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The Labor of Mary: A Comparative Analysis of the Virgin Birth in the Qur'an and the Gospels

By Jessica Leu

Abstract: Mary has been called a bridge between Christians and Muslims for centuries. Both religions revere her as the mother of Jesus (Isa) and for her status as a virgin when she conceived him, and both traditions have within them devotees who venerate Mary. But despite this shared adoration for the blessed mother, there are a variety of differences between their understanding of Mary's role in salvation and of her virginity. While the New Testament Gospels make some mention of Mary in their texts, the Qur'an dedicates an entire surah (chapter) to her story and mentions her with more frequency than the Bible. The Bible also describes very little of Mary's personal history, and what we do know about her within the Catholic tradition has been influenced by the apocryphal Gospel of James. While the Qur'an contains within it more context for Mary's life prior to conceiving Jesus than the Bible does, for this paper I felt it more important to analyze a literary moment that exists for Mary in *both* traditions. Therefore, in this paper, I will analyze the actual birth narrative of Jesus as well as the labor of Mary itself. How do these birth narratives compare, and how do both traditions interpret the importance of her virginity differently? Because I am comparing narratives between two different theological traditions, this is a paper dependent upon comparative theology. In addition, I will be analyzing both tradition's narratives through a feminist theological framework in order to see how our interpretation of these themes can be liberative for women in both Christianity and Islam. To highlight the differences in both narratives, in this paper I will argue that the Muslim account of Mary's labor contains within it themes of liberation that her Biblical labor does not.

Keywords: Mary, Islam, Christianity, Bible, Qur'an, Gender, Feminist Theology, Comparative Theology

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I. Introduction

Mary has been called a bridge between Christians and Muslims for centuries. Both religions revere her as the mother of Jesus (Isa) and for her status as a virgin when she conceived him, and both traditions have within them devotees who venerate Mary. But despite this shared adoration for the blessed mother, there are a variety of differences between their understanding of Mary's role in salvation and of her virginity. While the New Testament Gospels make some mention of Mary in their texts, the Qur'an dedicates an entire surah (chapter) to her story and mentions her with more frequency than the Bible. The Bible also describes very little of Mary's personal history, and what we do know about her within the Catholic tradition has been influenced by the apocryphal Gospel of James.

While the Qur'an contains within it more context for Mary's life prior to conceiving Jesus than the Bible does, for this paper I felt it more important to analyze a literary moment that exists for Mary in *both* traditions. Therefore, in this paper, I will analyze the actual birth narrative of Jesus as well as the labor of Mary itself. How do these birth narratives compare, and how do both traditions interpret the importance of her virginity differently? Because I am comparing narratives between two different theological traditions, this is a paper dependent upon comparative theology. In addition, I will be analyzing both tradition's narratives through a feminist theological framework in order to see how our interpretation of these themes can be liberative for women in both Christianity and Islam. To highlight the differences in both narratives, in this paper I will argue that the Muslim account of Mary's labor contains within it themes of liberation that her Biblical labor does not.

II. Birth Narrative of the Qur'an

We know quite a bit more about Mary's history in the Islamic tradition than we do in the Catholic one. According to the Qur'an, Mary's upbringing was dedicated to God from the

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moment of her conception.¹ She lived secluded within the temple, unbothered by men save for her uncle, the Prophet Zachariah. This is also an idea that could have also been influenced by the apocryphal Gospel of James,² which contains a number of similarities to the Islamic canon. It is said that Zachariah frequently found Mary in possession of summer fruits in the winter and winter fruits in the summer, and when asked their origin she would insist upon God's willingness to provide as he wills.³ The Qur'an also contains within it an account of the Annunciation, in which the angel Gabriel announces Mary's coming pregnancy. Despite these minor similarities to the Christian tradition, it is within Mary's pregnancy and labor that there are the largest differences. Below is the passage of Surah Al-Maryam that contains within it Jesus' birth narrative:

So she conceived him and withdrew with him to a remote place. And the pains of childbirth drove her to the trunk of a palm tree. She said, "Oh, I wish I had died before this and was in oblivion, forgotten." So a voice reassured her from below her, "Do not grieve! Your Lord has provided a stream at your feet. And shake the trunk of this palm tree towards you, it will drop fresh, ripe dates upon you. So eat and drink, and put your heart at ease. And if you see from among humanity anyone, say, 'Indeed, I have vowed silence to the Most Merciful, so I will not speak today to [any] man. Then she returned to her people, carrying him. They said 'in shock', "O Mary! You have certainly done a horrible thing! O sister of Aaron! Your father was not an indecent man, nor was your mother unchaste." So she pointed to the baby. They exclaimed, "How can we talk to someone who is an infant in the cradle?" "Jesus" declared, "I am truly a servant of Allah. He has given me to the [Gospel] and made me a

¹ Kathleen Mroz, "Mary the Bridge Builder: Rethinking Patriarchal Portrayals of Mary in Islam and Christianity," *Journal of South Asian and Middle Eastern Studies* 42, no. 3 (2019): 6, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.33428/jsoutasiamiddeas.42.3.0001>.

² This text is also often referred to as the *Protoevangelium of James*, the *Gospel of James*, or the *Infancy Gospel of James*.

³ Mroz, "Mary the Bridge Builder," 6.



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prophet. He has made me a blessing wherever I go and bid me to establish prayer and give alms-tax as long as I live, and made me dutiful to my mother. He has not made me arrogant or defiant. And peace be upon me the day I was born, the day I die, and the day I shall be raised alive!⁴

For the sake of clarity, this analysis will be divided by action: (1) Mary's withdrawal, (2) Mary's labor, (3) God's intervention, (4) Mary's return to her congregation, and finally (5) Jesus' first miracle of speaking from the cradle.

IIA. Feminist Reading of Surah Al-Maryam 19:22-33

First (1), Mary withdraws to the wilderness described only as a "remote place".⁵ It is not explained where she goes, or for how long she stays there. The duration of the pregnancy is also debated, just as it is in Christianity. Islamic scholars are unsure if Mary's pregnancy lasted the full nine months of a human pregnancy, or if it miraculously lasted only a few hours. Because she experiences a normal labor in which pain afflicts her, I am operating under the assumption that her pregnancy lasted a full nine months. Because of this, one can also assume that she spent the entirety of those nine months alone and in seclusion. Kushel argues that by retreating physically, Mary also retreated "into her body. In narrative terms, both aspects denote a deliberate disembodiment of the world described here, which becomes almost transparent through its lack of real-life detail."⁶

In my opinion, this also seems to mimic the early Islamic ascetics who practiced worldly renunciation just as the Christian monastics did. Because Jesus is considered the ascetic prophet of the Muslims, it seems only natural that his mother also practiced these ascetic renunciations.

⁴ Qur'an, Surat Al-Maryam 19:22-33.

⁵ It is worthy of note that this is Mary's second withdrawal from society. The first occurs in 19:16, in which she withdraws from her family to an unknown location in the "East." It is only then that Gabriel appears to her for the Annunciation. She withdraws a second time for the duration of her pregnancy.

⁶ Karl-Josef Kuschel, *Christmas and the Qur'an* (London: Gingko, 2017), 74, doi:10.2307/j.ctv5vddnz.

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From a literal perspective, it is not difficult to imagine the hardships experienced by an unwed, expectant mother alone in the wilderness. Whether she withdrew from society because of fear of being ostracized or to purposefully meditate on the spiritual role she was fulfilling is unclear.

Secondly (2), we can see that Mary's labor in the Qur'an is that of a normal human woman. She finds herself in pain with contractions, alone, and even expresses a desire to have died rather than experienced "this." Is it the labor itself that she is referring to, or even the entire task of conceiving miraculously as a virgin? It is unclear what exactly she means by these words, but it is clear that she who is in the Muslim tradition is called "Siddiqah" or "She who believes in complete sincerity," experiences a moment of doubt. This moment of fear and uncertainty humanizes her in a profound way. Like every other mother who experiences the pains of childbirth, Mary briefly finds herself afraid and disheartened by her labor.

Thirdly (3), God⁷ in "a voice from below" speaks to her in this moment of doubt.⁸ Although she is without human company during her labor (uncommon experience as most Jewish women in first-century Palestine were attended to by midwives during childbirth), Mary is not alone. In fact, it is God who is present with her as though God is her midwife. Mary is reminded of her constant companion who provided for her summer fruits in winter, and this companion tells her not to fear. God insists she eat and drink her fill from more miraculously provided provisions and knowing the persecution she will experience because of the birth, orders her to take a vow of silence for her own protection. By providing her with sustenance and protecting her through her vow, in this moment God asks Mary to trust in him. The cultural influence of this narrative can be seen within Muslim birth practices, where pregnant women are often fed three dates during or after their labor, mimicking and remembering Mary's own experience with Jesus.⁹

⁷ In some traditions, Jesus is said to be the one who is speaking, although this interpretation is less common than the interpretation that God is.

⁸ Some Muslim scholars interpret this voice as Jesus speaking to his Mother, but the larger consensus seems to understand the voice as God.

⁹ Jusuf Salih, "Mary as a Paradigm of Muslim Piety," *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 52, no. 4 (2017): 452, doi:10.1353/ecu.2017.0044.

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Fourthly (4), Mary returns to her congregation from this nine-month period of seclusion to a stunned community. They are shocked to see her unwed with an infant, and they remind her she is the child of an honorable man and a chaste mother. They imply that her arrival with her son is a huge source of shame not only for her but for the entire community. Mroz states that both the Bible and the Qur'an were "revealed in a context where a woman found pregnant out of wedlock was in great danger, a woman's life was worth less than that of man, and women were often only known in relation to their fathers or husbands."¹⁰ Her arrival with an infant and no husband places her into a perilous social situation. But obeying God's command of her, she does not defend herself, but rather points to her infant son. The congregation mocks her further, pointing out the ridiculousness of relying on a newborn for aid. Although she had no way of knowing what would happen, it is here that she entrusts herself completely with God's plan.

Finally (5), Jesus speaks as an infant to the congregation in his first miracle. Addressing the audience, he establishes his role as a Prophet who brings the Injil (Gospels) to the Muslims, but also explicitly states his loyalty and duty towards his Mother. By mentioning his lineage deriving only from his Mother (rather than a father, as was the custom) he not only defends his mother's chastity, but 'converts' the entire congregation of disbelievers into believers. Kuschel notes that "it has been correctly observed in this regard that in Jesus' first appearance in the Qur'an he does not figure independently, but as a secondary character in a story about his mother, and he subsequently remains closely tied to her."¹¹ This tie is highlighted in each address of Jesus in the Qur'an, who is always identified alongside his mother as "the son of Maryam".

The narrative of Jesus' birth is filled with symbolic reciprocity between Mary's inner state and her outward environment. When Mary begs to be forgotten, she is "answered by God's kindness. [Her] desire to die contrasts with the free-flowing spring water. Her bitter pains while giving birth contrast with the marvelous refreshment provided by sweet dates. The two times the newborn baby speaks respond to the adult Mary's vow of silence."¹² It is clear by these dynamics that Mary is the central focus of this narrative. Not only is it her perspective we follow, but it is

¹⁰ Mroz, "Mary the Bridge Builder," 9.

¹¹ Kuschel, *Christmas and the Qur'an*, 70.

¹² Kuschel, *Christmas and the Qur'an*, 81.



also her independence that dictates the narrative of Christ. It is she who acts and the rest who respond, even highlighted through God responding to her labor pains. Jesus is not a central character in this birth narrative, although he is one of the most highly revered Prophets in Islam. His continued identification as 'Isa, son of Maryam' indicates that "the Qur'an defines Jesus in terms of Mary's elevated status, not the other way around."¹³ This passage in the Qur'an is the defining narrative from which we receive context to interpret Jesus' prophethood in Islam.

Through the virgin conception *and* the impossible circumstances of Jesus' birth, the seemingly impossible happens. Not only does Mary conceive without a human partner, but she also endures her pregnancy and birth ceremony alone. Even without a husband, she was not shunned by her community, solely because of a miracle that occurred on her behalf. From this narrative we can infer that Mary is not only a strong and independent woman, but one deeply trusting of God's plan and a figure of immense respect and authority. She is not above experiencing pain or fear, but she is made that much stronger as she endures them in devotion to God. She points to Christ when ridiculed by her community as though commanding him, and he speaks only to defend her and insist on his loyalty to her. In the Muslim tradition Mary's elevated status is not based upon her son's importance. Rather, her son's importance is contingent upon the status of his mother. The Islamic narrative understands Mary as a significant and holy figure, with profound power in her own right. Now, how does this compare to the Gospels?

III. Birth Narrative of the Gospels

Only two out of the four Gospels contain an infancy narrative for Jesus: Matthew and Luke. Both say very little about Mary's history as an individual. Matthew identifies her only as the wife of Joseph, and Luke identifies her as the cousin of Elizabeth, the wife of Zachariah. As far as the birth narrative, there are some shared themes and some differences between them.

In the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus is born in Bethlehem, receives a visit from three wise men, and is then persecuted by Herod until the Holy Family is forced to flee to Egypt (Matthew

¹³ Kuschel, *Christmas and the Qur'an*, 31.



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1:18-25 and 2:1-18). In Luke, Joseph takes Mary to Bethlehem to participate in the Roman census. Jesus is born in a manger rather than in an inn because of the overwhelming number of people in the city. Instead of three wise men, a group of shepherds come to see him (Luke 2:1-20).

Because I am specifically focusing on Mary's labor, I will only provide the passages in both texts that refer to the birth itself. Below, Matthew and Luke respectively read:

When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took her as his wife, but had no marital relations with her until she had borne a son; [j] and he named him Jesus. (Matthew 1:24-25 NRSV)

While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn. (Luke 2:1-7 NRSV)

There is no mistake, in both Matthew and Luke, Mary's labor is nonexistent. In fact, she is not even considered a central character in the same light as the men such as Joseph, the three kings, the shepherds, or even Herod. In Matthew the labor is only referred to in passing, and through Joseph's perspective as a central (male) character. The Gospel of Luke fares only a tad better, saying that Mary gave birth to Jesus and participated in the birth practice of swaddling him afterwards. Rather than having women around her, it is inferred that Mary gives birth in both narratives surrounded entirely by men: her husband, three male wise men or an unnamed number of male shepherds, and her son.¹⁴

¹⁴ I do note that the apocryphal Gospel of James contains within it two midwives who confirm Mary's virginity, but because I am looking directly at the text of the Bible and the Qur'an, I will not include them within scriptural analysis. See apocryphal Gospel of James for further information.

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The Gospels do not address the labor of Mary, though they do address the overall narrative of Jesus' importance and his infancy. Mary is merely a side character in comparison to Jesus, who is persecuted from the moment he is born. Because the Gospels are so starkly describing Jesus' actual birth as well as Mary's labor, it is difficult to compare it to Surah Al-Maryam, which contains both. To truly make a fair comparison, we must look at Catholic tradition to discern how the virgin birth is understood by Catholic doctrine even beyond the textual narrative.

IIIA. Catholic Interpretation of the Virgin Birth

The nature of the virgin birth has been highly debated for centuries within the Catholic Church. Countless theologians have attempted to understand and describe the labor of Mary, piecing together what they can through scriptural interpretation and analysis. According to Genesis 3:16, pain during childbirth is seen as a punishment by God for the Fall of Adam and Eve, and from then onward all women experience this pain.¹⁵ Catholic tradition understands Mary as untouched by original sin, and therefore not subject to the punishment of her foremother, Eve. Without the stain of original sin, tradition explains, Mary could not have experienced the labor of the average human woman. Some theologians even go as far as to wonder if Jesus simply miraculously appeared, doing away with the physical birth altogether. In addition to insisting on a painless labor, Ambros (337-397 CE) argued that Mary's hymen was left intact and only "passed through" by Christ at his birth.¹⁶ Irenaeus (130-202 CE) and Clement of Alexandria (150-215 CE) also believed there was no rupture of Mary's hymen and no physical pain during her labor.¹⁷ In other words, Robert argues, "there was no bloody, painful birth.... the miraculous conception wasn't enough; they needed a miraculous delivery too."¹⁸

¹⁵ "I will increase your pangs in childbearing; in pain shall you bring forth children." (Genesis 3:16 NRSV)

¹⁶ Kyle Roberts, *A Complicated Pregnancy: Whether Mary Was a Virgin and Why It Matters* (Minneapolis: 1517 Media, 2017), 7, doi:10.2307/j.ctt1tm7gp2.

¹⁷ Roberts, *A Complicated Pregnancy*, 7.

¹⁸ Roberts, *A Complicated Pregnancy*, 4.

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Roberts also notes that the idea of Mary's *perpetual* virginity (believing she was a virgin for the entirety of her life) is an idea often inferred from the Gospel of James, an unfortunate influence "because it allowed docetic tendencies to creep in to the way theologians read the two Gospel accounts of Jesus' birth."¹⁹ Her perpetual state of purity and lack of sin coupled with Jesus' divinity continues to push us towards a divine understanding of the two. By insisting on a bloodless and painless delivery, one could argue that Jesus' entire incarnation has been undermined at heavy theological cost. This has already been pointed out by theologians opposed to a "sterilized" labor account, such as Tertullian (160-220 CE), who viewed the opening of Mary's womb through birthing Jesus as a fulfillment of Exodus 13:2.²⁰ If the incarnation is meant to birth a fully human divinity, naturally, a standard labor would be necessary.

Ultimately, "the Catholic tradition across the world continues to pigeonhole women as valuable for their bodies, for their sexuality (especially for their virginal status), for their "innate" capabilities of motherhood, and for their submissiveness or obedience. Despite this adulation, Christianity too often holds Mary captive in the grips of patriarchy."²¹ By using Mary as a role model for women but simultaneously defining her by her purity (down to the way she labored), the Church continues to pair childbirth with the unholiness associated with blood and the defilement associated with the sin of sex. Although the Gospel narratives are stark in their descriptions of Mary and her labor, we can see an overwhelming amount of discourse surrounding the event. Ultimately, Catholic tradition supports Mary's perpetual virginity, her painless and bloodless labor, and her status as a supporting character in Christ's overall origin story.

IV. Comparison of the Birth Narratives and Mary's Virginity

¹⁹ Roberts, *A Complicated Pregnancy*, 12.

²⁰ "Consecrate to me all the firstborn; whatever is the first to open the womb among the Israelites, of human beings and animals, is mine." (Exodus 13:2)

²¹ Roberts, *A Complicated Pregnancy*, 87.

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Looking at both traditions, there is clearly more information shared in the Islamic tradition surrounding the labor on a textual level. Several differences have also been highlighted, such as Joseph's lack of importance in the Qur'an. The largest of these, I would argue, is that of Mary's autonomy in Surah Al-Maryam. Mroz explains, "More so than the New Testament, the Quran establishes Mary's own individuality and personhood. It has been argued that from the Muslim perspective, even if Mary had not been Jesus's mother, she still would have been a prominent figure and a great example for believers,"²² and she continues to be venerated by a small Muslim minority as a prophet in her own right. In Surah Al-Maryam Mary is the central character and focal point of the narrative. It is she who withdraws to a remote place in preparation for Jesus' birth, she who vows to speak to no men, she who gives birth alone, and she who is ridiculed by her community for having a child without a husband.

Joseph's nonexistence in the Qur'anic account emphasizes the severe breach of custom this pregnancy truly was in Mary's patriarchal society. A difference even more profound, I feel, is her moment of fear and plight during the experience of her labor. Although Mary is recognized for her absolute devotion to God, this devotion did not stop the genuine peril she experienced during her labor. This moment humanizes her and gives us a deeper understanding of her personhood that the Gospels do not provide. The Gospels give us no information surrounding Mary's thoughts or feelings during or after the birth and tell us very little about her relationship with her son.

In addition to these, Islam does not believe in Mary's perpetual virginity, as celibacy is not considered an ideal path for Muslims. The Prophet Muhammad encouraged the Muslim community to live "in the world," to marry and begin families. Many Islamic scholars therefore infer that Mary would have eventually married, and her virginity from then on is unimportant. Although Catholics insist on Mary's perpetual purity, Matthew 1:24-25 implies Joseph had marital relations with Mary after Jesus' birth, and the texts also mention Jesus' siblings.²³ Varying schools of thought in Islam may hold that her virginity is perpetual, but the tradition generally does not place significant importance on her virginity after Jesus' birth. Mary's

²² Mroz, "Mary the Bridge Builder," 7.

²³ Matthew 13:55-56; Mark 6:3.

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virginity in the Qur'an is a narrative device to highlight God's power. Mroz explains that Mary's virginity in the Islamic tradition is paralleled with the Prophet's illiteracy, "demonstrating the incredible power and love of God, making possible what is ordinarily impossible (a virgin conceiving a child and an illiterate man reading), not necessarily [implying] that virginity and illiteracy are the most valued life paths."²⁴ Original sin is also non-existent in Islam, therefore Mary's experience of pain during labor is not viewed as a punishment tied to sexual sin, but rather a completely normal (and human) experience.

V. Surah Al-Maryam as Feminist Theology

Because Catholic tradition insists on Mary's virginity before, during, and after Jesus' labor (implying her labor was bloodless and painless) it can be inferred "that the blood, pain, and bodily changes associated with childbirth are a source of shame, that a woman's body is dirty or unholy simply because it is biologically female."²⁵ This continues to be used as justification against women's ordination in the Catholic Church, citing ancient purity laws that vilify women's menstruation. In a Christian birth narrative sans the "humanity" (blood, bodily fluids, and so on) it would not be a stretch to think of Mary's physical form as unchanging as well. She remains youthful, virginal, and untouchable. No stretch marks, no weight gain, and certainly no post-partum depression. The Muslim narrative in contrast "provides resources for not only viewing Mary's body as more similar to that of other women, but also for finding beauty in the birth pangs and bodily changes that pregnant and post-partum women experience."²⁶

In addition to her physical humanity reflected by a painful labor, Mary's moment of uncertainty provides an opportunity for God to intervene as a steadfast guide and protector, providing her not only with physical sustenance but spiritual sustenance as well. This at its core is a liberating message and understanding of Jesus' birth. The average woman is far more likely to find solidarity with the Mary of Surah Al-Maryam rather than the Mary of the Bible. In the

²⁴ Mroz, "Mary the Bridge Builder," 16.

²⁵ Mroz, "Mary the Bridge Builder," 14.

²⁶ Mroz, "Mary the Bridge Builder," 15.



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Islamic tradition, Mary is remarkably human and vulnerable even despite conceiving as a virgin. Not only can women relate to the physical experience of Mary's labor, but they can also relate to her expression of uncertainty. Despite the elevated status Mary enjoys in both traditions as Jesus' mother, this same respect is not often shared with the women of either tradition.

Mroz explains that "like the Catholic Church's ban on women's ordination, Muslim women are not allowed to act as an imam, or prayer leader, unless the congregation is all female. While cases vary depending on the mosque and the country, gender segregation is a prevalent reality in Muslim prayer services."²⁷ As the holiest woman to exist in Islam and as the mother of God in Christianity, Mary's virginity is used as a standard for both Muslim and Christian women. The continued romanticization of her virginity on a cultural level by both traditions places emphasis on a woman's purity over their personhood. This is evident in several Christian fundamentalist practices such as abstinence rings, abstinence pledges, and purity balls. In Muslim countries, this can also be seen in surgeries to repair one's hymen prior to marriage, honor killings that occur when a woman is sexually assaulted and "defiled" by her rapist, and other horrific examples of violence against women.

Women also continue to be pushed away from roles of authority and power. Ammar and Gray note that out of 142 countries ranked by the Global Gender Gap Index 2014, "the five countries with the largest gender gaps were Muslim majority countries."²⁸ Women earn less than men for the same jobs, are subject to discriminatory laws, and are often the lowest paid within the workforce. They continue by saying, "the inconsistencies in the conditions and non-religious factors influencing Muslim majority countries make it hard to present a generalized picture of the status of women as solely influenced by Islam."²⁹ Much of this inequality is cultural, as "Islam rightly understood reflects a philosophy of enlightenment and egalitarianism... unsavory

²⁷ Mroz, "Mary the Bridge Builder," 12.

²⁸ Nawal Ammar and Allison Gray, "Islamic Environmental Teachings: Compatible with Ecofeminism?," in *The Wiley Blackwell Companion to Religion and Ecology*, ed. John Hart (Hoboken: John Wiley & Sons Ltd., 2017), 308.

²⁹ Ammar and Gray, "Islamic Environmental Teachings," 309.

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practices relegating women to second-class citizenship are not intrinsic to true Islamic values or to the Shari'a³⁰ and never were."³¹

The patriarchy is the source of this continued oppression, and this association of virginity with a woman's value is a harmful narrative that continues to be perpetuated by both Catholic and Muslim traditions. Regardless of the theological interpretations surrounding Mary's virginity, both faiths ultimately do not "walk the talk." Instead, Catholic tradition demands women choose between an uncompromising dichotomy of celibacy or motherhood within marriage. Despite Mary's humanness in Surah Al-Maryam, Muslim tradition also continues to demand an impossible expectation of "physical" virginal purity from women³². Mroz notes that, "Women who do not meet the standards of "ideal womanhood" are often neglected, forgotten, and condemned; the divorced, the single mothers, the women who cannot or do not want to bear children, lesbians, the disabled, the survivors of rape and abuse, the poor and exploited."³³ In the Qur'an, Mary is just that: a single mother who is persecuted by her community for the "shame" she has chosen. She is a young, unwed teenager in a time when women were considered the property of men. Still, Mary persists. In Surah Al-Maryam, her exclamation of fear and doubt is not a reflection of her dismissal of God's plan, but rather a fear of the societal standards that others seek to crucify her with. This narrative is inherently liberative in nature, proving again and again that God is with the oppressed and the marginalized, and that they make the impossible happen by only murmuring "Be."³⁴

³⁰ Shari'a Law is Muslim religious law which has influenced portions of Islamic tradition.

³¹ Sherin Saadallah, "Muslim Feminism in the Third Wave: A Reflective Inquiry," in *Third Wave Feminism: A Critical Exploration*, ed. Stacy Gillis, Gillian Howie, and Rebecca Munford (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 221.

³² Virginity is a social construct and not tied to the presence/absence of a hymen. Therefore, the necessity to provide physical evidence of one's virginity is a patriarchal standard in its entirety.

³³ Mroz, "Mary the Bridge Builder," 17.

³⁴ "Maryam (Mary) submitted: 'O my Lord, how shall I have a son when no man has ever touched me?' He said: 'Just as Allah creates what He pleases.' When He decides (to do) some work, He just gives it the command 'Be', and it becomes." (Qur'an 3:47)

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VI. Conclusions

This paper attempts to highlight the feminist themes of Jesus' birth in Surah Al-Maryam. In contrast to the narratives of the Gospels, Surah Al-Maryam is liberative not only for humanity, but especially for women. The Mary of the Qur'an is independent, human, and most importantly daring; In a society where all odds are against her, her pregnancy and birth are a liberating example of God's power and love for the vulnerable. In this case, the marginalized persons in need of liberation are women who suffer within the confines of the patriarchy. Both Catholicism and Islam elevate Mary's status among women, expressing her superiority over all the rest. But while Catholic tradition elevates her to the mother of a god, an impossible standard that sterilizes the most dangerous experience a woman will ever endure, Muslim tradition offers a different understanding. In the Qur'an, it is Mary's courage and not her virginity that are most worthy of our awe.

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