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Growing Up a Witness

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Growing Up a Witness

In this essay, I pose the question: Is there freedom for women in religion? I set out to find if there is the possibility for women to find liberation within a religious institution. In order to find the answer, I look within my own upbringing and the experiences of the women within my family that have the Jehovah's Witness religion in their lives. I found that the institution is inherently patriarchal and poses a danger to women within it. However, women are able to find beliefs that allow fluidity and autonomy once they step outside of the bounds that religion has placed on them.

Early Memories

My earliest memories include waking up before the sun to attend meetings, learning how to put tights on under a long floral dress without creating snags, and whether to wear white or black shoes when the warmth of spring swept through New York State. I remember staring at the hands of the clock while Jehovah's word was spoken, still too young to understand what it meant, drawing doodles in my anticipation, but being required to listen while I shifted with youthful energy in my seat. I held hands with my family before we ate, listening to my grandfather speak for us about what we should be thankful for. I would squint, my eyes partially open, staring at my grandmother in these times of prayer. She was tall to me, with her own ideas, own beliefs. She was who I idolized. As I sat in silence, disobeying with my open eyes, I yearned to understand her and her unwavering faith. Religion has passed through the matriarchal lineage of my family. I have set out to understand the implications of patriarchal creed that has become

an immense part of our lives. Within the stories of the women in my family gained by interviews, I highlight the questions that we must ask ourselves. We all learn things from the people who take care of us, the village that raises us as children. We come into the public world with a platform of understanding built with the values of our caretakers. What does that look like within the bounds of religious practice? As we grow with experience that differs from the generations before us, are we subject to knowledge and change in that as well? Is it knowledge that allows us to disregard the idea of religion, or is it the loss of faith in an unpopular institution? I have seen change within my own family's passing down of beliefs; and I wonder, what are the possibilities of religion? Is there freedom for women in faith?

My Story

In religious practices, like a song that comes on the radio each time you turn it on, I learned to listen, to behave, to retain. When growing up, my grandparents helped raise my siblings and me. With our mom being a single parent pursuing a master's degree alongside holding numerous jobs, our grandparents were able to raise us how they saw fit. This included an upbringing within the Jehovah's Witness religion.

This entailed our understanding of the world being different than our peers in public school. We had differing ideas on holidays such as Christmas, birthdays, Easter, etc., which created a dissonance between us and the people around us. I learned through experiences – experiences of difference. I remember always pushing my grandmother to answer questions that flipped through my mind. When I asked about faith itself, she would say, “You cannot see the wind, but you can see it moves the world around us. You can feel it.” Her answer encompassed me, as I watched the grass bow down and the trees surrender their weight to the flowing air. These exchanges between us remain vivid even as I age. Yet, I still have questions left unanswered.

As I grew older, I stopped attending the meetings of my grandparents' faith. In adulthood, neither my mother nor my siblings or I still practice this religion. I began to understand that aspects of the faith were in conflict with my identity as a woman and as a feminist, although I didn't have the knowledge to understand that just yet. I also could not understand why faith would ask me to liquefy my body in order to place it neatly within the mold set before me. I realized that my heart would be unwilling to complete this request. I knew that until I stepped

from behind the heterosexual curtain that stifled the air around me, I would never be free. I now have the strength to identify as a lesbian. The various aspects of my identity conflict with central tenets of the faith, and hence, the beliefs of those who practice. I grew up knowing that something about my religion did not quite feel right. I knew that religions caused war, and that people were willing to hate in the name of something that they believed in. I only saw the ugliness and the confusion presented in media and in history books. After this realization, I was in a religious limbo, unaware of where I fit, what to believe, and what to reject. I grew pained at the idea that something that coursed through my veins could leave me feeling so alone and alienated. I questioned believing anything at all, an emptiness that made my bones feel cold. I was in a seemingly endless maze. I was lost and afraid. In her sociological article, Sharon Brown (2004) wrote about feeling this phenomenon after a traumatic life experience caused her to look inward at her faith:

A sudden loss of my Christian discipline would naturally elicit feelings of disorientation. I had based everything in my life upon Christian doctrine, so if Christianity was uncertain, then everything else would be also. On top of

this worry about what is true and what is not, I began to wonder what my family might think. My family had always been influential in my spiritual development and spiritual socialization, so it is predictable that their opinion would be important to me (p. 97).

I was experiencing these same feelings even as I began my college career. I was in courses that spoke of numerous religions. I came to notice that many of my peers felt as if they could not identify with a religion either. It seemed to me that somewhere along the way, the people within my generation discarded the idea of faith. Yet, the professor talked on, and we had compelling conversations about the beauty of difference, of believing in something greater, and believing in other people. We were asked again how we saw ourselves, and I still did not know. Impending questions continued to dawn on me: Could I believe in something separate from an institution? Could I believe in something that empowered me, which was free from conflict? Could I possibly pick and choose to create my own ideas of what felt right in my heart? If my identity as a lesbian is at odds with religion, am I banned from my beliefs?

Intensity of Unacceptance

I do not intend to discredit the prerogative people have to hold their own beliefs and be respected in doing so. I solely seek to expose the reality of the passing down of religion, particularly the Jehovah Witness religion, through following the matriarchal lineage within my own family and our experiences. In no way do I intend to belittle this religion or any other religion. I want to highlight certain aspects of this religious institution that I now reject. When looking on the Jehovah Witness website for my research, my heart began to race, making its home within my throat. My face became blood red as my stomach turned inside itself, over and over. The religion I once claimed to be mine proved to be unwilling to reciprocate my intense acceptance and love.

The Jehovah Witness website compares alcoholism to homosexuality:

Some may wonder, 'Would genetics, environment, or traumatic life experiences, such as sexual abuse, justify one's giving in to homosexual desires?' No, they would not. Consider this example: A person may have what some scientists consider to be hereditary tendencies toward alcohol abuse, or he may have been raised in a family where alcohol abuse was commonplace. Certainly, most people would be

empathetic toward a person in such circumstances. All the same, by no means would he be encouraged to continue abusing alcohol or to give up his fight against alcohol abuse just because he may have been born with the tendency or he was raised in such an environment (Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society of Pennsylvania, 2012, p. 24).

This not only assumes a heteronormative worldview, but it compares homosexuality to a disease. This strips the power of identity, highlighting that trauma can be the cause of sexuality. Taking this identity away from those who have been sexually abused places power back into the hands of the abuser, a terribly dangerous perspective to showcase. As a survivor of violence, this explanation sent chills down my spine. My abusers have no right to claim my identity as their doing. It is not morally right for a religious institution to give abusers that power either. Despite feeling the urge to scream until my voice gave out, to let tears stream down my face, and to curl my fingers into fists, I continued my research. On a further page, bisexuality is touched on, "But what if you're really drawn to both sexes? Many would urge you simply to embrace your sexuality and come out as bisexual. However, you should be aware that same-sex attraction

“is often nothing more than a passing phase” (Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society of Pennsylvania, 2010, para. 5).

Although we can acknowledge the fluidity of sexuality, this also presents a problematic ideal that heterosexuality is natural while other sexualities are not. Looking back on the time when I was searching for answers on my own sexuality, I did not turn to the internet. Yet, kids that have grown up with access to the technology that we have now turn to websites for help. They trust that someone out there can help them with their struggles, having the power to advise them in the right direction. The youth that turn to the website of their faith would solely find condemnation. As the Center for Disease Control and Prevention (n.d.) states, “LGBT* youth are at greater risk for depression, suicide, substance use, and sexual behaviors that can place them at increased risk for HIV and other sexually transmitted diseases (STDs)” (para. 2). Therefore, isolation is extremely damaging, if not deadly. We have a human responsibility to provide light for those who suffer within the darkness that this world can spread. The terrifying truth is that those who suffer from marginalization can be cloaked in even greater darkness. I remember when I was on the edge of either being swallowed in uncertainty or finding my

way toward the illumination of acceptance. We all have a right to reach that revelation.

A “Girl” Sin

We see that the Jehovah Witness faith has clear boundaries when it comes to understanding, and condemning, sexuality. It is important to gain further knowledge of Jehovah’s Witness beliefs in order to make inferences on the effects of credence within women’s lives. Sociologist Andrew Holden (2002), completed an ethnographic study on the faith, immersing himself within the culture and beliefs. Holden works to break down the complex ideas and offer a public understanding of the religion. One aspect that proves to be passionately taught is the idea that our world has been swallowed by evil. Holden (2002) states that to Jehovah’s Witnesses, the time we live in is:

A culture riddled with deceit, uncertainty, anxiety, sleaze, drug abuse, alcoholism, sexually transmitted diseases and a whole host of other evils caused by inherent flaws in the human condition. It is only when people come to their senses and turn back to God (Jehovah)...or better still when God exacts vengeance on those too crippled by their own depravity to see the error of their ways that the world will really change (Preface X).

When we step back and use a critical lens on our society, we see that indeed, some troubling aspects persist throughout our world, perhaps in our most intimate surroundings, the people whom we love, or even ourselves. However, when we look closer at the language used, aren't some of the words subjective? Are women more likely to be blamed for their "inherent flaws?"

My mother, Rae, is someone who possesses these imperfections in the eyes of the faith. At the age of 18, she was disfellowshipped as a Jehovah Witness due to her unwed pregnancy. The Jehovah Witness Website states:

We do not automatically disfellowship someone who commits a serious sin. If, however, a baptized Witness makes a practice of breaking the Bible's moral code and does not repent, he or she will be shunned or disfellowshipped. The Bible clearly states: "Remove the wicked man from among yourselves" (1 Corinthians 5:13) (Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society of Pennsylvania, 2013, para. 1).

In our interview, Rae spoke about this experience: "The worst time that I was having in my life, you know, as a young person, they disfellowshipped me. When I went for help, so yeah [pause] it had a big impact" (personal communication, 2019). When I asked if she thought she

would have had the same experience as a boy, her response was,

No. [pause] There were first hand cases of things that I saw when I was a teenager there ... they were also like sons of the elders of the church that got away with things and nothing was done or it was swept under the carpet or whatever" (Rae, personal communication, 2019).

In my mom's case, she was held accountable for the "flaws within her human condition" when her male peers were not. This raises the question, is the sin inherently more "serious" if a girl or woman is committing it? My sister, Morgan, responded to the expectations based on gender within religion by acknowledging, "Standards are different for women...the decisions you make as a woman can be reflected against you more than men ...Like mom... That was always something that we knew about and that was definitely hard" (Morgan, personal communication, 2019). When men hold the power to set rules for women, double standards surface. Ritzer and Ryan (2010) explain how this control operates within our culture: "there remains a near total domination of women by men at both the micro level of intimate relationships and the macro level of government, law, and religion" (p. 441).

Women continue to be disadvantaged at the hands of the patriarchal institutions that dominate our lives. Rae highlights and reiterates the validity of danger within this control,

“It’s just balance missing. You know what I mean. All powerful. That religion is like [pause] disfellowships people for divorcing. Like it doesn’t matter what happens. Like if there is cheating or abuse or anything, you can’t get divorced no matter what (personal communication, 2019).

When credence is such an integral part of identity, the threat of being exiled looms over those faced with violence. This is particularly dangerous to women because women are statistically more likely to be in relationships where intimate partner violence (IPV) is present. “About 1 in 4 women and 1 in 10 men experienced contact sexual violence, physical violence, and/or stalking by an intimate partner and reported an IPV-related impact during their lifetime” (National Center for Injury Prevention and Control, Division of Violence Prevention, 2018, p. 7). This proves that patriarchal institutions of religion can affect women on a macro level, as well as the most intimate parts of our lives.

I ask, when a person is fleeing from abuse, how would they be treated within

this religion? The Jehovah Witness brochure titled “*Keep Yourselves in God’s Love*” (2014) provides the answer to this question:

Regarding everyone who ‘does not remain in the teaching of the Christ,’ we read: “Do not receive him into your homes or say a greeting to him. For the one who says a greeting to him is a sharer in his wicked works” (2 John 9-11). We do not have spiritual or social fellowship with disfellowshipped ones. “*The Watchtower* of September 15, 1981, page 25, stated: ‘A simple ‘Hello’ to someone can be the first step that develops into a conversation and maybe even a friendship. Would we want to take that first step with a disfellowshipped person?’” (Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society of Pennsylvania, 2014, Appendix: How to Treat a Disfellowshipped Person, pg. 207).

A simple hello to someone enduring intimate partner violence could start a lifesaving conversation. You could be the person to provide an out to someone who cannot gain access to one. The New Testament itself states, “You must love your neighbor as yourself” (Matthew 22:39). Wouldn’t saving their life constitute as love? If both of these aspects are understood as truth, then this is a contradiction that must be resolved.

Religion: A Part of Family

Our stories show the danger of the discrimination of women within this faith. I ask, why does it continue to be passed down from one generation to the next? I believe that it has been passed down with the intention of love. As human beings, we live for the feeling of love. We find love in everything; in the people we connect with and particularly those we consider family. We sacrifice for the intensity that love offers us and we do anything to give what those we love need from us. Religion is seen as a guide that nourishes our children into people who are inherently good. Sharon Brown (2004) spoke of this:

The religious teaching of the parents is highly influential because as a child, whatever the parents say is usually accepted as truth. This is very important to consider when discussing religious beliefs. If the parents already assume the role of instilling in the child a sense of what is right or wrong, then their influence over the child's internalization of religious doctrine would be guaranteed. If a parent is the source of ultimate truth, then the child will predictably incorporate the values of the parent within him or herself (p. 96).

In talking with my grandmother, it was evident that doing this for children is immensely important, stating, "If you

can instill values from the bible early on, it gives them [children] structure. If they believe that god is interested and caring, they have a higher standard that helps through tough times... It makes them stronger (Claire, personal communication, 2019). Indeed, there is strength in being held accountable as a young person. When faced with decision-making, as all kids are, it is beneficial to believe actions have tangible consequences in the world around them. Rae also touched on religion within familial life, saying, "People that go to church and take their kids. The idea is nice" (Rae, personal communication, 2019). She reminisced on the past, wishing she had been more involved in her children's religious experience.

I realized in Rae's response that the culture in which she grew up has deep roots within the familial structure and in implementing values of togetherness. These values urge us to be part of the institution, perpetuating that it is necessary for our loved ones.

My mother's religious experiences started as early as she could remember. She would go at least three times a week into her teenage years, expressing:

It affected everything. I dedicated my life to that, and then, [pause] I mean I didn't know anything else, it wasn't like it was a choice. When I got older, I started to

resent it, so then the choices I made led me to go in the complete opposite other way, obviously affected everything (Rae, personal communication, 2019).

The strict bounds placed around her in the name of religion constricted her way of life, causing rebellion in search of freedom that she could not feel. Morgan spoke of the same phenomenon:

It made me make different decisions in my life, especially when I was younger trying to form to that religion... I think it limited me and my decisions and how I felt as a person when I was younger... feeling like if I made the wrong decisions, I could be blamed for that and looked down upon because of it (personal communication, 2019).

Although it is common for us to believe this institution is integral to moral development, there are clear negative consequences, such as self-esteem issues, uncertainty, and lack of confidence in identity.

If the implications of strict religion on youth causes pain, how do we raise our children? Although there is power in young people knowing that their decisions have impact, is there a line that can be crossed? Is the installation of religion causing fear instead of guidance? Morgan reflected on her own experience:

Growing up Jehovah Witness put a perspective on things... there are so many things they had in their own religion that would say that you're wrong and I think growing up with that puts a weight on you... the way they see sin... if you do make those decisions... you're wrong and you need to be ashamed of yourself, which is not true. Everybody makes mistakes in life... We're humans (personal communication, 2019).

Although all parents wish to provide the necessary values to their children to help them navigate life, the rigidity of the passing down of religion proves to burden youth. So how do we walk the line between value and fear? Morgan, with children of her own, expresses the difficulty of finding this balance:

I have a hard time... I have my own beliefs but I never want to put that on them... I don't want it inflicted on... [my eldest son] the way that it was with me when I was little.... Any time they ask me about things... they've asked me if there is one god... I explain that everybody has their own beliefs and you can choose for yourself what you want to believe.... That's the best thing that I can give to them... he's not to a point in his life where he can understand and neither were we... They don't have formed opinions about what life is or what those things mean. For people to push religion on children... it's wrong (personal communication, 2019).

Since the stories of our lives prove the hardships we have faced as Jehovah's Witnesses, it is challenging to desire that children be placed within those same bounds. Perhaps religion can provide a moral structure to help children face aspects of their life. But, maybe giving children the liberty to choose what makes sense and giving them the time to reach that conclusion when they are ready, is more powerful than anything.

Where to Go from Here

As a religious institution, there are power dynamics that must be acknowledged. There is a system that controls people, whether that's voluntary or involuntary. As the world changes, these aspects of the institution stay seemingly static. Morgan shares her view:

It's a lot of the same ideas, but everybody puts their own spin on it and it's man-made... from one core belief but then everyone having their own spin on it so I think that in a way that everybody's right and but then again, everybody is wrong because they persecute and deny people and hate other people in specific religions, which I think is wrong (personal communication, 2019).

Religion has the power, due to faith that people put in it, to alter their view of the world around them. This power is immensely influential in the rules it sets for its followers. Claire highlights the

roles that she believes accompany her faith:

The bible standards are a husband who loves his wife and a woman who respects her husband. The husband is the head of the household and the woman is secondary. It works perfectly if the woman is loveable and the man is respectable. It is only when women make decisions that they aren't supposed to make and men try to overpower that the balance doesn't work. Men are problem-solvers and have stronger opinions while women are more about feelings and emotions (personal communication, 2019).

In this way, biological ideas of sex and gender work with religion to reinforce societal norms of what people "should be." While men solely have to "be respectable," women must not push too far, ask too much, or make too many decisions. Perhaps then, she may be deemed lovable, and therefore worthy within the eyes of the religion. Women continue to push back against these harmful narratives. As we keep fighting for the rights we deserve, will a change in religious views follow?

Can We Believe, Can We Be Free?

After the rich data that I received from my family, I circle back to my question; What is the possibility of religion, and is there freedom for women in faith? I

argue that there is not freedom within Jehovah's Witness Religion but there is possibility. With the current ideals placing shackles on women that lie under the institutional hierarchy, freedom and equity are hard, if not impossible to achieve. However, is this a dynamic that can be altered as our society shifts its messages about women? Claire says:

Change is inevitable and you have to change along with it. It's possible to apply old principles in new ways, it just takes some getting used to. Jesus would understand feminism, he would agree. It's a good thing, the value in life and women not wanting to be put down." I can only hope that religion does indeed change to include women at the forefront of discussion and allow for difference as our society continues to move forward. If Jesus was a feminist, would he agree with the old ways of thinking, or would his "high regard for women" push him to change how religion treats them? (personal communication, 2019)

Rae stepped outside of the religion, finding contentment. In her adulthood, she still believes much she was taught in her upbringing, remembering her experiences, yet not letting them deter her.

I still believe some of [pause] a lot of things that they taught [pause] but I can't bring my [pause] it's the human part of religion. Like organized man-made

structures that I can't bring myself to go and have any faith in it (personal communication, 2019).

Rae spoke about being comfortable with who she is in her identity as a woman and a mother within her religious journey. She expressed that although her experience as a woman within this religion posed many challenges that her boy-gendered peers did not face, she does not reject the moral teachings from her past. Instead of rejecting everything, she solely rejects the institution. Morgan found freedom in identifying with a differing religion altogether:

Paganism isn't defining by action, limiting and telling this is how you need to be...its worshipping the earth and what is around you... what sustains you. I believe in the earth... the things that are here and being thankful for those and knowing there is a bigger picture to life outside of ourselves as human beings... there's freedom in it (Morgan, personal communication, 2019).

Within my own pursuit, I have rejected the institution of Jehovah's Witness religion in its entirety. The label that I place upon myself is "spiritual." I still find myself believing in the power of the universe beyond our human understanding. I do accept some of what I learned within this religion as my own

truth, but I refuse to succumb to limitations based on my identity.

Conclusion

So, is there freedom for women in religion? The answer lies within ourselves. It is up to us to take what has been passed down to us and push the boundaries. We must ask questions, demand answers, and find our own truth. There are clear limitations placed on women with the institution of religion. The accounts of our stories

show you that our experiences prove that to be true. I refuse to let my relationship to the world, to myself, and to my spirituality be restricted. I refuse to settle for aspects that make me subordinate. I have the power to pick and choose my values, to be proud of my identities, and to find acceptance in that. Look within yourself, choose what lets you be human, what makes sense to you, and what liberates you. Religion belongs to all of us.

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