

ABSTRACT

"The Impact of Patriarchal Interpretations of Religion on the Creation of Oppressive Cultures of Female Purity and the Contribution to Rape Culture"

Haley Stepp

Director: Elise Edwards, Ph.D.

Patriarchal interpretations of religions have given rise to purity cultures which are selectively oppressive, dangerous, and sexually restrictive to women. Furthermore, patriarchal versions of religions have led to the development of pervasive rape cultures, beliefs that normalize sexual violence and shame the victims. By studying Christian and Islamic scriptures, theological doctrines, and traditional practices concerning women and sex, this thesis will demonstrate how these religions have been utilized in sexually oppressive societies. The societal attitudes and practices derived from oppressive religious stances are harmful to women, both socially and physically, by oppression and rape. Before the horrors of purity and rape cultures can be fought, the culpability of religions and their patriarchal interpretations should be understood.

APPROVED BY DIRECTOR OF HONORS THESIS:

Dr. Elise Edwards, Department of Religion

APPROVED BY THE HONORS PROGRAM:

Dr. Elizabeth Corey, Director

DATE: _____

"THE IMPACT OF PATRIARCHAL INTERPRETATIONS OF RELIGIONS ON THE
CREATION OF OPPRESSIVE CULTURES OF FEMALE PURITY AND THE
CONTRIBUTION TO RAPE CULTURE"

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By

Haley Alise Stepp

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CHAPTER ONE

Patriarchal Oppression

Introduction

Patriarchal interpretations of religions have contributed to purity-obsessed cultures which are sexually restrictive to women. These patriarchal purity cultures are extremely dangerous to women because they have led to the development of pervasive rape cultures, beliefs that normalize sexual violence and shame the victims. While numerous religions have patriarchal interpretations that are complicit in this oppression, I have chosen to study Christianity and Islam which, as the two largest world religions, are the most prominent and widespread examples of this phenomenon. By examining scriptures, theological doctrines, and traditional practices concerning women and sex from each religion, this thesis will demonstrate how these religions have been utilized in sexually oppressive societies. While not every interpretation of Christianity or Islam is oppressive to women, there are ample societal attitudes and practices derived from oppressive religious stances that are harmful to women, both socially and physically through subjugation and rape. This work is important because the horrors of rape culture and female oppression cannot be combatted until their roots, including their religious causes, can be fully understood.

This first chapter will present an overview of some of the types of oppression that women in different cultures face and expand upon the terms and concepts that will be used throughout the thesis. Primarily it will be concerned with describing the pervasiveness of purity cultures and examining the harm that they cause. Chapter two

will discuss the Christian and Islamic scriptures, doctrines, and practices concerning women and sex. Chapter three will take an in depth look at the culture of rape by looking at scriptural rape references, rape laws, and common practices present in both Christian and Islamic societies.

Definitions

No religions are patriarchal in their entirety and many are not even patriarchal in their origin. However, many, including Christianity and Islam, have widely accepted, highly patriarchal interpretations. The patriarchal religious interpretations that will be explored in depth in this thesis are defined as male-dominated structures of cultural morality and male-led organized systems of beliefs about a higher power. The social institutions of religion draw from the existing culture, reinforcing what is expected of people within traditional society, including acceptable hierarchies and gender roles.¹ On the other hand, religion is also one of the single greatest designers of gender roles. The societies that Christianity and Islam influence, as religions with patriarchal tendencies, are nearly all strongly patriarchal cultures, societal structures that follow male preferential, male enforced gender norms, where men have authority over women.² Lamia Rustum Shehadeh, a distinguished professor at the American University of Beirut and a prolific writer on women in Islamic cultures, describes such cultures by saying, "men and women live on a stage on which they act out their assigned roles, equal in importance... But the stage is set, conceived, painted, defined by men. Men have written the play, have directed the show, interpreted the meanings of the action. They have assigned themselves the most interesting, most heroic parts, giving women the supporting

¹ Doyle, *Sex and Gender: The Human Experience*, 65.

² Ibid, 66.

roles".³ With the help of religiously emphasized priorities, women are encouraged to be docile, domestic, and chaste, whereas men are expected to be tough, worldly, and sexual.⁴

The patriarchal systems established and perpetuated by patriarchal religious interpretations lead to discrimination and oppression of women and sometimes abuse. Discrimination is "any distinction, exclusion or restriction made on the basis of sex which has the effect or purpose of impairing or nullifying the recognition, enjoyment or exercise by women, irrespective of their marital status, on a basis of equality of men and women, of human rights and fundamental freedoms in the political, economic, social, cultural, civil or any other field", according to the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women.⁵ It is important to note that, according to this definition, discrimination is not solely a product of male action. The sexist assumptions about gender, misogynistic values, and oppressive customs are often absorbed by the culture so entirely that they are taken for granted, transmitted by men and women alike.⁶

One of the most oppressive results of patriarchal culture is the purity culture that ensues. Religiosity is a direct contributor to this concept of purity because religions are historically obsessed with purity, regulating what passes in and out of bodily orifices. In Islam and Christianity, impurity may result from caste, physical behaviors like eating or sex, or physical conditions like diseases or bodily discharges. Women are at a disadvantage where purity is concerned because menstruation and childbirth,

³ Shehadeh, *The Idea of Women in Fundamentalist Islam*, 218.

⁴ Doyle, *Sex and Gender: The Human Experience*, 15.

⁵ Nussbaum, *Sex and Social Justice*, 87.

⁶ Kristof and WuDunn, *Half the Sky*, 69.

fundamental aspects of womanhood, have historically been considered extremely impure.⁷ In this thesis, I will use the term purity culture to refer specifically to the imbalanced societal expectation for sexual innocence among females in which wholesomeness and virginity is expected, demanded, and worshiped. This sexist standard “simultaneously asks women to be both vulnerable and strong. They are expected to not break societal expectations regarding gender, but to break other expectations surrounding sexual activity. They are being taught to be submissive while being told not to submit, at least not yet”.⁸ Women’s sexuality is not their own, but instead is protected and regulated by men, symbolic of the honor of the husband, father, family, or community, and used to please men.

The drastic and yet all too real complication that arises from female oppression and patriarchal values is rape. Rape is an act of violence and a power struggle that is inextricably connected to the ideal male's gender role.⁹ As Doyle states, “rape is not the act of a disturbed male but rather an over-conforming male” because society continually teaches male aggression and superiority over women.¹⁰ Rape is an intimidation tactic by which men can keep women in a state of fear, a form of patriarchal intimidation that weakens women and empowers traditional gender roles and further oppression.¹¹ And the pinnacle of this sexist societal system is that, historically, and still in many religious, conservative societies, rape is considered a crime against the males to whom the victim “belongs”, not against the women herself.¹² But the problem goes deeper than individual

⁷ Cahill, *Sex, Gender, and Christian Ethics*, 130.

⁸ Browning, “Acting out Abstinence, Acting out Gender”, 150.

⁹ Doyle, *Sex and Gender: The Human Experience*, 44.

¹⁰ Ibid, 48.

¹¹ İlkkaracan, *Deconstructing Sexuality in the Middle East Challenges and Discourses*, 178.

¹² Ibid, 186.

acts of violence. The problem is that the patriarchal societies in question have developed into rape cultures: a complex set of beliefs that supports male violence against women, sexualizes and degrades women, and blames the victim instead of the perpetrator. As Emilie Buchwald described it,

“Rape culture is a complex set of beliefs that encourage male sexual aggression and supports violence against women. It is a society where violence is seen as sexy and sexuality as violent. In a rape culture, women perceive a continuum of threatened violence that ranges from sexual remarks to sexual touching to rape itself. A rape culture condones physical and emotional terrorism against women as the norm... In a rape culture both men and women assume that sexual violence is a fact of life, inevitable.”¹³

And because of the patriarchal nature of these cultures, rape culture renews itself by making sure that women stay silent about their abuse because they do not have enough power to speak out and make a change.

Now that I have introduced the key terms and concepts, the rest of this chapter will be an introduction to the general ways in which women are oppressed and the forms that sexual oppression takes. Chapter two will examine Christian and Islamic teachings and traditions concerning women, and chapter three will look specifically at rape within each of these religious traditions including a discussion of rape culture and rape myths in religious societies.

Forms of Gender Oppression

The practical effects of patriarchal religious interpretations are seen in various forms of gender oppression that lay the basis for purity and rape cultures. Women around the world and across history have been discriminated against by restrictions of their

¹³ Barnes, *The Handbook of Women, Psychology, and the Law*, 278.

autonomy, health care, economic freedoms, educational opportunities, political access, and sexual liberties. All of these oppressions play into each other; the "devaluation of women's work, as well as their lesser physical strength and economic dependence upon men, in turn, allows them to be subject to physical, sexual and/or psychological abuse".¹⁴ Gender oppression may occur in a wide range of social practices, some radical and some normalized, many of which will be discussed in this thesis. In many cases, women participate in and endorse these acute inequalities. When women come to accept the legitimacy of the inequality of the gender system, they become accomplices, allowing it to survive.¹⁵ Men see themselves as benefitting from the oppressive gendered practices and women see them as necessary to secure femininity. "In order for women to become whole, the patriarchal culture that shapes abuse must be rejected and women must disassociate themselves from the institutions that perpetuate and glorify their suffering".¹⁶

The first major way in which women have been historically oppressed has been through the disproportionately high emphasis placed on maintaining virginity and promoting abstinence. In general, conservative contemporary American ideas about virginity are heavily influenced by traditional Christian values which venerate premarital virginity.¹⁷ Early Christian theologians said Adam and Eve were virgins and sinless until sex; then sin entered world. Even the word "virginity" has historically been used primarily in reference to women whereas "chastity" was used for men, "implying that sexual purity and abstinence were innate in women but had to be cultivated by men".¹⁸

¹⁴ Nussbaum and Glover, *Women, Culture and Development: A Study of Human Capabilities*, 284.

¹⁵ Ibid, 292.

¹⁶ Wells, "The Church's Contribution to Patriarchy", 135.

¹⁷ Carpenter, *Virginity Lost*, 18.

¹⁸ Ibid, 19.

The female body was believed to be biologically more capable of purity than the male body because she was hollow, thereby allowing the divine to enter her and sealing out other influences. By the 18th century, science was also being used against women. Medical professionals stated that the safest and therefore only viable option was for single women to maintain their virginity, but, reinforcing the sexual double standard, many warned that sexual continence was injurious to health of men. As seen in this example, the Enlightenment did not revolutionize beliefs about virginity; men still took the virginity of their wives very seriously. However, it gave secular reasons for valuing virginity on top of the religious reasons already in place.¹⁹

In this thesis, I will refer to Christian ideals concerning virginity interchangeably with the western, primarily American, ideals on which I will be focusing. Western culture has been historically Christianized for thousands of years and even in the modern secular culture of America, remnants of this religion and its patriarchal tendencies live on, influencing attitudes, laws, and customs. While certainly some people view virginity as a burden, in traditional, conservative western societies, the commonly held belief is that women's virginity is a gift. This informs a classic double standard for sexuality which can be traced back to “women's historic status as property which is transferred from fathers to husbands at marriage”.²⁰ This idea of "giving away" or "losing" one's virginity is a patriarchal concept, primarily attributed to females, implying that a woman never owns her sexuality. Either she's a virgin, and therefore assumed to be asexual, or her sexuality belongs to a man.

¹⁹ Carpenter, *Virginity Lost.*, 20.

²⁰ Ibid, 60.

The conservative Western church, especially traditional evangelical culture, is so disdainful of premarital sex that it is almost a taboo topic. It is not discussed or explained even by most parents. As Carpenter explains, many young people rebel against the church entirely because of the condemnation of their sexual freedom, turning to media to answer their questions for how to handle sex.²¹ But even when sexual education is taught in the Christian church and western society, girls and boys are often taught in drastically different ways. The church encourages young people to make pledges of abstinence, to make choices about their bodies within the constraints of a dualistic concept of masculinity and femininity and a virgin and slut stereotype.²² Boys are taught to wait for sex because it will be more pleasurable if they wait and girls are taught that one mistake could ruin their life. “In abstinence-only programs, the choice to wait takes on epic proportions as heaven and hell are said to literally hang in the balance of adolescent decision-making”.²³ The story of Elizabeth Smart is one horrifying example of the oppressive and detrimental effects this kind of abstinence teaching can have. Growing up, Smart was taught by use of the metaphor that a person is like a stick of gum and having sex is like getting chewed. Her sexual education taught her that once a person has been “chewed”, no one else will want her. But at the age of 14, Smart was raped. In a speech at an abuse survivors’ conference at the John’s Hopkins School of Public Health, she expressed the severe guilt that she experienced for years after the sexual assault, believing the detrimental teachings that the church had given her. In her words, “That’s

²¹ Ibid, 103.

²² Browning, “Acting out Abstinence, Acting out Gender”, 160.

²³ Ibid, 153.

terrible. Nobody should ever say that”.²⁴ Sexual education, when done well, can do so much good, but if done poorly, it can do far more harm than nothing at all.

Many people agree that sex is an important enough and potentially dangerous enough part of life that young people should be formally educated on the matter. However, there are numerous opinions on exactly what should be taught. There are three varieties of possible sex education programs: comprehensive, abstinence plus, and abstinence only. However, for a sexual education program in America to qualify for federal funding under Title V, it must teach that “sexual activity outside of marriage is likely to have harmful psychological and physical effects”. Because of this, both religious programs like True Love Waits and federal, secular ones describe virginity as a potentially dangerous gift to be given.²⁵ There is little evidence that abstinence only programs significantly delay first intercourse. In addition to this ineffectuality, they neglect teaching about birth control or protection from sexually transmitted diseases, leaving young people uneducated about their alternatives for safe sex. On the other hand, the more inclusive sex education programs increase rates of condom and birth control use and often are more successful at delaying the onset of sexual activity than their abstinence only counterparts.²⁶

The classic, religious abstinence only program, True Love Waits, pronounces the “top 10 risks of having sex before marriage”. Risks include (1) ruining your “testimony” as a Christian as a result of never being able to say you lived in purity and (2) giving

²⁴ David Rosowski, *Elizabeth Smart Visits Johns Hopkins*.

²⁵ Carpenter, *Virginity Lost*, 181.

²⁶ *Ibid*, 191.

Satan a weapon, shame, to make you question your worth as a person. In teachings such as these, non-virgins are impure and somehow less valuable humans.²⁷ I argue that the spiritual compulsion to maintain virginity promoted by these teachings can be dangerous. A study conducted by Janet Rosenbaum and the John's Hopkins School of Public Health found that a statistically equivalent proportion, more than 50%, of virginity pledge takers and non-pledge takers are sexually active by their early twenties. And not only do a majority of people who take obligatory virginity pledges such as True Love Waits end up breaking them, but when they do, they are significantly less likely to practice safe sex, having never been taught to do so.²⁸ Furthermore, people who view maintaining their premarital virginity as an act of worship suffer severe guilt and emotional distress when they fail.²⁹ This emotional trauma is the result of being taught to treasure virginity above all else and it is regrettable for all young women, but it is especially tragic in the case of sexual assault victims who feel misplaced guilt as a consequence of these teachings.

Christian abstinence pledges damage the lives of many women. In solidarity, many women have taken to blogging and to telling their own personal stories of how this sexist and controlling trend has affected them. Samantha Pugsley is one such woman. She, like many raised in the American evangelical church, took a pledge at the age of ten to maintain her virginity until marriage. She says she was taught that "extramarital sex was sinful and dirty and I would go to Hell if I did it. I learned that as a girl, I had a responsibility to my future husband to remain pure for him. It was entirely possible that my future husband wouldn't remain pure for me, because he didn't have that same

²⁷ Ibid, 181.

²⁸ Rosenbaum, "Patient Teenagers?"

²⁹ Ibid, 197.

responsibility, according to the Bible.” She says that she wore her virginity proudly, finding her identity and worth in this covenant until her wedding night. But no one ever tells girls how hard it will be, after years of clinging to one’s virginity, to lose it and not feel soiled. Samantha admonishes the church for telling girls that if they just wait to have sex, God will bless them with a happily ever after marriage. The expectations that followed this teaching have left her battling “to remember that my body belongs to me and not to the church of my childhood.” Calling out the Christian ideal of female virginity she says “I’m now thoroughly convinced that the entire concept of virginity is used to control female sexuality”.³⁰ Men get to own theirs, but even in marriage many women find it hard to escape the grasp of the church’s gendered message of compulsory abstinence.

Another world religion, Islam, has very similar views on female virginity although these beliefs manifest differently in Islamic culture. Women’s identities are tied inextricably to their virginity. Their sexuality is considered dangerous and so they are strictly kept asexual until marriage. Non-virgin, unmarried women have no value in society because they have no ability to acquire a husband, the *raison d’être* for women, since men will not take a tarnished bride.³¹ So while men can gain honor (*sharaf*) from their good acts or family status, women gain honor (*ardh*) only by persistent chastity and sexual virtue.³² Female sexuality does not belong to the women themselves, but instead it belongs to their fathers and husbands. Therefore, their sexuality is dangerous and a constant threat to their family’s honor. Not only can girls not have sex as they see fit, but

³⁰ Pugsley, “IT HAPPENED TO ME.”

³¹ İlkkaracan, *Deconstructing Sexuality in the Middle East Challenges and Discourses*, 180.

³² Ibid, 19.

they cannot be trusted not to have sex because the stakes of their potential sin is too great. This leads to practices, many of which will be discussed later in this thesis, such as the *purdah*, meant to shelter women and protect their sexuality at all costs. The cultural weight placed on the purity of women, virginity, and family honor increases female vulnerability and enables oppression by the patriarchal system.³³

A further way in which women are oppressed in some Islamic societies is through female genital mutilation (FGM). FGM is a ritualistic act taking place primarily in rural, African, Islamic cultures, although some Christian cultures have adopted it as well. Sometimes called by the misnomer “female circumcision”, it is actually the female equivalent to amputating most of the penis. There are three versions of FGM that are practiced: clitoridectomy, the surgical removal of the clitoris; excision, removal of the clitoris and inner lips; and infibulation, removal of the clitoris and labia minora with the labia majora stitched together covering the urethra and most of the vagina.³⁴ This surgical amputation is most often performed by medically untrained tribal women with crude, unsanitary tools on girls between the ages of 1 and 15.³⁵ An estimated 125 million women and girls are estimated to have undergone this mutilation in their lives and approximately 3 million more girls are at risk every year.³⁶

Female Genital Mutilation is a controversial practice that is based on an ideal that women should be asexual, meant to cut down on sex drive, and intended to delineate further distinctions between male and female. It is horrifically cruel to the girls and

³³ Ibid, 192.

³⁴ Nussbaum, *Sex and Social Justice*, 120.

³⁵ Kristof and WuDunn, *Half the Sky*, 220.

³⁶ “WHO | Female Genital Mutilation (FGM).”

causes a loss of sexual pleasure before girls know to value it. This practice is not openly advocated by Islamic clerics in most nations, but it thrives because it is ingrained in the fabric of the culture and because in these patriarchal cultures, female sexuality is still considered so destructive and fearsome.³⁷ The official rationales for female genital mutilation are that it helps maintain purity and serves as propriety insurance. Because of this, even in nations like Sudan and Egypt in which there are laws against certain types of FGM, it is still widely practiced.³⁸ One Egyptian Muslim man, Said Ibrahim, expressed his outrage at the FGM ban by saying, "Am I supposed to stand around while my daughter chases men?" Not only is FGM cruel, sexist, and misguided, but it is ineffectual. FGM does not prevent sex or ensure purity; it just makes sex one-sided for male pleasure.³⁹ As is true of many sexist practices, FGM is not promoted solely by males. Women are usually the ones doing the cutting and are just as likely to support it. One woman from Togo was cited as saying she was opposed to the practice and wishes she had been able to run away before it had been done on her, but she would still perform it on her daughter because she has no authority to argue with her husband and because she knows no one would ever marry her daughter if she was not cut.⁴⁰ This demonstrates that FGM is much more than a misguided medical practice. It is a deeply rooted societal problem, treasured as a necessary practice, based on intransigent patriarchal beliefs about female value and sexuality.

³⁷ Boden, *Women's Rights and Religious Practice*, 11.

³⁸ İlkkaracan, *Deconstructing Sexuality in the Middle East Challenges and Discourses*, 28.

³⁹ Nussbaum, *Sex and Social Justice*, 125.

⁴⁰ Ibid, 124.

By no means is FGM practiced or condoned in all Islamic societies. Compared to many more prevalent, moderate sexist practices, this is a rare tradition. Nevertheless, once every ten seconds, a girl is pinned down, her legs pried apart and a woman with a razor blade and no anesthetics slices off her genitals.⁴¹ As demonstrated, female genital mutilation is not a practice that will change with new legislation. It is deeply imbedded in the traditions of these cultures, but it finds its true power from the disparate beliefs and attitudes about women's sexuality and worth upheld by patriarchal interpretations of religions.

A more widespread form of oppression in many Islamic societies is the practice of veiling. The veil is used as an enforcer of female modesty and as a means of controlling male sexual passion. However, there are “numerous styles of Islamic dress throughout the world today that reflect local traditions and different interpretations of Islamic and Qur’anic requirements.”⁴² Many Muslim women wear nothing that distinguishes them as Muslim, some wear light head scarves, others pin dark veils tightly around their faces, and those in the most fundamentalist societies wear coverings that shield them entirely from the male gaze except for their hands and eyes.⁴³ This extreme veiling is a direct result of fundamentalist Islamic purity culture which fears the sexuality of women and places the responsibility of “proper” gender relations on women. The religious basis for the practice of veiling will be discussed in chapter two.

Sexist and oppressive beliefs about women’s sexuality do not always manifest themselves in such an obvious way. One way in which women are sexually oppressed is

⁴¹ Kristof and WuDunn, *Half the Sky*, 221.

⁴² Killian, “The Other Side of the Veil North African Women in France Respond to the Headscarf Affair.”

⁴³ Ibid.

by “slut” and “prude” stigmatization. In the words of the ironic commentary of one anonymous blogger, "Don't be slutty, don't have sex. But be sexy. If you're too sexy though and you get raped, then that's your own fault because you're not actually supposed to listen to us about being sexy, even though we tell you your value is derived from how sexy you are." Women have a very narrow window of acceptable sexual behavior and, unless they conform to this unspoken expectation, they are stigmatized and demonized. Even the language that American society uses to insult each other shows this preoccupation with female sexuality. Words that men direct at men, i.e. faggot, gay, girl, insult “masculinity”. However, women are called words with demonize the free expression of their sexuality, i.e. cunt, bitch, slut.⁴⁴ These are just some of the many projections of the pervasive double standard of acceptable male and female sexual behaviors.

Another way in which women are sexually oppressed is through objectification. While it may seem less extreme than many forms of oppression like FGM or rape, they are all on the same continuum.⁴⁵ Sexual objectification is what forms the base for these more extreme outlets and it is rampant. In fact, "all women live in sexual objectification the way fish live in water".⁴⁶ John Stuart Mill proposed that boys and men are brought up being taught that, by virtue of being male, they are superior to womankind and "they are corrupted by this awareness".⁴⁷ Males are taught that they have full reign over women and over female sexuality. In chapter three I will argue in depth that rape culture is a major result of this, but another way in which this presents itself is through the

⁴⁴ Julé, *Gender and the Language of Religion*, 78.

⁴⁵ Nussbaum, *Sex and Social Justice*, 245.

⁴⁶ Ibid, 214.

⁴⁷ Ibid, 243.

pornography industry. Pornography objectifies women by reducing them to sexual images for the consumption of men. Pornography might be said to be a feminist expression insofar as it represents women throwing off the hindrances to their sexual capacities. However, the male demand for pornography controls the industry, so sex in pornography is merely a commodity, another possession to mark the status of men.⁴⁸

Patriarchal societies and the religions that feed them are rampant with double standards concerning female sexuality, many of which will be discussed in detail further on in this thesis. Women must be virgins entering marriage, but not men. Women are dangerous seductresses whereas men are not responsible for their virility. Women do not own their own sexuality; it belongs to their fathers and husbands. Patriarchal societies teach that male aggression and objectification of women is just "boys being boys". By condemning female sexual autonomy and praising that of men, society eroticizes male violence over women, leading therefore to rape culture.

⁴⁸ Ibid, 245.

CHAPTER TWO

Patriarchal Interpretations of Religions

Female oppression occurs in both Christian and Islamic societies. The patriarchal forms of these religions both influence and are influenced by the societal sexual subjugation. Some nations like Turkey use religion as a cornerstone of their secular law, while others have only religious law as in Saudi Arabia. Other countries, such as the United States, claim to have purely secular law, but religion still colors their history and culture.⁴⁹ Religion has also historically been one of the major sources of support and impetuses for positive human rights movements around the world. However, in all of these cases, religion "reflects interests and values of the powerful and privileged," promising future rewards to the most powerless in society and placating them so they accept their subjugation.⁵⁰ As a result, "the world's major religions have perpetuated the most terrible barbarisms on women, as well as other forms of inequality and exploitation".⁵¹

Many of even the most liberally minded, equality-seeking people are hesitant to accuse religions of injustices because Western societies hold up freedom of religion and liberty of conscience as ideals.⁵² Because religious rights are seen as sacred and untouchable, even in purportedly secular nations like the United States, religiously affiliated persons and organizations often have exemption from laws that other special

⁴⁹ Ibid, 112.

⁵⁰ Doyle, *Sex and Gender: The Human Experience*, 65.

⁵¹ Ibid, 78.

⁵² Nussbaum, *Sex and Social Justice*, 86.

interest groups do not have.⁵³ However, it is fair to analyze religions for the way they impact negative attitudes and customs concerning women in the same way that any societal systems or beliefs would be. Even the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, a multilateral United Nations treaty signed by 168 nations that protects religious freedom, does not do so at the cost of personal rights.⁵⁴ In this chapter, I will examine the relevant scriptures, teachings, and laws of Christianity and Islam that have been used (or misused) to justify the subordination and sexualization of women.

The religious traditions of both Christianity and Islam have an abundance of theological, cultural, and textual resources to ensure gender equality. However, there are also sufficient resources with which to uphold the disempowerment and marginalization of women. Patriarchy is retained by choice.⁵⁵

Fundamentalist religious movements within Christianity and Islam share some identifiable characteristics including attitudes towards gender, women, and sexuality. They both tend to have a separate spheres ideology. Although there is often a belief that men and women are spiritual equals, they play different roles in the physical world, as encouraged by the religious traditions.⁵⁶ Barnes writes that this "dichotomy is often reinforced by a belief in a divine hierarchy: men must obey God, and women must obey men in return for their protection and financial support".⁵⁷ One reason that women need men's protection is because their sexual virtue is directly correlated to their family's honor. Because women's sexuality is dangerous, it must be controlled by relegation to the

⁵³ Ibid, 112.

⁵⁴ Barnes, *The Handbook of Women, Psychology, and the Law*, 286.

⁵⁵ Boden, *Women's Rights and Religious Practice*, 27.

⁵⁶ Barnes, *The Handbook of Women, Psychology, and the Law*, 281.

⁵⁷ Ibid, 282.

domestic sphere and restrictions on dress, reproductive choices, and actions. The forms in which these take are unique to each patriarchal society. This separate-spheres ideology enables the violation of women's human rights and disguises the subordination of women behind patriarchal, protectionist, religious language.⁵⁸

Christianity

Christianity is the religion that has had the most profound influence on western society and its laws and norms concerning women. In Christianity, God has traditionally been conceived of as masculine and historical attempts to give God female characteristics have been met with strong resistance and cries of heresy. Christianity historically has been the cause of some extreme anti-woman teachings and sentiments, but in other ways, its roots and its more liberal sects can be seen as uniquely feminist. This section is an analysis of historical interpretations of the Christian scriptures in an attempt to understand their influence on Western views of women as sexual objects.

Old Testament

The Old Testament is a body of literature that reflects the culture in which it was written. It also shaped later church cultures insofar as people took these scriptures as the divine, infallible word of God and attempted to live by them. The Old Testament portrayals of women and sex are no exceptions. As theologian April C. Wells writes,

"For generations, the Bible has been used as the weapon of choice to keep women in their place. This method has become an extremely dangerous misuse of power and control; resulting in horrifying consequences of physical, mental, emotional,

⁵⁸ Ibid, 282.

and spiritual abuse. It is an imposition comprised of unjust corrupt practice, derived from the overwhelming sexist attitudes perpetuated by the church".⁵⁹

The Old Testament is a "man's book" in which women appear mostly in supporting roles.⁶⁰ However, it is hard to interpret the Old Testament conclusively because it is a compilation from multiple authors spanning several centuries of history. Some parts of the Old Testament reference women and men side-by-side as equals,⁶¹ while some refer to women in dehumanizing ways as inherently unclean or sexual objects for men.⁶² Among the multiple texts, there are two primary scriptural theologies of female worth and purpose that emerge.

The first is that of subordination, which is scripturally rooted in Genesis 2. This theology uses the creation story which is most commonly translated as stating that Eve was taken from Adam's rib.⁶³ The theology formed from this creation account emphasizes that Eve's purpose was to be Adam's helper. It also highlights that she was the first sinner. This creation account has been frequently misappropriated to apply the supposed inferiority and sinfulness of Eve to all women. The analogies of Christ as the man and the church as the female in later scriptures are used to solidify this hierarchy of creation. While this theology often supposes that women are superior in their ability to withstand suffering, practice piety, and maintain chastity, it paradoxically assumes that women are inferior in virtue and self-control, viewing them as temptresses. Jewish author

⁵⁹ Wells, "The Church's Contribution to Patriarchy.", 118.

⁶⁰ Doyle, *Sex and Gender: The Human Experience*, 67.

⁶¹ Genesis 1:27, Exodus 15:20-21, Judges 4 and 5, 2 Kings 22:14, 2 Chronicles 34:22, etc.

⁶² Genesis 2:22, Genesis 29:15-30:22, Genesis 16, Esther 1-2, etc.

⁶³ Genesis 2:22

Philo said that women are inferior in all things and must be held in servitude to man to create obedience.⁶⁴

The second theology of female value that Christians may subscribe to is that of *Imago Dei*, derived from Genesis 1. This theology states that both men and women were designed as the heads of creation, made as equal partners, and made in the image of God. Therefore, the reality of gender inequality and domination that occurs is “not through embodiment, but through entry into social arrangements of civilization which distort the original order of nature into a hierarchical order of privilege”.⁶⁵ Adherents to this theology believe that the originally liberating perspectives of women in religion have been overlooked in favor of selective utilization of patriarchal teachings, but that Christianity is not intrinsically patriarchal. Patriarchy is retained by choice, not out of scriptural necessity.⁶⁶

In line with this second theology, feminist theory proposes that before the ascent of the Hebrew faith, the religion that birthed Judaism and Christianity, societies were generally matriarchal and dominated by goddess culture. By the time Judaism became an established religion, the patriarchal aspects of this religion and its scriptures had pervaded deeply into the culture.⁶⁷ The status of women fell even further after the fall of Jerusalem because the collective Jewish fear of sin led to women and sexuality being viewed as dangerous and unclean.⁶⁸ Furthermore, because of the male nature of God and of the

⁶⁴ DeSilva, *Honor, Patronage, Kinship & Purity*, 181.

⁶⁵ Boden, *Women's Rights and Religious Practice*, 25.

⁶⁶ Ibid, 25.

⁶⁷ Julé, *Gender and the Language of Religion*, 31.

⁶⁸ Doyle, *Sex and Gender: The Human Experience*, 69.

religious leadership, women were inferior and powerless compared to men.⁶⁹ They were dependent on male figures for life and prosperity. Although theologies that emphasize the *Imago Dei* propose that women are not actually inferior to men, I will demonstrate in chapter two that there is ample scriptural support for the unequal treatment of women that has historically been one of the legacies of the church.

The Old Testament scriptures present restrictive expectations for women (and men) through purity codes. Purity codes are the scriptural and legal edicts which governed the ways in which the Jewish people could remain unpolluted and ritualistically pure while interacting with objects and people in their environment that were considered unclean. These codes are an example of how the Old Testament scriptures caused people in Hebrew society to see certain people, including women, as unclean and less deserving of equality and divine favor. To the Jewish people, the Old Testament purity codes were both laws and morality.⁷⁰ As a part of their ritualistic worship and religious observance, the Jewish people were required to uphold these various purity standards to accrue God's favor. These purity practices consisted of rules and lines determining people's relationships with each other, their bodies, their worship practices, and even their food.⁷¹ The nation of Israel was separated from the Gentiles by their observance of these purity codes. Those who were observant of the restrictions were believed to be clean and holy in the eyes of God whereas those who crossed the lines were polluted.⁷²

⁶⁹ Wells, "The Church's Contribution to Patriarchy."

⁷⁰ DeSilva, *Honor, Patronage, Kinship & Purity*, 268.

⁷¹ Leviticus 2:20-21, Leviticus 7:20-27, Leviticus 11, Leviticus 15:3-15, 19-24, 28-30, Numbers 5:2, Numbers 9:6-13, Deuteronomy 14; *Ibid*, 256.

⁷² *Ibid*, 254.

There are many selectively restrictive codes involving purity for women that imply that women were naturally unclean. In ancient Jewish society, people understood women's natural bodily functions as polluting the body in the same way as contact with a corpse or a leper. As told in Leviticus 15, women were deemed unclean for a quarter of their childbearing years merely due to menstruation. Having sex with menstruating women was strictly forbidden under these codes.⁷³ Conversely, there were no unavoidable male bodily functions that were considered impure in the same way.⁷⁴ Even ejaculation only left men impure until sundown as opposed to the seven days for menstruation.⁷⁵ Childbirth rendered women impure as well, for forty days if the child was male and eighty if it was a female.⁷⁶ For all such impurities, ritualistic *mikvah* baths were required for re-purification. However, for some severe acts, there were no remedies for their pollution other than God's intervention. These included murder, incest, adultery, bestiality, homosexuality, and rape of a woman, but only if she was married.

Apart from purity laws, the Old Testament scriptures have many more passages discussing sexual encounters and the ways these should be governed. While contemporary mainstream Christian views of sexuality are conservative and modest, theologian and psychotherapist Harold J. Ellens points out that God gave both men and women sex drives, making sex pleasurable in a way that would be unnecessary if it was only meant to be practical for reproduction.⁷⁷ Historically, the church has moralized sex beyond what the Bible does, contributing to the strict view of sex that most Christians

⁷³ Ibid, 263.

⁷⁴ There were, however, skin or genital maladies that men (or women) could contract that would make them even more ritualistically unclean: Leviticus 13-14

⁷⁵ Sharma, *Women in World Religions*, 191.

⁷⁶ DeSilva, *Honor, Patronage, Kinship & Purity*, 264.

⁷⁷ Ellens, *Sex in the Bible*, 18.

hold.⁷⁸ There are many Old Testament stories that can be interpreted as having a pragmatic view of sex. In the book of Esther, a young Jewish girl seduced the king in order to save her people. Another similar story is one of Ruth who was told by her mother-in-law to seduce a wealthy land owner to gain his favor. Both of these women are honored by the scriptures and by Christian tradition. They resorted to sex to get justice, but their acts, although sexual, were praised for being obedient and good.⁷⁹ Furthermore, Song of Solomon praises and poeticizes the act of sex elaborately.⁸⁰ Only later in church history, when Christians developed an excessive wariness of sex, did the sexual nature of these stories become occluded in the metaphor through which they are viewed by most Christians today.⁸¹

The church has also used the Old Testament to derive laws regulating sexual behavior. Genesis 38 led to much of the strict Catholic doctrine against masturbation and birth control because the story states that when Onan “spilled his semen on the ground...he did was wicked in the LORD’s sight.” Ellens argues that the passage has been misappropriated for sexual moralization by the church because the passage is actually about God’s displeasure at Onan’s shirking of his familial duty, his unwillingness to father children for his brother so.⁸²

Religion professor Arvind Sharma makes the point that not all religions of the Middle Eastern ancient world were the same and he argues that many of the religious

⁷⁸ Ibid, 8.

⁷⁹ Although Esther and Ruth did use their sexual relationships to save the people they cared about, some interpretations would still describe them as victims of powerful men and an oppressive patriarchal system; Ibid, 43.

⁸⁰ Ibid, 11.

⁸¹ Ibid, 10.

⁸² Ibid, 49.

traditions of the Israelites were meant to set them apart from the pagans around them. Contemporary Roman women had a slightly elevated position in society with modest financial freedoms, educational opportunities, and allowances to work alongside men. The goddess religions of the Near East had empowering and equalizing stances on female sexuality. The Israelites feared them for the threat that they and their messages posed to Jewish monotheism and their patriarchal societal structure. The Israelite nation had many laws and practices in place that were a form of defensive recoil to the sexual freedom around them. For example, the reason Israelite girls married earlier than girls in the nations around them was to protect their virginity.⁸³

This emphasis on female virginity in Hebrew society also came from the fact that their women were generally restricted and inferior to men, primarily only needed in society for their domestic, reproductive, and sexual capabilities. So in Hebrew women, modesty and chastity were praised above all virtues; they gave women worth and desirability as paragons of virtue and future child bearers.⁸⁴ Deuteronomy 22:13-21 states that if a man took a wife and did not like her after sex, he could simply claim she was not a virgin, and unless her parents could prove her virginity by showing the sheets with her blood to the town elders, then she would be stoned to death on the doorstep of her father's house. The scripture states: "She has done an outrageous thing in Israel by being promiscuous while still in her father's house. You must purge the evil from among you". The hymen is a fragile, rarely seen membrane with little medical significance and yet religion idolizes it to the point of killing girls in the name of God.⁸⁵

⁸³ Sharma, *Women in World Religions*, 185.

⁸⁴ DeSilva, *Honor, Patronage, Kinship & Purity*, 185.

⁸⁵ Kristof and WuDunn, *Half the Sky*, 81.

Similarly, adulterous men and women were stoned, but only because they violated the property rights of the woman's husband. If a man had sex, either consensual or nonconsensual, with an unmarried woman, he must only marry her and claim her as his property. Sharma also explains that in Israelite society, prostitution was indulged because it was seen as a necessary evil to provide for men's sexual needs, but the prostitutes themselves were maligned. Female sexuality was not seen as belonging to the woman herself, but to her male next of kin and she had no legal right to bodily integrity or independence.⁸⁶

Israelite society generally believed that women's *raison d'être* should solely be motherhood because of the covenant with God and the command to be fruitful and multiply.⁸⁷ Due to the patriarchal preference for males, bearing sons was the main priority for women. Barrenness and the inability to conceive sons were attributed to sin and judgement and often resulted in husbands taking new wives and leaving their old, useless ones.⁸⁸

In Israelite society, the alleged innate potential for evil and impurities such as menstruation excluded women from high religious participation like priesthood.⁸⁹ And still in modern society, the Southern Baptist Convention has employed the theology of subordination, citing men being "first in creation and the woman first in the Edenic fall," as reason to exclude women from pastoral leadership.⁹⁰ The sexism of the Old Testament has had far reaching consequences and contributed to harm to women for thousands of

⁸⁶ Sharma, *Women in World Religions*, 185.

⁸⁷ Ibid, 184.

⁸⁸ Ibid, 188.

⁸⁹ Ibid, 190.

⁹⁰ "Southern Baptist Convention > Resolution On Ordination And The Role Of Women In Ministry."

years. People use the Old Testament scriptures to justify the subordination of women in favor of male-dominated, androcentric societies due to the unequal purity expectations and the dangerous lack of sexual autonomy for females found there.

New Testament

Written a few centuries after the last book of the Old Testament, the teachings of the New Testament differed in some significant ways, reacting to the teachings and values of the Old Testament and reinterpreting them. The purity codes of the New Testament are an example of how drastically the values of the scriptures changed. The main impetus for change in the new church was the influence of Jesus Christ, the figurehead and savior of the emergent religion, Christianity. Jesus radically redefined purity both in his teachings and actions, crossing the lines of purity as the Old Testament scholars of the day understood them. The new idea of purity that he presented to the world was a separation from vice, not a separation from Gentiles, food, bodily emissions, or other unclean objects as the Old Testament stated. Jesus made the process of being made holy an ethical observance and not a ritual one.⁹¹ He told a self-righteous, legalistic group of religious leaders that "nothing is unclean in itself" and to be more concerned with the inside, the heart and motivation, not the outside, the ritualistic cleanliness.⁹²

Jesus rejected the rote legality and the exclusivism by which purity laws, which often stigmatized women and the poor, were observed. In the Gospels, there is a story in which Jesus healed a woman who had been hemorrhaging for twelve years.⁹³ By Old

⁹¹ DeSilva, *Honor, Patronage, Kinship & Purity*, 295.

⁹² Ibid, 283.

⁹³ Cahill, *Sex, Gender, and Christian Ethics*, 135.

Testament standards, she was perpetually in a state of impurity, her gender compounding the impurity and stigmatization of a physical illness, and no self-respecting Jewish man would go near her. Jesus, however, called her “daughter” and healed her.⁹⁴ Additionally, in the New Testament teachings, most Jewish women were excluded from all but domesticity. They were mothers, cooks, and housekeepers, but rarely religious scholars in the way men were. But Jesus famously let a young woman by the name of Mary sit at his feet and listen to his teachings alongside the men, letting her shirk her normal womanly duties. The way in which Jesus considered women and untouchables to be equals was scandalous. Doyle asserts that, in this way, Jesus was the first feminist.⁹⁵

Jesus was also a radical egalitarian. While in Old Testament times, the temple curtain was a physical symbol of the separation that existed in religious society, according to the Gospels, and the temple curtain was split in two at the moment of Jesus’ death, indicating that in his new religion, there was no longer a priestly elite. All people had equal access to God through the Holy Spirit.⁹⁶ Through Jesus, God is seen as “all-inclusive love, a God who especially accepts ‘the impoverished, the crippled, the outcasts, the sinners and the prostitutes’”.⁹⁷ During his time of ministry, Jesus established an “alternative ethos” that radically overturned the norm of societal values and changed the people who were valued, favoring the poor over the rich, the gentle over the strong, and the outcast over the scholar. As ethicist Lisa Sowle Cahill described it, “the essential and enduring relevance of the New Testament for ethics lies in its heightening of the human

⁹⁴ DeSilva, *Honor, Patronage, Kinship & Purity*, 283.

⁹⁵ Doyle, *Sex and Gender: The Human Experience*, 70.

⁹⁶ DeSilva, *Honor, Patronage, Kinship & Purity*, 302.

⁹⁷ Cahill, *Sex, Gender, and Christian Ethics*, 122.

ability to recognize humanity in others”, especially the outcasts and lowly.⁹⁸ Following the direction of Jesus, early Christianity challenged and even reversed cultural criteria of inclusion and exclusion.⁹⁹ Both in Jesus’ ministry and in the early church that modeled after him, women held respected and important positions, granting them a status closer to that of men than their non-Christian counterparts.

The Gospels are “responding to and challenging highly stratified social relationships”, especially the economic and social divisions structured around purity laws and “gender hierarchy within the patriarchal family”.¹⁰⁰ Jesus obliterated these lines of purity and sexual discrimination by including many women in his ministry, even women of the basest social and moral standing.¹⁰¹ Nevertheless, Christianity entered a period where women were controlled by a domineering patriarchal social order. And nothing was as controlled by the patriarchal religious society as women’s sexual and reproductive rights and abilities.¹⁰² Sexual purity ideals for women, often involving strict adherence to virginity, and the social boundaries they represent are merely a form of the strong controlling the weak. Contrary to this, theologian William Countryman proposes that Jesus’ sexual ethic is only concerned with intention and that “all sexual norms beyond consent and equality are the illegitimate residue of a purity mentality”. He argues that church teachings defining unacceptable sexual behaviors stemmed from purity culture, not the teachings of the Gospels or the person of Jesus.¹⁰³ Because of scriptural teachings

⁹⁸ Ibid, 129.

⁹⁹ Ibid, 125.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid, 125.

¹⁰¹ DeSilva, *Honor, Patronage, Kinship & Purity*, 302.

¹⁰² Cahill, *Sex, Gender, and Christian Ethics*, 141.

¹⁰³ Ibid, 137.

such as 1 Corinthians,¹⁰⁴ gender discrimination and strict sexual morality are still pervasive in the Christian community, despite the fact that Jesus liberated oppressive constraints on sexual and gender behavior.¹⁰⁵

In addition to the Old Testament scriptural support for the two distinct theologies of female equality discussed in the previous section, there is substantial support in the New Testament for both subordination and equality as well. Those who support the theory of equality believe that God redeemed humanity and all are made equal. They maintain that there are no texts in the Gospels to justify women's subordination and that Jesus' message of inclusion to the outcasts should take priority. Supporters of the theology of equality therefore state that all the New Testament scriptures justifying subordination, those used by supporters of the theology of subordination, must be read as expressions of the patriarchal nature of the post-Pauline adaptations of Christianity.¹⁰⁶

Much of the misogynistic approach to women in the early church has been attributed to Paul and his teachings although some of the misogynistic texts are later additions to his writings. However, there is a good argument that the subordinate role of women in the church is not a problem caused by Paul, but by those who selectively choose to interpret Paul. "Although he himself did not systemize such a split, the Pauline legacy laid the basis for dualism that has haunted subsequent Christianity to the present day...the bifurcation of creational theology of subordination and the eschatological theology of equivalence".¹⁰⁷ For example, there are passages in I Corinthians that

¹⁰⁴ 1 Corinthians 6:12-20

¹⁰⁵ Cahill, *Sex, Gender, and Christian Ethics*, 125.

¹⁰⁶ Sharma, *Women in World Religions*, 210.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid, 214.

champion celibacy and women's silence in the church that have been taken at face value and used to defend the church's misogynistic practices. However, they were a later addition and likely intended to correct the growing gnostic influence at the Corinthian church, not intended to promote the squelching of all Christian women.¹⁰⁸

Paul inherited an inclusivist tradition. In his letters to the churches, he greeted 16 women and 18 men, calling women apostles and deacons alongside the men and he may not have intended to generate the exclusion of women from the church that he is attributed with.¹⁰⁹ And although he only begrudgingly approved of marriage, he did teach that marriages should be male dominated. He did not want gender equality in the church translating to drastic equality in the social system.¹¹⁰

The dualistic religious society that Paul left to future Christians was one in which unmarried, charismatic Christian women preached, received gifts, and were martyred for the faith. Examples of this are seen in the apocrypha, including the Acts of Paul and Thecla. The pastoral epistles, however, condemn women for speaking out, modeled after extreme patriarchal family structure. It is this largely patriarchal post-Paulinism which, by the middle of the 2nd century, is the victorious version of Christianity.¹¹¹ Followers of the other more radical Christianity were increasingly condemned as heretical, the books that supported this version of women or gave God feminine qualities were not included in the sanctioned scriptures, and patriarchal Paulinism became canonized.

¹⁰⁸ Doyle, *Sex and Gender: The Human Experience*, 72.

¹⁰⁹ Sharma, *Women in World Religions*, 212.

¹¹⁰ Ibid, 213.

¹¹¹ Ibid, 215.

Post-Canonical Christian Church

The Bible is far from conclusive on the role of women or sexuality. It presents many different sexual attitudes and rules, both strict and tolerant, but the condemnation of sex has been the most widely used teaching of the church. Augustine, Tertullian, and Jerome were some of the most influential theologians that promoted the church's disdain of sex. Shame of eroticism and pleasure were not instinctual for early Christians, but developed after these and other theologians began moralizing and allegorizing the sexual parts of the Bible, like Song of Solomon. This led to church teachings discouraging sex except for procreation.¹¹²

Gender equality diminished with each theologian who contributed teachings on the matter. In the third century, women were no longer considered to have been made in the image of God. Jesus's teachings of inclusion were disregarded and the religious leaders that came after him instead chose to build upon the patriarchal aspects of Christianity and the sexism entrenched in society.¹¹³ Tertullian taught that women, as an extension of Eve, were the downfall of humanity and it is because of them that Jesus had to die.¹¹⁴ Augustine said women's spiritual souls were equal to those of men, but their embodied souls were lower in value because of their innate tendency to corrupt men. He believed that women do not bear the image of God the way men do.¹¹⁵ In the medieval period, Aquinas stated that women were "misbegotten", both innately subordinate and hopelessly inferior expressions of human nature.¹¹⁶ He described conception in terms of

¹¹² Ellens, *Sex in the Bible*, 41.

¹¹³ Doyle, *Sex and Gender: The Human Experience*, 75.

¹¹⁴ Tertullian, "The Apparel of Women." Chapter 1.

¹¹⁵ Boden, *Women's Rights and Religious Practice*, 25.

¹¹⁶ Aquinas, "Summa Theologica - Christian Classics Ethereal Library", q 92, obj 1.

the semen contributing the soul and everything good and the woman providing the flesh and everything bad about humanity. Female children, he believed, were formed in the womb when too much of the woman contributed during conception, resulting in a defective male.¹¹⁷

Tertullian believed that women were "the Devil's Gateway", and the Devil's foothold was often through the evil act of sex. Since many of the early church fathers thought of women as merely the matter of humanity and none of the spirit that men had, sex was seen as symbolic of the "higher soul getting trapped in matter".¹¹⁸ However, Augustine said "celibacy serves as an escape" from the dangers of sex and Jerome believed that virginity could serve as a possible equalizer between the sexes, allowing women to become honorary men.¹¹⁹ Because of this, convents became popular. They ensured permanent virginity, the noblest version of a woman, and they constituted the only other viable option for a woman other than submission to her husband in marriage.¹²⁰ But the mandated celibacy of church leaders (the nuns, monks, and priests) led to the view that sexual behavior was directly correlated to spirituality.

These same Church leaders created the church's first doctrines on rape as well. Augustine saw rape as a God given opportunity for women to learn and repent of sin, calling it a "prophylactic punishment".¹²¹ Augustine was the first to make rape a theological issue, but his stance is an extreme version of the victim blaming that still occurs in society. His contemporary, Jerome, granted only a single allowance for suicide,

¹¹⁷ Sharma, *Women in World Religions*, 219.

¹¹⁸ Isherwood, *Introducing Feminist Christologies*, 52.

¹¹⁹ Cahill, *Sex, Gender, and Christian Ethics.*, 174.

¹²⁰ Ibid, 172.

¹²¹ Scholz, *Sacred Witness*, 9.

when a woman's "chastity is jeopardized" through rape. Only in this way, he said, can she keep her honor.¹²²

Most early movements and texts that championed women, for example Gnosticism and the Acts of the Apostles, were considered heretical by the medieval period.¹²³ However, chaste religious women could find some prominence in society by becoming nuns or martyrs. Female monastic life became an especially popular option for women seeking learning and independence in the 12th century. Convents became wholly independent of men and self-sustaining contributors to society, however only virginal women had this option and women in the main Church were still resented. Later in the middle ages, however, female monasticism got reabsorbed by male orders, divided by factional conflict, and lost the appeal of most of the opportunities it provided to women.¹²⁴

Reformation

Christianity underwent radical change in the 16th century with the rise of Protestantism. Early reformation movements embraced the culture of subordination of the day.¹²⁵ Women were expected to obey the absolute rule of men, for such was their divinely ordained punishment for the sins of Eve and weakness of their sex. Furthermore, the celibate, independent monastic option for women was eliminated in Protestantism and no equivalent positions of respect, independence, or power were added for women within the new religious system.

¹²² Ibid, 8.

¹²³ Sharma, *Women in World Religions*, 217.

¹²⁴ Ibid, 219.

¹²⁵ Ibid, 221.

The advent of Protestantism saw the emergence of a multitude of denominations with a variety of beliefs on all theological issues, including women's place in society. Martin Luther, who began this break from the Catholic Church, believed that women's talents lay primarily in childbearing and childrearing and that because of Eve's sin, women were obligated to serve as the "antidote" for male sexual urges.¹²⁶ John Calvin drew on Augustine's teachings that women were intrinsically inferior to men, even before the fall.¹²⁷ Although spiritually men and women are equal, he said that God ordained that within the social order, men be superior to women. This relegated women to the domestic sphere, excluding them from church leadership.¹²⁸ Furthermore, Calvin believed that a wife was to be obedient and pleasing at all times in order to curb her husband's lust. This remained her marital duty even in the presence of verbal, physical, or sexual abuse.¹²⁹

Some Christian sects that emerged a little later attempted to reform not just the Catholic Church, but the other Protestant branches as well. The Anabaptists, for example, took reform to a more radical level than Lutherans or Calvinists. One infamous example was the Anabaptist expansion of the definition of marriage in which "polygamy emerged as an acceptable way to extend patriarchal marriage... born of a moral need to deal with the surplus of unattached women".¹³⁰ Like many of the denominations of the day, Anabaptists prohibited women from holding leadership roles, but many women managed to rise to prominence within the faith, often by declaring a spiritual marriage to God and becoming a martyr.¹³¹ Another sect, the Puritans, took the stringent stance that women

¹²⁶ Clark and Richardson, *Women and Religion*, 146.

¹²⁷ Sharma, *Women in World Religions*, 222.

¹²⁸ Clark and Richardson, *Women and Religion*, 148.

¹²⁹ Doyle, *Sex and Gender: The Human Experience*, 77.

¹³⁰ Clark and Richardson, *Women and Religion*, 149.

¹³¹ *Ibid*, 149.

should be domestic and docile helpers to men. They additionally believed that women were inferior, with wicked tendencies, and thus were more susceptible to witchcraft which they feared above all.¹³² However, the Puritan view of marriage was much less oppressive to women. Milton, for example, believed marriage to be a spiritual partnership aimed at the creation of a loving, mutually beneficial bond, not a primarily sexual relationship.¹³³ Mystic Christian groups, more so than mainstream Christian sects, recognized the feminine nature of God and praised spiritual androgyny, yielding some amount of respect to women.¹³⁴ The Shakers, for instance, believed that the divine revelation was incomplete without acknowledgment of the mothering nature of God and believed that this recognition of the androgynous nature of God was a necessary step to the realization of gender equality.¹³⁵

Modern Period

Since the time of the Reformation, the modern western church has generally seen progress in its treatment and inclusion of women. Patriarchal interpretations of Christianity often dealt with the dualism and contradiction of the scriptures by saying God meant for the patriarchy to govern on earth and the equality spoken of would be saved for heaven.¹³⁶ The Enlightenment, however, made strides towards breaking the hold that the patriarchy had on the church and it reinforced the theology of *Imago Dei* for all.¹³⁷ The philosophy that came from this movement was that the hierarchical ordering of

¹³² Sharma, *Women in World Religions*, 223.

¹³³ Clark and Richardson, *Women and Religion*, 171.

¹³⁴ Sharma, *Women in World Religions*, 227.

¹³⁵ Ibid, 228.

¹³⁶ Ibid, 228.

¹³⁷ Ibid, 229.

society which created castes and gender division was a result of the sin of humanity, not natural inequality. In the modern era, the Enlightenment merged Christianity with social justice and reform.

Following this precedent, 19th century Christian feminist leaders like Sarah and Angelina Grimke said that male dominance is a violation of nature and the first effect of the fall.¹³⁸ Such leaders called for an over-throw of the male dominated pulpit and the restoration of women to their equal rights to church leadership.¹³⁹ Between late 19th and mid-20th centuries, many churches began ordaining women, although the Catholic Church and most conservative Protestant denominations remain opposed to this movement. In this time, feminine virtues including love and altruism became closely correlated with general Christian virtue.¹⁴⁰ Women have experienced gains in equality in the modern Christian church, but the dualistic messages of the church still exist and provide a foothold for sexism and exclusion.

The church uses this dualism to perpetuate the patriarchy, choosing to ignore the potential for gender equality and control women instead. One particular way in which Christianity controls women is by dictating their roles in marriage. The primary purpose of marriage has always been procreation and providing legitimacy to offspring, but women are also expected to serve and ensure the sexual satisfaction of their husbands. Until the day of their marriage, however, proper Christian girls are expected to be innocent virgins. But ironically, as Christian feminist writer Rachel Held Evans states, “upon reaching her wedding night, a Christian woman is expected to transform from the

¹³⁸ Ibid, 230.

¹³⁹ Ibid, 231.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid, 232.

model of chastity into a veritable sex goddess, ready to honor God by satisfying her husband's sexual needs without fail".¹⁴¹ One controversial Christian writer, Debi Pearl spoke about such wifely duties saying, "Wife, it is your God-ordained ministry to your husband to be his totally enthusiastic sex partner, ready to enjoy him at all times... If you don't score high points here, you are providing an opening for your husband to be tempted by other women." She says that neither pain nor exhaustion is an excuse for a wife to say no to sex.¹⁴² 1 Corinthians 7:3-5 is often cited by Christians as a command to women justifying this philosophy of sexual obligation.¹⁴³ These beliefs alleviate men from the responsibility of their own sexual decisions and yet fail to give women sexual autonomy, both of which are demeaning and dangerous to women.

Islam

Islam is the second largest world religion after Christianity with a growing influence primarily in Europe, Africa, and the Middle East. As with Christianity, there is no single theology or ideology of Islam, but instead, many different sects and branches. The religion has many prominent socially and religiously conservative groups, which are infamously intolerant of other ways of life, and this religious right has seen increasing mass support in the recent modern era due to the constant wars on Islamic nations.¹⁴⁴ Islam, however, also has some of the most radical and first historical "expressions of toleration and the transcendence of sectarian boundaries".¹⁴⁵

¹⁴¹ Evans, *A Year of Biblical Womanhood*, 103.

¹⁴² Ibid, 108.

¹⁴³ Ibid, 212.

¹⁴⁴ İlkkaracan, *Deconstructing Sexuality in the Middle East Challenges and Discourses*, 4.

¹⁴⁵ Nussbaum, *Sex and Social Justice*, 8.

One particular issue for which Islam has received a lot of condemnation from the global community at large is that of their treatment of women. The Western stereotypes about Islamic societies are that the women are all oppressed and passive and that the religion as a whole is static and backwards.¹⁴⁶ Just as the West has often seen the Middle East as the enemy since 9/11, the Middle East views the West and their loose morals as dangerous to Islamic society.¹⁴⁷ However, as will be shown in this section, Islamic traditions and scriptures are quite varied in their treatment of women. As with Christianity, Islam has many justifications for both gender equality and female subjugation, yet it remains largely patriarchal.

The issue of gender discrimination and control of sexuality reflects systems of power and domination in society because the ability to control sexuality is institutionalized in cultural norms, religious doctrine, and legislation. Pinar Ilkcaracan is one scholar who has written extensively on women and Islam. She contends that in Islamic societies, various legal systems sanction the atrocities committed against women “such as early and forced marriage, virginity tests, discriminatory divorce laws, female genital mutilation, or murders committed in the name of family honor”.¹⁴⁸ Militarization and global conflicts only exacerbate the control of sexuality because men and nations feel threatened and cling to rigid ideals of masculinity, perpetuating a culture of aggression, intolerance, and exclusion.¹⁴⁹

Islam conceives of the Qur'an as the literal and perfect word of God, therefore Qur'anic law cannot be questioned in Islamic societies, including every verse

¹⁴⁶ Ilkcaracan, *Deconstructing Sexuality in the Middle East Challenges and Discourses*, 4.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid, 10.

¹⁴⁸ Ibid, 5.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid, 6.

encouraging female subjugation. Yet, at the time of its origin, Qur'anic law gave Arabian women legal advantages that were unheard of in the Western Judeo-Christian world.¹⁵⁰ Conservatism, especially when it is a conservative government in conjunction with conservative Islam, is what oppresses women, not Islam itself. Although to the outside world, Islam is typically thought of as being oppressive to women, this is an overgeneralization. There are over half a billion Muslim women and their experiences are bound to be different.¹⁵¹ While eight of the ten countries most oppressive to women are predominately Muslim, not all Muslims agree with these practices.¹⁵²

Islam is not historically misogynistic, but misogynists routinely quote Muhammad to substantiate their actions.¹⁵³ The problem of oppressive sexism is not merely in conservative religious powers, but in the culture at large. This is seen in the fact that "during the Taliban era, if a woman went to market and showed an inch of flesh, she would have been flogged; now, she's raped".¹⁵⁴ As governments changed hands and laws evolved, many forms of violence and intimidation, like flogging, have virtually disappeared under new supposedly secular rule. Sexism and the patriarchal need to force women into submission, however, have not gone away, and so in the absence of a legal, violent outlet, some enforcers fundamentalist gender roles have chosen rape as the preferred form of demeaning punishment. Whether related to an Islamic government or not, this misogynistic culture has deep roots in Islam, although in many ways it is a misuse of the religion.

¹⁵⁰ Sharma, *Women in World Religions*, 236.

¹⁵¹ Sharma, *Women in World Religions*, 235.

¹⁵² Kristof and WuDunn, *Half the Sky*, 150.

¹⁵³ Kristof and WuDunn, *Half the Sky*, 150.

¹⁵⁴ Ibid, 151.

One of the reasons for societal gender distinctions in Islam is a genuine belief in relevant biological differences. For example, menstruation is considered to be a diseased state resulting in extreme mental and physical changes including loss of body heat, decreased blood pressure, slowed metabolism, reduced immunity, and impaired concentration, speech, and intellect. Menstruation is believed to cause hysterical and suicidal fits, leaving women unfit for work. However, most in Islamic society would say that while men and women are different, they are genuinely equal. The argument for this separate but equal mentality is that while women are not philosophers or leaders, men are not mothers. Both men and women contribute characteristics necessary to a well-rounded society. Despite this basic human equality, gender roles are still strictly adhered to because of the natural differences,¹⁵⁵ and thus men enjoy privileges as rulers and protectors while women are dependent and weak.¹⁵⁶

In Islam, "women are both honored as mothers and loathed as causes of *fitnah*," the Arabic term for the evil of temptation and civil strife.¹⁵⁷ They are viewed as the quintessence of life and goodness, and yet simultaneously they embody sexuality, seduction, and anarchy. Women are thought of as chaste, absent of independent sexual desires, paragons of virtue, and yet susceptible to corruption and the cause of man's distraction.¹⁵⁸ Islamic society uses the view of women as weak and fragile creatures in need of protection to justify their exclusion from the public sphere. Yet ironically, they

¹⁵⁵ Shehadeh, *The Idea of Women in Fundamentalist Islam*, 20.

¹⁵⁶ Ibid, 38.

¹⁵⁷ Ibid, 240.

¹⁵⁸ Ibid, 220.

are also seen as “strong, evil devils against whom society needs protection” to justify their control and seclusion.¹⁵⁹

The foundational belief behind the control of women in Islamic society is the belief that relationships between men and women are driven purely by sexual attraction. Men must therefore be protected against this inevitable seduction by women and women must be kept from their attraction to men by restrictive regulations on women such as the veil, forbiddance of eye contact, and separation in all public spheres.¹⁶⁰ Feminist writer Susan Moller Okin argues that the existence of separate spheres exaggerates the differences between men and women, giving the most profitable parts of society to men who made the very distinctions from which they benefit.¹⁶¹

Qur'an

The Qur'an is a generally liberating book with some select passages that have been interpreted to justify female oppression. But many of the practices in modern Islamic society that are oppressive to women are not actually supported by the Qur'an, but are the result of centuries of commonly accepted patriarchal beliefs and Islamic interpretations. For example, many believe that the Qur'an has no directive for the veil, a literal covering and seclusion that is imposed to all "virtuous women" in modern conservative Islamic societies. The veil, which takes the form of the *chador*, *burqa*, or *hijab* depending on the region, functions as a safeguard not only of female virtue but of the Islamic state because greater freedoms for women and increased sociopolitical

¹⁵⁹ İlkkaracan, *Deconstructing Sexuality in the Middle East Challenges and Discourses*, 181.

¹⁶⁰ Shehadeh, *The Idea of Women in Fundamentalist Islam*, 22.

¹⁶¹ Ibid, 245.

interactions between men and women would lead to sexual perversion and anarchy.¹⁶²

Extreme societies use *purdah*, the seclusion or screening off of women so that they are never seen by men, or support the confinement of women to the home. However, Shehadeh points out that these ideas are taken from a misreading of verses meant specifically for the Prophet's wives in a certain context, so this practice as a whole is in fact in contradiction to the true spirit of the Qur'an.¹⁶³ Similarly, the modern forbiddance of women attending public prayers in mosques is a digression from the Qur'anic intent.¹⁶⁴ Women were accepted in mosques and encouraged to participate in the faith in all ways at the time of the Prophet.¹⁶⁵

Sayyid Qutb, a renowned 20th century Egyptian thinker, stated that "the main role of a woman is the guardianship of morality and the upbringing of children".¹⁶⁶ However, he believed that women do not become fully women until after their second pregnancy. This reduces single women, childless women, as well as those with only one child to "an inferior position plagued by imbalance and neurological instability".¹⁶⁷ This understanding of women is not founded in Qur'anic truth and in fact directly contradicts the gender equality that is implied by a majority of Qur'anic texts. As with Christianity, the stance of Islam on women has been directed by fundamentalists, such as Qutb, more than the scriptures themselves.¹⁶⁸

¹⁶² Ibid, 42.

¹⁶³ Ibid, 43; Sura 24:3.

¹⁶⁴ Shehadeh, *The Idea of Women in Fundamentalist Islam*, 44.

¹⁶⁵ Ibid, 45.

¹⁶⁶ Ibid, 59.

¹⁶⁷ Ibid, 72.

¹⁶⁸ Ibid, 233.

The first of the two main suras used in justification of female oppression is sura 4:34, which states that, "men are in charge of women, because Allah hath made the one of them to excel the other" and fundamentalist Islam takes this verse as the literal word of God.¹⁶⁹ In contrast, sura 7:189 says all humans are created absolutely equal, from "a single soul". Instead of choosing to take this verse at face value the way the previous verse is taken, Islam tends to qualify it saying that while men and women are equal in their soul, they differ in "natural instincts and abilities" so their roles are different.¹⁷⁰ Qutb affirmed that men and women were created of "one soul", but he says that women remain stagnant at this basic level of equality whereas men are capable of far greater growth and humanity.¹⁷¹ He argued that, while women do possess "rational and deliberative faculties", they become dulled and their emotional faculties become magnified when confined to the domestic sphere, which in effect guarantees that they become unfit for the public sphere.¹⁷² He therefore claims that allowing women to be in charge of men would in fact be oppressive because they are not made for it, just as putting men in charge of child care would be cruel.¹⁷³

In the second sura used to justify women's inequality, sura 2:282, the Qur'anic law requires two females to witness to a debtor's transaction whereas one male suffices. Qutb argues that the law in this verse is necessary because women have an innate emotional volatility which, although necessary for childrearing, makes them untrustworthy.¹⁷⁴ And rather than be taken as a specific law about a specific situation,

¹⁶⁹ Ibid, 19.

¹⁷⁰ Ibid, 60.

¹⁷¹ Ibid, 70.

¹⁷² Ibid, 71.

¹⁷³ Ibid, 68.

¹⁷⁴ Ibid, 68.

this sura has been used to claim that women have one-half the value of men, justifying that women receiving half the inheritance and less education than men is in fact fair, not unequitable.

This verse and the rest of surah 2 is often interpreted as saying women shall have rights proportional to what is equitable, not necessarily equal. Men are superior to women because they are more naturally righteous. Women must also learn to be righteous in the eyes of God to obtain salvation, but it requires more work and sacrifice for them to achieve this. Therefore, clerics advocate that the discriminatory practices for women, like those in Shari'a law, do not violate equality, but rather aid women in becoming righteous, the only way they will be truly equal in the eyes of God. Because women have a different nature, one that is tender, nurturing, yet prone to evil, their relegation to the domestic sphere is deemed natural in keeping with God's plan and the social order. In effect, "the religiously and socially constructed subordination of women and the emotional and psychological ramifications of that subordination are used as proof" of women's actual inferiority.¹⁷⁵

Islamic proverbs tend to be highly derogatory to women, reflecting and exacerbating the patriarchal society that rose to prominence after the earliest days of Islam had passed.¹⁷⁶ One such proverb states that obedience to women causes a man to enter hell and another declares that women can only enter heaven by obeying their husbands.¹⁷⁷ Legend, propagated by many prominent Islamic scholars, attributes Muhammed to the saying "I looked into Hell and I saw that the majority of its inhabitants

¹⁷⁵ Boden, *Women's Rights and Religious Practice*, 4.

¹⁷⁶ Ibid, 6.

¹⁷⁷ Ibid, 7.

were women, and I looked into Paradise and saw that but few inhabitants were women".¹⁷⁸ Justifying women's exclusion from the public sphere, both written and oral Islamic traditions teach that "women's function is to bear and rear children".¹⁷⁹ Further propagating gender separation is the prominent belief that men's brains have greater capacity to handle technical and analytical thought, whereas women's brains have more active emotional centers. Discrimination is also justified based on the scientific fact that men's brains weigh on average 100 grams more, although science does not show that this size difference leads to any difference in functional abilities.¹⁸⁰

Muhammad himself, on the other hand, was a revolutionary who did a lot in his own life and through his teachings to protect the rights of women. In his life, Muhammad was unique in that he remained monogamously married to Khadijah for her entire life. She was his primary confidant, his greatest supporter, and the first Islamic convert. Muhammad also greatly treasured his daughters, some of whom, including Fatima, played influential roles in the establishment of Islam. Arabian women in the seventh century had very few rights, but Muhammad not only valued the women in his own life, but he sought to change the status quo. He taught that men and women are totally equal in the eyes of God and he granted women in Islam rights to inheritance, property, and marriage. While he did allow Muslim men to take up to four wives, this permission was granted so that widows would be taken care of and he discouraged the practice unless they could treat all wives equally. However, since the seventh century, polygamous practices have been detrimental to many Muslim women and in various respects many

¹⁷⁸ Kloppenborg and Hanegraaff, *Female Stereotypes in Religious Traditions*, 110.

¹⁷⁹ Boden, *Women's Rights and Religious Practice*, 7.

¹⁸⁰ Ibid, 8.

modern Muslim women do not have the radically equal rights proposed by Muhammad.¹⁸¹ Similar to the implications of Jesus's life on Christianity, the examination of Muhammad provides strong evidence that, although many Muslims claim to execute misogynistic acts in the name of Islam, the basis of Islam itself is radically egalitarian.

Law

Like the varied societal beliefs about women, the laws concerning them are equally contradictory. For example, in most Islamic countries all people have constitutional rights to equality but existing local penal codes "prioritize the interests of males, ensure male lineage, and disable the rights of women".¹⁸² There are numerous legal practices in the Islamic world that hold women at a lesser, dependent status as well as attempt to ensure female sexual and moral conformity.

Islam has been accused of "denigrating the value of female life in ways that have undermined women's claim to basic goods of subsistence".¹⁸³ It has been used to justify the imposition of the veil, the prohibition of women from receiving an education or earning money, and even extreme practices such as murder for dowry. Besides the belief of women's biological inferiority, women are denied education and participation in the world as an attempt to shield them from becoming corrupted by the outside world or tempting men with their sexuality.¹⁸⁴ Early Islamic society did not have the extremes of separation that modern conservative Islamic society does. Much like in early Christianity, women enjoyed a slightly elevated position in the new religion than the other women in

¹⁸¹ "Muhammad: Legacy of a Prophet . Muhammad and Women | PBS."

¹⁸² İlkkaracan, *Deconstructing Sexuality in the Middle East Challenges and Discourses*, 38.

¹⁸³ Nussbaum, *Sex and Social Justice*, 88.

¹⁸⁴ *Ibid*, 101.

that society, worshipping alongside men.¹⁸⁵ It was later in Islamic history that these restrictions on women began being imposed.¹⁸⁶

Although there are some feminist, progressive Muslim women and some unhappy with their position within society, Shehadeh presents the disclaimer that many Muslim women are likely content with their position in society, both because it is all they have ever known and because oppressive laws are equated to Qur'anic law (whether or not they should be) and the Qur'an cannot be questioned.¹⁸⁷ For many, it is easier to embrace Islamic fundamentalism and simply accept control over the domestic sphere that it grants them, than be isolated in a fight against it.¹⁸⁸ Women also see liberation as the responsibility that would accompany it and the loss of a safety net that male dominance provides.¹⁸⁹ Because of this, Western ideas of equality may not be feasible or desirable for Islamic societies. However, even if some women are content with their subjugation, this does not negate the harmful societal and personal consequences that highly patriarchal Islamic societies often have, including rape and purity culture.¹⁹⁰

In Islamic marriage, women's duties are to obey and procreate. And of all the non-communist Islamic countries, only Turkey has a secular civil law separate from the Islamic family code, demonstrating that Islam highly influences family life and law in Islamic societies. Following the ancient Islamic law, women never truly belong to themselves, transitioning from the care of their father to the ownership of her husband. The *mahr*, the dowry, is the price paid by the man to the woman in exchange for her

¹⁸⁵ Sharma, *Women in World Religions*, 241.

¹⁸⁶ Nussbaum, *Sex and Social Justice*, 88.

¹⁸⁷ Sharma, *Women in World Religions*, 249.

¹⁸⁸ Shehadeh, *The Idea of Women in Fundamentalist Islam*, 249.

¹⁸⁹ Sharma, *Women in World Religions*, 249.

¹⁹⁰ *Ibid*, 250.

marital duties in many fundamentalist Islamic societies and mandated by Sharia law.¹⁹¹

Theoretically, marriage is a legal contract that women can negotiate as equals, keeping their own dowry price, and they must be at least fifteen. In reality though, girls are often illegally pressured into marriages at a very young age by male relatives.¹⁹² Islamic law states that the husband must provide for her and cannot mistreat her, but her marital duties, sex and procreation, are ordered by God, so disobedience is punishable in escalating steps leading to retributive beating.¹⁹³

Women's independent sexual need is ignored in a vast majority of Islamic society, but the Qur'anic law itself recognizes men's natural sexual needs and allows for their release. Islamic law allows men to take up to four wives, to demand sex at any time, and gives them a right to unilateral divorce and *mut'ah*, or temporary, marriages.¹⁹⁴

There are two forms of divorce under Islamic law. *Talaq* is the most common form of divorce, taken on initiative of a man with or without the woman's consent. All that is required is the declaration of his intent to divorce followed by a three month waiting period to ensure she is not pregnant or he can simply say "I divorce you" three times and the marriage is legally void. *Khul* is the second form of divorce that is taken at the initiative of the woman. It requires either a special clause in the marriage contract allowing for divorce or it must be done for specific reasons such as desertion, insanity, or impotence.¹⁹⁵ To initiate *khul*, she must return her *mahr* as payment, be able to prove his neglect or infirmity in court, and, to ensure that she is in her right mind, she cannot be

¹⁹¹ Shehadeh, *The Idea of Women in Fundamentalist Islam*, 34.

¹⁹² Sharma, *Women in World Religions*, 238.

¹⁹³ Shehadeh, *The Idea of Women in Fundamentalist Islam*, 34.

¹⁹⁴ Ibid, 220.

¹⁹⁵ Sharma, *Women in World Religions*, 239.

menstruating.¹⁹⁶ Many countries are trying to do away with the ancient triple repudiation law, but even divorces that go through the courts are still much harder for women to win because many male judges are entrenched in patriarchal Islamic society.

Similarly, in some fundamentalist Islamic countries, for a man to accuse his wife of adultery, he merely has to swear to it five times and damn himself if he is lying. The wife can defend herself by swearing five times the allegations are false and calling on the wrath of God if she is lying. But since she is only granted acquittal if a judge rules in her favor, the charge of adultery and the punishment that follows usually depends only on the claims of the husband.¹⁹⁷ Infidelity is strictly forbidden in Islamic society, however polygamy, *mut'ah*, and *talaq* do provide the possibility for men to take sexual license not granted to women.¹⁹⁸

Within fundamentalist Islamic societies, sex is seen as a polluting force, the work of the devil. Many of the teachings of Islam are meant to prevent such intimacy between men and women which would threaten devotion to Allah.¹⁹⁹ Islamic society views the West as a culture of sexual anarchy where women are independent, mingling with men. Islamic fundamentalists compare Western “gender equality” to “female promiscuity”²⁰⁰ and believe unbridled sex to be the cause of deterioration of society and the breakdown of the family unit.²⁰¹ Fundamentalist Islam, on the other hand, has found the way to sustain a pure society, by maintaining separate spheres and subversion of women who are the

¹⁹⁶ Shehadeh, *The Idea of Women in Fundamentalist Islam*, 35.

¹⁹⁷ Ibid, 36.

¹⁹⁸ Ibid, 223.

¹⁹⁹ Boden, *Women's Rights and Religious Practice*, 12.

²⁰⁰ Ibid, 5.

²⁰¹ Shehadeh, *The Idea of Women in Fundamentalist Islam*, 33.

cause of men's degradation.²⁰² However, a complete suppression of sex is believed to have deleterious effects on men's intellect and health so sex is harnessed by marriage.²⁰³

In Islam, sex outside of marriage is wrong for both men and women. However, in reality, female sexuality is much more stigmatized. Moroccan feminist writer Fatima Mernissi states that "the whole Muslim social structure can be seen as an attack on, and a defense against, the disruptive power of female sexuality".²⁰⁴ It is a popular myth that men are powerless against female sexuality but that women can control their sexual needs. Because of this, the sexual exploits of men are given more leniencies whereas women must take responsibility for both their sexual actions and those of men.²⁰⁵ This disproportionate societal expectation that women be chaste and modest serves patriarchal desires for men to maintain control over their daughters and wives.²⁰⁶

Muslim women feel the cost of the absolution of men's sexual responsibility. Not only are they secluded and granted no sexual autonomy, but the ideology that men are not required to respect women's bodily integrity, requires that women earn it by adhering to social controls. If a woman does not maintain proper decorum, if she makes eye contact or becomes uncovered in public, the popular line of thought is that she deserves whatever harassment or violence occurs. Men are virile, sex-driven creatures, but since this cannot be helped, Muslim women are held responsible, even for their own rapes, for any and all actions that might have tempted men.²⁰⁷

²⁰² Ibid, 31.

²⁰³ Ibid, 33.

²⁰⁴ Boden, *Women's Rights and Religious Practice*, 10.

²⁰⁵ Shehadeh, *The Idea of Women in Fundamentalist Islam*, 223.

²⁰⁶ Boden, *Women's Rights and Religious Practice*, 5.

²⁰⁷ Ibid, 11.

Conclusion

No generalizations can be made about Christianity or Islam or their religious adherents. With close to two billion Muslims and over two billion Christians in the world, their beliefs and practices are extremely diverse. But both religions have a history of association with and promotion of patriarchal and misogynistic sentiments and practices. The religious scriptures and traditions of each are as varied as its modern interpretations. There are foundations for both the sexist interpretations and the egalitarian ones, and while I argue that Jesus and Muhammad likely intended Christianity and Islam to be religions of gender equality, these egalitarian traditions have been tragically usurped throughout history to perpetrate atrocities against women in the name of God.

CHAPTER THREE

Rape

There are many ways in which purity culture results in discrimination and maltreatment of women, but sexual assault and specifically rape that emerge from purity culture are some of the most severe. As opposed to the many other forms of abuse that may be directed at women, rape is a unique form of assault in that it “violates personal, intimate and psychological boundaries – what in human rights language is designated human dignity and bodily integrity, and in feminist and critical theory is termed sexual autonomy or sexual sovereignty”.²⁰⁸ Clinically, rape is typically defined as penetration of the vagina, anus, or mouth with a penis without consent.²⁰⁹ Although this assault is clearly sexual since it typically involves the genitalia, rape is not primarily a sexual act, but a violent one. It represents “something more sinister than just libido and prurient opportunism. Namely: sexism and misogyny” that is deeply embedded in gendered society.²¹⁰ Sexual violence and rape are caused by gender inequality and yet also contribute to inequality because they keep women in fear of violent displays of male domination.²¹¹

Rape is an extremely pervasive crime. It is widely agreed upon that approximately one in every three women worldwide are victims of rape.²¹² In fact, according to the World Bank data, for women between the ages of 15 and 44, rape is a higher risk factor

²⁰⁸ Horvath and Brown, *Rape*, 3.

²⁰⁹ Ibid, 5.

²¹⁰ Kristof and WuDunn, *Half the Sky*, 67.

²¹¹ Horvath and Brown, *Rape*, 18.

²¹² Ibid, 17.

for death or disability than cancer, car accidents, or war.²¹³ It is estimated that between 1972 and 2006, the global incidence rates for all violent crimes declined by 16%, but rape incidences increased by 678%.²¹⁴ Both this increase and the conviction rates for rape which remain stagnant around a mere 6% of all reported cases, show that rape and the misogyny of patriarchal culture are flourishing.²¹⁵

Patriarchal societies that emphasize the differences between men and women are more prone to rape culture. The Gerai tribe of Borneo is a unique example of a society which legally and practically recognizes no differences between men and women and case studies done on this people group have shown zero incidences of rape.²¹⁶ On the other hand, a tragic and yet far too common example of rape in patriarchal cultures is seen in the case of Dina, a seventeen year old girl from a Congolese tribe who was gang raped by a tribal militia. She was paralyzed when they shoved a tree branch into her and she developed a devastating fistula through her bladder and rectum. Her family did not prioritize her highly enough to pay for surgery and her fistula was seen as a curse from God, so she was put in hut alone while rancid feces, urine, and menstrual blood leaked constantly and uncontrollably from her body.²¹⁷ In a similar case involving Prudence, a Cameroonian woman, her family specifically stated that if she had been a man, they could have raised the one-hundred dollars needed for her lifesaving procedure, but since she was a woman, they chose not to try.²¹⁸ These are examples of the unfortunate reality

²¹³ Ibid, 18.

²¹⁴ Westmarland and Gangoli, *International Approaches to Rape*, 102.

²¹⁵ Horvath and Brown, *Rape*, 5.

²¹⁶ Scholz, *Sacred Witness*, 13.

²¹⁷ Kristof and WuDunn, *Half the Sky*, 94.

²¹⁸ Ibid, 112.

for many rape victims in patriarchal societies that do not respect or prioritize the wellbeing of women.

In these patriarchal societies, one factor that contributes to the prevalence of rape is that oftentimes, neither boys nor girls are being taught the meaning of consent, abetting an already dangerous culture of misogyny and violence. A study in the *Washington Post* asked college students about what constitutes sexual consent, asking if they believe that consent is granted if someone gets undressed, or pulls out a condom, or says yes but then changes their mind. Forty percent of the sample population said that these constituted valid consent and even more of the surveyed students discounted the need for clear consent when alcohol was involved.²¹⁹ Furthermore, fraternities in many colleges including Yale, Texas Tech, and Louisiana State University have been caught using the slogan, “No means Yes! Yes means Anal!”, a disturbing example of the rampant sexism in the rape culture today.²²⁰ An analogy by news comedian John Oliver perfectly describes the line between consensual sex and rape: “Sex is like boxing. If both people did not fully agree to participate, one of them is committing a crime”.²²¹ Since the difference between boxing and assault is obvious, the difference between sex and rape should be equally as clear.

Rape Myths

Just as consent is not well understood, there are many myths surrounding rape that contribute to the prevalence of rape. One such rape myth is the belief that women are to

²¹⁹ Anderson and Craighill, “College Students Remain Deeply Divided over What Consent Actually Means.”

²²⁰ Kingkade, “Frat Gets Punished By National Office For Pro-Rape Banner.”; Beyerstein, “‘No Means Yes, Yes Means Anal’ Frat Banned From Yale.”; Times-Picayune, “LSU’s Kappa Sigma Fraternity Writes ‘No Means Yes’ on Wall, University Looking into Incident.”

²²¹ LastWeekTonight, *Last Week Tonight with John Oliver*.

blame for their own rapes. This rape myth is reassuring because it rests on a belief in a just world in which bad things only happen to bad people, but it is dangerous and false.²²² Female abuse victims are often accused of inciting rape by their behavior, appearance, or situation, but men who are assaulted are rarely portrayed as “asking for it.” Seemingly innocuous acts like flirting or being alone with a man are often used to hold the victim culpable in instances of rape.

This victim blame is not based in reality, rather in the assumptions of patriarchal societies. To prove this, Andrea Barnes, a psychologist and lawyer, studied forms of rape that do not conform to the typical, heterosexual idea of assault. While acknowledging that some rapes are in fact perpetrated by women and many rapes are directed against men, she qualifies that these numbers are far fewer than male-on-female rape, and furthermore, “men do not experience the cultural context of fear in which women live.” The rape of women is a part of a unique and pervasive culture of sexist violence.²²³ It is because the main cause of rape was found to be gender differences and discrimination which Barnes maintains as “the strongest contradiction of the victim precipitation argument.” Therefore, she states that in order to understand the culture that feeds rape, we must “examine the power relations between the sexes that both enable and condone rape”,²²⁴ including the patriarchal social hierarchy in which women are considered less valuable and less capable than men, placing them under the authority of men.

When women accept their submission to men and their cultural sexualization, they contribute to the culture of passivity and silence that surrounds rape. However, when

²²² Doyle, *Sex and Gender: The Human Experience*, 47.

²²³ Barnes, *The Handbook of Women, Psychology, and the Law*, 278.

²²⁴ *Ibid*, 268.

women stay silent about abuse, whether from shame or fear, rape culture in effect perpetuates. This silence is far too common and is bad for victim recovery, justice, and the progression of societal equality. Women need to share their perspectives about gender inequalities with men to begin to change the ignorance that men have about the women's restricted freedoms and safety and to share their experiences with each other to begin to break the stigma and guilt that surrounds rape victims. Breaking this silence will begin to change the very culture that causes rape, the patriarchal culture of entitlement and aggression which views women as dispensable, dependent, and sexual beings.

Law makers, law enforcers, economists, teachers, inventors, doctors, humanitarians, and many others have attempted rape prevention. Numerous feminist and global health institutions have made rape prevention a priority. Of the numerous tactics of rape prevention that well-meaning people and organizations have come up with, some are useful but some are ineffective and even perpetuate the myth of victim blame. There are two main approaches to rape prevention. The assertive approach encourages women to learn self-defense and how to best confront an attacker. The restrictive approach, on the other hand, tells women to dress modestly and to avoid any alluring actions that might encourage men. But even with this second prevention method, all women can do is try to avoid rape. Only men, the perpetrators, can truly prevent it by choosing to not commit the crime.²²⁵ This is why victim blame is a faulty accusation: rape is only the responsibility of the perpetrator.

Besides victim blame, another form of rape myth is the belief that “true” rape consists of a violent attack by a stranger; this myth is perpetrated by stereotypes and

²²⁵ Doyle, *Sex and Gender: The Human Experience*, 57.

media portrayal.²²⁶ In reality, most rapes are committed by acquaintances, significant others, or family members and many involve threats, drugs, or psychological violence in lieu of brute force. But because rape myth discredits these realities, these sexual assaults tend to be far more confusing than stranger rape.²²⁷ Within rape culture, there is a pervasive belief that men have the right to coerce women to have sex as long as they know them and do not physically beat them.²²⁸ Furthermore, in society and in court proceedings, it is often easier to doubt a woman (especially a sexually active woman) and accuse her of being provocative, not fighting back, or even liking the assault, than it is to accept that even innocuous, well-liked, family men have the potential for rape.²²⁹ This misunderstanding of the variety of forms rape can take, the tendency for accusations to be discredited, and the shame and stigma of victim blame frequently makes women doubt the validity of their rapes and reluctant to report them as such, making rape the most underreported crime in the world.²³⁰

Types of Rape

There are many specific forms of rape which, upon examination, reveal unique facets of gender discrimination and rape culture. Marital rape is one form of rape that is on the rise, underreported, and gravely misunderstood. It is a form of domestic violence that stems from a benign acceptance of patriarchal values, the belief that man is king of his own home.²³¹ Historically, wife abuse has been condoned as a form of chastisement.

²²⁶ Barnes, *The Handbook of Women, Psychology, and the Law*, 269.

²²⁷ Scholz, *Sacred Witness*, 28.

²²⁸ Ibid, 27.

²²⁹ Ibid, 29.

²³⁰ As of 2011; Barnes, *The Handbook of Women, Psychology, and the Law*, 269.

²³¹ Doyle, *Sex and Gender: The Human Experience*, 93.

In medieval Europe, laws permitted flogging, exile, or murder for marital offenses like adultery. In 1824, the Mississippi Supreme Court upheld the husband's right to physically censure his wife and an 1865 North Carolina court decision declared that the state could not intervene in domestic abuse unless a life threatening injury was sustained.²³² Even in the modern era, many societies, including that of the United States, remain fiercely patriarchal and violence prone. There is a trend in which men rape their wives because of a misplaced belief that they are entitled to sex and in an attempt to punish and control their wives.²³³

Another specific form of rape is that of genocidal rape in war. Mass rapes in wartimes are not a new tactic. For example, one of the greatest mass rapes in history which took place at the end of World War II was committed by Serbian soldiers at the expense of the German women. But because the world wanted to see the USSR as the heroes, this did not become widely recognized until much later.²³⁴ The first widely documented incidence of war-rape was in the early 1990's: the genocide in former Yugoslavia which led to systematic mass rape of Bosnian and Croatian Muslim women by Serbian men.²³⁵ Between 20,000 and 50,000 women were estimated to have been raped in an attempt at ethnic cleansing by forced impregnation. Furthermore, the physical and psychological trauma of the rapes served as a constant reminder to the Bosnian and Croatian Muslims of the Serbian domination.²³⁶ Serbian soldiers who refused to rape the

²³² Ibid, 94.

²³³ Scholz, *Sacred Witness*, 91.

²³⁴ In 1945, WWII came to an end. The Axis powers, including Germany, fell to the Allies. These nations, including the US, France, Great Brittan, and the USSR, were generally seen as liberators, restoring justice and goodness to the world; BBC, "The Rape of Berlin."

²³⁵ Scholz, *Sacred Witness*, 135.

²³⁶ Barnes, *The Handbook of Women, Psychology, and the Law*, 300.

women were subjected to castration, implying and reflecting the idea that rape is a way to prove masculinity. Additionally, in 1994, the Rwandan genocide saw between 250,000 and 500,000 rapes by the Hutu militia against Tutsi women. Hateful propaganda against the Tutsi people identified sexuality as the means of destroying their women.²³⁷

According to Barnes, until recently, war-rape has been considered an "offense against women's honor", a private issue, but it has not been condemned by the general humanitarian groups and international legal organizations in the way in which crimes like torture or other violent war crimes perpetrated primarily against men have been. This designation mischaracterizes women's honor and links it to their sexuality.²³⁸ However, since the time of these public incidences of genocidal rape, rape has finally become recognized as a war-crime, a human rights violation, and a crime against humanity.²³⁹ The International Crime Tribunal for Rwanda broadened the definition of rape, assigned it equal status to other violations of war,²⁴⁰ and qualified rape which is intended to destroy a group by bodily or mental harm to its members as genocide.²⁴¹ Furthermore, the UN Security Council stated that "rape is no longer just a by-product of war but a military tactic that has reached pandemic proportions".²⁴² Despite the numerous international prohibitions, some nations such as these sometimes tolerate rape in wartime because it is an effective strategy aimed at wearing down the spirits of the opposing forces.²⁴³

²³⁷ Ibid, 301.

²³⁸ Ibid, 297.

²³⁹ Scholz, *Sacred Witness*, 136.

²⁴⁰ Barnes, *The Handbook of Women, Psychology, and the Law*, 305.

²⁴¹ Ibid, 306.

²⁴² Scholz, *Sacred Witness*, 138.

²⁴³ Barnes, *The Handbook of Women, Psychology, and the Law*, 299.

War-rape is a "means of vengeance, a tool of propaganda, a way to signify power to the opposing side, a reward for weary troops and a way to build morale... a way to subjugate and terrorize a population... and, increasingly, a strategic tool of ethnic cleansing or genocide." However, at their core, there is nothing that necessarily distinguishes war-rape from other forms of rape except that war amplifies the androcentric gender roles that are present in peace time.²⁴⁴ Men are required to be aggressive and violent and women and their bodies are a means of serving the purposes of men.²⁴⁵

Rape and Christianity

Biblical Rape Allusions

The Old Testament contains many rape allusions.²⁴⁶ Whether describing God's relationship to the people of Israel or Israel's relationship to neighboring nations, the use of rape imagery in the Biblical texts normalizes these violent acts against women. This can lead to an interpretation that such acts are approved by God.

There are many Old Testament passages that use rape language to describe God's vengeance against the idolatrous Israelite nation. These poems using sexual assault metaphors use brutal and crude language to explain God's relationship to God's people, and in effect "justify sexual violence as divinely mandated punishment".²⁴⁷ Ezekiel 16 is one such passage, consisting of pornographic objectification of Jerusalem as the wife of

²⁴⁴ Scholz, *Sacred Witness*, 137.

²⁴⁵ Barnes, *The Handbook of Women, Psychology, and the Law*, 301.

²⁴⁶ Ezekiel 16, Isaiah 3:17, Jeremiah 3:22,26, etc.

²⁴⁷ Scholz, *Sacred Witness* 181.

God, a husband infuriated by his wife's "prostitution".²⁴⁸ The speaker portrays God as ranting, threatening to strip her naked in front of a mob who will destroy and "ravage" her, stoning her and hacking her to pieces with swords. The speaker says that only after this will God "be calm and no longer angry".²⁴⁹ Interpreting this passage as an actual profile of God as if he were a man, analysts have found three stages of abusive relationships present in the text: tension and anger building, an acute violent incident, and then a return to kindness and regret. Religiously, this passage is used to explain how God's anger is justified and yet his children receive undeserved grace. However, this metaphorical situation also implies that men, like God, are justified to get angry and abusive towards women in this manner.²⁵⁰

Isaiah 3:17 has a similar passage in which God threatens to punish Israel with sexual abuse. The speaker, and through him, God, threatens to "afflict with scabs the heads of the daughters of Zion, and [that] the Lord will lay bare their secret parts." In Jeremiah 13:22 and 26 as well, Jerusalem is also personified as a woman, raped by God for her sins. "On account of the greatness of your iniquity, exposed are your skirts, violated are your genitals... I myself [God] shall strip your skirts over your face, so that is seen your shame." Although the author is not literally recounting a rape or calling God a rapist, these rape poetics endorse "masculine authoritarianism," the "dehumanization of women," and the justification of sexual violence against women.²⁵¹

The most direct message behind these assault passages, portraying "a culture invaded, raped and devastated", is one of Israel's hatred and distrust of the surrounding

²⁴⁸ Ibid, 187.

²⁴⁹ Ezekiel 16:42

²⁵⁰ Ibid, 194.

²⁵¹ Ibid, 185.

nations and their idolatrous practices. However, because the metaphors in these passages “portray a sickening picture of battered sexuality and torn flesh”, they demonstrate not only the xenophobia of the culture of Israel recorded in the text, but the overpowering androcentrism as well.²⁵² The inclusion of these violent metaphors of God in the Old Testament exemplifies the patriarchal society in which the scriptures were formed and excuses misogynistic sentiments. As theologian Martin Franzmann says, "The metaphor is a scandal - a scandal for the human persons who thought it worthwhile to express some aspect of God in this way, rather than a scandal about this God". However, this is a scandal which far too often proves problematic when uncritical followers of this religion do not understand the context and do not appreciate the horror of the metaphor.²⁵³ Uncritical readers might take the analogy of God’s anger against Israel because of "her many lovers" and "whoring" as confirming male possession of women’s sexuality and justifying male violence, jealousy, and rage. The Old Testament forms the basis of Christianity and in many ways the spirit of the Old Testament and the Old Testament view of God remain powerful and widely accepted views of many conservative Christians. Therefore, misogynistic passages such as this, when absorbed into the culture of Christianity, have the potential to teach that women have no sexual independence and that they should obey and fear their husbands, reflecting and perpetuating the patriarchal morals of the culture.²⁵⁴

²⁵² Ibid, 185.

²⁵³ Ibid, 208.

²⁵⁴ Ibid, 191.

Biblical Rape Laws

In addition to the rape metaphors in the Bible, the Old Testament contains many laws concerning rape that give great insight into the cultural gender abuses of that culture. The customs and laws of this ancient era normalized the marriage of female captives during wartime despite the fact that forced marriage is almost inevitably equivalent to rape. The scriptural law on adultery in Deuteronomy 22 states that “if a man is found lying with the wife of another, both of them shall die”. This condition is general and could refer to either consensual or forced sex, but if the man claimed it was adultery and not rape, she would be stoned alongside him.²⁵⁵ Furthermore, this law only applied to married women. A second law existed for a betrothed woman, who was assumed to be virginal. She was exempt from responsibility if she was raped in the country and shown this mercy because her previous virginal state gave her more value in this society. On the other hand, if the rape took place in town, she also was assumed to be complicit because she “did not scream for help” and therefore was punished for adultery.²⁵⁶

Finally, this law states that, if a man rapes a single virgin, he must pay a monetary compensation to her father and take her as his wife.²⁵⁷ For the men involved, this law was minimally inconvenient because the father received the bride price he was owed for his daughter and the rapist avoided any punishment and he was able to continue raping the girl in marriage. For the girl, however, this law was extremely damaging. By forcing her to continue to live with and have sex with her rapist, this law gives no consideration for the pain, fear, and disgust that she would have for him nor any concern for her wellbeing

²⁵⁵ Scholz, *Sacred Witness*, 113.

²⁵⁶ Deuteronomy 22:23-27

²⁵⁷ Deuteronomy 22:28-29

or her hope of a healthy marriage. These are all extremely androcentric laws because they assume that a woman is damaged goods after rape since her virginity was her value and they establish a culture of victim blame. Furthermore, these scriptural laws do not condemn or prohibit rape, but “rather they stipulate the terms under which a man may commit rape.”²⁵⁸

In addition to the misogynistic rape laws in Deuteronomy, there are numerous accounts of God directly ordering the Israelites to take the conquered women in marriage. While God told the Israelites to “kill every [conquered] woman who has known a man by lying with him,” he ordered, “all the young girls who have not known a man by sleeping with him, keep alive for yourself.”²⁵⁹ The fulfillment of this directive would have led to violating examinations, rape, and murder, all based on the inherent devaluation of sexually active women. However, to people in this patriarchal society, this was not considered rape because there was no understanding of marital rape. Rape was the “sexual penetration of another man's human property, compromising the legitimacy of [his] future children” and the women in question had no husbands and their fathers were dead, therefore it was considered impossible to commit rape against them.²⁶⁰

The rape metaphors present in the Bible, although not literal stories of rape nor explicit approval of the act, are troubling additions because they are indicative of a pervasive rape culture present in the time in which the stories were written. Because the Bible is now considered the holy Word of God by most Christians, the misogynistic

²⁵⁸ Scholz, *Sacred Witness*, 217.

²⁵⁹ Numbers 31:17-18

²⁶⁰ Ellwood, “Rape and Judgment.”

sentiments of these metaphors have been included into the collective Christian religious thought and thus impacted the patriarchal rape culture present in Christian societies.

Biblical Rape Narratives

Apart from the rape metaphors and rape laws present in the Old Testament scriptures, there are many literal accounts of rape in the Bible,²⁶¹ but they are often overlooked or reinterpreted by the Christian church as metaphors. For example, in many modern translations, words such as "fondle", "ravage", and "touch" are used, but they come from the same Hebrew word that is used to indicate rape. This softer, ambiguous language is often interpreted as referring to consensual sexual encounters, but detailed studies of the original Hebrew scriptures indicate that rape passages occur far more often in the Bible than is initially apparent.²⁶²

One example of a biblical rape narrative is Judges 19-21 which has been called by some, "the most horrible story of the Hebrew Bible". In the story, a Levite man and his concubine sought shelter for a night with a Benjamite man for the night when a mob appeared, asking to rape the Levite. The man of the house refused to give up his house guest, instead saying "Look, here is my own virgin daughter and his concubine. I will bring them out to you now, and you can use them and do to them whatever you wish." The concubine was gang raped all night until she died.²⁶³ The psychology behind this narrative is that males use rape and the act of penetration to affirm their power, masculinity, and heterosexuality.²⁶⁴ However, to be on the receiving end of penetration

²⁶¹ Genesis 16, Genesis 29, Genesis 34, Genesis 35:22, Judges 19-21, 2 Samuel 11, 2 Samuel 13, 1 Kings 1:1-4, Daniel 13, etc.

²⁶² Scholz, *Sacred Witness*, 91.

²⁶³ Ibid, 140.

²⁶⁴ Ibid, 144.

could ruin a man's masculinity, so the Benjamite in this story offered his own daughter to the rapists because he preferred a woman he loved be raped as opposed to a strange man.²⁶⁵ This story is most commonly interpreted as being about the xenophobia and conflict between the tribes, but it is additionally about a homophobic, misogynistic, phallocentric society in which women had negligible worth and a breach in hospitality was worse than the rape of one's own daughter.²⁶⁶

The quintessential rape story in the Bible is that of Tamar's rape by her brother Amnon, son of David. In the story, Amnon fell in love with Tamar, but since she was a virgin, he was discouraged because he could not "do anything to her" consensually. Therefore, he pretended he was sick and asked her to come take care of him. When she did, he grabbed her, saying "Come to bed with me, my sister." She pleaded, "Don't force me! ... Do not do this wicked thing... Where could I get rid of my disgrace?", and yet he held her down and forcibly raped her. But after the assault, he immediately was filled with hatred for her and sent her away, at which point she mourned and was forced to live with her other brother Absalom, disgraced and desolate.²⁶⁷

Oftentimes, people use this story to teach against Tamar's actions that invited and prompted the sexual assault, portraying her as a temptress when in reality the story describes her merely as a woman caring for her sick brother.²⁶⁸ Some people even use a feminist term, sexual agency, to force responsibility onto Tamar, but liking and trusting a man do not equate to consent. These interpretations support the notion that love and rape are compatible, deny the reality of familial rape, and perpetuate victim blame. In

²⁶⁵ Ibid, 145.

²⁶⁶ Ibid, 146.

²⁶⁷ 2 Samuel 13:1-21

²⁶⁸ Scholz, *Sacred Witness*, 39.

addition, the way in which Tamar is forced to live in shame after the rape reflects a society that condemns female sexuality so strongly that they were even held responsible for their non-consensual encounter.²⁶⁹

Another specific rape story is that of Dinah. Shechem was the ruler of the region who saw Dinah and raped her. However, only some translations actually call Shechem's actions against Dinah "rape"; others use gentler and vaguer language.²⁷⁰ Therefore, many interpretations of this passage choose to ignore the rape, focusing instead on her brother's actions to avenge her honor or claim that it was merely premarital intercourse.²⁷¹ In addition to the rape, the passage contradictorily states that "he loved the young woman and spoke tenderly to her". This is a distortion of a narrative, which is already patriarchal in the fact that the woman's perspective is never told, meant to make Shechem seem more sympathetic and less violent.²⁷²

The gang rape of Susanna is another scriptural case study of this phenomenon. Susanna was a wealthy woman whose husband's friends decided they wanted her. They surrounded her, threatening to accuse her of adultery unless she slept with them. After her refusal, they did just that and she was sentenced to death. This is a story which has gained fame through frequent artistic portrayal of Susanna at the bath; she is typically portrayed as a seductress. By this portrayal, as opposed to the depiction of a victim of attempted

²⁶⁹ 2 Samuel 13:1-21; Scholz, *Sacred Witness*, 42.

²⁷⁰ New International Version: "raped her", English Standard Version: "humiliated her", King James Version: "defiled her", New Century Version: "forced her to have sexual relations with him", New Revised Standard Version: "lay with her by force".

²⁷¹ Scholz, *Sacred Witness*, 33.

²⁷² Genesis 34; Scholz, *Sacred Witness*, 37.

rape, the societies which commission and appreciate such art in effect blame Susanna for her own assault and remain in denial of the prevalence of rape in the Bible.²⁷³

The rape of Bathsheba is one of the most well-known stories of sexual assault in the Bible, but it is not always recognized as such. In the story, King David saw a beautiful woman bathing on the rooftop. He discovered that her name was Bathsheba and that she had a husband who was off at war and so he sent for her. The narrative states that “she came to him, and he slept with her”. After the king impregnated her, he had her husband killed and he took her as one of his wives. As with Susanna’s story, some interpreters of this passage claim that by bathing on the roof top, Bathsheba was guilty of enticement. And like the story of Tamar, other interpreters paint this story as a love story between her and David. The passage is not as clear about the fact that Bathsheba and David’s sexual encounter was rape because no physical force was mentioned, unlike in the case of Amnon and Tamar. However, since David was the king and Bathsheba was a woman of little means or power, his summon was as demanding as an attack.²⁷⁴

Another assault that David committed was the attempted rape of Abishag, a beautiful servant girl. In this story, the king was very old and his attendants brought him this young virgin so that he could “keep warm”. The text states that he “had no sexual relations with her”, but Scholz states that this implies that the king’s impotence was all that prevented these relations.²⁷⁵ Like the story of Bathsheba, this story illustrates how socioeconomic power imbalances can just as easily put women in vulnerable positions that lead to rape as physical violence can.²⁷⁶ Because of the power difference between

²⁷³ Daniel 13; Scholz, *Sacred Witness*, 48.

²⁷⁴ 2 Samuel 11; Scholz, *Sacred Witness*, 101.

²⁷⁵ 1 Kings 1:1-4; Scholz, *Sacred Witness*, 43.

²⁷⁶ *Ibid*, 49.

King David and these women, their consent or lack thereof meant nothing, thereby likening all sexual conduct that occurred between them to rape.²⁷⁷

Another way in which women are sexually violated in the Biblical narratives were through forced marital encounters. In the story of Abram and his wife Sarai, she could not bear him children, and so per the custom of the time, she gave her slave woman, Hagar, to her husband so that she could conceive children for him.²⁷⁸ This practice was not considered rape because the consent of a slave was meaningless and procreation was more important than female bodily autonomy.²⁷⁹ This custom benefited the men who got two sexual partners and children that reflected well on his lineage, but was detrimental to the women, who were often forced into sex and pitted against one another in competition.²⁸⁰ A similar account is that of Jacob and his wives, Rachel and Leah. In order to increase their chances of bearing him more children, each of these women gave Jacob a servant to have sex with, Bilhah and Zilpah respectively.²⁸¹ Later in the story, it was told that Jacob's own son Reuben "laid with Bilhah, the concubine of his father", continuing the sexual abuse of the slave women.²⁸² Reduced to her reproductive capabilities, Bilhah was used as a pawn both in the competitive reproductive games of Leah and Rachel and in Reuben's desire to challenge his father by assaulting his property.²⁸³ In both this and in the story of Abram's family, God supports the wives, but the servant women are neither cared for nor delivered from their nonconsensual sexual

²⁷⁷ Ibid, 101.

²⁷⁸ Genesis 16

²⁷⁹ Scholz, *Sacred Witness*, 58.

²⁸⁰ Ibid, 59.

²⁸¹ Genesis 29

²⁸² Genesis 35:22; Scholz, *Sacred Witness*, 72.

²⁸³ Ibid, 73.

union.²⁸⁴ However, all six of the women in these stories were sexual victims of a patriarchy obsessed with the production of male heirs.²⁸⁵

Many of the men committing these acts of rape and assault in the scriptures are some of the most revered figures of the Christian and Jewish faiths. Abram was considered the Father of the Hebrew people and David was called a “man after God’s own heart”. While by no means is all of Christianity misogynistic, there is an entrenched history of culturally accepted rape which has even been included in the Holy Scriptures. This makes it quite easy for uncritical readers of the Bible to find justification for sexually abusive acts against women. If the rape accounts in the scriptures were being committed by evil men that God condemned, there would be no culpability for the Christian faith. But since this is not the case, it is fair to identify a dangerous patriarchal sentiment at the core of Christianity that suggests that women are sexual pawns to be used by God and by men.

Response to Rape in Christian Societies

While most societies in the modern era do not subscribe to Old Testament laws and would not see the rape accounts and references as an indication of how God wants Christians to live, the sexism of the biblical rape accounts still pervades Christian societies. In the West, many societies have made strides towards gender equality and justice, one of which is that rape is acknowledged as a serious violation of autonomy and human rights.²⁸⁶ However, it often proves extremely difficult in the legal system to confirm a sexual encounter as rape. Victims are frequently impeded from reporting the

²⁸⁴ Ibid, 64.

²⁸⁵ Ibid, 65.

²⁸⁶ Horvath and Brown, *Rape*, 281.

rape by feelings of guilt, humiliation, and betrayal;²⁸⁷ approximately 94% of rapes go unreported.²⁸⁸ Furthermore, the institutional sexism present in Western society leads to a “culture of skepticism” so that people doubt the victim’s tale even if the rape is reported. These factors all lead to the high rate of attrition: the process by which rape cases fall out of the legal system and contribute to the justice gap.²⁸⁹

Legally, there are multiple reasons why rape cases are dismissed. Lack of physical injury evidence accounts for half of all reported rape cases getting dismissed. Victims often instinctively shower after a sexual assault, which washes away the DNA evidence that could tie the attacker to her. In addition, the lack of defensive wounds or other signs of physical abuse can be used to discredit rape claims.²⁹⁰ Because rape is thought of as a violent crime, police officers and jury members might see this lack of obvious external trauma as an indication that the sex was actually consensual. In reality though, this idea of “typical” rape not always accurate because rapists do not necessarily need to beat their victims into submission. Threats or psychological abuse can be just as effective at subduing a rape victim.

Another reason for discrediting rape claims is intoxication. Jury members and rapists alike often say that since women are more likely to consent to sex when they are intoxicated, they are likely to make false rape allegations when they become sober and regret having sex.²⁹¹ Furthermore, rape claims are often doubted if the rapist and the victim had a previous relationship because this is automatically interpreted as a level of

²⁸⁷ Ibid, 286.

²⁸⁸ Ibid, 328.

²⁸⁹ Ibid, 286.

²⁹⁰ Ibid, 290.

²⁹¹ Ibid, 291.

consensual intimacy. Lastly, previous rape allegations or prior promiscuous behavior may also negatively affect the credibility of rape claims because rape is still wrongly associated with female sexuality.²⁹² When people discredit women's rape accusations, they are often in effect saying that they believe she chose to have sex with him and then decided to claim it was rape. Because of this, the testimonies of women who are thought to be likely to agree to sex are most strongly doubted. However, the reality of rape is that, because it is a non-consensual act, it can happen to sexually active women and chaste women alike, so a sexual history is not an indication of a false testimony.

The justice gap of rape convictions is often the result of the problematic assumptions of what constitutes a normal rape.²⁹³ This rape myth influences the actions of the victims and the decisions of the court and is propagated by media. Television, movies, and books stereotype the women who get raped as scantily clad and walking down a dark street alone and the men who commit rape as oversexed, violent strangers.²⁹⁴ Victims are objectified, perpetrators are dehumanized and portrayed as the "other", all of which diverts attention away from the dangerous gender discrimination entrenched in patriarchal society.²⁹⁵ A 2006 study in the United Kingdom shows that while stranger rape accounts for more than half of media coverage, it makes up only 17% of all rapes.²⁹⁶ And since "real rape" in the media is portrayed as being instigated by a "jump from the bushes" and reported immediately, when women are raped by a friend or routinely by a significant other, the women often do not see this as valid rape.²⁹⁷

²⁹² Ibid, 293.

²⁹³ Ibid, 18.

²⁹⁴ Ibid, 19.

²⁹⁵ Ibid, 80.

²⁹⁶ Ibid, 86.

²⁹⁷ Ibid, 326.

News outlets and the entertainment industry may be obsessed with sex and violence, featuring stories like Jack the Ripper and fraternity rape trends, but news outlets tend not to delve into the big picture issues at play in society.²⁹⁸ The media industry is driven by sales and horrific stories sell, but convicting pieces about societal sexism do not. Anything that detracts from the appalling reality of sexual assault or avoids addressing the endemic social issues at play, serves only to "excuse assailants and discredit individual women" and widen the justice gap.²⁹⁹ For example, newspapers eagerly covered the gang rape of a woman who got her face bashed in with a rock in 1989 while she was jogging in Central Park. However, they used terms such as "fondling", "exploring her body", and "having sex with" in lieu of the more accurate "raping" or "penetrated" or the vulgar terms "grabbing" and "fucked" that the teenage assaulters themselves used.³⁰⁰ Media coverage, like this, which makes light of sexual assault, avoids making rape the gendered issue that it is, protecting the humanity of the attackers by making their actions seem more innocent at the expense of getting justice or validation for the victim.

Rape culture is a reality in society when men are encouraged to be aggressive and taught that they are superior to women whereas women are taught to be passive and obedient. As described in chapter two, the purity culture of patriarchal Christian societies exacerbates this. Christian societies have a history of objectifying and imposing uneven, strict sexual purity expectations on women. This constricts women's sexual autonomy, as discussed in chapter one, teaching them that they should be ashamed of sexual

²⁹⁸ I also think of the numerous popular television shows that are centered around grand, sadistic plot lines i.e. *Criminal Minds*, *CSI*, etc; *Ibid*, 77.

²⁹⁹ Horvath and Brown, *Rape*, 84.

³⁰⁰ Benedict, *Virgin Or Vamp*, 248.

encounters, even the non-consensual ones. This shame compels rape victims to remain silent, widening the justice gap, and prevents society from solving the true issues of gender equality.

Rape and Islam

Unlike the Bible, the Qur'an has no explicit rape texts. However, the criminal codes of Islamic societies defining sexual crimes and the parameters of permissible sexual conduct are "a good indicator of how sexuality and gender is constructed by that state".³⁰¹ Some Islamic societies, especially in the Middle East, are under religious rule,³⁰² but others, like most Christian nations, claim to be under secular rule,³⁰³ but the laws and traditions of both are good indicators of how Islam influences societies. However, it must be noted that laws in different nations are often very different and often there are laws that contradict each other even within each individual nation. For example, in many Islamic nations, such as Turkey, there is a constitution and modern laws which declare gender equality, but older traditional laws that are more commonly followed establish gender discrimination. By no means do all of the laws present in Islamic societies reflect the true spirit of Islam, but even these provide examples of what Islam has been wrongly used to justify.

While Islam has many branches that are progressive and inclusive, there are also many fundamentalist branches that have strict laws and customs that are often oppressive

³⁰¹ İlkkaracan, *Deconstructing Sexuality in the Middle East Challenges and Discourses*, 12.

³⁰² Islamic majority nations under religious rule: Afghanistan, Kuwait, Bahrain, Yemen, United Arab Emirates, Pakistan, Iran, Iraq, etc.

³⁰³ Islamic majority nations under secular rule: Azerbaijan, Burkina Faso, Chad, Gambia, Guinea, Kazakhstan, Kosovo, Kyrgyzstan, Mali, Senegal, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Turkey, Uzbekistan, etc.

to women. Fundamentalist Islam has two general views of women: as either chaste and pure or as sinful and seductive. There is often no concept of women being sexually autonomous, virtuous individuals, and this lack leads to a religious society that deals with female sexuality harshly.³⁰⁴ For example, Islamic tribal law, which forms the foundation of modern Islamic society and law, “treated rape as both an act of physical damage and a theft of sexual property that diminished a virgin female’s financial worth”.³⁰⁵ In these ancient laws, rape was not seen as a crime against the woman but against her father and current or future husband. These perspectives are still pervasive in fundamentalist societies, establishing a strict purity culture and a dangerous rape culture with laws and beliefs which ignore women’s sexuality, hold them to unequal standards of chastity, and minimize the tragedy of sexual assault. In addition, they make it difficult and even dangerous for women to accuse men of rape, so few do and thus men have little legal deterrent.³⁰⁶ In fact, in many instances, the only punishment that rape results in is that the rapist must pay his victim’s father her *mahr*, the bride price, and *dhiyya*, monetary compensation, since she will no longer be an attractive marital match.³⁰⁷

In many traditional Islamic societies, a woman meeting a man alone for any reason is drastically against social and religious norms. Therefore, when girls are raped, even if they recognize that their rapist committed a crime, they often blame themselves more for putting themselves in that situation. After a rape, people in these societies tend to question the victim (her dress, her demeanor, her reasons for leaving the house, her

³⁰⁴ Nussbaum, *Sex and Social Justice*, 93.

³⁰⁵ İlkkaracan, *Deconstructing Sexuality in the Middle East Challenges and Discourses*, 26.

³⁰⁶ Nussbaum, *Sex and Social Justice*, 92.

³⁰⁷ İlkkaracan, *Deconstructing Sexuality in the Middle East Challenges and Discourses*, 23.

reasons for not fighting back) rather caring for the victim's needs or looking into the perpetrator's crimes.³⁰⁸ Islam propagates norms of female purity and submissiveness that inadvertently justify the rape of women who buck these norms by being out in public, talking to men, or dressing immodestly.³⁰⁹ This leads to a rape culture in fundamentalist Islamic societies not unlike that of conservative Christian societies.

Muslim women are often subjected to harsh punishment for sexual crimes. As previously discussed, adultery and fornication are grave offenses for women in conservative Islamic societies, but sometimes women are punished for their own assaults. Pinar Ilkkaracan, author, human rights activist, and political scientist, cites an example of a 2006 case in which a Saudi Arabian girl, who has come to be known as the "Girl of Qatif", was gang-raped by seven men. At the rape trial, the court infamously ruled that she should be dealt 90 whip lashes "for being alone in a car with a man to whom she was not married".³¹⁰ Another example of extreme legal codes are the penalties for breaking dress code. In Iran, the penalties range from cash fines, whip lashes, having one's feet being put in sacks with serpents, to having one's face splashed with acid. In 1991, when a girl committed suicide after violating hijab and being subjected to a variety of these punishments, the Iranian Prosecutor General supported her self-inflicted death by saying that anyone who violates Hijab "is an apostate and the punishment for apostasy under Islamic Law is death".³¹¹

³⁰⁸ Ibid, 188.

³⁰⁹ Nussbaum, *Sex and Social Justice*, 91.

³¹⁰ Ilkkaracan, *Deconstructing Sexuality in the Middle East Challenges and Discourses*, 26.

³¹¹ Nussbaum, *Sex and Social Justice*, 83.

There are many more specific examples that illustrate how female sexuality, virginity, and rape are viewed in conservative Islamic societies both by men and women themselves. Ilkkaracan presents one example of a young girl whose husband died on their wedding day. This girl rejoiced because she got to maintain her virginity which she knew was her greatest possession. Ilkkaracan also tells of a fifteen year old Muslim girl who was raped, without full penetration, who became pregnant. For the sake of preserving her precious hymen, she chose to suffer and get an abortion by a dangerous caesarian section. A sixteen year old Muslim girl who was raped by her cousin and then attempted suicide later said that "nothing is left for a girl after she loses her virginity. All I see is my deep need to die and to run away from my shame... death is the best solution for dirty girls like me".³¹² Virginity is priceless in conservative Islamic societies. Whether girls consent to have sex or are raped, they lose considerable marriage appeal and thus inherent value in the eyes of society, family, and (many believe) even God.

An example of rape in fundamentalist Islamic society which shows the serious failings of the legal system is seen in the case of a young blind girl, Safia Bibi. After her rape, she filed an official complaint, but under the Hudood Ordinances, Pakistani laws that remained in place until 2006, a valid rape complaint required four male witnesses, and complainants that could not produce these witnesses were prosecuted for fornication. Because of this requirement, which is similar to many that can be found in different countries, Safia was sentenced to three years of labor in prison.³¹³

³¹² Ilkkaracan, *Deconstructing Sexuality in the Middle East Challenges and Discourses*, 187.

³¹³ Nussbaum, *Sex and Social Justice*, 82.

On the other hand, the case of another Pakistani rape victim, Mukhtar Mai, shows how a just legal system can cause real societal change.³¹⁴ As a part of a local power struggle, her brother, Shakur, was kidnapped and raped by a group of upper class Mastoi men. To cover up their crime, the men held him on the false charge of having sexually violated a Mastoi girl. For Shakur's fake crimes, they sentenced Mukhtar to be gang-raped. In a later interview, Mukhtar said that "they know that a woman humiliated in that way has no other recourse except suicide. They don't even need to use their weapons. Rape kills her." But Mukhtar's parents watched over her, prevented her from taking her own life, and a local Muslim leader spoke up and boldly denounced the rape as an outrage against Islam.³¹⁵ Emboldened, Mukhtar reported the crime and remarkably the men were arrested and she received compensation. She has become a revolutionary in her community, inspiring other girls to stand up for themselves, and the result has been that "raping poor girls is no longer always a penalty-free sport, and so rapes appear to have declined considerably in [this Pakistani community]".³¹⁶

A story with a similarly redeemed ending is that of a twenty year old Muslim girl who was raped by her fiancé. She was also deterred from committing suicide and her parents supported her rejection of the groom. Taking this as a threat to his manhood, *tiksir rejoultu*, he and his brothers kidnapped and raped his former fiancé, pouring acid all over her face and body. In this case, there was a notable backlash against these actions from the community. The men were evicted from village, the girl was monetarily

³¹⁴ Kristof and WuDunn, *Half the Sky*, 70.

³¹⁵ Ibid, 71.

³¹⁶ Ibid, 78.

compensated, and was encouraged to seek aid from a counseling center.³¹⁷ Both of these stories demonstrate that rape culture can be fought and victims can be delivered justice when women refuse to accept victim blame and society treats them as people worthy of care.

There are many facets of Islamic society that represent the imbalanced gender sexual expectations. The way conservative Islamic societies view prostitutes is one such facet. Prostitutes are typically stigmatized and disdained because they are a sexually active threat to male control of women and female promiscuity seen as immoral.³¹⁸ Prostitutes themselves are viewed as the enemy by conservative Muslim men and women because of their sexual licentiousness. However, the institution of prostitution is believed to be necessary because there is a recognized need for men to have a sexual outlet that does not involve despoiling reputable virginal girls. The seemingly contradictory nature of these views represents the double standard between the sexual allowances given to men and women. While it is assumed that many men will have sex outside of marriage, it is considered unthinkable for a woman to have the same sexual freedoms. The women involved in prostitution are the exceptions to this purity expectation, but they have no more sexual autonomy than other Muslim women because their sexuality is owned, bought, and taken from them without consent. This need to control women's sexuality which leads to hatred of prostitutes is the same oppressive purity culture which leads to veiling, seclusion, FGM, rape culture, and victim blame.³¹⁹

³¹⁷ Ibid, 191.

³¹⁸ Nussbaum, *Sex and Social Justice*, 286.

³¹⁹ Ibid, 287.

Additionally, marriage is the aspirational state for both men and women in Islamic societies, and yet it is a frequently unequal union. Marriage in fundamentalist Islamic societies infamously takes place when the wife is quite young. Parents typically want to get their daughters married off soon after puberty, before the girls begin to develop independent sexual attractions that could compromise their financially profitable arranged unions and certainly before they have a chance to “damage [their] most valuable possession of all, [the] hymen”.³²⁰ Once women are in a marriage relationship, there is not much that can protect them from the potential wrath or sexual aggression of their husbands. In fact, marital rape is legal in all primarily Islamic countries except for Turkey.³²¹ In fact, in most of these fundamentalist societies, marital rape is a completely foreign concept: husbands are assumed to have unlimited access to their wives’ sexualities.³²² In fact, article 398 of the Iraqi Penal Codes states that marriage is a “legally mitigating excuse” for rape or assault.³²³ A dangerous way in which Islam plays a role in this abuse is in the sentiment many abused women take, that “my life and death is in God’s hands” which is used by women to justify staying in abusive relationships. In this case, the idea that God is in control is disempowering and allows for the propagation of atrocities by the hands of men.³²⁴

Furthermore, there are numerous, socially acceptable ways of covering up a rape in many of these societies. One is a temporary marriage. *Mut’a*, in Iran, or *urfi*, in Egypt, is a legitimizing cover that allows men to fleetingly have their way with women while

³²⁰ Kristof and WuDunn, *Half the Sky*, 75.

³²¹ İlkkaracan, *Deconstructing Sexuality in the Middle East Challenges and Discourses*, 27.

³²² Nussbaum, *Sex and Social Justice*, 92.

³²³ İlkkaracan, *Deconstructing Sexuality in the Middle East Challenges and Discourses*, 29.

³²⁴ Kristof and WuDunn, *Half the Sky*, 74.

maintaining a façade of virtue. In Egypt, for example, *urfi* is frequently employed by Arab tourists when prostitution is unavailable, allowing men to rent the sexual company of Egyptian girls for the summer simply by paying *mahr* to their families. This practice is also sometimes employed hastily after a rape becomes public knowledge as a retroactive justification.³²⁵

Another method by which rape is covered up is through honor killings. Honor killings are murders perpetrated against women by men for which the perpetrator receives little to no punishment. These can be executed based on charges against the women: adultery, fornication, or rumors of sexual misconduct, and for strategic reasons: to silence a rape victim or to prevent the birth of illegitimate children. As an example of how such acts are legalized, article 630 of the Iranian Penal Code states that if a man catches his wife committing *zina*, or adultery, and suspects her to be a willing participant, then he has the right to kill her and her lover. In Kuwait, laws state that a man who kills his wife or her sexual partner is eligible for a sentence reduction because her sexual actions are presumed to have sufficiently provoked him. As recently as 2002, Pakistan had 461 reported honor killings. Some estimate that as many as one third of all Jordanian homicides are honor killings, for which perpetrators serve only an average of seven and a half months.³²⁶ These acts, both forced marriage and killing the victim, are most notably employed by male family members, who feel they have lost their power over the female victim, in an attempt to restore social order.³²⁷

³²⁵ Ilkkaracan, *Deconstructing Sexuality in the Middle East Challenges and Discourses*, 37.

³²⁶ Ibid, 23.

³²⁷ Ibid, 194.

Another gender abuse present in some war ridden Islamic societies is military rape. Ilkcaracan describes the sexual violations that are used as tools of war as including “stripping; parading naked; mutilating and disfiguring; tattooing or branding the breasts and genitalia with triumphal slogans... amputating breasts; knifing open the womb; raping of course, and killing fetuses.”³²⁸ In these conservative societies, women and their sexualities are treated as symbols of the purity of the culture as a whole. So during times of war, violence against women takes on a symbolic role as well. Women are raped as a way to disgrace not only them, but the nation that their purity represents. The women's bodies, identities, and value are destroyed in this process, but the larger aim is to destroy the soul of the nation and humiliate the men. Feminist activist Stasa Zajovic spoke of this phenomenon that occurred against Bosnian women saying that “when ‘their’ women are raped, it is experienced not as, and through, the women’s pain, but as a male defeat: they were too feeble to protect their property”.³²⁹ War rapes in many nations including Iraq, Afghanistan, and Algeria have been excused by assigning *mut’a*, or temporary marriages, and extremists even say it is imperative to rape virgins before they are killed because it is considered discourteous to kill a virgin.³³⁰ The lack of female sexual autonomy is clearly a dangerous precedent. Because women's bodies are symbolic and not their own, rape is merely considered a reflection on their men and community rather than being seen as a violation of human rights.

In conservative Islamic societies, there is no obviously correct way that rape should be dealt with. In conservative Christian societies, one of the biggest issues

³²⁸ Ibid, 174.

³²⁹ Ibid, 175.

³³⁰ Ibid, 29.

concerning rape is the shame of victim blame which creates the justice gap. Despite the shame that victims often feel after a sexual assault and the culture of silence that ensues, in the West, there is an objective knowledge that after a rape, the steps that should be taken include reporting it to the authorities so that the rapist is more likely to receive punishment. But reporting rape is not always a good choice in fundamentalist Islamic societies. Like in conservative Christian societies, the pervasive practice of nondisclosure serves to shield the victim from public shame. Furthermore, in these Islamic societies, nondisclosure often serves to protect women from death because rapists would often rather kill their victims than face punishment. However, as in all societies, this silence is bad because it ensures that rapists will never be punished, implies that the victim's shame is warranted, and prevents her from receiving social support.³³¹ When victims remain silent about physical and psychological pain, they lose their voice and their power.³³²

One Palestinian rape victim summed up the sexist double standard that contributes to rape culture saying that,

"If someone commits a crime against a man, or against property, everyone will condemn it and direct their anger against the criminal. If someone beats or harm an animal, people will react with anger. But if someone commits a crime against a woman, raping her, taking all she has, the only thing this damned society gave to her to be proud of, the only source of honor, dignity and respect ... she has no right to say anything."³³³

The culture of fundamentalist Islam is often one in which men believe that they deserve sex and the obedience of women while women have no autonomy and believe their worth is in their sexual purity. These set a dangerous precedent for gender relations and establish a culture of rape, which causes vast destruction to women psychologically,

³³¹ Ibid, 193.

³³² Ibid, 196.

³³³ Ibid, 197.

physically, and socially. This extreme purity culture is not present in all Islamic societies and many Muslims would argue fiercely that neither rape nor these vast gender differences are condoned by the spirit of Islam, the Qur'an, the person of Muhammed or of God, yet by fundamentalists, this religion has been usurped and invoked in some of the most horrific acts committed against women.

CONCLUSION

Patriarchal societies around the world maintain many oppressive sentiments and practices regarding women, including purity cultures. These purity cultures are not only sexually restrictive for women, but are dangerous for them as well. They emphasize the need for women to be paragons of virginal virtue and yet also see women as temptresses who must be controlled by men. Most dangerous is the double standard in which men are allowed considerably more sexual freedom and are taught to be aggressive and entitled. In this framework, men are not taught to value or respect women, but instead to see them as sexual objects that men themselves have the right to control. The combination of these factors has led to the development of pervasive rape cultures. Furthermore, when women become victims of the patriarchal culture and reality of rape, the purity expectations of the culture compound the tragedy by compelling them to feel shame for the violence enacted against them. This culture of victim blame leads to unwarranted guilt and trauma for the women, silence of the victims, and therefore a severe justice gap.

The causes of rape culture must be understood before they can be properly combatted. Men should be taught the meaning of consent and, most importantly, they should be taught that women are valuable, equal members of society worthy of respect. If men and women both strive for gender equality, the end of discrimination and sexualization, then rape culture can begin to be combatted. Men will be less likely to commit the crime, women will feel less shame, and societies will stop normalizing the violence and the shame.

However, before rape culture can be brought to an end, people should understand the gender imbalances and oppressions that lay its foundation, including the religious causes. Rape and the patriarchal oppression and sexualization of women are often overlooked as important issues, but they have significant social, economic, legal, and moral implications. Furthermore, the impact of religion on these issues concerning women is often overlooked in favor of the examination of other social determinants, but I argue that patriarchal religious interpretations are major contributors. Christianity has historically been a major influence on culture and morality in many Western societies, just as Islam has been formative in many African and Middle Eastern societies. Since these religions are vitally important contributors to the traditions of these societies at large, they and their stances on women and sexuality have had a significant impact as well. Neither religion is purely misogynistic in its origin or intent, but both have substantial fundamentalist, patriarchal interpretations which have had the most direct impact on purity and rape cultures by their insistence on sexual purity and on male authority. In these cultures, women are held to disproportionately high expectations of purity compared to their male counterparts. And because female sexuality is erroneously associated with rape, women who make rape claims are viewed with doubt and blame by those within patriarchal society and rape culture. By studying Christian and Islamic scriptures, theological doctrines, and traditional practices concerning women and sex, I have demonstrated how these religions have been selectively utilized in sexually oppressive societies.

The oppression and rape of women is a critically important problem of patriarchal societies, one which needs to be researched more in order that its causes may be even

more fully understood and it may be combatted. As I continue on to a career in public health, women's issues, including sexual violence, will be my central focus. As others and myself pursue these issues further, we must not underestimate the contribution of fundamentalist interpretations of religions, which fail to respect women and their autonomy, to patriarchal societies in which women are raped, silenced, and denied justice in the name of God.

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