a very close associate of Jesus, that she was seen as an apostle or a disciple, and a leader in the early Christian church. The Gnostic gospels suggest that she received special teaching from Jesus that she then shared with the disciples. Some of them were quite thrilled to hear it, and some of them were jealous that he gave it to a woman. And that indication of jealousy that comes out in the Gnostic gospels also suggests what may have happened, that women were leaders in the early church, but gradually a male dominant hierarchy began to develop.

CityEdition: Some scholars suggest that women like Mary Magdalene were financing the new religion.

Christ: There is an indication that since they didn't have churches, it was like what happens in the neopagan movement today. People meet in people's houses, or out in people's backyards or things like that. We do know that there was a "house church" movement

in the early church, and many of the sponsors who provided the home and the food were women. According to these same biblical scholars, there's no indication that Jesus thought women were lesser people.

CityEdition: Do you think mythologies about women being weak and manipulative and prone to evil are psychologically damaging in the cultures where the stories are disseminated?

Christ: That's one of the reasons I think it's important to question and challenge the religions that have been handed down to us. I certainly know women who have suffered physical and sexual abuse who feel that well, maybe they deserved it somehow, maybe they did something wrong. I don't think we can discount the fact that these same women had been taught in their church that woman was first to sin, and she deserved to be punished for the evils that arose from her body and her sexuality.

As far as the Genesis myth goes, I agree with Merlin Stone that that
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"Theology is ultimately political. The way human communities deify the transcendent and determine the categories of good and evil have more to do with the power dynamics of the social systems which create the theologies than with the spontaneous revelation of truth from another quarter."

-Sheila Collins

story was purposely constructed to discredit religions that were going on in the general area where the Hebrew religion was developing - religions that celebrated sacred trees because trees are old and almost eternal. Because whole communities can celebrate and be sheltered by large trees... And yet in the Bible it's taught that the tree from which the apple is plucked is the beginning of evil.

The female body was seen [in Neolithic times] as sacred and sexuality was seen as sacred... And the snake - I was recently reading that mankind automatically had an innate fear of snakes. But that's not true. In many cultures, people feel that snakes are protective. They eat mice and rats, keep the house clean. And in Old Europe - even up to the present day... - people were putting bowls of milk out to attract snakes to live under their houses.

Eve conveys the idea the sexuality and the female body are somehow sinful. *The DaVinci Code* offers a different message with its notion that sexuality and the female body of Mary Magdalene are sacred.

CityEdition: On that point, did the suggestion that Mary Magdalene had a child with Jesus - was that something that just came up recently, or did people in the past debate this issue with the Vatican?

Christ: I can't say I'm an expert on the Middle Ages, but I think Mary Magdalene was remembered positively and negatively in the Christian period after the church was legitimized by Constantine and then became the only religion allowed in Europe and in the Roman Empire. She was remembered as an important disciple all the way through the

Middle Ages, and as a teacher. I think that the whole story about there being a bloodline and all that - it's not very likely to be true. And it's odd that it became so important in *The DaVinci Code* because the people who are now touting the line that the Priory of Zion exists - they want a male king to rule the world who comes from that bloodline, and that's certainly not a very progressive or feminist idea.

CityEdition: Finally, tell us why you don't like the word "prehistory".

Christ: As has been said, history is defined by the victors, and the victors tell their own story. And they generally try to discredit the history of those they conquer. And so we have that problem with all of our history. And in the western academic world we talk about history beginning with written records. Generally those records are written in Sumerian and then later on Greek and anything that doesn't have written records is called prehistory, and it doesn't really count, because if you can't prove it by the written word then you can't really say anything about it.

So that is one of the things they're saying now about the idea that there were Goddess cultures in the Neolithic and people who were peaceful... They dismiss [these periods] by calling them prehistory, a prelude to history. I think this bias in the favor of the written word is something we ought to be questioning, because written words can also lie.

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