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The Whore and the Holy Woman: How Christianity and Islam Slandered Their Leading Ladies

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To all of the women who have endured unhealthy relationships because they believed God made men in charge.

Abstract

Mary Magdalene and Aisha Bint Abi Bakr—women hailing from the early days of Christianity and Islam respectively—are household names among adherents to each of those religions, but most know surprisingly little about who the women were. Both were independent, highly influential women, but their legacies have been corrupted by associations with repentance for deviation from traditional gender roles as well as with sexual immorality. This paper examines the biography of each women and puts it in conversation with her legacy in order to demonstrate a theme of strong women being erased from religious narratives—a theme which we must reverse in order to recover true, God-given gender roles and empower today's women in both traditions.

Table of Contents

Author's Note

A few comments before I begin: Firstly, I would like to acknowledge the formatting style I have chosen to use for this paper. While I am an academic, my professional experience is primarily in two areas: teaching and communications. Between those, I have come to understand that how information is presented is just as, if not more, important than the content itself. While this paper engages in critical reasoning to the standard level for collegiate scholarly work, I have chosen to format it differently than a traditional academic paper. These choices—including visuals, graphics, and variations in text styles—serve to enhance readability and make the work more accessible to a broader audience.

Secondly, I would like to note the name transliterations I am using for this paper. Both Mary Magdalene and Aisha Bint Abi Bakr's names are originally from another language, Koine Greek and Classical Arabic respectively. While spellings of their names, especially Aisha's, vary significantly in the English language, I have decided on the above spellings because they are the most commonly used, the simplest to pronounce and write, and still quite true to the original name. Mary Magdalene's name in Greek is technically Maria the Magdalene-- Μαρία ἡ Μαγδαληνὴ, pronounced originally as something like (ma-ree-ah hee mahg-dah-leen). Aisha's name is عائشة بنت أبي بكر, pronounced (i-ee-shuh bint ah-bee bah-kur). Feel free to use these transliterations to help pronounce their names correctly as you read the paper.

Thirdly, I want to explain why this paper covers Mary Magdalene in far more detail than Aisha. This is a result of three factors: one, the amount of literature on each subject that I—a native English-speaker with just rudimentary Arabic language skills—had access to. Because Mary Magdalene is from a religion that has dominated Europe for millennia and Aisha is not, there is much more research available on her in English. Two, Aisha's story is more recent and better

recorded than Mary Magdalene's. Hence, the expansive sections where I discuss extracanonical vs. canonical texts for Mary Magdalene is entirely avoided for Aisha. Three, Mary Magdalene's transformation was so multifaceted because she was commonly depicted through art in an era where most of the population was illiterate. In contrast, Muslims generally do not believe it is appropriate to make religious artwork that includes human figures, since they equate this to idolatry. Therefore, there is relatively little artwork depicting Aisha, which has in many ways contained the bounds of her legacy. For these reasons, I feel justified in dedicating more pages to Mary Magdalene than Aisha within this paper, and am confident that I accomplish the same goal for both women nevertheless.

Introduction: An Exercise in Humility

Muslim women are oppressed, right? Westerners hear how Muslim women are forced to wear veils, prevented from going to school, and forbidden from hanging out in public coffee shops. Having lived in Morocco, I have experienced this firsthand. But I would also turn the question back on those very Westerners—who may call themselves adherents to the Christian faith.

- "Let a woman learn quietly with all submissiveness. I do not permit a woman to teach or to exercise authority over a man; rather, she is to remain quiet."

  1 Timothy 2:11-14[1]

- "Neither was man created for woman, but woman for man."

  1 Corinthians 11:9

- "Wives, submit to your own husbands, as to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife even as Christ is the head of the church, his body, and is himself its Savior. Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit in everything to their husbands."

  Ephesians 5:22-24

When many Christians continue to deny women leadership positions in the Church, tell them to submit to their husbands, and compare women to objects when providing "object lessons" in sexual purity, anyone who claims that Muslim women are oppressed sounds quite hypocritical.

The reality is that both Christianity and Islam are over a thousand years old, both were established in a highly-patriarchal setting, and both continue to be influenced by this gender bias today. In many ways, the institutionalized religion causes patriarchal practices to be perpetuated even

[1] ESV

past transformation in broader society, since generally one group of religious scholars is tasked with continuing the tradition, and they are almost always all men. As Islamic scholar Georgina Jardim notes, "The absence of women's voices is centrally representative of the religious oppression of women that has been 'one of the great flaws of monotheism".[2]

But women's voices have not been nonexistent in the Christian and Muslim religious traditions; women have been part of the story the whole time. Their silence is not because they have nothing to contribute, but rather because what they contribute is not always what the dominant culture—one in which men are in charge—wants to hear. As Christian historians Tucker and Liefeld share,

> "Why a history of women in the church? Why not a history of men in the church? The vast majority of published church histories are histories of men… As so frequently happens in the writing of history… the women have simply disappeared. Their role in religion down through the ages has been flagrantly neglected. And it continues to be neglected, despite longstanding appeals to historians to do otherwise".[3]

More and more evidence is presented each year on the prominent roles played by women in the early Christian and Muslim communities. The question now is discovering where these prominent women went. If women were integral to the formation of our religious traditions, why have we not heard their stories?

What this paper aims to show is that we *have* heard the stories of the strong women who founded our religious traditions. However, we have heard the wrong ones. The generations of male religious scholars, translators, teachers, and leaders have over the centuries, realized that women's submission could be induced through including support for it in religious tradition, but only if the

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[2] 2014, p. 1
[3] Tucker and Liefeld, 1987, p. 13

strong female figures—the role models with the potential to usurp patriarchal norms—were mitigated. This is precisely the course that religious history took. The strong women at the heart of Christianity and Islam were erased from communal memory, and the gaps in history left by this alteration were filled through the creation of elaborate, mythological backstories that emphasize the wrong parts of a woman's life or conflate her with another woman entirely. This has been the fate of Mary Magdalene and Aisha Bint Abi Bakr.

Why two? Why put two women, two religions, two cultures, and two histories side-by-side in one paper? On one hand, it is to show that patriarchal erasure of strong women in religious history is not an accident but a trend. If this paper were a book, perhaps it would dive into parallel stories of women in Hinduism, Buddhism, and Judaism experiencing the same fate. On the other hand, comparison allows us to learn more objectively. Religion—perhaps more than anything—is something that we are steeped in to the point where it is almost impossible to reflect on ourselves with an unjaded eye. However, I think we all agree that religion is influenced by humanity as well as by the God who is always at the center. When we idolize our particular interpretation of religion, we are creating something that competes with God—a sin in both Christianity and Islam. This paper will encourage all of us to step out of our own faith bubble and reevaluate our beliefs objectively. Studying the stories of two women whose legacies have been shaped in a nearly-identical way will provide a mirror in which to see why feminist interpretation of historical theology is so important.

Through learning the stories of how Christianity and Islam slandered their leading ladies—Mary Magdalene and Aisha Bint Abi Bakr—we uncover a wealth of insight into what these religions really taught about women's roles as well as about how patriarchal culture gradually edited the story. In doing so, we recover the strong women at the heart of Christianity and Islam and discover that feminists today are not merely engaging in wishful thinking, but are guiding us towards a more faithful interpretation of God's will for our lives. We also restore to their full glory the true role

models for Christian and Muslim women, which will radically shift perspectives on what godly women should be like.

Part 1: Mary Magdalene

Who was Mary Magdalene, and how did the Christian Church slander her? To answer this, we begin with an analysis of Mary Magdalene as depicted in the New Testament, followed by the similar Mary of the extracanonical Gospels which circulated among the earliest Christians. We will explore why the Church would have seen Mary as a threat and how she was erased before taking a look at the legacy that was developed for her instead over the course of history. Finally, we will draw conclusions about hher relationship to women within the Christian tradition as a whole.

1. Mary Magdalene of Scripture: The New Testament

For most of Christian history, Mary Magdalene has been characterized as the repentant whore. This identity is not Biblical, but was a turn that her legacy took centuries after the formation of the Church. In this section, we will examine the Mary Magdalene of Scripture. Mary Magdalene is mentioned in just four books of the New Testament: Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. She is given roles in six scenes in particular.

1. **Mary as Disciple**

Only one Gospel mentions Mary Magdalene before the Crucifixion. In Luke 8:1-3, Mary Magdalene and other women are listed as followers of Jesus along with the Twelve.[4] However, Mark does retrospectively mention that Mary and the other women had been following Jesus "when he was in Galilee", so we can conclude that she is not a new figure when Jesus is crucified.[5]

2. **At the Crucifixion**

Matthew, Mark, and John all describe Mary Magdalene as witnesses of Jesus' crucifixion, even as the male disciples flee.[6] Six different women are listed across the Gospels as being among these witnesses, but Mary Magdalene is the only common denominator.[7]

3. **Jesus' Burial**

Matthew, Mark and Luke all describe Mary Magdalene, specifically or with other women, as watching Jesus' burial.[8]

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[4] NIV
[5] 15:40-41
[6] Mark 15:40-41; Matt. 27:55-56; John 19:25
[7] Gardner, 2008, 42-46
[8] Mark 15:47; Matt. 27:59-61; Luke 23:5

4. **Anointing Jesus**

Matthew, Mark and Luke also all describe Mary Magdalene as going to the tomb on Easter morning to anoint Jesus' body.[9] In this era, women were the standard anointers, so it makes sense that Mary would carry out this role.[10]

5. **The Commission**

Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John all depict Jesus or angels from heaven inviting Mary Magdalene—and sometimes the women with her—to go and tell the disciples about Jesus' resurrection.[11] Mark and John also both feature individual post-resurrection appearances of Jesus to Mary Magdalene individually.[12] Mark claims that Mary is the first person that Jesus appears to, and John features a famous scene where Mary sees Jesus and mistakes him for a gardener. In both, Mary Magdalene receives a personal commission to be the first evangelist of the Christian Gospel—and as the first to see the Risen Jesus and believe, she is also the first Christian.

6. **Mary as Newsbearer**

Luke and John both show us the scene where Mary Magdalene tells the disciples about Jesus' resurrection.[13] According to John, her words are "I have seen the Lord" and he has said these things to me.[14] However, as we know from Luke and Mark, when Mary Magdalene and her fellow women announce Jesus' resurrection to the other disciples, they are accused of lying.[15]

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[9] Matt. 28:1; Mark 16:1; Luke 24:1-2
[10] Chilton, 2005, 55
[11] Mark 16:7; Mat. 28:7; John 20:17; Luke 24:10
[12] Mark 16:9-10; John 20:11-17
[13] Luke 24:10; John 20:18
[14] 20:18
[15] 24:11; 16:11

Mary's Prominent Role

Even a cursory view at Mary Magdalene's role in the Gospels demonstrates her prominence in the early Christian movement. She appears by name in all four New Testament Gospels, which is more than many of the male disciples, including "Levi, Nathaniel, Thaddeus, and Matthias".[16] As far as the Easter story goes, "she is the only person who consistently appears at all the key locations and witnesses the most important events".[17] When the male disciples flee as Jesus is captured by Roman authorities, it is Mary Magdalene who stays firm and attends Jesus through death, burial, and resurrection. Even after the Resurrection, Mary Magdalene believes Jesus' words immediately whereas Thomas needs proof.[18] While the Twelve appear to have been closest to Jesus during his ministry, Mary Magdalene is the most faithful companion during his death and resurrection.

Another aspect of Mary Magdalene's role in the New Testament Gospels worth noticing is that she is the leader of the women following Jesus. Mark and Luke indicate that women had been part of Jesus' movement since the beginning, and in every list of women throughout the Four Gospels where Mary Magdalene is included, her name comes first.[19] Christian theologian Ingrid Maisch notes that this "cannot be accidental; analogously to the primacy of Simon [Peter], it must point to her importance in the community of disciples".[20]

Mary Magdalene's privileged first appearance by Christ and commission to be the first to spread the Christian message attest to her prominence among Jesus' early followers even further, yet after the book of John, she never appears in the New Testament again. This brings up a valid question: if Mary Magdalene played such an integral role in the formation of Christianity, why is she

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[16] Brock, 2006, 429
[17] The Mystery of Mary Magdalene, 2014
[18] John 20:24
[19] Haskins, 1993, 10
[20] 1998, 11

given such low status today? As Magdalene experts Burnstein and Keijzer point out, "If a man had been the first witness of the Resurrection and had gone to tell the disciples, he would probably be held up as the primary apostle".[21] Mary's prominence in these scenes present some questions: why was she so important? Why do we have so little information about what she was doing before Jesus' crucifixion? And perhaps most intriguingly, where did she go after He rose again?

Mary's Shifting Role

Jesus empowered women. He broke barriers in talking with the Samaritan woman from the well, and not just because of her ethnicity. He included women in his ministry. As New Testament scholar Joan Taylor explains, "Having women on the road with Jesus was something very revolutionary… this is a very radical picture we're getting in terms of gender relationships".[22] Even the fact that Jesus chose women to be the first to announce his resurrection is absolutely radical, since women in this era could not testify as witnesses in court.[23] However, Jesus' empowerment of women took place in a context where patriarchy was dominant. As a result, these long-standing influences took root even as early as the writing of the first Gospels, a narrative we can see as we move from book to book chronologically. A closer look at the Synoptic Gospels reveals the way they "illustrate a program of suppressing Mary's influence".[24]

Mark

Historians generally agree that Mark was the first canonical Gospel to be written.[25] If we understand women's roles to be diminished chronologically as time passes, then it makes perfect

[21] 2006, 180
[22] The Mystery of Mary Magdalene, 2014
[23] The Mystery of Mary Magdalene, 2014
[24] Chilton, 2005, 110
[25] Bourgeault, 2010, 33

sense that Mark is the kindest to women—which plays out. Mark includes Mary Magdalene and other women in all of the major scenes around Jesus' death and resurrection, and even features a clear rebuking of the male disciples from the risen Jesus for not believing the women's witness.[26] Also in Mark, the commission by Jesus to go and proclaim the Gospel throughout the world is given to all of Jesus' disciples, both men and women.[27]

The women are clearly part of the Jesus story in Mark. However, even this earliest Gospel is imperfect in its representations of the genders. New Testament scholar Bruce Chilton points out how "the Gospel According to Mark effaces women. Almost every female—even Jesus' mother—is deprived of her name… Mark goes on to name Jesus' four brothers and tells us in the same passage that Jesus had sisters without telling us how many or who they were (6:3)".[28] This earliest text depicting Jesus' life demonstrates a gendered preference towards men—a bias that will only grow as we move into Matthew.

Matthew

Matthew is the second oldest canonical Gospel.[29] In it, Mary Magdalene and the other women retain most of their prominent roles around Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection. However, there are subtle changes that mark this author as slightly more woman-blind than the author of Mark. While in Mark both men and women are endowed with the Holy Spirit and commissioned by Jesus, in Matthew this scene is limited to the eleven remaining disciples from Jesus' all-male Twelve;[30] Matthew has seemingly forgotten to note the women's presence in this scene entirely. His carelessness around women in the Jesus story is also visible in the way that he misidentifies which

[26] Mark 15-16
[27] Mark 16:15-20
[28] Chilton, 2005, 98
[29] Carroll, 2006, 24
[30] De Boer, 2004, 136

women were present at which events as compared to the other Gospels; "women are interchangeable. Matthew has Mary Magdalene go to the tomb with 'the other Mary'... and somehow loses all track of Salome (28:1)".[31]

Luke's Mary Magdalene

From Jesus to Mark to Matthew, a trend of women's gradual erasure is visible. However, Luke takes the prize for reducing the role of women in the Jesus narrative. Luke is often noted for mentioning women the most frequently out of the Synoptic Gospels, but this should not be equated with positive representation of those women: New Testament historian Ann Graham Brock notes how "the Gospel of Luke devotes considerably more space to women than the other canonical gospels do, but Luke tends to portray the women as followers, not as leaders".[32] The women are present, but they are subordinate, always playing the stereotypical gender roles of mother or servant rather than teacher or leader.

One textual change is in Luke's description of the cost of discipleship. When Mark and Matthew describe the cost of following Christ, they use the words "family" which allow for disciples of either gender. However, Luke changes the word in the same context to "wife", which changes Jesus' statement regarding discipleship to one aimed exclusively at men".[33] Whether intentional or not, Luke is excluding women from the Biblical picture.

The most significant way that Luke reduces the stature of women is in his removal of the commissioning for Mary Magdalene. While every other Gospel features Jesus himself telling Mary Magdalene and the other women to preach the good news to the disciples, in Luke this is reduced to

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[31] Chilton, 2005, 102
[32] 2003, 55
[33] Luke 14:26 compared to Mark 10:28-30 and Matthew 10:27-40; De Boer, 2004, 144

a commissioning by two angels.[34] In addition, Mark and John both give Mary Magdalene individual post-resurrection appearances by Jesus, whereas Luke misses out on this entirely and instead gives the individual post-resurrection appearance to the head of the male Twelve, Peter.[35] *The role that belongs to Mary Magdalene according to Matthew, Mark, and John—the first to see the Risen Christ and the first to be commissioned with His message—is handed by Luke to a man instead.* As Brock says, "The noticeable absence of this commissioning in Luke significantly influenced Mary's status as a resurrection witness… [because in doing so] he does not provide divine justification for women to claim the right to preach, teach, or share the good news… Thus, the Gospel of Luke undermines the status of Mary Magdalene in several subtle but eventually significant ways".[36]

John

The book of John, the fourth Gospel, restores Mary Magdalene to her prior status in many ways by returning her to her position as the first commissioned by Christ to spread the Gospel. In this book, Mary Magdalene again receives an individual post-resurrection appearance—albeit with the embarrassing component of mistaking him for a gardener.[37] The legacy of Mary Magdalene's role was too strong for the Lukan author to stamp out completely. However, the damage was already complete. After the book of John, the name of Mary Magdalene is never mentioned again in the Bible.

Analysis of Mary Magdalene in the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John allow us to see that the role she played is larger than what we usually remember of her. Comparing the texts to the timeline over which they were written also allows us to see a clear trend towards minimization of

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[34] 24:4
[35] Mark 16:9-10; John 20:11-17; Luke 24:24
[36] 2006, 439
[37] John 20:11-17

her role. If the Biblical authors were diminishing Mary's status—either by accident or intentionally—are there any other sources available to us that may provide us insight on the real Mary Magdalene? Actually, yes—Mary Magdalene plays a prominent role in many of the extracanonical Christian scriptures written in the first few centuries after Jesus' death.

2. Mary Magdalene of Scripture: Beyond the Biblical Canon

While only canonical New Testament books are considered authoritative in the Christian tradition, I will argue why extracanonical books—which discuss Mary Magdalene extensively—can be used as additional sources for understanding this woman. Of the nearly 100 Christian Scriptures written and circulating in the early centuries of the Christian religion, only a quarter have found a permanent home in the New Testament. The rest—deemed less useful, less important, or less authoritative—gradually fell out of use or were destroyed.[38] Many of these extracanonical gospels have been rediscovered in the last couple of centuries and are changing the face of New Testament scholarship.

Many of the extracanonical texts featuring Mary Magdalene fall into the category labeled Gnostic. The Gnostics often get a reputation for being heretics of early Christianity. However, this understanding of the Gnostic Christians is historically inaccurate. Gnosticism was not a religion distinct from Christianity—those who fall into this category believed themselves to be the Orthodox Christians .[39] Rather, it is a scholarly classification for extracanonical New Testament texts that were condemned by later Church Fathers because of their overemphasis on Greek philosophical concepts which they saw as a drift from Jesus' teachings.[40] However, when the texts that fall into this category are labeled in this way, it becomes easy to dismiss them all as irrelevant heresies immediately rather than recognize their nuance as books that just got the Jesus story a bit wrong. While some Gnostic Scriptures delve into heresies within Early Christianity, others simply fill out narratives and themes that are already potent in the New Testament. One example of this is the Gnostic portrayal of Mary Magdalene.

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[38] Watterson, 2019, 78
[39] King, 2003, 155
[40] King, 2003, 155

The Gnostic gospels present a Mary Magdalene who is in total alignment with the Biblical Mary Magdalene; a strong, courageous woman who stood by Jesus to the end and became a core part of his ministry. The Gnostic texts—with authors who lived within a century or two of Mary Magdalene herself—are helpful to us in that they elaborate on Mary Magdalene and provide clues as to why she seemed to disappear after Jesus' resurrection. I argue that the Gnostic texts can be deemed at least somewhat authoritative on Mary Magdalene's story not on their inherent credibility but on the basis of several contextual factors: in particular, literary independence, Gnostic views on women, and alignment with New Testament representations of this female figure.

1. Literary Independence

Scholars are currently aware of about 75 extracanonical New Testament scriptures. Of them, 10 feature Mary Magdalene as a prominent disciple, teacher, and actor in Jesus' early ministry: the *Gospel of Peter*, the *Gospel of Thomas*, the *Epistle of the Apostles*, *Pistis Sophia*, the *Gospel of Mary*, the *Manichean Psalms*, the *Dialogue of the Savior,* the *First Apocalypse of James*, the *Sophia of Jesus Christ*, and the *Gospel of Philip*.[41] In fact, "every one of the recently discovered sources that mention Mary Magdalene… unanimously picture Mary as one of Jesus' most trusted disciples".[42] The prominence attributed to Mary Magdalene in these texts is not limited to one geographic region that could have developed a Magdalene cult either; these books are from diverse geographic locations all over the Holy Land and were discovered in several different codices.[43] King notes that given the difficulty of copying manuscripts in the Ancient World, multiple copies of a text is a symbol in itself that these books were widely read and distributed.[44] Noticing how widespread and independently developed

[41] Brock, 2006, 431
[42] Pagels, 2006, 3
[43] Pagels, 2006, 3; Schaberg, 2002, 122
[44] 2003, 11

the Gnostic stories about Mary Magdalene were, we can presume that there is some common historical backing to them—perhaps the woman herself.

2. Gender Norms

Another reason the Gnostic stories of Mary Magdalene deserve credibility is the lack of reasons for these communities to falsely elevate the status of a woman. It has been suggested by opponents of relying on the Gnostic Scriptures to learn about the historical Mary Magdalene that the communities where these texts were read were influenced by matriarchy or even a history of Goddess worship.[45] However, there is no evidence suggesting either of these, and in fact we can tell that the Gnostic communities were just as patriarchal as the Orthodox Christian communities who opposed them; "Women and the female gender were devalued and subordinated, both in theory and in practice in Gnostic communities".[46] In the Gnostic *Gospel of Thomas*, Jesus himself actually tells Mary Magdalene that he will make her into a man so that she can be spiritually enlightened.[47] It was understood in most communities at the time that women had only understanding of earthly and base knowledge whereas spiritual knowledge was reserved for men—clearly not a feminist take.[48] Also, De Boer observes how many scenes that have women in the canonical books lack them in the Gnostics.[49] Given that they were subject to the same gender biases, it is highly unlikely that Mary Magdalene's role would have been falsely elevated by Gnostic communities.

3. Alignment with Canonical Texts

Most importantly, the Gnostic gospels suggest faithfulness to the real Mary Magdalene because their representations of her align remarkably well with Mary's role in the New Testament

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[45] De Boer, 2004, 9
[46] Schaberg, 2002, 187
[47] Gospel of Thomas, 114
[48] Acocella, 2006, 48
[49] 2004, 9

Gospels.[50] As we will see when we examine some specific passages from these texts, they are all in accordance with stories from the New Testament.

The consistent strength of Mary's figure among every Gnostic text, the lack of reasoning for an artificial increase in her stature among Gnostics, and the ways that Mary's role in the Gnostics does not contradict but simply builds on her role in the New Testament make a strong case for a basis in how the real woman was understood by the earliest Christians. If not from history, where would the idea of a strong female figure have come from? The critical takeaway is that the Mary Magdalene of Scripture is more significant and virtuous than the Mary Magdalene as she has been remembered for most of history, but that the Gnostic Gospels present a Mary Magdalene who closely resembles the original.

Mary Magdalene in Gnostic Sources

We will now explore what exactly the Gnostic Gospels say about Mary Magdalene. Mary Magdalene features prominently in every extracanonical text in which she is mentioned. She is known as Jesus' companion, the only individual in known Scriptures to gain this descriptor, and through her constant engagement and leadership demonstrates that she is a pre-eminent disciple.[51] In many dialogue texts, Mary is one of the primary speakers asking Jesus questions about Christian theology both before and after the resurrection.[52] In the *Pistis Sophia*, a text dating to the third century, Jesus tells Mary "Blessed Mary, you whom I shall complete with all the mysteries on high, speak openly, for you are one whose heart is set on heaven's kingdom more than all your brothers"—clearly favoring her over all of the male disciples.[53] However—and most interestingly for

[50] Bourgeault, 2010, 207
[51] Gardner, 2008, 57-56; King, 2003, 143
[52] King, 2003, 141
[53] Pistis Sophia 1:19

the sake of this study—we also see the Gnostic Mary Magdalene actively facing severe discrimination on the basis of her gender.

Mary Magdalene features prominently in *The Gospel of Thomas*, an early Christian text describing a dialogue between Jesus and his disciples. "The collection of sayings in *The Gospel of Thomas*, although compiled c. 140, may include some traditions even older than the gospels of the New Testament, 'possibly as early as the second half of the first century' as early as, or earlier, than Mark, Matthew, Luke, and John".[54] In this Gospel, Mary Magdalene is one of the main speakers and asks many questions of Jesus on behalf of the other disciples.[55] However, we also see a scene where Peter gets annoyed by her and asks her to leave on the basis of her gender and his perceived unworthiness of her discipleship because of it: "Simon Peter said to them, 'Make Mary leave us, for females don't deserve life".[56]

We see more rejection of Mary Magdalene's role by the male disciples in the *Pistis Sophia*. In this text, Peter complains to Jesus that Mary Magdalene talks too much. Jesus' response is to say, "let her speak".[57] It appears that Mary is conscious of this tension, because later in the Gospel she says to Jesus, "I am afraid of Peter, for he threatens me and he hates our race".[58] Knowing that Mary was likely the same race as the rest of the disciples since they were all from the same region, the word "race" here is understood by scholars to refer to her sex.[59] For a second time, Mary Magdalene is rejected by the other disciples specifically on the basis of her gender.

In these passages from extracanonical Gospels, we see not only Mary's prominent role but also the male disciples' discomfort with it. These gospels—that until recently have been lost to

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[54] Pagels, 1979, xvii
[55] King, 2003, 141
[56] Thomas 114
[57] Fruchtman, 2006
[58] Pistis Sophia, 2:71:2
[59] Gardner, 2008, 72; King, 2003, 148

Christians—place Mary Magdalene at the very center of the Jesus movement; they also place her in a position where her authority is threatened by the patriarchal society surrounding her. These themes are continued in the Gospel attributed to Mary Magdalene herself.

The Gospel of Mary Magdalene

The *Gospel of Mary Magdalene* was first discovered in 1896 as part of what is now called the Berlin Codex.[60] This text has since been found in two other editions in multiple languages, suggesting widespread circulation and a composition date from the early second century.[61] Unfortunately, no complete copy has been found, but enough of the text is salvageable for us to find some interesting parallels with the narrative of Mary Magdalene that we find in the canonical Gospels.[62]

The *Gospel of Mary Magdalene* describes Mary going to the disciples after Jesus' resurrection appearance to her and telling them the Good News.[63] In this sense, it parallels the passage we see in Mark 16, but with a few key differences. In the *Gospel of Mary,* Mary is a comforter to disciples who are scared and confused—a role that in Mark is given to the resurrected and reappeared Jesus himself.[64] Second, we see that Mary Magdalene is harshly refuted and disbelieved by the disciples, again on the basis of her gender.[65] Because the powerful language used against her is best read for oneself, I will provide the primary source excerpts below. For comparative purposes, we will first read the passage depicting this scene in Mark 16. Then, we will read the parallel passage in The Gospel of Mary.

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[60] Ralls, 2013, 34
[61] King, 2003, 11; Griffith-Jones, 2008, ix; Ralls, 2013, 34
[62] King, 2003, 3
[63] King, 2003, 29
[64] Griffith-Jones, 2008, 136
[65] Mary 10:3-4

Mark 16:9-20

9 When Jesus rose early on the first day of the week, he appeared first to Mary Magdalene, out of whom he had driven seven demons. 10 She went and told those who had been with him and who were mourning and weeping. 11 When they heard that Jesus was alive and that she had seen him, they did not believe it.

12 Afterward Jesus appeared in a different form to two of them while they were walking in the country. 13 These returned and reported it to the rest; but they did not believe them either.
14 Later Jesus appeared to the Eleven as they were eating; he rebuked them for their lack of faith and their stubborn refusal to believe those who had seen him after he had risen.
15 He said to them, "Go into all the world and preach the gospel to all creation. 16 Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned. 17 And these signs will accompany those who believe: In my name they will drive out demons; they will speak in new tongues; 18 they will pick up snakes with their hands; and when they drink deadly poison, it will not hurt them at all; they will place their hands on sick people, and they will get well."
19 After the Lord Jesus had spoken to them, he was taken up into heaven and he sat at the right hand of God. 20 Then the disciples went out and preached everywhere, and the Lord worked with them and confirmed his word by the signs that accompanied it.

In this passage, we can observe several significant features:

- Mary Magdalene receives an individual resurrection appearance. We can recall that she also received an individual appearance in John.[66] In Matthew and Luke, she sees Jesus with a group of other women.[67]
- Mary brings the news to the disciples and they do not believe her.
- Jesus criticizes the Eleven (the Twelve minus Judas) for not believing Mary
- All of the disciples are commissioned to go preach—which would have included Mary Magdalene and the other women

Next, we will look at the parallel scene in the *Gospel According to Mary*.

[66] 20:11-17
[67] Matt. 28:7; Luke 24:10

Gospel of Mary, 10:1-9

Andrew responded, addressing the brothers and sisters, 'Say what you will about the things she has said, but I do not believe that the Savior said these things, for indeed these teachings are strange ideas.' Peter responded, bringing up similar concerns. He questioned them about the Savior: 'Did he, then, speak with a woman in private without our knowing about it? Are we to turn around and listen to her? Did he choose her over us?'
Then Mary wept and said to Peter, 'My brother Peter, what are you imagining? Do you think that I have thought up these things by myself in my heart or that I am telling lies about the Savior?'
Levi answered speaking to Peter, 'Peter, you have always been a wrathful person. Now I see you contending against the woman like the Adversaries. For if the Savior made her worthy, who are you then for your part to reject her?'

In this passage too, we can see that:

- Mary Magdalene receives an individual resurrection appearance.
- Mary brings the news to the disciples and they do not believe her.

In addition, we observe that:

- Peter complains that Mary Magdalene would have had a special message from Jesus because she is a woman.
- Peter is called out for a consistent negative attitude
- The disciples who do not believe Mary Magdalene are led by Peter and his biological brother, Andrew.[68]
- The Gospel ends with a man—Levi—speaking on Mary's behalf.

A comparison of the post-resurrection appearances to Mary Magdalene and her report to the disciples in Mark—a New Testament Gospel—and Mary—an extracanonical Gospel—reveal almost the exact same story. However, the difference is that in the *Gospel of Mary*, Mary's perspective on this

[68] Brock, 2003, 20

situation—of not being believed because of her gender—is provided. This passage gives us insight on what we already know from our canonical sources was a gendered issue. In the mainstream Christian tradition, Mary Magdalene is regarded as a surprising choice of witness to Jesus' resurrection precisely because she was a woman. In the extracanonical *Gospel of Mary*, that dynamic is manifested. Mary's gender is identified as the primary source of her questionable authority: her gender comes up three times in this Gospel as a whole, and twice in just the passage provided above.[69]

The Gospel of Mary confirms the overall Gnostic perspective and builds on the New Testament hints suggesting that Mary Magdalene was a prominent and trusted disciple of Jesus who was gradually pushed out of her authoritative role on the basis of her gender. The total elimination from the Biblical canon of Gospels that explicitly confirm Mary Magdalene's leadership suggests that the role of Mary in a book may even have influenced whether or not it became regarded as authoritative. If this is the case, why would canonization have pushed Mary Magdalene out of the story? In other words, why would the early Church be motivated to conceal Mary Magdalene?

[69] Mary 6:1; 10:3-4; 10:8

3. The Threat of Mary Magdalene

"In the canonical Gospels, Mary rarely spoke. In the Gnostic Gospels, she seems to be speaking all the time".[70] Why was Mary Magdalene's story erased from Christianity by the early Church? Answering this question will require a review of the information we've gathered so far from a study of her in the New Testament and extracanonical gospels. It will also require a dive into the suggested rivalry between Mary Magdalene and Simon Peter, the head apostle and the first pope.

Even if we just look at Mary Magdalene as depicted in the New Testament, she is a strong character. She stands by Jesus' side when the male disciples flee. She is there at his capture, his crucifixion, his death, his burial, and his resurrection. According to two of the four Gospel accounts, Mary Magdalene alone is the first one to see the risen Jesus and the first to be commissioned with the Christian message. Mary Magdalene barely features in the Gospel stories before Jesus' death and resurrection, but this is unsurprising when we examine the lack of attention the male Gospel authors paid to the women in general.[71] Luckily, this gap is somewhat filled in by the extracanonical Gospels, where we see Mary Magdalene as a favorite disciple of Jesus throughout his ministry. However, while Mary receives privileges as a trusted disciple of Jesus, we see her facing challenges to her authority, her role, and even to her existence. Simply put, Mary Magdalene was a strong, independent women living in an extremely patriarchal society.

Patriarchal Society

Mary Magdalene was a strong woman, which was an unpopular thing to be in the 1st century. One reason to erase her leadership role would be to ensure that dominance by men could continue unimpeded in society. In the Roman Empire during the 1st century A.D., women were the property

[70] Gardner, 2008, 62
[71] Kraemer, 2006, 53

of their closest male relative.[72] They lacked education, freedom, and independence. When Jesus came along, he changed this in radical ways. New Testament historian Dr. Joan Taylor points out that even having had female disciples (Susanna, Joanna, and Mary Magdalene among others) would have been absolutely revolutionary for this era.[73] Jesus protects the adulterous women from stoning, and breaks societal norms around both race and gender in conversing with the Samaritan woman at the well.[74] Considering that women's testimony was not considered valid in court, it is even more astounding that Jesus chooses to make his witness to the greatest news of all time a woman.[75]

However, we can also see constant pushback against Jesus' empowerment of women in Scripture, even from the disciples. When his disciples find him speaking to the women at the well, they are "surprised to find him talking with a woman".[76] As Mary Magdalene and her fellow women tell the male disciples about Jesus' resurrection, the disciples do not believe them, assuming this is just "an idle tale".[77] If we take the extracanonical texts into account, Jesus is defending Mary against sexist attacks by the disciples constantly. As literary scholar Joan Acocella writes, "Feminists had long suspected that the New Testament, together with its commentators, had downplayed women's contributions to the founding of Christianity. [The Nag Hammadi library of extracanonical Christian texts] was the proof".[78]

If Jesus' empowerment of women was fought against so hard during his lifetime, we can only imagine what must have happened when Jesus was no longer there to stand up for Mary Magdalene. As Chilton points out, the infamous verse in 2 Timothy saying that "the women in the churches will keep silence, because it is not appropriate for them to speak', reflects more than

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[72] Cox, 2018
[73] The Mystery of Mary Magdalene, 2014
[74] John 8:1-11; John 4
[75] The Mystery of Mary Magdalene, 2014
[76] John 4:27
[77] Luke 24:10-11
[78] 2006, 49

personal male chauvinism. Men in antiquity generally agreed with him".[79] Mary Magdalene's story took place in a patriarchal society in which she—a strong, independent women—posed a threat to the core understanding of gender relationships.

Peter and Mary

A second reason for the erasure of Mary Magdalene's story is an apparent conflict between her and Simon Peter that is explicit in the Gnostic texts yet carries over in a quieter way into the canonical New Testament Scriptures. Given Peter's prominence in the formation of the early Church (Peter was the first Pope), a rivalry between him and Mary Magdalene could be a major reason behind her disappearance.

In the Gnostic Gospels

The Gnostic Gospels clearly and repeatedly spell out a conflict between Mary Magdalene and Simon Peter as leaders of early Christianity, both before and after Jesus' death and resurrection. In the *Pistis Sophia*, Mary says that she is "afraid of Peter, for he threatens me and he hates our [sex]".[80] In *The Gospel of Thomas*, Peter is claimed to have said: "Make Mary leave us, for females don't deserve life".[81] Even in *The Gospel of Mary*, Peter and his biological brother Andrew lead the male disciples in denying Mary Magdalene's claims based on her gender, making it clear that "at least one aspect of Peter's problem was that [Mary] was a woman".[82] While most Gnostic texts display Peter as the leader of the male disciples, they display Mary Magdalene as another favorite of Jesus with equal status to Peter, so it seems logical that Peter's rivalry is based on jealousy and is exacerbated by the fact that Mary Magdalene is a woman.

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[79] 2:12; 2005, 99
[80] 2:71:2
[81] 114
[82] King, 2003, 88

Interestingly, the transmission of the Gnostic Gospels themselves also suggests a rivalry between Mary and Peter as far as preferences for one or the other among communities. Brock observes how apocryphal texts frequently would change Mary Magdalene's name to Peter or even Jesus' mother Mary of Nazareth in later translations and versions, giving esteemed roles and sayings to those figures instead.[83] Brock gives an example of this from the extracanonical *Acts of Philip*:

> "The replacement of Mary by Peter as Philip's companion in the Coptic version of the *Acts of Philip* eliminates the authoritative position she held in the original Greek text... This Coptic text provides one of the most interesting examples of the elimination or replacement of her figure…the frequency of the substitutions in a number of texts widely distributed in space and time make it unlikely that these substitutions are the result of mere accident or arbitrary decisions. These substitutions and replacements occur in certain Greek and Syriac texts as well as in Coptic fragments. In the majority of the texts that replace Mary Magdalene with another character – especially those texts that substitute Mary, the mother of Jesus, as the first resurrection witness – the Apostle Peter is present and prominent".[84]

Studies of the Gnostic gospels give us insight into the supposed rivalry between Mary Magdalene and Simon Peter and their followings in two ways: one, we see narrative accounts of them in conflict with one another, often specifically on the basis of Mary's gender; two, we can trace tampering of the Scriptures over time in which Mary's role is often diminished as her name is replaced with that of Simon Peter or Mary of Nazareth. Between them, these observations provide strong evidence for a Peter-Mary rivalry with real historical roots. Analyzing the clues regarding this rivalry in the canonical New Testament provides further evidence in support of this position.

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[83] 2003, 123
[84] 2003, 129

In the New Testament

The narrative of Mary Magdalene and Simon Peter's rivalry for Jesus' most prominent disciple can be found in the New Testament as well, both in the texts themselves as well as through comparative analysis. *The Gospel of Mary* portrayed Peter as clearly questioning Mary's testimony regarding Jesus' resurrection, and we see the exact same thing in Luke and John when Peter, refusing to accept Mary's report that Jesus' body is missing, goes to the tomb himself.[85]

The most fascinating analysis of Peter versus Mary in the New Testament is looking at the ways that the *Gospel According to Luke* alters the roles of both figures compared with in the earlier Gospels, Mark and Matthew. As mentioned previously, Luke is known for diminishing the roles of women in the Gospel story across the board, but Mary Magdalene seems to get special treatment. Luke consistently elevates the role of Peter and lowers the status of Mary Magdalene.

Brock points out many indicators that Luke is privileging Simon Peter in his telling of the Jesus story. On one hand, we see places where pro-Peter text is added. While in Mark and Matthew Peter's call from Jesus is given just 3 lines and shared with his brother Andrew, in Luke the call is for Peter alone and takes up a full 11 lines.[86] It is only in Luke where Peter's three-fold denial of Jesus during his Capture is accompanied with forgiveness by Christ himself, and Luke is the only Gospel in which Peter receives an individual post-resurrection appearance from Jesus (in Mark and John, this is Mary Magdalene).[87] Luke also takes the line identifying Jesus as Christ from Martha, another New Testament woman, and gives it to Peter.[88]

In other places, text is changed from in earlier Gospels to benefit Peter. The famous verse about catching people rather than fish experiences a grammatical change from plural to singular,

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[85] Luke 24:11; John 20:3; Gardner, 2008, 59
[86] Brock, 2003, 20
[87] Brock, 2003, 21; 29
[88] Brock, 2003, 42

which changes the meaning to make it sound like this call is given to Peter rather than to all of the disciples.[89] However, when Jesus is berating the disciples for falling asleep in Gethsemane, the verb gets changed the other way so that not just Peter but all of the disciples receive the beratement now.[90] Finally, we see strategic omissions of elements that are in both Mark and Matthew from the Lukan Gospel that also elevate Peter's status in the eyes of the reader. Peter's questioning of Jesus' sacrificing himself is removed, as well as the scene in which Jesus tells Peter "Get behind me, Satan!".[91]

While Luke elevates the role of Peter in his text through addition, alteration, and omission, he simultaneously diminishes that of Mary Magdalene. The most prominent reduction of Mary's role is the removal of her seeing Jesus post-resurrection at all. Whereas in the other Gospels Mary is both in the group of women to first discover Jesus' tomb and talk to him as well as receives an individual post-resurrection appearance, in Luke both of these encounters are denied to her.[92]

The analysis of Luke—how Peter is elevated in a text in which Mary Magdalene and other women are simultaneously downgraded—provides strong evidence to complement that provided by the Gnostic Gospels that Mary Magdalene and Peter had a rivalry. Perhaps most importantly to note is that "in the earliest Christian gospels, only two individuals are singled out as recipients of an individual Resurrection appearance from the Lord: Mary Magdalene (John 20:14-17) and Simon Peter (Luke 24:34)".[93] Clearly, both played a significant role in early Christianity, yet as we know from history, only one is remembered as an apostle and founder of the early Church.

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[89] Brock, 2003, 21
[90] Brock, 2003, 26
[91] Brock, 2003, 22; 24
[92] Luke 24:4; 34
[93] Brock, 2003, 140

Conclusions on the Peter-Mary Conflict

Christianity was not formed overnight. The foundations of this great religion were set over the course of several hundred years, and in that time there was significant debate over how things should be done, including women's role in the new Church.[94] From what we can see explicit evidence of in the Gnostic Gospels and implicit evidence of in the canonical New Testament, one of these power struggles was between Mary Magdalene and Simon Peter. Mary Magdalene lost, and as such, she was the rival power whose authority had to be erased from history.

The author of Luke is the same as the author of Acts, so it is no surprise that Mary Magdalene is never mentioned in that book.[95] Paul, who wrote most of the New Testament after this, appears to have ended up—aware or not—in the Peter faction: "Paul does not refer to Mary Magdalene when he lists the witnesses to Christ's resurrection appearance… Because Peter's name is at the top of the list… it is perhaps not surprising that Mary Magdalene's name is not included in the received tradition that Paul transmits".[96] Therefore, even as scenes of Jesus' death and resurrection are shared throughout Paul's letters, Mary Magdalene's name never comes up. In fact, after John we never see her name in the Bible again.

Besides her erasure from Biblical history, the other implication of this battle between Mary Magdalene and Peter is the leadership of the Christian Church. Peter is known as the Rock on which the Church is founded: the keeper of the keys of heaven, and the first pope. When Peter won this role, Mary Magdalene was excluded from the Church Institution that Peter had made. In *The Gospel of Mary* when Peter says that he doesn't believe Mary Magdalene's messages from Jesus, he is

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[94] King, 2003, 87
[95] Brock, 2003, 151
[96] Brock, 2006, 442

essentially telling her to leave. Women have not been invited back into the Roman Catholic Church since.

The Real Mary Magdalene

We have evidence of one more way in which Mary Magdalene's influence has been erased. Mary Magdalene's name in Greek is Μαρία ἡ Μαγδαληνὴ: literally, Mary the Magdalene. For millennia, the assumption behind this name has been that she is from a town called Magdala.[97] But new scholars like Jane Schaberg, Margaret Starbird, and Joan Taylor have pointed out an interesting fact: Magdala was the new name given to a town that had been Taricheae until it was destroyed in AD 67.[98] Jesus died around 33 A.D. Mary Magdalene cannot have been from a town that did not yet exist.[99]

Secondly, the Greek wording for her name is not correct for framing the geographic origin of a person. In Scripture, we see examples of other individuals who are named based on where they are from, and the name is not structured in this way.[100] Alternatively, Mary's name is structured in Greek like a nickname: the same as for John the Baptist and Simon the Zealot.[101] No one would argue that Simon's name is really Simon from Zealot. Also, Mary Magdalene's name is structured differently in two places in the New Testament. "In Luke 8:2, she is Μαρία ἡ καλουμένη Μαγδαληνή, 'Maria called Magdalene', and, more interestingly still, ἡ Μαγδαληνὴ Μαρία, 'the Magdalene Maria' in Luke 24:10. When other people are 'called' by such epithets in Luke-Acts [like Simon, Judas, or

[97] Ranger, 2019
[98] Burnstein, 2006, 88
[99] Burnstein, 2006, 88; The Mystery of Mary Magdalene, 2014; Taylor, 2014, 205
[100] Matthew 27:57, Mark 15:43, Luke 23:50-56, John 19:38, John 11:1
[101] Matt. 10:3, Mark 15:40).

Simon Peter], it is because they are named in a special way by Jesus or others".[102] There is strong evidence suggesting that Mary's name is really a nickname.[103]

Magdala—in Hebrew—means "tower". And in Aramaic—the language spoken by Jesus, Mary, and the other disciples—it means "magnificent" or "great".[104] If Mary's epithet was "Mary the Great", this affirms the view of her developed from reading the New Testament and the extracanonical gospels—as a prominent disciple of Jesus. It also poses an interesting question: if Peter is Peter the Rock and that makes him the head of the Church, then what does Mary the Tower imply for Mary Magdalene? Her mistranslated name is further evidence of the woman she was: a woman who was in the way of male domination of the Jesus ministry and stood in the face of a patriarchal society. It is also further evidence as to why her story was distorted and erased, even down to the meaning of her name. "If Christian theologians in the Latin West were going to establish an exclusively male church, then the central figure to Christ's story, Mary Magdalene[—Mary the Tower—], needed to be retold".[105]

[102] Taylor, 2014, 206
[103] Greek exegetical assessment corroborated by Riley Gombis and John Goodhew
[104] Ranger, 2019
[105] Watterson, 2019, 106

4. Transformation Over Time: A Reception History

When the Church fathers removed Mary Magdalene from the story of Christianity, they left a huge gap. Mary Magdalene was the witness to Jesus' death and resurrection, and a major player in his ministry. The erasure of her real identity required creation of a new one for her—a legendary Mary that evolved and became more interesting with each new era of Christianity. We will now examine the journey Mary Magdalene's legacy took throughout history.

Apostle to the Apostles (2nd c.)

In the early centuries of Christianity, Mary Magdalene's influence was still being stamped out, but not before our written records began. By the second century, Church Fathers like Hippolytus were attributing her the title "Apostle to the Apostles"—a fair title, considering that Mary Magdalene was the first to announce the news of the Risen Christ to the Twelve generally considered to be the Apostles, and one that would continue to be used throughout the medieval era.[106] "Many of the greatest theologians …Hugh of Cluny, Peter Abelard, and Bernard of Clairvaux, among them—each use the title when referring to Mary Magdalen".[107]

Second Eve (4th c.)

Early Church Fathers also characterized Mary Magdalene as a "Second Eve".[108] While Eve brought sin into the world through disobeying God, Mary Magdalene brought God's grace back into the world as the deliverer of the news of Jesus' resurrection and thus Christian salvation.[109] Augustine was one of the early theologians to view Mary in this light: he claimed that in leading the

[106] Brock, 2003, 161
[107] Jansen, 2006, 153
[108] Haskins, 1993, 67
[109] Jansen, 2000, 35

way back to God, Mary was correcting the errors of the original woman, Eve.[110] However, Mary Magdalene's comparison to Eve did not remain her dominant role in Christian history for long. By the end of the 6th century, the conflation of her with a prostitute had begun.

Mary the Prostitute (6th c.)

Mary Magdalene was not a prostitute. However, in 591, Pope Gregory delivered a famous sermon, Homily XXXIII, in which he conflated Mary Magdalene with Mary of Bethany and the sinful woman in Luke who washes Jesus' feet with oil and her hair.[111] Around this time, he also connected her with the woman brought to Jesus to be stoned for adultery.[112] This identification of Mary Magdalene with these women is not Biblically-rooted. In fact, "Nowhere in the NT is she ever referred to as either a prostitute or a sinner", yet in the words of this Pope, Mary Magdalene becomes not one but four women; and two of them being prostitutes, Mary is now also a whore. [113]

The identity of Mary Magdalene as a prostitute only grew in the ensuing decades as more women were amalgamated into her identity. Mary Magdalene's first biography, dating to the 9th century, ties her to Saint Mary of Egypt, a reformed prostitute who spent the last 30 years of her life living as an ascetic in the desert.[114] The life of St. Agnes of Rome is also added onto Magdalene's identity: Agnes was a chaste, wanna-be nun who was thrown into a brothel by vicious family members and miraculously grew hair that covered her entire body to protect her modesty.[115] By the end of the first millennium, Mary Magdalene's identity is really six women combined into one under one name.

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[110] Jansen, 2000, 31
[111] Ralls, 2013, 24
[112] Ralls, 2013, 25
[113] The Mary Magdalene Conspiracy, 2017
[114] Jansen, 2000, 37
[115] Griffith-Jones, 2008, 189

While other identities of Mary Magdalene came and went over time, this mistaken view of her as a prostitute has persisted for over fourteen-hundred years, and is still widespread today. Why has remembering Mary Magdalene correctly been so difficult? A large component of this has been the reluctance of the Church to change their—by now—deeply ingrained views of her. Biblical scholars of the Roman Catholic Church have known that Mary's legacy as prostitute is "historically inaccurate" since the early 16th century, yet have repressed these ideas.[116] The first known questioning of Mary Magdalene's representation was by French Dominican scholar Jacques Lefevre d'Etaples in 1517, who was refuted for this "sacrilege" by the local Bishop.[117] D'Etaples was actually excommunicated for the "heresy" of separating Mary Magdalene from the prostitute.[118] Four hundred years later during the Second Vatican Council, Mary Magdalene's identity was revisited by the Roman Catholic Church, and this time the view was finally corrected.[119] However, the small "edit" went largely unnoticed—many Christians of all denominations today still view Mary Magdalene as the repentant whore.[120]

Missionary to France (11th c.)

The most prominent devotees of Mary Magdalene today are found in Southern France along the shores of the Mediterranean, a tradition which has roots extending back to the beginning of the 2nd millennium.[121] In legends native to the cities of Marseille and Saint Baume, Mary Magdalene is said to have escaped persecution in the Holy Land after Christ's resurrection and come to France in a rudderless boat, planting the first French Christian Church.[122] One legend suggests that Mary was a

[116] Watterson, 2019, 107
[117] Jansen, 2000, 11
[118] Muir, 2019, 70
[119] Watterson, 2019, 107
[120] Ralls, 2013, 27; Burnstein, 2006, 15
[121] Jansen, 2006, 151
[122] Ralls, 2013, 68-70

prominent preacher throughout the land and even converted the then-royal family to Christianity. Another claims that Mary "spent the last 33 years of her life in the caves of Sainte Baume, in penance and deep spiritual contemplation… [a tale that would give] rise to the 'ascetic hermit' image that prevails in the medieval writings about her".[123]

The French legends of Mary Magdalene became hugely influential for her legacy among future generations primarily because they were spread throughout Europe in a copy of Jacobus de Voragine's *The Golden Legend*, released in the 1260s.[124] This book, which "depicts the lives of the saints in a range of stories designed to have mass appeal—some seemingly factual, some obviously fictional," was the most widely read text of the Middle Ages besides the Bible.[125] The text had an immense impact on Mary's popularity in the medieval era and beyond as a result, influencing figures like St. Catherine of Siena among others.[126] It also propagated some odd ideas from these French legends, including the Cathar Heresy of believing Mary Magdalene was Jesus' lover; this legend persists even in Modern American culture.[127]

Jesus' Lover (13th c.)

The Cathars of Southern France were the first to suggest that Mary Magdalene had a romantic relationship with Jesus Christ—a heresy for which they were massacred in a Vatican-led Crusade in 1208.[128] Mary Magdalene continues to be depicted in this light in certain peripheral Christian projects even today, including Dan Brown's *The Da Vinci Code,* Nikos Kazantzakis' *The Last Temptation of Christ* and Andrew Lloyd Webber's *Jesus Christ Superstar.* A small selection of

[123] Ralls, 2013, 76
[124] Voragine, 2006, 228
[125] Voragine, 2006, 228; Acocella, 2006, 41
[126] Ralls, 2013, 76
[127] Fruchtman, 2006
[128] Chilton, 2005, 148

scholars actually still promote this view, although the evidence for it is scant; scholars like Margaret Starbird and James Gardner point out that Jesus' singleness would have been extremely unusual in Jewish culture, and that in the non-canonical Gospel of Phillip, Mary Magdalene kisses Jesus on the mouth.[129] However, these views seem to fantasize out of what is left unsaid, and perhaps willfully misinterpret the meaning of a kiss among Jesus' disciples; it is well-documented that Jesus regularly kissed all of his disciples as a symbol of passing the Holy Spirit between them.[130] Interestingly enough, Chilton notes that translators often changed this word to "greet" when referring to male disciples but kept it as "kiss" for Mary—perhaps "perpetuat[ing] the Magdalene's caricature as modern Christianity's favorite vixen" in doing so.[131] While we can never know for sure, it seems unlikely that Mary Magdalene was Jesus' lover.

Feminist scholars point out reasons why focusing on this aspect of Mary Magdalene is misleading anyway. Brock argues that debating whether or not Mary Magdalene was Jesus' wife is just another way of reducing her to her sexual status and her relationship to men, rather than recognizing her as a spiritual leader in her own right.[132] Chilton and Meyer essentially argue, why do people care?[133] Mary Magdalene's true value to later generations should be in her accomplishments, not her marital status. As such, as author Elizabeth Clare Prophet writes, "the debate over their marriage misses the point".[134]

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[129] The Mystery of Mary Magdalene; Gardner, 2008, 120; Chilton, 2005, 143
[130] The Mary Magdalene Conspiracy, 2017
[131] Chilton, 2005, 125
[132] 2006, 143
[133] 2006, 56; 2006, 116
[134] Keijzer, 2006, 161

The Penitent Magdalene (14th c.)

As the legends of Mary Magdalene as repentant whore living an ascetic life in the caves of St. Baume permeated Europe, Mary became the medieval symbol for Christian penitence.[135] By the late medieval period, Mary Magdalene was "the most popular female saint after the Virgin Mary".[136] This role emerged for her mostly because of the historical figures she was conflated with. The story where Mary of Bethany—believed to be Mary Magdalene at this point—weeps at Jesus' feet and wipes oil on him with her hair was seen as the original story of repentance, and mendicant orders of the medieval era strived to achieve this same posture before God.[137] Mary's conflation with St. Agnes and Mary of Egypt contributed further to her role as a penitent, since both had been desert mothers and strong ascetics; "Mary Magdalene [even] took over features of Saint Agnes and (like the latter) by divine grace grew hair over her entire body so as to clothe her nakedness;" hence the many depictions of Mary from this period in which she is covered in hair from head to toe.[138] Mary Magdalene's following, which at this point could only be accurately described as a "cult", popularized only further after the Fourth Lateran Council mandated annual confession for Christians in 1215.[139] The medieval Mary Magdalene became "an encouraging model for human sinners seeking forgiveness", for if this prostitute could become a saint, then there was hope for the rest of us.[140]

The only Scriptural elements of Mary's penitent role here were what we know of her being the chief mourner of Jesus at his crucifixion, although this suggests grief more than repentance.[141]

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[135] Jansen, 2000, 6
[136] Jansen, 2000, 3
[137] Jansen, 2000, 49
[138] Maisch, 1998, 48
[139] Jolly, 2014, 2
[140] Jolly, 2014, 2
[141] Januzczak, 2017

However, the exemplary status of Mary Magdalene as penitent has added to her title—now "repentant whore"—and become a pillar of her legacy in Western Christianity.

Donatello, *Penitent Magdalene,* c. 1453.

Attavante degli Attavanti and workshop, *Mary Magdalene*, c. 1492

Inspired by the conflation of Mary Magdalene with the legend of St. Agnes, Mary here is depicted as covered in hair, which protects her modesty.

The Birth of the New Venus: Magdalene of the Renaissance (15th c.)

With the rise of humanism and the revival of Greco-Roman culture during the Renaissance, Mary Magdalene took on yet another role, although not one unexpected for Christianity's favorite whore; Mary became the means for Renaissance artists to depict Venus in a "chaste" way appropriate for their Christian audiences.[142] We see more Marys with red hair, which in Classical culture implied sexuality—albeit the abundance of her hair signaled her parallel spiritual development.[143] The nakedness of her ascetic years is continued, but now her hair is used to accentuate her features rather than protect her modesty. As historian of Christianity Katherine Ludwig Jansen observes:

> "Representations of the Magdalen nakedness could be construed as her post-conversion condition of innocence and purity. But given her prior association with sins of the flesh, medieval depictions of the hair-covered and naked Magdalene did more than evoke images of edenic innocence: they also pointed out the sexual aspect of her nudity, a reminder of her past as a sexual sinner… Her nakedness was at once innocent and seductive".[144]

Interestingly enough, there is also a shift in this time in the main patrons of Mary Magdalene art. While the medieval period was marked by portraits of the Magdalene being commissioned by or for women, during the Renaissance there is an uptake in paintings of the Magdalene purchased by men.[145] Hence, art of Mary from this period is often labeled by historians as essentially "holy pornography": the type of "pin-up" that a faithful Christian could respectfully have in his home.[146] Quite a few artists even played into the legendary romance between Mary Magdalene and Jesus by

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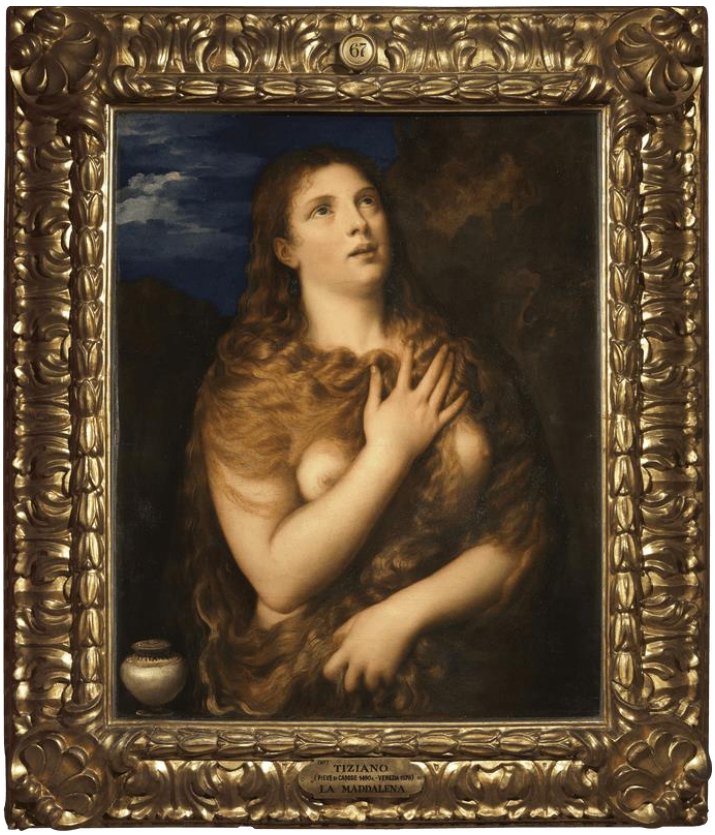
[142] Haskins, 1993, 236; 238
[143] Apostolos-Cappadona, 2006, 201
[144] 2000, 133-134
[145] Jansen, 2000, 265; The Mystery of Mary Magdalene, 2014
[146] Carroll, 2006, 35; The Mystery of Mary Magdalene, 2014

painting her reaching for or staring at his crotch.[147] As Melvyn Bragg says in the BBC documentary, "Under the guise of a religious painting, Careggio is clearly exploring something more sensual: a Renaissance pin-up".[148]



Titian, *The Penitant Magdalene* , c. 1531

Guido Reni, *The Penitent Magdalene*, c. 1635,

[147] The Mystery of Mary Magdalene, 2014
[148] 2014

Antonio Allegri da Correggio, *Noli me Tangere,* c. 1525

The Mary Magdalene in this painting is rounder than usual in her lower abdomen, suggesting pregnancy. In addition, we see here an example of artwork where she is looking at or almost reaching towards Jesus' crotch, which is a wave to the legends of their romantic affair.

Pregnant Mary Magdalene (16th c.)

Mary Magdalene was beloved by Christians throughout Europe before the Renaissance, as Apostle to the Apostles, the Second Eve who restored womenkind, model ascetic, and hope for all Christians. Now after the Renaissance, she was beautiful as well. This adoration of Mary Magdalene resulted in the bestowal of some of Christianity's highest honors for women by the late Renaissance period: a status as honorary mother and virgin.[149] Art of Mary Magdalene began to commonly feature a pregnant Mary, which although sometimes pointed to by scholars who theorize on Mary and Jesus' love affair, is really a symbolic pregnancy with roots in medieval theological literature.[150] In the *Vita Beatae Mariae Magdalenae et Sororis ejus Sanctae Martha* from the late twelfth century, "the

[149] Jansen, 2000, 286
[150] Jolly, 2014, 13

author specifically uses the discourse of impregnation, conception, and birth for [Mary Magdalene's] conversion".[151] After this, Mary Magdalene was commonly viewed as pregnant with the Holy Spirit, the Gospel, and "redeeming grace" itself.[152] After all, Mary was the woman who delivered the Good News of Jesus' resurrection to the world.

Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio, *Martha and Mary Magdalene*, c. 1598.

This Mary Magdalene is clearly pregnant, as can be seen by the depth details on her womb.

Mary's Fall from Grace (17th c.)

Mary Magdalene was to reach her height of prestige at the end of the Renaissance. For immediately after this was when the Reformation began, which was to be her great downfall.

The Protestant Reformation launched a new emphasis on Scriptural backing behind all beliefs, and therefore the expulsion of anything legendary about the Christian faith. The Council of Trent—the Catholic response to the Reformation—took the same path, and declared defunct many of the claims that had given Mary Magdalene such prominence over the centuries.[153] The legends that had emerged about Mary—including her mission work in France and her alleged love affair with Jesus—were dispelled, and only the presumably-Scriptural idea of her as a prostitute remained intact.

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[151] Jolly, 2014, 38
[152] Januzczak, 2017; Jolly, 2014, 13
[153] Jansen, 2000, 335

Mary Magdalene was robbed of many of her identities. She was no longer an ascetic or a model penitent. She was neither beautiful nor filled with God's grace. Perhaps most significantly and intriguingly, she was also deprived of her title, The Apostle to the Apostles. For no apparent logical reason, the Biblical understanding of Mary Magdalene as the first messenger of the good news in Christianity—which warranted her title of Apostle to the Apostles—was thrown out along with the legends.[154] Jansen theorizes that this is because "even if the title drew its inspiration from scripture, neither the Protestantism nor the Catholicism of the period was hospitable to the idea of religious women preaching to men".[155] Between the Council of Trent on the Catholic end and the exclusion of non-Scriptural theological texts by Protestants, "after the Reformation, in Protestant and many Catholic works the attribution to her of apostleship disappeared".[156] It is yet to be restored even today.

Without her beauty, her grace, or her apostleship, Mary Magdalene is left in the dust by the Modern Era. Magdalene becomes synonymous with prostitute and fallen woman; the other half of her identity is forgotten.[157] The Magdalene of popular culture and art is now sad and lost. As Ingrid Maisch says, "While in the Church's tradition her pardoning was always part of the story, that aspect vanished from the secular literature. Mary Magdalene is now only the woman lying prone on the ground without a halo".[158]

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[154] Jansen, 2006, 153-154
[155] Jansen, 2006, 153-154
[156] Schaberg, 2002, 97
[157] Haskins, 1993, 319; Acocella, 2006, 44
[158] 1998, 130

Domenico Tintoretto, *Penitent Magdalene*, c. 1598-1602

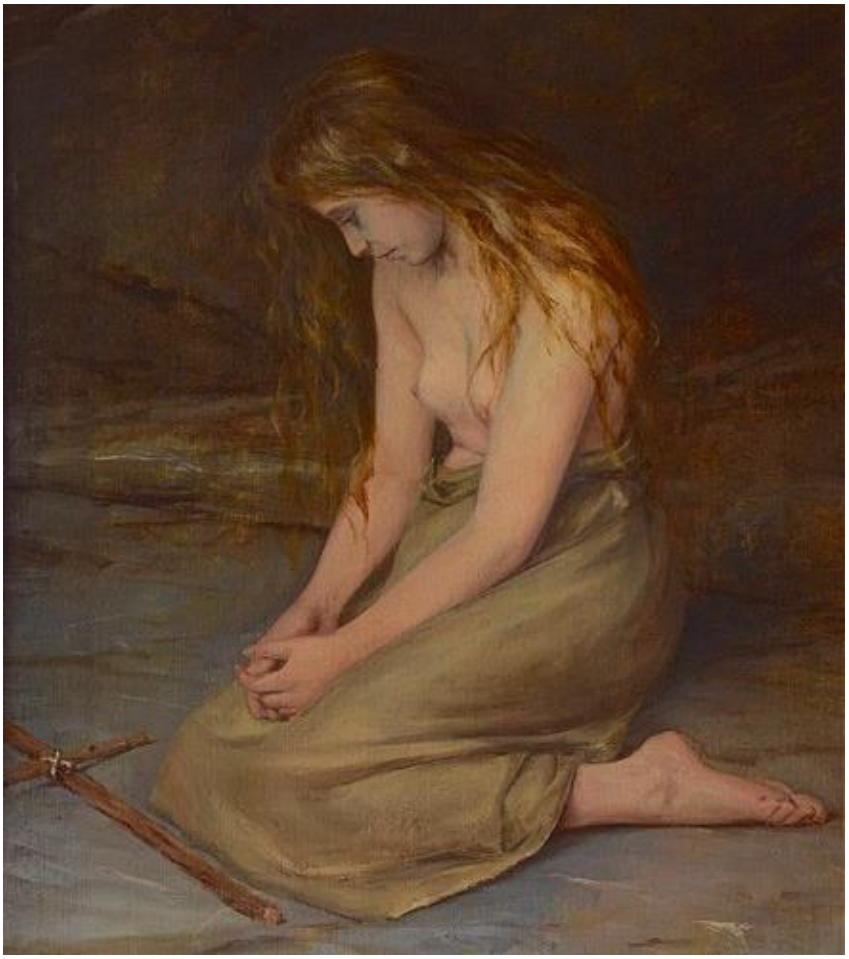
Tintoretto's Mary was painted right before the Reformation swept away Mary's prominence. Hence she still has a ray of divine light shining onto her face, a common way to depict holy persons.

Georges de la Tour, *Magdalene with the Smoking Flame*, c. 1640

This Magdalene, a few decades lighter, has lost the heavenly light, but at least is given a candle to point at her posture towards God. She also appears to be pregnant.

George Romney, *The Magdalene*, c. 1792

By the end of the 18th century, Mary Magdalene is barely a saint. We can see that she is looking upwards and a light is shining on her, but the light itself is not visible. Mary looks like an ordinary woman lying on the floor.



Adolfo Tommasi , *Penitent Magdalene,* c. 1893

As the 20th century approached, Mary's holiness has disappeared almost entirely. As Maisch mentioned, she has lost her halo, her light, and her looking upwards. She is now just a naked women dressed in rags on the ground.

Mary Magdalene Today (20th c.)

As Christianity developed and spread throughout Europe, it is important to remember that most of the population was illiterate. Therefore, stories were told and Christianity was understood through art. Art was influenced by various theological ideas about Mary Magdalene, some less true than others. From that, art became influential in determining how the majority of Christians understood her, and thus her role transformed. Artists played with Mary, because with such a multi-faceted role, their creativity had no limits. "During the Renaissance, artists found her a muse of great versatility--she could be buxom and bountiful (Titian), or haggard and ascetic (Donatello).[159] Depictions of Mary Magdalene in her original Biblical context as sharer of the news of Jesus's resurrection gradually disappeared, to be replaced with more exciting or current interpretations of her. Finally in the early years of the 21st century, we see a Mary Magdalene who is too often seen as simply a prostitute who plays a small role in the resurrection of Jesus Christ. The real Mary Magdalene has been lost.

[159] Burnstein and Keijzer, 2006, x

5. The First to Fall

Mary Magdalene—the first Christian woman—was erased from the Christian story so that a male-dominated Church could be established. Her diminishment was the beginning of many narratives pursued by the early Church in order to remove women from the story entirely.

The Twelve (and the) Apostles

The first way in which the Church removed women from its history was in the elevation of the all-male Twelve apostles. The Greek word, ἀπόστολος (apostle), had previously been used only in seafaring language to refer to the sending out of a fleet.[160] It is typically translated to English as "messenger". Originally, apostle was a title that could be used for any disciple of Jesus who was spreading the Gospel—making Mary Magdalene the first; however, over time this role's definition was falsely narrowed in order to exclude all except for those twelve men from Jesus' ministry.

John Chrystostom, Origen, Hippolytus, and Gregory of Antioch are among the Church Fathers of the first six centuries A.D. who specifically reference female apostles.[161] Junia, Barnabas, and Paul have also all been called apostles at various points, yet only Paul is counted as one in most Christian denominations today.[162] This is especially intriguing considering that the evidence Paul gives that he is in fact an apostle is actually a line that Mary Magdalene was the first to say: "I have seen the Lord".[163] According to this Pauline definition of apostleship, Mary Magdalene was the first apostle. Furthermore, it is clear from the fact that in 1 Corinthians 15:3-7 as well that the apostles and the Twelve are not coterminous groups, since Paul actually refers to them separately.[164] Despite this, the myth that the Twelve are the only apostles persists today. The Twelve male apostles is used

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[160] Brock, 2003, 3
[161] Jeffries, 2019; Jansen, 2000, 28; Brock, 2003, 15
[162] Romans 16:7; Brock, 2003, 150; Bourgeault, 2010, 32
[163] Maisch, 1998, 12
[164] Brock, 2003, 442

as the reasoning behind the exclusion of women from leadership roles and ordination in many denominations, including Roman Catholicism.

Erasure of Women in Early Christianity

A second narrative pursued by the early Church is that women have never been and can never be leaders in the Church. However, all of our historical records, art, and Scripture combat this idea. Women have a legacy in all of them: of being present, and then later of being erased.

Early Christian writers like Origin and Irenaeus refer to female teachers like Marcellina, Salome, Mariamme, and Martha---some of whom we have never heard of—which as New Testament scholar Carolyn Osiek writes raises "the interesting probability that in traditions now lost to us, not only male biblical figures were revered as founders of tradition, but gospel women as well".[165] A letter from the venerated bishop Ambrose (340-397 AD) confirms that there were female leaders in the early Church, which has always been known because of historical laws from that period that discuss women leaders.[166] Priscilla and Junia are both listed as Bishops in early annals, and the role of deacon was gender-inclusive as early as 60 A.D.[167] Art from the early period confirms this tale: the *Fractio Panis* fresco depicts the earliest known visual image of a Eucharist, and the people breaking the bread are women.[168] Not to mention, scholars have discovered "at least fifteen Latin and Greek inscriptions that bear leadership titles for women including 'head of the synagogue', 'leader,' elder, 'mother of the synagogue,' and 'priest'. Such evidence, written in stone, repudiates stereotypes, recovers lost leadership roles, and deserves further investigation into the future".[169] And

[165] 2006, 515
[166] Jeffries, 2019
[167] Jeffries, 2019; Osiek, 2006, 518
[168] Chilton, 2005, 112
[169] Brock, 2006, 443

of course Christian Scripture is our most reliable clue. 1 Timothy uses both *presbuteros* and *presbutera*, masculine and feminine forms, which were the predecessors for the word priest.[170]

At the same time, we have evidence of these women's roles being erased as well. Frescoes in the Priscilla Catacombs have been altered with beards painted on the female faces, and even Scripture has been altered through mistranslation.[171] While in Greek the plural form is the same whether it is a mixed-gender group or all men, the translation to English separates the men and women, which results in denying women the title of disciple among other roles.[172] Junia, who is labeled as an apostle by Paul, had her name mistranslated to a man's name for nearly two-thousand years; the NIV had her listed as a man as late as 1984.[173] In these and other ways, women who exhibited prominent roles in early Christianity had their legacies distorted and erased in order to make room for a patriarchal institution. "In translations of Romans 16: 1-2, Phoebe is not allowed to appear as what she is: deacon of the Church at Cenchreae and its presider; Junia was permitted to retain the title of apostle, but had to mutate into a man; and the prophet and teacher Jezebel became a whore--a career that also awaited Mary Magdalene".[174]

Influence Today

"There was a story about Jesus that won out. There was a version of Christ that was created in the 4th century. Emperor Constantine in 313, by a single edict, converted Christianity from this struggling, persecuted and forbidden religion--the one Perpetua died for--to a state religion redefined by men".[175] The story of Christianity that we—women included—hear today is one in which a male

[170] Chilton, 2005, 112
[171] Gardner, 2008, 13
[172] Brock, 2006, 436
[173] Romans 16:7; Jeffries, 2019
[174] Maisch, 1998, 13
[175] Watterson, 2019, 45

Jesus following a male God selects male disciples to pass on a tradition using male bishops.[176] Yet this narrative is not true; "in the early centuries and throughout Christian history, women played prominent roles as apostles, deacons, preachers and prophets".[177]

The narratives ingrained in us impact our behavior, and as such the patriarchy that has burrowed itself into Christianity is harmful to all of us. Little girls grow up being told that God made men in charge, with 1 Timothy (which we now know was written thirty years after Paul's death so cannot be attributed to Paul) and historical precedent (which we have already identified as null) as reasoning.[178] These girls become women who fail to reach their full potential as *imago dei* because of the restraints placed on them by what they are told is God's will. It is our responsibility to correct these narratives of women's roles in Christianity. That begins with reanalysis of what our religion says about women and especially about the women who were there in the very beginning.

Conclusion

Mary Magdalene is arguably the most influential women in Christianity. She was the first to see the Risen Jesus and believe, and therefore the first Christian. She was the first to spread the Good News, and in that sense she was the first apostle and preacher. Mary Magdalene was remarkably smart, independent, and accomplished considering the patriarchal culture she was deeply steeped in and that was constantly working against her. She is the type of woman who should serve as a role model for Christian women everywhere. But instead, Mary Magdalene—seen as a threat to men who wanted to continue the patriarchy—was dethroned, whored, and thrown in the mud. Jesus' mother Mary of Nazareth—who "regarded her son a frivolous character" and is mentioned just once as present at Jesus' crucifixion and zero times at his resurrection (compared to Mary

[176] Watterson, 2019, 45
[177] Watterson, 2019, 45
[178] Chilton, 2005, 111

Magdalene who is at both events in all four Gospels) –is instead made into Christianity's female role model.[179] The Virgin Mary is elevated to a status of literal perfection as a wife and mother, while Mary Magdalene becomes the fallen woman. Just to ensure Mary Magdalene's permanent removal from her apostolic office and as a role model for Christian women who might dare to lead, she is made a prostitute to boot. The slandering of Mary Magdalene is complete.

[179] Mark 3:21; Gardner, 2008, 42-46

Part 2: Aisha Bint Abi Bakr

Mary Magdalene's historical legacy, which has slandered her name and erased her true significance for Christianity, is built on a lie—the story of an entirely different woman. In contrast, the legacy of Aisha Bint Abi Bakr is based on the extrapolation and distortion of actual historical events in her life, the original details of which we have meticulously recorded. However, these two women's legacies took a remarkably similar path towards misrepresentation. The Christian religion may be guilty of erasing its women, but so is Islam.

6. The Life of Aisha Bint Abi Bakr

Aisha Bint Abi Bakr's name translates to Aisha, Daughter of Abu Bakr. Abu Bakr was the first Caliph (successor) of the Islamic Empire—the first to lead the Muslim community after the Prophet Mohammed himself.[180] His daughter Aisha was also married to the Prophet Muhammad.[181] It was said that "Abu Bakr, Aisha's father, was Muhammad's most beloved man and Aisha was his most beloved woman.[182]

Because of their significance, the lives of Aisha and those around her are recorded in vivid detail. Their stories can be found in the thousands of pages of *hadith* (quotes of Muhammad) and *sunna* (biographical records of Muhammad and his family). From these sources, we can draw out the details of Aisha's remarkable life: particularly, her roles as wife, religious scholar, and political leader within early Islam.

Aisha the Wife

The polygamy practiced by Muhammad, Prophet of Islam, is often a topic of discussion. However, we also have historical documentation of the personalities of many of his wives—Aisha most of all. Aisha rose to prominence within early Islam because of her role as Muhammad's wife, moving from betrothed to his beloved and later to a spokeswoman for the rights of the wives.

Debates rage on over the precise age of Aisha Bint Abi Bakr when she married the Prophet Muhammad. Some sources claim that she was a mere six years old, while others stretch the date to as late as her 11th birthday.[183] What is generally agreed, however, is that Aisha was a child bride. Despite the early age at which Aisha married Muhammad, among the wives of the Prophet, "she

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[180] Spellberg, 1994, 33
[181] Geissinger, 2011, 45
[182] Spellberg, 1994, 33
[183] Francois-Cerrah, 2012; Elsadda, 2001, 49

became, and remained Muhammad's undisputed favorite".[184] Contemporary Islamic historian Bint al-Shati's extensive research on Aisha has led her to refer to her as "the beloved of Mohamed", and Aisha's contemporary, Amr b. Al-'As, narrates a *hadith* in which the Prophet, asked who he loves most, replies "Aisha".[185] Aisha's special place in Muhammad's heart was accompanied by special privileges. Aisha was the only wife to be with Muhammad when he received his divine revelations, and the only to see the Angel Gabriel—the deliverer of the Quranic message to Muhammad.[186] The Prophet is recorded to have spent the most time with Aisha out of his wives, and on his dying day, he chooses to spend his final moments in Aisha's arms.[187] Aisha's importance to Muhammad also meant that threats to their relationship caused him significant grief; when Aisha was accused of adultery, "Muhammad's distress over the matter became so intense that his revelations ceased for the duration of their estrangement".[188]

The status of wife brought with it great power, but also great responsibility. Many of the gendered institutions of Islam that are practiced by the majority of Muslim women today—most prominently veiling and seclusion—were initially reserved for the wives of Muhammad alone.[189] This meant that the wives saw limitations on their freedoms during their marriages—yet mysteriously, the records are silent on the wives' response. As Islamic historian Leila Ahmed writes,

> "There is no record of the reactions of Muhammad's wives to these institutions (veiling and seclusion) given their articulateness on various topics (particularly Aisha's, as the tradition well attests)--a silence that draws attention to the power of suppression that the chroniclers also had. One scholar has suggested that it was probably the wives' reaction to the

[184] 1992, 51
[185] Elsadda, 2001, 51; Sohail, 2015
[186] Stowasser, 1994, 114; Ibid 43-46
[187] Spellberg, 1994, 38
[188] Ahmed, 1992, 51
[189] Ahmed, 1992, 55

> imposition of seclusion that precipitated Muhammad's threat of mass divorce…. Muhammad's wives were presented with the choice between divorce and continuing as his wives, which meant accepting the special conduct expected of them".[190]

The texts are silent on the opinions of Aisha and her co-wives regarding limitations of women, but we can presume from Aisha's fiery attitude, later legal judgements in favor of women's rights, prominence among men and women of her time, and defiance of traditional gender roles in the rest of her story that she did not accept these changes passively.[191]

Finally, Aisha's role as a wife of the Prophet Muhammad bestowed upon her another title: Mother of the Believers.[192] Aisha did not have any biological children, but the wives of Muhammad were considered honorary mothers of the entire Muslim community, assigned the task of stewardesses and role models.[193]

Aisha the Scholar

Aisha's prominence within Islam began with her marriage to Muhammad. However, this is only the beginning of the life of Aisha bint Abi Bakr. Another aspect of Aisha's life was her role as a prominent theological scholar of early Islam. "During [Muhammad's] lifetime, he established [Aisha's] authority by telling Muslims to consult her in his absence; after his death, she went on to become one of the most prolific and distinguished scholars of her time".[194] Given that within mainstream Islam today, only men are regarded as authoritative religious scholars (*ulama)*, judges,

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[190] 1992, 56
[191] Sayeed, 2013, 31
[192] Quran 33:6
[193] Spellberg, 1994, 41; Quran 33:6
[194] Francois-Cerrah, 2012

and prayer leaders (*imams)*, it is perhaps surprising that these roles were originally given to a woman.[195]

Abundant sources show us that Aisha and other women from the early days of Islam played active roles in the religious community. As Ahmed shares, "women of the first Muslim Community attended mosque, took part in religious services on feast days, and listened to Muhammad's discourses. Nor were they passive, docile followers but were active interlocutors in the domain of faith as they were in other matters".[196] Women were not only participants in early worship but leaders as well: "At least one woman, Umm Waraqah, was appointed imam over her household by Muhammad," a precedent which endangers current Muslim thought on the subject of female imams.[197] As the foremost Mother of the Believers, Aisha was no exception to the trend of authoritative Muslim women.

Aisha demonstrated authority within early Islam as both a source for religious texts and a well-respected religious teacher. One-quarter of religious knowledge in Islam was transferred through Aisha. Several of the wives of Muhammad were major contributors to the hadith—the remembered sayings of the Prophet—but none so much as Aisha. As Islamic historical scholar Asma Sayeed points out, "Compilers have enumerated between 1,500 and 2,400 hadith for which Aisha is the first authority. Umm Salama, though a distant second, contributed between 175 and 375 reports".

A primary reason Aisha has been so influential in the transmission of Muslim religious knowledge is because of a lack of gender bias in the original compilation. The only prerequisite for

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[195] The orthodox ruling is that woman may not be *imams*, although exceptions are made for all-female congregations and in some liberal sects. Exclusion of women from scholarly and legal discourse is more *de facto*—a result of the seclusion of women in their homes and strong stances against mixed-gender spaces. The need for gender segregation in many Muslim institutions makes it difficult for women to have access. This is different from Christianity, where women are often directly prohibited from holding leadership positions. Esposito, 2021

[196] 1992, 72

[197] Esposito, 2021

narration of hadith was an eyewitness encounter with Muhammad, a good memory, and a good reputation—which meant that Aisha's authority was on par with that of even Muhammad's senior male companions. Aisha's word stood as authentic, and as such her reliable transmission has provided Muslims with religious teachings which have been practiced for the last fourteen-hundred years. Some of Aisha's knowledge is surface-level: telling us that "The Prophet used to like to start from the right side when putting on his shoes".[198] However, much of it is highly significant to religious teaching because of the precedent it sets for laws or what it tells us about Muhammad's revelation; it is Aisha who provides narration on the immorality of alcohol consumption and Muhammad's experience of his first revelation.[199]

In addition to her influence as a source of Muslim religious texts, Aisha is well-recorded as having been a religious teacher, scholar, and authority. "She herself ranked with such leading traditionists of the school of Medina as Abu Hurairah, Ibn Umar, and Iban al-Abbas", and we know that "men and women of all classes came from far and near to this Mother of the Believers to listen, to inquire, and to be guided". Aisha founded the first *madrasa* (religious school) led by a female teacher, and both men and women attended her classes; even the Caliph Umar was known to visit and listen to Aisha teach. According to her contemporary Yusuf bin Mahk, her ordering of the Qur'an even became the standard canon that is still used today.[200] Aisha's own nephew claimed that "[He] did not meet anyone as eloquent as Aisha, or anyone who was as cognizant of Islamic theology as her, among men or women, both before and after her". Aisha's prominence as a religious teacher within Islam was highly influential on Muslims both of her own time and of today.

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198 Bukhari, Ablutions, 169
199 Bukhari, Revelation, 3; Bukhari, Ablutions, 243
200 Sahih al-Bukhari 4993, Book 66, 15

Aisha as Political Leader

Early Islam was a theocracy. The political organization and the religious institution were deeply intertwined. Therefore, the influence that Aisha exhibited within early Islam as a scholar and teacher of religion was paralleled by her influence in the political sphere. Aisha played a key role in the development of Islamic Law (Shariah), served as an advisor to the heads of state who succeeded Muhammed, and led an entire faction in the first Muslim Civil War.

The political component of Islam is made possible by a practice stemming from the time of Muhammad itself: Muslim scholars establish laws and rule judgments based on careful exegesis of Muslim canonical texts (the *Qur'an*, *hadith*, and *sunna*) that they find ways to apply to real-world situations. This type of religious jurisprudence is known as *fiqh,* its resulting code of law is known as *shariah,* and it continues to be practiced and applied today in many Muslim communities. One way in which Aisha's influence passed from the religious sphere into the political sphere is through these legal rulings. Aisha is known to have served as a *fiqh* judge during the reigns of Umar and Uthman, the caliphs who followed her father.[201] In fact, "the late medieval writer, Ibn Hajar al-'Asqalani (d. 1448) famously states that 'one-fourth of the laws of the Shari'ah are based on [traditions from] 'A'isha".[202] Aisha's rulings were sometimes related to women—in which she often took a feminist stance.[203] However, Islamic historian Aisha Geissinger makes it clear that Aisha was not limited to making legal judgements related to women's issues only: "by far the majority of traditions or opinions attributed to her… address the correct performance of rituals, particularly ritual prayer (*salat*), pilgrimage, and fasting, and many of these are evidently intended to apply to male and female

[201] Geissinger, 2011, 39
[202] Geissinger, 2011, 39
[203] Sayeed, 2013, 31

worshippers alike".[204] To this day, Aisha is the only Muslim woman to have a compilation of *fiqh*. Her legal rulings continue to influence the lives of Muslim men and women worldwide.[205]

Aisha not only served within the judicial component of the early Islamic government, but the executive as well, as an actively involved advisor to the heads of state—the caliphs.[206] The majority of Muslims hold that when Muhammad passed away, it is Aisha with whom he shared the news of who would be his successor.[207] Considering this successor was Aisha's father, Abu Bakr—a role that made sense since Abu Bakr had always been Muhammad's right-hand man—Aisha was of course continuously involved in the decision-making of the empire throughout his reign, and historian of early Islam Resit Haylamaz notes that this influence continued even through the next few caliphs. "During the Caliphate of Umar, Aisha remained an important authority to consult on issues that arose"; often, Umar visited Aisha and made decisions based on her advice.[208] Aisha maintained this role during the reign of Uthman, the third Caliph, and it is even reported that the decision to determine Uthman as successor to Umar took place in Aisha's house.[209]

Clearly, Aisha's influence within the political state of early Islam was immense. The portrait we are given for Aisha is one of "a strong capable woman who positively influenced her society and whose gender was not the determining issue".[210] Unfortunately, this status as top advisor to the Muslim head of state was not to last forever. Many Muslims disagreed with the model of selecting leadership that had been chosen—particularly the male biological relations of Muhammad who felt the position should remain in the family—and they would not back down from their views quietly.

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[204] Geissinger, 2011, 40
[205] Sayeed, 2013, 27
[206] Haylamaz, 2012, 133; 137
[207] Haylamaz, 2012, 123
[208] Haylamaz, 2012, 133
[209] Haylamaz, 2012, 137; Abbot, 1942, 102
[210] Elsadda, 2001, 47

One of Aisha's most astounding accomplishments is her role in the Battle of the Camel, the first Muslim civil war. When it came time for Muhammed to choose a successor, the early Muslims found themselves in two camps: some believed that the line should descend biologically, which would place Muhammed's nephew Ali on the throne; others asserted that leaders should be strategically selected by a forum and a vote among the top Muslim officials. This second camp won out, but not without consequence. This disagreement is the origin of the split between Sunni and Shi'i Muslims that continues to this day. Sunni Muslims are those who supported democratic selection of leaders, which led to Abu Bakr, then Umar and Uthman. Shi'i Muslims believed that Ali—the nephew of Muhammad—was the rightful heir to the caliphate, and their earliest lashing out resulted in the infamous Battle of the Camel.

Uthman was murdered in 656.[211] Ali—who Shi'i Muslims believed should have been the original leader after Muhammed—was chosen to replace him, but this situation quickly got messy. Evidence suggested that Ali arranged Uthman's murder in order to become caliph.[212] Loyal to the well-being of the Muslim community and horrified by the dishonorable actions of the new caliph, Aisha intervened. She gathered thousands of men in the mosque and delivered a speech calling for revolt against Ali.[213] Her words were so full of passion and a desire for honor for the empire that half of the Muslim army chose to come to her aide, and soon Aisha was leading thirty-thousand troops into battle.[214]

Aisha's actions were not met with universal respect. Most of the Muslim army who opposed her did not do so on the basis of opposing her political agenda, but because of her gender; they "censured her for assuming public leadership and thus violating the seclusion imposed upon

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[211] Fernea and Bezirgan, 1977, 34
[212] Fernea and Bezirgan, 1977, 34; Abbot, 1942, 131
[213] Ahmed, 1992, 75
[214] Abbot, 1942, 146; Haylamaz, 2012, 146

Mohammed's wives".[215] The help of several influential political actors—including companions of the late Muhammad Zaid ibn Suhan and 'Amr ibn al-As—was denied explicitly because they believed it was not Aisha's gendered role to fight sedition.[216] Clearly, this opinion was not universal; the thirty-thousand who fought with Aisha had no qualms about being led into battle by a woman, and the politician Shabath ibn Rib'i defended Aisha's actions by claiming that "she has not commanded except that which Allah [God] most high has commanded".[217] Islamic historian Nabia Abbot narrates what this battle might have looked like based on what we know about the event: "Seated in a mail-covered red pavilion mounted on her own camel, Askar, Aishah went into the midst of the fray".[218] She was known to have remained in the midst of the most intense fighting, and "like a general ordering his forces", yelled encouragement and instructions to the troops.[219] Despite a magnificent effort, Aisha's side lost and she was forced to surrender.[220] Her defeat would go down in history as a divine symbol that women should not be leaders.

[215] Abbot, 1942, 146-7
[216] Abbot, 1942, 153; 169
[217] Abbot, 1942, 154
[218] 1942, 158
[219] Abbot, 1942, 159
[220] Abbot, 1942, 175

7. The Legacy of Aisha Bint Abi Bakr

Aisha Bint Abi Bakr was an incredible woman: the beloved wife of the Prophet Muhammad, leading religious teacher and scholar, the named successor to Muhammad's religious leadership role, and top political player. Her legacy should be one of encouraging Muslim women everywhere that they too can be scholars, teachers, judges, politicians, and warriors—that their call to modesty does not require separating themselves entirely from the world of men. However, this is not at all how her story has played out.

Over the centuries, Aisha's story has been rewritten by a circle of male scholars who repeatedly exclude women from their work. The historical evidence on Aisha's person is too strong to erase completely, so instead scholars have found ways to explain away Aisha's role, often by overemphasizing negative parts of her story and inserting details that drastically change what her life tells us. Through this process, Aisha's life has been reduced to a highlight reel used for political purposes, which diminish her role, misrepresent her, and allow for continued discrimination against millions of Muslim women.[221]

Aisha the Child Bride

A first aspect of Aisha's identity that has been overly-emphasized by later scholars is her early marriage to Muhammad. As we know, Aisha was between the ages of six and eleven when she married the Prophet—who by then was a middle-aged man and the founder of an empire. Modern feminists view this marriage of unequal partners with horror, and most Muslims and non-Muslims are also made uneasy. I have oft heard Christians reject Islam on the premise of "their leader

[221] Geissinger, 2011, 37

married little girls". The problem is that Aisha's age at marriage should not be the number one way in which she is referenced.

The reality is that marriages between older men and very young girls have been standard around the globe for most of history. In Aisha's lifetime, this was a totally normal occurrence—in fact, we have records that she was betrothed to someone else even before she married Muhammad instead.[222] We must avoid projecting our current views on what constitutes an appropriate marital age on the past and relegating Aisha to "the poor child bride of Muhammad".

On the other hand, we must also avoid allowing Aisha's story to become justification for allowing this practice to continue. Muslim countries "Iran and Saudi Arabia have both sought to use the saying concerning Aisha's age as a justification for lowering the legal age of marriage".[223] Child marriage is a relic of the past because it *is* highly problematic, and the fact that it happened to Aisha is no excuse for continuing the practice today. Aisha's identity as a child bride has become hypocritical—a dual-sided approach that reflects poorly on women on both sides: it is a way of reducing her role to one negative connotation while simultaneously allowing for perpetuation of patriarchal traditions in Muslim countries. Unfortunately, Aisha's child marriage is not the only aspect of her life that has been turned into a double-edged sword.

Aisha the Adulteress

A second aspect of Aisha's identity that has become overly focused-on is the accusation of adultery against her: *al-ifk*.[224] Records show that Aisha was traveling with a caravan and—on one of their stops—left her carriage to retrieve a necklace she had dropped. Since the carriage was covered, the caravan did not realize Aisha had left and packed up to continue their journey without her.

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[222] Francois-Cerrah, 2012
[223] Francois-Cerrah, 2012
[224] Elsadda, 2001, 42

Luckily, one of the soldiers also was riding behind the group and found Aisha standing beside the road. He carried her on his horse to meet with the rest of the group.[225]

This seemingly innocent event became the source of immense outrage in the early Muslim community; Aisha was accused of committing adultery with this soldier. When she returned home, her family and even Muhammad had to be convinced of her faithfulness.[226] Justifiably angry, Aisha insisted upon her innocence, and is later vindicated by a Quranic revelation on this topic.[227] However, this event has major implications for her future legacy and the rules around women.

The slander of Aisha overemphasizes her sexual history and diminishes memory of other aspects of her life. The story of her slander also gets elaborated on throughout time—eighth century works barely cover it, whereas ninth-century al-Bukhari has an extensive section on *al-ifk*.[228] Ali—who we know Aisha later challenges the leadership of in the Battle of the Camel—is blatantly unconvinced of Aisha's innocence in this event. Records reveal that he "urged the Prophet to repudiate his favorite wife, 'Aisha" and even tortured a servant girl in an attempt to get the girl to condemn Aisha.[229] It is thus no surprise that to this day, Shi'i Muslims—the loyalists of Ali—do not accept Aisha's innocence and regard her as an adulteress.[230]

Particularly because of the Shi'i/Sunni disagreement over her innocence, *al-ifk* was one of the most-discussed topics of Aisha's life in medieval times: one's views on Aisha's innocence even became a core part of professed beliefs.[231] One event in Aisha's life led to her chastity becoming

[225] Elsadda, 2001, 42
[226] Elsadda, 2001, 42; Ibn Hanbal, Musnad, 6:60
[227] Sohail, 2015
[228] Geissinger, 2015, 177
[229] Spellberg, 1994, 70
[230] Spellburg, 1994, 84
[231] Spellburg, 1994, 85

synonymous with the honor of the entire community, and fed the perceived need to seclude and segregate Muslim women for fear of similar accusations—a legacy that continues today.[232]

Aisha the Exception

Aisha's role as the beloved wife of Muhammad has been altered in her legacy to overemphasize her child marriage and her accusation of adultery, leaving out her many good traits to emphasize the flaws. However, this is not the end of Aisha's being "explained away" by later Muslim scholars seeking to diminish her role. Shi'i Muslims have completely written Aisha off as a lying adulteress, but even the Sunni Muslims who venerate her traditions distort her legacy by treating her engagement as a religious scholar and teacher as a rare exception in a field that should presumably only be open to men. By idolizing Aisha as more than a normal woman, Sunni Muslim scholars were able to marginalize all other women from religious interpretation. Ninth century transmitters of hadith claimed that "Aisha was the most knowledgeable of people," but "for Muslim women who came after Aisha, hadith transmission became increasingly like an intellectual revolving door…Women remained unable to participate".[233] Aisha is "consistently praised and respected", while "other women are sexualized and ignored".[234] In this sense, Aisha's prominence within Sunni Islam actually became harmful to the rest of her sex: as Islamic historian Denise Spellberg writes, "exceptional women are the chief imprisoners of nonexceptional women, simultaneously proving that any woman could do it and assuring, in their uniqueness, that no other woman will".[235]

A second way in which Aisha was made an exception to women's participation in Sunni religious scholarship was through delegation to a role of "source". Aisha contributed one-quarter of

[232] Spellburg, 1994, 64; Abbot, 1942, 27
[233] Spellberg, 1994, 53; 57
[234] Geissinger, 2011, 44
[235] Spellberg, 1994, 59

the religious source texts of Islam, but Sunni Muslim scholars argue that she only was in a position to do this because she herself lived with Muhammad. Aisha's role as an active exegete and an interpreter was denied by later Muslims.[236] Other women who contributed to hadith came to be understood in this same sense. As Geissinger writes, "Simply being a source or transmitter of traditions deemed relevant to the interpretation of the Quran was not regarded as actually doing *tafsir* [exegesis]…at most, these women were seen as having provided raw materials of varying degrees of usefulness to exegetes".[237] By pigeonholing women's participation in religious knowledge—including Aisha's—as transmitters only, Muslim scholars were able to justify denying access to scholarly institutions to later generations of women.

Aisha the Defeated

As we recall, Aisha was not only a religious leader—her influence also expanded into the political sphere. Aisha's success in rallying thirty-thousand soldiers into rebellion and leading them against those loyal to the new Caliph demonstrated the incredible strength and prominence of this woman. However, her defeat allowed for Muslims who came after to decide that her loss was divine judgement for allowing a woman to lead.

Muslim historians cannot avoid Aisha's story and her involvement in the Battle of the Camel, but they have found ways to work around it. In some ways, they downplay this role by emphasizing other aspects of Aisha instead—like her role as wife—or by prioritizing other prominent female figures in Muslim history; Mernissi suggests that the reason the Battle of the Camel is named after the animal Aisha rode rather than the woman herself is to prevent little girls from learning about this female warrior.[238] When faced with Aisha's actions directly though, scholars

[236] Geissinger, 2004, 2
[237] Geissinger, 2015, 266
[238] 1991, 5

on both sides of the Sunni/Shi'i divide have found explanations that deny the validity of Aisha's role as a political actor and become a universal warning against strong women.

Shi'i

Shi'i Muslims believe that Ali was the rightful heir to the Caliphate. Therefore, Aisha is their enemy. The Shi'i view of Aisha here is simple: they believed that she should not have gone to war, and they see her defeat as divine judgement confirming their view. One modern Shi'i scholar goes so far as to blame the bloodshed of the Battle of the Camel on Aisha alone, and also hold her responsible for the rift between Shi'is and Sunnis that exists to this day as a legacy of this first civil war.[239] Ever since, most Shi'i Muslims use Aisha as an example of what happens when women try to "involve themselves in political matters".[240]

To support their view, Shi'i Muslims have relied on proof-texts that denigrate women's leadership. In particular, Muhammad's wife Umm Salama is consistently quoted by Shi'i Muslims to harm Aisha's reputation. Umm Salama's hadith are consistently used to prove that even the other women around Aisha disapproved of her actions.[241] However, looking at this source in context reveals that Umm Salama was not an unbiased actor in this situation. Umm Salama was the second-favorite wife of Muhammad after Aisha, and the second-most prominent source for hadith.[242] As such, she was also Aisha's main rival. Records show that Aisha and Umm Salama were mutually jealous of one another during Muhammad's lifetime.[243]

Umm Salama's attack on Aisha's actions makes further sense when one recognizes Umm Salama's place in this family. [244] Umm Salama was the assigned guardian of Muhammad's daughter

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[239] Merniss, 1991, 6-7
[240] Spellberg, 1994, 137
[241] Spellberg, 1994, 135
[242] Abbot, 1942, 98; Sayeed, 2013, 25
[243] Abbot, 1942, 14
[244] Spellberg, 1994, 137

Fatima, who then married Ali. Umm Salama was, in a sense, Ali's mother-in-law. So when Aisha launched a revolution against Ali, Umm Salama was not on Aisha's side. Not only had she had a long-time rivalry with Aisha because of jealousy, but she was protecting her family from enemy attack. Umm Salama has been quoted out of context to condemn women's leadership for 1300 years—a classic case of a woman being used to hurt other women.

Sunni

The Sunni take on Aisha's role in the Battle of the Camel is more complex. Because they were on the losing side and still hold that Aisha's cause was correct, they cannot use divine judgment to make an example out of Aisha. Instead, Sunni scholars construct a narrative of Aisha as repentant of her involvement in the Battle of the Camel and wishing that she had let the men take care of the situation instead. Even though Aisha's involvement in politics after the Battle of the Camel was minimal, this would make sense given her disempowerment through that loss, and is not necessarily indicative that she regretted her actions. On the contrary, Aisha is reported to have "vigorously denied any guilt" for her actions in the battle of the Camel.[245] She is also recorded as having tried to be involved in political affairs later—only to be asked to back down to avoid starting another battle.[246] Despite this, Muslim sources as early as the 9th century depict her as guilt-ridden and full of regrets.[247] She is recorded in hadith as lamenting that she wished she had been "a grass, a leaf, a tree, a stone, a clump of mud…not a thing remembered".[248] "Words of misery and regret poured out from her lips" and "she was plunged into a deep, silent contemplation, as if she had closed her door to the world and the people in it, and started to live entirely focused on the Hereafter".[249] Aisha's

[245] Abbot, 1942, 172; 198-199
[246] Abbot, 1942, 199
[247] Spellberg, 1994, 119
[248] Ibn Sa'd, Nisa', 51-52
[249] Haylamaz, 2012, 156

regret has been painted to claim that she was repentant of having been involved in politics at all, yet if Aisha was repentant of anything, it was surely that she had lost the Battle and was now seen as a threat to peace. However, by constructing a portrait of Aisha as repentant of her political role as a whole, Sunni Muslims are able to still use her as an example of why women should not be political leaders without discrediting her motives themselves.

Regarding the legacy of the Battle of the Camel, Aisha loses on both sides. While Shi'i Muslims condemn her as an adulteress and "a serious political player", Sunni Muslims affirm her virtue but minimize her role as religious scholar and politician.[250] While Shi'i Muslims claim that Aisha received what she deserved in the Battle of the Camel since women should not lead anyways, Sunni Muslims avoid condemning her cause while condemning her role in it by painting a picture of a repentant Aisha. As Jardim notes, "the point of commonality for Sunni and Shi'i , although they disagreed about Aisha's responsibility and culpability in the first civil war, is an agreement fundamentally about her potential as a negative example for all women who aspire to political leadership in Islamic communities".[251] This image is perpetuated in the common memory of today's Muslims, as female political leaders in Muslim countries receive heavy criticism for supposedly violating precedent.[252] Rather than be like Aisha, many are told to be like Fatima.

Creating a Foil: Fatima[253]

In *hadith*, there is a list of perfect women in the world. Aisha is at the top of the list. In the version of this list presented by Classical scholars including al-Tabir and Ibn Asakir, Aisha's name is crossed out and replaced with that of Fatima.[254]

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[250] Spellberg, 1994, 129
[251] 2014, 54
[252] Mernissi, 1993, 1
[253] Arabic: فَاطِمَة, Pronounced (fah-tee-muh)
[254] Spellberg, 1994, 172; 174

Fatima is a wife, a daughter, and a mother. We know much less about her life, but we know that she was not the religious scholar or political leader of Aisha's sort. However, the patriarchy chose her as its model for women. Fascinatingly, Fatima's personality has developed into one almost identical to that of the Virgin Mary in the Christian tradition, who serves the same role in relation to the strong Mary Magdalene. Fatima is venerated as *al-batul*, the virgin, from the 11th century onward and compared to the Virgin Mary in hadith from as early as the 10th.[255] Fatima is known as the *mater dolorosa* in the Shi'i tradition, meaning suffering mother; she is believed to intercede on the behalf of believers. Other titles include "the virgin, the chaste, and the radiant".[256] While not formally a "Mother of the Believers", Fatima becomes the preferred "Mother", especially in the Shi'i tradition.[257] Yet her role as mother is clearly given as a way to limit her authority; "Whereas the men who are spiritually enlightened are endowed with interpretative faculties to guide the community, in Fatima's case, she is only a channel of light. As the 'mother of the imams', Fatima passes on the light of revelation without the capacity to be an imam herself".[258] Fatima is a perfect replacement for Aisha in the Muslim tradition because she is humble, obedient, and pure. She lacks authority, and is most known as a daughter, wife, and mother. She is the community-ordained role model for Muslim women today.

Aisha Bint Abi Bakr was a beloved wife, a scholar, a teacher, a leader, and a warrior. Yet in the eyes of Muslims worldwide, she is a child bride, an adulteress, and a sorry woman. Aisha was removed from the office of female role model among Muslim women, and like Mary Magdalene, replaced with a virgin.

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[255] Spellberg, 1994, 160-161
[256] Jardim, 2014, 63
[257] Jardim, 2014, 53
[258] Jardim, 2014, 64

8. The First to Fall

Unfortunately, Aisha's slander is just one example of ways which women have been erased from the history of Islam. Like Christianity, Islam was founded in a patriarchal context, and the gender equality at the heart of the religion did not last.

Mohammed was decidedly pro-women. Under Islam, women gained more rights than they had ever had in this region of the world.[259] However, not all of the men around Muhammad were of the same view. Umar, who became the second caliph and the caliph after Aisha's father Abu Bakr, was "well-known [for his] severity toward the women".[260] Umar was surely not alone in his views: after all, this was a deeply patriarchal society in which woman were considered property of men.[261] Many men who converted to Islam would have faced struggles with their sudden loss of privilege. As Islamic scholar Fatima Mernissi narrates,

> "Men continued to try to suppress the egalitarian dimension of Islam. These men, who came to Islam to enrich themselves and have a better life, were caught by surprise by this dimension of the new religion. They suddenly found themselves stripped of their most personal privileges. And, unlike slavery that affected only the wealthy, the change in the status of women affected them all."[262]

Umar seems to have been the "spokesman in favor of the segregation, domesticity, and marital obedience of the Prophet's wives" and other women.[263] Records reveal that he was the one urging Muhammad to seclude his wives.[264] During his reign (633-44), Umar also instituted segregated prayers, assigned women male imams, and prevented Muhammad's wives from going on the

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[259] Ahmed, 1992, 72
[260] Abbot, 1942, 59
[261] Mernissi, 1991, 120
[262] 1991, 126
[263] Stowasser, 1994, 90; Mernissi, 1991, 142
[264] Ahmed, 1992, 54

pilgrimage to Mecca—all of which went against the precedent set by Muhammad.[265] Muhammad interrupted patriarchy, but he did not end it.

Removal of Women from Religious Roles

Women lost status during the reign of Umar—who was well-known for his misogyny—and further still as the empire expanded.[266] Women in early Islam served as imams, scholars, religious judges, and teachers. However, this prominent role for early women was erased within the first few centuries of Islam. Historian John L. Esposito provides an abbreviated narrative demonstrating this shift:

> "According to the hadith, the Prophet commanded men not to bar women from public worship. In the days of Muhammad, women performed the morning prayer at the mosque, although they were required to line up in rows behind the men. They left the mosque before the men, preventing, at least in theory, any contact between the sexes. During the caliphate of Umar ibn al-Khattab, women had to pray in a separate room of the mosque with their own imam. By about 700, Muslim religious authorities completely banned women from mosques. They justified their reversal of the Prophet's order by claiming that public spaces were unsafe for women".[267]

The Abbasid period (750-1258 AD) that followed was also characterized by a "stark decline and near disappearance of women from the historical records," and we have zero religious works written by women during the medieval era.[268] Even the religious texts themselves undergo a de-womanization: "Whereas there are approximately 2,065 hadith in which a woman is listed as the first

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[265] Ahmed, 1992, 61
[266] Abbot, 1942, 94
[267] 2021
[268] Sayeed, 2013, 66; Spellberg, 1994, 57

authority after the prophet, there are approximately 525 hadith in which a the woman is listed as a second or later narrator in the major Sunni collections"—when these texts were compiled, there was a clear preference to include traditions sourcing from men.[269] Over the course of a few hundred years, women are erased from the religious leadership roles in Islam, and the major Sunni hadith collections put together at the end of this period are the ones still used today.[270]

Patriarchal Reinterpretation of Scripture

In the same way that women disappeared from mosques and religious schools, there was an observable shift in Muslim religious texts towards gender disparity. Muslim religious texts are highly complex. Not only is there the Qur'an—understood to be the direct word of God—but also the *hadith*, the *sunna, fiqh*, and countless commentaries by Muslim theologians from throughout history, all of which are used by Muslim scholars today. However, it is important to understand that almost all of these sources were impacted by the societal views of the authors—and that includes by their patriarchal perspectives. Prominent Muslim commentator from the Classical Era al-Bukhari quoted many hadith that are highly detrimental to women, including a verse saying that "those who entrust their affairs to a woman will never know prosperity" and another insinuating that most inhabitants of hell are women.[271] However, what al-Bukhari fails to share with readers is that these hadith are not very credible. The source of the hadith about women's leadership is Abu Bakra, who recalled the hadith 25 years after the Prophet said it, was known to be against Aisha's role in the Battle of the Camel anyways, and had been flogged for giving "false testimony" at another point in his life.[272] For better or for worse, explanations like this exist behind almost every sexist hadith that can be derived

[269] Sayeed, 2013, 77
[270] Sayeed, 2013, 64
[271] Mernissi, 1991, 49;76
[272] Mernissi, 1991, 56; 58; 60

from Muslim religious texts. Al-Bukhari himself reminds readers that only God is infallible, yet many Muslims allow women's oppression to continue on the basis of unreliable hadiths and commentaries.[273] Moroccan sociologist Fatima Mernissi notes how even today, questionable hadith are regularly quoted by Muslim men to justify denying women political roles and discriminating against them in other ways.[274] Through ignoring the context of patriarchal scripture, establishing Aisha as a unique woman, and pigeon-holing women as sources not scholars, Muslims have been able to erase the role of women in religious interpretation for over a millennium.

Conclusion

Aisha bint Abi Bakr was an incredible women. She was the most beloved wife of the Prophet Muhammad, personally charged with carrying on the Muslim traditions. She was an invaluable source of religious knowledge for both the early Muslims and those of the faith today. She even defended Muhammad's legacy by personally leading an army against Ali. However, Aisha is not remembered this way at all. Her story is replaced with words like "child bride", "adulteress", and "repentant". Her roles are transformed into those that are considered *sahih*—"correct"—for women. The patriarchal culture began to erase her, beginning with the time of Omar, and misquoted whoever it needed to in order to build their case. Aisha was thrown out as the repentant whore while Fatima is elevated to the status of ideal Muslim woman. Her story is remarkably similar to that of Mary Magdalene.

[273] Mernissi, 1991, 76
[274] Mernissi, 1991, 2

Juxtaposition

Mary and Aisha

Mary Magdalene and Aisha Bint Abi Bakr. Two women, two worlds, two religions. Yet their stories are the same. Both are holy women, fundamental to the foundations of their respective religions. Both were the favorite person of the Messiah or Prophet who inspired them. Both demonstrated incredible leadership, radical breaking of gender roles, and whole-hearted devotion. But both were deprived of these roles and slandered as repentant whores by the patriarchal institutions that claimed their religions for themselves.

One goal of this paper is to demonstrate that the distortion of strong female figures in order to control religious role models for women is not a one-time mistake, but a trend. It appears that when religions begin as grassroots movements, women experience greater agency since misogyny's erasure is a spiritual good for all, but as the religion grows and begins to institutionalize, the patriarchal default is reverted to and women's roles are again lost. We see this happening in Islam and Christianity through exploring the stories of Aisha and Mary Magdalene. The same narrative can be viewed in other religions as well. As social historian Sayeed points out:

> "The early success of an order of Buddhist nuns in India was followed by a precipitous decline in their fortunes. Similarly, the marginalization of Brahmanic women after the Vedic period is a familiar theme in Hindu women's studies. And for the Jewish and Christian traditions, the early public religious participation of women was curtailed by factors such as the canonization of texts inimical to women's interests and the emergence of male-dominated central institutions of religious authority".[275]

[275] Sayeed, 2013, 193

We can recognize that societal misogyny is inherent in human nature—Genesis 3:16 clarifies it as a result of the Fall—but as we strive for higher, spiritual ends, we are able to overcome this and acknowledge the dignity in all people. However, when left unquestioned, our religious pursuits can lead us back into patriarchal structures that last thousands of years. Christians, Muslims, and those of all other religious beliefs should learn to distinguish between divine truth and the political interests inserted later—including those around the roles of women. Until then, we are allowing human instincts to trump God's will.

Today's Christianity and Islam are Not Feminist

Christianity has taken huge strides towards gender equality over the last century and a half—"even in the nineteenth century, Grace Aguilar, Jarena Lee, Zilpah Elaw, the Grimke sisters, Anna Julia Cooper, and Sojourner Truth, just to name a few, were insisting on women's equality within Christian communities"—but our work is not yet finished.[276] Christian women still face an onslaught of "Biblical" messages that question their autonomy, authority, and equality. Pastors—usually male—preach topics like headship and youth leaders give purity rings to young girls while comparing them to objects. Even divinely-inspired Scripture itself is sexist, claiming that "woman is to be silent in church, is 'blessed through bearing children', 'led man astray', and 'was the first to sin".[277] These issues are not of the past, but are recent and present: "During the summer of 1998, when Southern Baptists declared women should be subservient to the "servant leadership" of their husbands, Pope John Paul II made it a part of canon law that there will be no ordination of women in the Roman Catholic church, reaffirming the 1976 ban and later insisting that there be no more discussion of this issue".[278] In its current state, the majority of Christianity is not kind to women.

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[276] Shaner, 2006, 21
[277] Moltmann-Wendel, 1982, 2
[278] Schaberg, 2002, 17

Islam too has had its ups and downs in the marathon towards gender parity. Colonialism spurred a feminist revival in the Muslim world, and 19th and 20th century authors began writing biographies of famous Muslim women, including Aisha, to promote positive imagery.[279] The 20th century saw revolutionary inclusion of women in prominent political institutions, including Benazir Bhutto's election as Prime Minister of Pakistan in 1988 and the formation of feminist Muslim organizations, including the National American Council for Muslim Women (NACMW), the Women's Islamic Initiative in Spirituality (WISE), and Women Living Under Muslim Laws (WLUML).[280] Muslim women are increasingly working outside of the home and throwing off their veils. However, these changes have not gone unopposed. Most Muslims continue to see veiling of women as a Quranic mandate rather than one interpretation of the Quran's prescribed modesty, and view the presence of women in public as "a source of temptation and conflict".[281] Women are typically segregated from men at mosques and prohibited from teaching men on religious subjects. Sometimes we hear of young women who are murdered by their families for having sex outside of marriage, and a small percentage of radical Islamic groups even ban women's education and commit terrible atrocities against women and girls in the name of Allah. Not all Muslim women are oppressed—but in mainstream, unquestioned Muslim thought, many become so.

Role Models

Christianity and Islam are both making strides towards gender equality. Most Christian denominations now ordain women, and more Muslim women are running for political office than ever before. However, Christian and Muslim feminism is often a niche category that few adherents to each religion are aware of, and that means most young girls are raised without adequate discussion

[279] Elsadda, 2002, 41
[280] Mernissi, 1993, 1; Jardim, 2014, 87
[281] Esposito, 2021

of how their gender impacts their role within their faith. Even if young Christian girls are raised knowing that they are allowed to be pastors, many never attend a church with a female head pastor, which subconsciously ingrains an expectation that pastors are men. Similarly, Muslim girls may be raised knowing that they can run for political office, but if every political candidate they ever hear about or see is a man, they will develop the expectation that this is not really a good option for them. Gender equality cannot be reached with just a change in policy; gender equality requires representation, which is difficult to achieve when Christianity and Islam are still deleting their strongest female figures from history.

Mary Magdalene's legacy has never been corrected by the Church. In 1969 when the Roman Catholic Church finally confirmed that she was not a prostitute after all, they also lowered her status within Church hierarchy to a mere disciple.[282] In 1974, they followed up on this by downgrading her festival day to just a memorial, "one of the lowest forms of such liturgical dignity"—hardly a fitting role for the first apostle.[283] Not only has mainstream Christianity lowered the status of Mary Magdalene formally, they have also (intentionally?) refrained from widely publicizing the fact that her assignment as prostitute was a myth, and many Christians today still think that Mary Magdalene was the repentant whore. As Burnstein comments, "Spending 1,378 years institutionalized in western consciousness as a prostitute has had certain lingering effects… as recently as the mid-1990s, I heard a priest deliver a sermon on the meaning of Jesus forgiving the sins of Mary Magdalene, the prostitute. This was almost three decades after the church had supposedly corrected the record".[284] Biographical historian Susan Haskins summarizes the current situation remarkably: "in the late twentieth century, the Church of Rome has been forced to acknowledge the crucial role

[282] Ralls, 2013, 27; Jansen, 2000, 335
[283] Griffith-Jones, 2008, 207
[284] 2006, 15

of Christ's female followers, and particularly that of Mary Magdalene, but yet, in its steadfast adherence to male symbolism and supremacy, refuses to accept its enormous significance".[285]

The legacy of Aisha Bint Abi Bakr is suffering from the same repression. While more Muslim feminists are using her as an example of women's empowerment dating back to the era of Muhammad, there is still significant misinformation about Aisha in Muslim circles. In Shi'i communities, Aisha's whoredom is still well-attested, and in Sunni circles she continues to be repentant for her political role. Many historians continue to deny Aisha's role in Muslim history totally; in his recent book *The Rights of Women in Islam,* Muhammad Arafa claims that "At the beginning of Islam, Muslim women played no role in public affairs, despite all the rights that Islam gave them, which were often the same as those according to men".[286] In making this claim, Arafa is completely denying everything we know about Aisha, "[who] played a key role in the lives of two caliphs, and contributed to the destabilization of the third".[287] The fact that so many Muslim women are still denied the ability to be an imam, a religious scholar, a religious judge, a political leader, or even to leave their home without a male guardian testifies to the lack of awareness of who Aisha Bint Abi Bakr truly was.

In their respective traditions, Mary Magdalene and Aisha Bint Abi Bakr possess incredible power to revolutionize the roles of women. Both were political and religious leaders integral to the establishment of their faiths. Both toppled traditional gender roles and testified to a feminist God in the face of thousands of years of patriarchy. And as such, they can encourage these same values among Christian and Muslim women around the world today. As Christian authors Anna Quindlen and Lucy Winkett point out, "The church does indeed have a tradition of women's ordination…

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[285] 1993, 55
[286] Mernissi, 1991, 4-5
[287] Mernissi, 1991, 4-5

'[Mary Magdalene is] the tip of the iceberg; she's the icon for women's suppressed roles in Christianity"; "What Mary Magdalene teaches us is that it is part of a woman's God-given calling to speak publicly about what she believes".[288] Muslim women also can recognize that they are not limited to the gender roles prescribed to them by Classical interpreters of Muslim Scripture, but in breaking past these expectations they are actually "upholding and securing a historically valid precedent of women's education and religious engagement that dates back to the era of Muhammad".[289] Embracing our female role models in Christianity and Islam is a route towards universal women's empowerment, more faithful practice of our religious beliefs, and a means of "reclaiming and reconstructing a more complete leadership model".[290]

Conclusion

For faithful adherents of Christianity and Islam, nothing bears more weight than the will of God. Therefore, what we understand as God's will for us—through Scripture and tradition—has significant impact on how we live our lives and think of ourselves. For too many years, women in these traditions have been convinced that God made them inferior. What this paper aims to show is that by uncovering the truth about the earliest women around Jesus and around the Prophet Muhammad, we can correct this misconception, and no woman will ever again have to feel like she must choose between feminism and her faith.

Aisha Bint Abi Bakr and Mary Magdalene have impacted women and men throughout the ages in their variety of roles—lover, whore, mother, leader, preacher, witness—but now it is time to say goodbye to many of these roles. This will lessen their relevance in certain aspects of our religious beliefs; Mary Magdalene can no longer fairly be the namesake of rehabilitation centers for

[288] 2006, 316; 2002, 27
[289] Sayeed, 2013, 196
[290] Brock, 2006, 444

prostitutes, or venerated as the sinful woman who still earned God's grace. World-renowned philosopher Charles Taylor discusses how our current age is marked by a grounding in reality and facts, as opposed to the enchantment that dominated our past.[291] The legacies of Aisha and Mary Magdalene are now following this trend; we are removing the myths that have embellished these women to uncover the real heroines underneath. However, this change is not a bad thing at all, because in removing the slanderous stories about Mary and Aisha we are discovering women who are so much stronger than we ever realized. As Haskin writes, in "losing the myth of Mary Magdalene [and Aisha Bint Abi Bakr]… has not our culture not only nothing to lose, but also everything to gain?".[292] Taylor would agree: "The sense of loss can perhaps never be stilled, only swept away or swallowed up (and for how long?) in the exhilaration of total emancipation".[293]

The title of this paper—"The Whore and the Holy Woman"—is a line from an extracanonical Christian text dating to the second century called *The Thunder, Perfect Mind*. This beautiful poem has enchanted readers for centuries—at least before and after it was buried in the desert for a thousand years. In it, God, who is characterized as female, describes being one giant contradiction—one eternal woman who embodies the characteristics of all women everywhere. While Mary Magdalene and Aisha Bint Abi Bakr are far from divine, the poem's verses are an excellent parallel to the ways that these women have been painted in every way possible for two-thousand years. Their stories essentially become those of all women—who women were meant to be in each time period, as well as women who are inherently strong and complex and because of that seen as threats—women who too often are defined by weakness and sexuality, rather than unapologetic self-confidence and holistic personhood. Whoever they truly were, Mary Magdalene

[291] Taylor, 2007, 593
[292] Haskins, 1993, 400
[293] Taylor, 2007, 593

and Aisha Bint Abi Bakr today are understood as the ultimate paradoxes of femininity, and through that have become immortalized as symbols of what it means to be a woman.

Unknown, *Mary Magdalene Announcing the Resurrection to the Apostles,* c. 1123

Unknown, *Aisha's Assassination of Ali Caliph*

Do not be ignorant of me.

For I am the first and the last.

I am the honored one and the scorned one.

I am the whore and the holy one.

I am the wife and the virgin.

I am <the mother> and the daughter.

I am the members of my mother.

I am the barren one

and many are her sons…

I am the one who has been hated everywhere

and who has been loved everywhere.

I am the one whom they call Life,

and you have called Death.

I am the one whom they call Law,

and you have called Lawlessness.

I am the one whom you have pursued,

and I am the one whom you have seized.

I am the one whom you have scattered,

and you have gathered me together.

I am the one before whom you have been ashamed,

and you have been shameless to me.

I am she who does not keep festival,

and I am she whose festivals are many.

I, I am godless,

and I am the one whose God is great.

I am the one whom you have reflected upon,

and you have scorned me.

I am unlearned,

and they learn from me.

-***The Thunder, Perfect Mind***[294]

[294] v.10-18, 85-114, Translated George W. MacRae

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