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BEING YOUR OWN RELIGIOUS PROTAGONIST: THE RAMIFICATIONS OF RELIGIOUS GUILT, SHAME, AND ABUSE ON WOMEN'S IDENTITIES

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ABSTRACT

BEING YOUR OWN RELIGIOUS PROTAGONIST: THE RAMIFICATIONS OF RELIGIOUS GUILT, SHAME, AND ABUSE ON WOMEN'S IDENTITIES

Amanda Rose Farrell

Through analysis of various literary texts, social media, and television, "Being Your Own Religious Protagonist: The Ramifications of Religious Guilt, Shame, and Abuse on Women's Identities" will examine the different ways in which women experience religion as children and teenage girls, as well as how their individual and complex religious experiences affect their upbringing and eventual identities as adult women. I am particularly interested in looking at how these experiences affect not only their identities, but their decisions regarding faith and whether or not they wish to remain in the same religious organizations they grew up in. While many who suffer from religious trauma decide to cut ties with their faith entirely, there are a great deal of women who wish to stay connected to their faith, either by finding a new form of religion that brings them joy, or by attempting to make positive changes within their religious community that are beneficial to all women involved. The introduction to this work will include some of my own personal experiences with religion as a young woman growing up in the Catholic church, as well as presenting the layout of the thesis contents.

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INTRODUCTION

As a child growing up in the Catholic Church, my religious experiences were typically positive ones; my parents and my teachers always made it something welcoming and loving, and I enjoyed going to mass every week and participating in different events hosted by the church. My childhood view on religion was that the primary focus was on love and acceptance of all people. But as I graduated middle school and began my years in an all-girls Catholic high school, I noticed how certain people, both fellow students and faculty, would view and speak about certain people due to their own religious beliefs. We were expected to have certain "morals" and behave at a certain standard; if girls were sexually active, they were looked down upon, if a girl came out as gay or bisexual (very few did until after we graduated due to fear of their peers) there were whispers and judgmental looks, some even coming from the faculty. The year of our senior prom, one of my friends asked if she could bring a girl as her date and was denied, since those in charge of the prom deemed it "inappropriate." During these four years, going to church began to feel like a chore, especially when going at school, with faculty members being extremely rude and strict, making the atmosphere unenjoyable and quite miserable at times for most of us. My yearly religion classes no longer felt so inviting or interesting, and by the end of high school I rarely went to church unless it was a holiday or a school event. Once I graduated, I no longer had any desire to go at all, and only went occasionally to make my parents happy. The connection I once had to my faith as a child now feels so strained, and I don't want to continue going to church just to keep my family happy when I don't feel the same devotion that they do. Not going to church anymore

doesn't mean that I don't want any relationship to faith or that I'm not trying to observe a higher power, but the way many people in the Catholic church use religion as a form of control, specifically over women, is not an appealing organization to me. I still like the idea of faith and having that connection, but as it has no longer been a positive experience for me as it used to be, it's harder for me to remain in the same religion when I know there are many who are part of the community that will use their religious beliefs as justification for the way they treat others who do not practice the same religion or simply live different lives. I find myself relating to many of the women in these novels that I analyze; I have frustrating feelings on belonging to a specific religious organization and don't even know if that is what I believe in anymore, but don't want to upset others if I say that I do not believe or agree with them.

While I was lucky with my religious experiences as a child, many young girls are not so fortunate; from a young age they are forced to navigate intense hardships where religion is turned into a weapon and used as a justification for abuse, causing lifelong trauma, anxiety, and self-hatred. Many women are also afraid to leave their church or their faith because they may ask themselves that constant question, "what if I am wrong?" They worry that if they *are* wrong, then they'll be sent to suffer in hell for all of eternity because of the immense fear and guilt that has been instilled in them since childhood. Recovering from that trauma as an adult is not only a very difficult and slow process, but it can keep them away from faith for the rest of their life because of their past negative experiences with it.

This paper will examine the different ways in which young girls are taught religion and how it affects their identity as they grow up through literary texts and literary analysis. There are different outcomes on how women view themselves and how they deal with their past religious trauma as they become adults, and the texts I have chosen are a reflection of women's real-life experiences; while these stories are fictional, they eloquently convey the struggles and conflicting thoughts that women have about religion, as well as the varying ways of coping. Some stray from the religion they were taught, and cut ties with it altogether, while other women discover different faiths that resonate with them, and even create new religious beliefs or communities that can comfort them in a way that their former religious organizations never did. Having the ability to find joy and support in whatever form of faith they want should be the primary focus, not staying in one religious organization because they feel that they have to out of guilt or in order to please others.

Examples of this can be seen in books such as *Parable of the Sower* by Octavia E. Butler, *The Poisonwood Bible* by Barbara Kingsolver, and *The Secret Lives of Church Ladies* by Deesha Philyaw. There are also articles discussing real women's different experiences with religion and why they do or don't stay in the church as adults, such as "Women-Church: Feminist Concept, Religious Commitment, Women's Movement" by Mary E. Hunt, "Theorizing Gender from Religion Cases: Agency, Feminist Activism, and Masculinity" by Orit Avishai, and "Different Identity Accounts for Catholic Women" by Elaine Howard Ecklund. Along with these articles, there are different forms of media, including television and online posts from young women that I will also discuss.

The first chapter of this paper will look at *Parable of the Sower* and "Women-Church," which display more positive experiences women have with faith, including women that have found a faith and religious organization that they genuinely resonate with, whether that is something that has already existed or something entirely new. They also describe the difficulty of feeling like they need to belong to a certain religious organization due to guilt and fear, while also describing the joy and connection they feel to their current faith.

The second chapter will discuss *The Poisonwood Bible,* a novel that shows the abuse that the wife and daughters of Nathan Price, an evangelical Baptist preacher, have to endure. The story is told from the point of view of each sister, as well as one chapter from the mother in the beginning of each new section. Each sister has different views of religion, and while they are staying in the Congo on a missionary trip, they begin to doubt what they have been taught by their father. Along with this novel I will also discuss "Theorizing Gender from Religion Cases," in which Avishai examines the relationship between feminism and religion, and why some women remain in conservative religions.

The third chapter of this paper focuses on *The Secret Lives of Church Ladies* and "Different Identity Accounts for Catholic Women." Philyaw's book is comprised of short stories about Black girls and women and their unique and personal relationships with religion and religious organizations, as well as their own internal struggles of who they want to be, and the conflicting thoughts about what they have been taught in the church versus their own feelings and needs. Ecklund's article compares thirty-seven different interviews with women, including women who agree

with their Church and its teachings, women who disagree and leave altogether, and women who still have faith but do not agree with everything that is taught. This will also lead into the fourth and final chapter that examines the topic of purity culture and the "Good Girl Syndrome," with examples from TikTok and television shows, including women's online posts that involve the topics of religious trauma and abuse and what caused them to question religious teachings and ultimately leave the church. Many of the hashtags used in these posts include #religioustrauma, #exvangelical, #deconstruction, and #purityculture.

By examining these texts, along with social media and different television shows, I will show the ways in which young women can and should find joy and comfort in whatever form of faith that they feel a connection to, focusing on love and compassion, as well as have the ability to express this faith without feeling ashamed. While many of their journeys are difficult and traumatic, they gain the courage to embrace the faith that they want and reject the abusive teachings taught to them during their childhood, reclaiming control over their own religious identities and becoming the protagonists of their own unique religious journeys.

CHAPTER ONE: *PARABLE OF THE SOWER* AND "WOMEN-CHURCH"

Whether in reality or in fiction, many women wish to create a better version of God and embrace a faith that comforts them in a way that the religious organizations that have been presented to them their entire lives never have, believing they can grow a community that all can benefit from without limitations or unbalanced power structures preventing them from practicing faith on their own terms. There are continuously growing communities of women in real life who have been able to create new religions that they have genuinely connected with in comparison to their previous ones, such as the organization known as "women-church." In "Women-Church: Feminist Concept, Religious Commitment, Women's Movement," Mary E. Hunt gives a background on the origins of the movement, which began with theologian Schüssler Fiorenza, who taught her ideas and beliefs to anyone who wanted to listen, and many who heard her resonated with her words and ended up joining the community. Hunt describes women-church as a "movement of autonomous groups seeking to actualize "a discipleship of equals." ("Women-Church," 85) She examines the origins of the movement, as well as its influence on religion and religious feminism, while also showing respect for Fiorenza. Hunt states that women-church is a "living example of the fact that feminist studies in religion are dangerous to those who seek to preserve kyriarchy and liberating to those who envision change." ("Women-Church," 85)

The inspiration for women-church came from "ekklesia", a Greek word meaning that all free male Athenian citizens were able to attend and vote on decisions regarding their lives and families, as well as slaves and animals. ("Ecclesia Definition

& Meaning.") Hunt also notes that "If those who were marginalized were to be included, they had to have rhetorical representation as well as voice and vote. So, the term women came to signify those who had been left out. Only by including the marginalized in 'women-church' could a 'discipleship of equals' come into being." ("Women-Church," 88) Many women who were drawn to women-church had deep connections to faith, and wished to be ordained in the Roman Catholic church, but were not permitted to by the Vatican; they were told that since Jesus never had any female disciples, and because they were not biologically male and therefore did not "naturally" resemble Christ, they could not be included in those positions in the church. Multiple conferences were had over these issues, including discussions from many female Catholic theologians who had the qualifications required for ordination, but were denied simply because of their biological sex. Hunt notes how even these theologians who have studied religion for years and devoted their lives to their faith do not understand why there are these biological rules set in place, and that this "one-dimensional analysis" that the church has for ordination requirements only works so that a kyriarchal power can use it to their advantage, remaining in their positions of power while denying and limiting the abilities of other people. ("Women-Church," 88)

Many women decide that they want to leave the Catholic church based on their negative experiences and religious trauma, along with the very bad history the church has in regards to sexual abuse and pedophilia, cover-ups, money, and views that are stubborn and unchanging. With these situations, they do not want to stay or support this particular organization, but they do not want to give up on their faith

altogether and lose that connection, as their faith is still something vital to them. Many women did not know where to go to get that positive experience that they are seeking. Women-church has been a wonderful alternative for these women, as the primary focus is on the healthier values of the Catholic religion: love, justice, sacrament, and solidarity, while also being a space where there are no hierarchies or barriers preventing them from being as involved in their religion as they wish to be, whether that is simply attending a mass or becoming ordained and hosting mass for others (if having the proper qualifications; their intellect and their love and devotion to their faith is what matters, not their biological sex). ("Women-Church," 94)

Similar to the women involved in women-church, the protagonist of *Parable of the Sower* by Octavia E. Butler*,* Lauren Olamina, is a 15-year-old girl who struggles to connect to the faith she has been brought up in and creates a new one, "Earthseed," that comforts and motivates her. The post-apocalyptic science-fiction novel is told from Lauren's point of view, as she is living in Los Angeles in the year 2024. While the novel examines their broken society and the danger that awaits outside the walls of their small community, it also focuses on not just Lauren's journey to survive, but also her personal journey with faith, and her connection to the religion "Earthseed." Her father is a Baptist pastor, and his entire family and community practice the same religion. While Lauren loves her father and has a great amount of respect for him, she does not identify with his religion; she doesn't feel connected to it in the same way that he does, but won't let anyone know her differing views on faith:

> "At least three years ago, my father's God stopped being my God. His church stopped being my church. And yet, today, because I'm a coward, I let myself be initiated into that church. I let my father baptize me in all three names of that God who isn't mine any more. My God has another name." (*Parable of the Sower*, 7)

While she does not outwardly challenge her father or confront him about his beliefs in order to please him, she does so internally to herself, and acknowledges that although he is the best person she knows, he is not perfect and not all of his beliefs or teachings are beneficial to the community. For example, he does not believe that humans have contributed to the drastic change in the climate, and that God will be able to easily fix this issue. Lauren disagrees:

> "'People have changed the climate of the world. Now they're waiting for the old days to come back.' 'Your father says he doesn't believe people change the climate in spite of what scientists say. He says only God could change the world in such an important way.' 'Do you believe him?' She opened her mouth, looked at me, then closed it again. After a while, she said, 'I don't know.' 'My father has blind spots,' I said. 'He's the best person I know, but even he has blind spots.'" (*Parable of the Sower,* 37)

While others in the community, including the friend she is talking to about the climate, may listen and believe in whatever her father tells them, Lauren silently challenges those beliefs, and prepares for when things will inevitably worsen. Although she doesn't want to be a Baptist like her father, Lauren does not wish to cut ties with faith or have no connection to it at all; she expresses her frustration with not being able to find comfort in her father's religion and wishes that she could see the importance in it the way her community does: "I almost wish I could believe it was important the way a lot of people seem to, the way my father seems to." (*Parable of the Sower*, 14) She often questions the ideas that the people in her community have of God, saying that for some, it may just be a name for "whatever makes you feel special

and protected" (*Parable of the Sower*, 15) and not something that makes a genuine or positive impact on their lives or the world around them.

Lauren also recognizes that many in her world who are practicing certain religions (politicians and people in power) wish to use religion as a means of holding on to that power for as long as they can, taking more rights away from others for their own selfish gain. For the women of women-church, along with wishing to be more active participants in the church through ordination, many also realized that there was more of an emphasis on power to the church, and maintaining those certain positions of power while refusing others who had genuine faith. They did not want the focus to be on power, but rather to be on the positive values of Catholicism and Christianity, because that is what it s*hould* be about, not about who has more influence and control. So rather than continuously try to change the minds of those in power in the church, and attempt to be ordained, and realizing that the probability of achieving this goal was unlikely, women created their own organizations that removed the power structures and limitations. These groups were not always large ones, but were still their own communities who stood in solidarity wanting to make a change and challenged the outdated views of original organizations they were once a part of.

In *Parable of the Sower,* Lauren does not want an all-powerful being controlling everything while she sits around and waits for things to either improve or worsen, and does not want to force people to follow a certain religion as her government does, she wants God, and religion, to be something better. Her religion is on her own terms, and she makes the change that she wishes to see in the world, just as those in women-church wish to accomplish. There are no set limitations for what

one can do in this religious organization to embrace their faith; they are welcome to do it in whatever way they wish, something that is prohibited by their original organizations.

While she has her own unique ideas of faith and who or what God is, she even questions her own personal beliefs that differ from those around her: "Sometimes I don't know the answer. I doubt myself. I doubt what I think I know." (*Parable of the Sower*, 26) Lauren doesn't claim to have all of the answers on religion, and acknowledges that there is still so much that she doesn't understand yet, but when she talks about her own faith and why she believes it, it is because it's what feels right to her. In her savage and chaotic world, she finds solace in her own religion, which is something she never felt with her family's faith.

Lauren keeps a journal which contains all of these ideas and beliefs, and a religion/belief system that is labelled as "Earthseed" later in the novel. Throughout her journey, she continuously writes new verses. When describing her beliefs of God and who God is to her, she describes God as Change that cannot be resisted, but can be influenced:

> "For whatever it's worth, here's what I believe…This is the one I keep coming back to: God is Power – Infinite, Irresistible, Inexorable, Indifferent. And yet, God is Pliable – Trickster, Teacher, Chaos, Clay. God exists to be shaped. God is Change. This is the literal truth. God can't be resisted or stopped, but can be shaped and focused. This means God is not to be prayed to. Prayers only help the person doing the praying, and then, only if they strengthen and focus that person's resolve. If they're used that way, they can help us in our only real relationship with God. They help us to shape God and to accept and work with the shapes that God imposes on us. God is power, and in the end, God prevails. But we can rig the game in our own favor if we understand that God exists to be shaped, and will be shaped, with or without our forethought, with or without our intent. That's what I know. That's some of it anyway. I'm not like Mrs. Sims. I'm not some kind of potential Job, long suffering, stiff necked, then, at last, either humble

> before an all-knowing almighty, or destroyed. My God doesn't love me or hate me or watch over me or know me at all, and I feel no love for or loyalty to my God. My God just is." (*Parable of the Sower*, 25)

In Lauren's world, it is not enough to just hope that God will fix all of their problems. For her, there is a different, more important relationship to be had with God. While her God does not have any personal connection to her, and has neither love nor hatred for her, she believes that their relationship is to shape one another. If the shape they give to God is to do nothing and simply wait for their situation to get better on its own, it will be of no benefit to anyone, and will cause them to become too weak to continue surviving. While the future of their world looks bleak, Lauren believes that the way they are living now doesn't have to be permanent if they can shape God into something better. Like Lauren, the women who are a part of women-church think that there can be a better version of faith than the one that is presented by the Roman Catholic church.

While Lauren already has her own belief system, it takes her a while to find the right name for it:

> "Well, today, I found the name, found it while I was weeding the back garden and thinking about the way plants seed themselves, windborne, animalborne, waterborne, far from their parent plants. They have no ability at all to travel great distances under their own power, and yet, they do travel. Even they don't have to just sit in one place and wait to be wiped out. There are islands thousands of miles from anywhere – the Hawaiian Islands, for example, and Easter Island – where plants seeded themselves and grew long before any humans arrived. Earthseed." (*Parable of the Sower*, 77)

These tiny plant seeds seem weak and insignificant, but are able to spread to other places and take root. They don't have to just sit and wait for death, they have the ability to move and grow, just as Lauren wishes to do with those around her in order to build a better world. She believes that anyone can be "Earthseed," and that

eventually, they will have to "seed ourselves farther and farther from this dying place" and begin again. (*Parable of the Sower*, 78) As she continues to write in her journal, creating more poems and verses, she decides to call her book *Earthseed: The Book of the Living.* The inspiration for the title came from books her father owned: Tibetan and Egyptian Books of the Dead. While she has never heard of a book that sounds like hers, she states that she wouldn't be surprised if a book like that already existed, and that if there happen to be other people already out there with the same beliefs as her, she won't care about being the original creator of this faith, or to be in charge, she just wants to join them, teach others, and help out whenever she can.

Lauren's goal is to start a community of "Earthseed" on earth, and eventually spread this community to other planets. She has no idea how long it will take or even how it will begin in the first place, but is determined to keep writing and teaching, and feels that it is something hopeful for humanity, since their planet is completely ravaged:

> "'The Destiny of Earthseed is to take root among the stars…That's the ultimate Earthseed aim, and the ultimate human change short of death. It's a destiny we'd better pursue if we hope to be anything other than smooth-skinned dinosaurs – here today, gone tomorrow, our bones mixed with the bones and ashes of our cities…'" (*Parable of the Sower*, 222)

While Lauren travels and more people join her group traveling north, she tells them about "Earthseed." Not all of them are on board with her ideas, but Lauren does not try to force her beliefs on anyone she is with:

> "'But what the hell do you stand for?' she demanded. 'What do you pray to?' 'Ourselves,' I said. 'What else is there?' She turned away in disgust, then turned back. 'Do we have to join your cult if we travel with you?' 'No.'" (*Parable of the Sower*, 238)

If people want to join her community, she is fine with that. If not, she is fine with that too. She does not want to become like the oppressive religious government that not only forces people to follow one religion, but does not even take care of its people as it should. Women-church is also something welcoming of all; while the name is women-church, it's not considered to be a church that is strictly available to women alone. Some groups do only have women in order to magnify their voices and experiences with the Roman Catholic church, but other groups allow anyone to join no matter who they are, unlike their traditional religions and religious communities they were once part of. Fiorenza describes women-church as a place that women "in the angry power of the Spirit, are sent forth to feed, heal, and liberate." ("Women-Church," 88) Hunt also notes how a lot of female ministers enjoy being a part of women-church organizations because everyone participates and takes responsibility; they're not required to be in charge of every service or bear the burden of solving every issue that arises, everyone contributes. ("Women-Church," 96) They focus on community and working together, rather than upholding imbalanced power structures.

One of the people Lauren meets, Bankole, doesn't believe in "Earthseed," but supports Lauren and what she wishes to accomplish with it, and has thoughtful discussions with her about her God:

> "'Your stuff isn't very comforting.' 'It is after a while. I'm still growing into it myself. God isn't good or evil, doesn't favor you or hate you, and yet God is better partnered than fought.' 'Your God doesn't care about you at all…' 'All the more reason to care about myself and others. All the more reason to create Earthseed communities and shape God together. 'God is Trickster, Teacher, Chaos, Clay.' We decide which aspect we embrace – and how to deal with the others.'" (*Parable of the Sower*, 221)

Lauren emphasizes that because her God does not care about her, it's even more important to take care of one another and give a better shape to God than the one that currently exists to her. Her religion also gives her more choices and abilities: "God is Change, and in the end, God *does* prevail. But we have something to say about the whens and the whys of that end." (*Parable of the Sower*, 294) Rather than just sitting and waiting in fear of an all-powerful being to make change happen, her God requires people to come together as a community and have a say in what happens to them and their future. The options Lauren has aren't limited or controlled by other people; she and the people around her get to make the decisions for themselves.

Lauren is also the own protagonist for her individual faith, and that is what her religion is all about. She does not create any obstacles for others or make herself the main leader of this faith; she even says that she is not the "creator" and if others already believe in her faith somewhere out there, she'll just join them in their mission to shape God into something better in order to shape themselves into something better, because that is what is vital to her: making a difference and creating a better destiny for humans than the oppressive and abysmal lives that they currently lead.

Rather than abandoning faith altogether and feeling hopeless after losing her entire family, trying to survive, and find safety, "Earthseed" becomes a great source of comfort for Lauren, and becomes a huge part of her identity. "'When my father…disappeared,' I began, 'it was Earthseed that kept me going. When most of my community and the rest of my family were wiped out, and I was alone, I still had Earthseed. What I am now, all that I am now is Earthseed.'" (*Parable of the Sower*, 262) She wants a connection to faith, and wants to believe in things getting better for

people. And while her God does not seem very comforting or caring, her view of God can actually be extremely beneficial; she is so focused on community and actually making a difference to the world around her, and encourages others to do the same. She doesn't believe that God will magically fix everything for her, but that they must take action and work with one another to create a better world. When religion is not being used as a form of control, or is not being participated in out of guilt from others or fear of being wrong, people have much better and healthier experiences with it, as there are no feelings of shame.

At the end of the novel, when the group reaches a remote piece of land belonging to Bankole, they decide to stay there and build the "Earthseed" community, calling their new home Acorn. While not everyone wants to be a part of Lauren's religion, when they arrive, they have conversations about it, look at some verses together, and even think about how some of those verses apply to their own lives:

> "We spoke our individual memories and quoted Bible passages, Earthseed verses, and bits of songs and poems that were favorites of the living or the dead." (*Parable of the Sower*, 328)

Lauren does not force everyone to only read specific verses, everyone is welcome to share whatever passages and memories they would like to, no matter what religion they believe in. Similar to Lauren and her acceptance of everyone's differing beliefs, women-church does not only include those who are Catholic. It may have started out that way, but they welcome anyone, and there are also a significant number of Protestants who now participate as well. While not everyone has her same views, they are their own little community and she believes in all of them to make a difference.

Lauren believes that they are genuinely good people, and their actions and the way they treat others is what is important, because in her view, that is the shape that God will also have.

It is not likely that much change will happen very soon in real life within institutions such as the Roman Catholic church; even though organizations such as women-church have now existed for decades and gained more traction, that does not mean that the Roman Catholic church will suddenly make drastic changes to rules that have existed for centuries: “More than two decades after women-church began, the kyriarchal church during the papacy of Benedict XVI shows few signs of moving in the direction of a discipleship of equals. But the movement is mature enough to let the needs of the world, not the failings of the institutional church, guide it.” (“Women-Church,” 93) However, movements such as women-church have gained more and more traction over the years and have been supported by more and more people who desire to be a part of an organization that welcomes them. They don’t wish to abandon their faith, despite the obstacles they have faced, finding guidance on what to do next outside of the church based on the world around them that is constantly changing and evolving. There have already been some very positive impacts as a result of the women-church movement, despite it still being so young in comparison to Christian churches that have existed for much longer. More people have been able to find something that brings them comfort in a way their original religion didn’t, and have found a way to continue practicing their faith on their own terms, rather than by strict rules given to them by people in power who limit their abilities and how they can practice their faith. They want to have a relationship with

God, but do not like that others are telling them how that relationship is supposed to look, because it is not their relationship to control; whatever connection they wish to have should be between that one individual and God, with no one else attempting to influence it for their own selfish gains. The way of thinking about ordination in the church has also changed for many, emphasizing that they should focus more on the abilities and theological qualifications of a person, man or woman, and encourage them to do so as well as encourage their love and devotion for Christ and the church. This can be seen with Roman Catholic Women priests, and more people who have genuine faith will be drawn to a religious organization that is welcoming and focuses on love and genuine faith.

CHAPTER TWO: *THE POISONWOOD BIBLE* AND "THEORIZING GENDER FROM RELIGION CASES"

While Lauren's journey with faith and her relationship with her family are much more positive, and she was able to gain the courage and strength she needed to keep moving because of her genuine connection to her faith, there are many instances in which young girls suffer familial abuse in relation to religion, and struggle to connect with faith in the way they are dictated to. In Barbara Kingsolver's *The Poisonwood Bible,* the Price family goes on a missionary trip to the Belgian Congo in 1959. Nathan Price, the father and leader of the family, is an evangelical Baptist preacher who uses his religious beliefs as a means of justification for the abuse he inflicts on his wife and five daughters. The girls in this novel struggle with their own identity and agency in relation to religion, and wish to escape their current situation and no longer remain complicit to the actions of Nathan. This is a common dilemma for young girls who suffer familial abuse due to religious views and feel that they have nowhere else to go. In "Theorizing Gender from Religion Cases: Agency, Feminist Activism, and Masculinity Author(s)," Avishai examines the relationship between feminism and religion, and why some women remain in conservative religions and why women undergo abuse in those religious organizations, finding varied results. She discusses agency and the different definitions of it throughout generations, as well as the connections between agency, autonomy, and free will. Many gender studies noted how agency was often defined through the experiences of men, and was connected to being an autonomous person able to make their own decisions. ("Theorizing Gender from Religion Cases," 265) This definition of agency

was not applicable to all women at the time, especially those in conservative religions. As Leah and her sisters deal with harsh abuse from their father that connect to his religious beliefs, he does not allow them to have any agency or to think for themselves; they must blindly follow his rules and never question him, as he is convinced that he knows what is best for all of them.

Kingsolver's novel is told from the point of view of each sister: Rachel, Leah, Adah, Rebekah, and Ruth, with one chapter from the mother, Orleanna, in the beginning of each new section. Each sister has different views of religion, and while they are staying in the Congo, they begin to doubt what they have been taught, especially Leah. Leah is the sister who wishes to gain her father's favor the most, ("I myself would not curse, in or out of Methuselah's hearing or even in my dreams, because I crave heaven and to be my father's favorite." (*The Poisonwood Bible*, 66)) and has always trusted him, but questions his teachings more and more as the novel progresses. During their stay in the Congo, their trip does not go according to plan, with most of the people living in the village refusing to convert to this new religion Nathan is introducing them to:

> "Father is trying to teach everybody to love Jesus, but what with one thing and another around here, they don't. Some of them are scared of Jesus, and some aren't, but I don't think they love Him. Even the ones that go to church, they still worship the false-eye dolls and get married to each other time and again. Father gets right put out about it. I'm scared of Jesus, too." (*The Poisonwood Bible*, 157)

As Nathan tries to convert people, he does so by attempting to make them afraid and guilty if they do not abandon their own faith and way of living and embrace his teachings. He often gets angry when things do not go his way, yelling at the people who have welcomed him and making them feel ashamed of themselves and their own

lifestyles. He instills fear into them and does not make his faith seem inviting at all, and even his own daughters are afraid of the God their father believes in. Although Nathan claims to be doing this missionary work to save the souls of other people, in reality he is doing it for himself; he believes that God is constantly watching his every move and thought, and demands him and his family to behave perfectly or else he will not get into heaven. Convinced that he will be rewarded for his actions, he does whatever he can to ensure the safety of his soul in the afterlife, even if it means endangering his wife and children, and ignoring their troubles and needs to fulfill his own desires. He completely lacks empathy and love for his family, and at times even seems to resent them. A lot of the animosity he has for them has to do with his religious beliefs; since he thinks that God is always watching, he feels shameful and angry about any sinful thoughts or sins that he may commit, and takes his frustration out on everyone else but himself. The abuse he inflicts on them is in a way his revenge, since he seems to believe that they are intentionally trying to make him commit sins, which would prevent him from getting into heaven.

While in the Congo, Nathan's obsessive relationship with God and his lack of relationships with the people around him has a destructive effect on the entire family. The girls and their mother are stuck in the Congo indefinitely, as Nathan is extremely persistent that these people will convert, despite the lack of people doing so as well as political tensions rising, and other missionaries warning them that they should leave now while it is safe. He refuses to listen, forcing them all to stay in their tiny temporary home, sleeping under special nets to avoid deadly mosquitos. Leah, the daughter who has always tried her best to be perfect for her father, and who has

always listened to what he has taught her without question, is beginning to doubt him and is less certain about her faith than she has been in the past:

> "If his decision to keep us here in the Congo wasn't right, then what else might he be wrong about? It has opened up in my heart a sickening world of doubts and possibilities, where before I had only faith in my father and love for the Lord. Without that rock of certainty underfoot, the Congo is a fearsome place to have to sink or swim." (*The Poisonwood Bible*, 244)

Leah begins to wonder why her family is suffering so much when her father is trying to do something that he believes is beneficial. She has never felt the need to question him in the past, but the harsh realities of the world around her greatly contribute to her changing point of view on her father, his religious beliefs, and why he believes them. She also questions why God isn't helping them, considering what they are doing is ultimately for the Lord:

> "'Heavenly Father, deliver us,' I said, although I didn't care for this new angle. Father had already bent his will to Africa by remaking his garden in mounds, the way they do here. This was a sure sign to God of his humility and servitude, and it was only fair to expect our reward. So what was this business of being delivered through hardships? Did Father aim to suggest God was not obligated to send us down any beans or squash at all, no matter how we might toil in His name? That He just proposed to sit up there and consign us to hardships one right after another? Certainly it wasn't my place to scrutinize God's great plan, but what about the balancing scales of justice? Father said nothing to ease my worries. He just plucked up another bean flower and held it up to the sky, examining it in the African light like a doctor with an X-ray, looking for the secret thing gone wrong." (*The Poisonwood Bible*, 78)

Leah is frustrated with her feelings of doubt; she wants to believe and trust in her father and his plans, but is also questioning where women fit in in not just her father's plans, but in the church: "For Father, the Kingdom of the Lord is an uncomplicated place, where tall, handsome boys fight on the side that always wins…But where is the place for girls in that Kingdom? The rules don't quite apply to us, nor protect us either." (*The Poisonwood Bible*, 244) She is aware that because of her gender, she is

not viewed or respected the same way her father is by their religious organization, and even her own father does not have as much respect for her simply because she is a girl. She has tried her entire life to be just like him, and thought that if she did exactly as he did, then she would turn out the same way, have the same opportunities, and be just as respected and important as him, but the longer they stay in the Congo, the more she realizes that that is not true, and recognizes that he prevents her and her sisters from having their own agency and making their own decisions, not because he may know what is best, but because he wants to continuously have power over them. She also sees how her father doesn't have feel any real love or concern for the people he claims he wants to save; he tries to make the people of the Congo feel ashamed about themselves for not being Baptists, whereas Leah genuinely wants to help the people she meets. Not only does Leah go from having the closest bond with Nathan, but also is the one who shifts the most to opposing views and feelings against him.

Although they are a part of a very conservative religion, Leah and her sisters are not bad people like their faither. Avishai mentions how people who study gender and religion often look through a biased lens, approaching the subject with hostility, negatively affecting the way they study and write about religion in relation to gender studies:

> "A similar pattern has been observed in women's and gender studies, a discipline that has historically viewed religion as an obstacle to feminism's goals. Gender scholars across disciplines - including sociology - have approached religion with ambivalence, hostility, or indifference, thereby stifling interest in religion among gender scholars and narrowing the analytical frames available for understanding religion cases. ("Theorizing Gender from Religion Cases," 263)

But conservative religions are very fascinating to many scholars, as there are a lot of women within the community who have welcomed feminist thoughts and practices, but did not want to have the title of "feminist" attached to them. These women do not wish to completely ignore or shut out certain modern ideas simply because they are in conservative religions:

> "…they are clearly not impervious to contemporary ideas about gender, women's bodies, sexuality, empowerment, etc., as indicated by the impact of feminist ideologies and sensibilities on their articulation of goals, explanations of political participation, and strategies for action. Pious religious women's movements draw on and are shaped by feminist ideas, even in instances where they seem to embody its antithesis. What is rejected is the feminist label." ("Theorizing Gender from Religion Cases," 270)

Although they do want to be labeled as feminists, many of the changes they wish to make within their religious organizations have been inspired by feminist thought. ("Theorizing Gender from Religion Cases," 269) Avishai's research shows how feminist ideologies regarding gender, sexuality, and autonomy occupy space in religious spaces, having an influence on religious rules and thought sometimes without these women even realizing it:

> "In aggregate, women emerged as thinking, strategizing, and planning individuals who made choices within a certain set of realities, thereby providing examples that expanded definitions of agency as resistance, negotiation with oppressive social structures, and partial compliance. This scholarship, therefore, contributed to feminist theories of gendered social regimes and interaction with seemingly oppressive social institutions. To return to Wuthnow's terms, religion cases illuminated and sophisticated general theoretical concepts" ("Theorizing Gender from Religion Cases," 267)

Even when some women appear to be the antithesis of feminism due to the religious organizations they are a part of, they actually have a lot of progressive feminist thoughts and ideas. For many women in these religions, they focus on self, family, and community, and wish to stay due to their faith and devotion which bring them so

much joy that other people's views or rules do not matter to them as much. And many of these women do not just passively follow and comply with certain rules set for them; many rules have been reinterpreted or refused, resulting in changing limitations and creating new meanings for them. Avishai explains how religion both "reproduced gendered power dynamics but also empowered women," making it a good place to create feminist ideas in relation to agency in the face of restrictive and oppressive religious rules. ("Theorizing Gender from Religion Cases," 266) Rather than leaving altogether, they try to make change happen in the community they are a part of, because they wish to stay connected to their faith and to others.

Similar to Lauren in *Parable of the Sower*, Leah doubts her father. However, their relationships with their fathers are entirely different. Lauren's father never portrayed their religion as something oppressive, or something that is violent or controlling, and merely wanted to share his faith with others. Leah's father, on the other hand, made it controlling from birth, and a lot of it was due to their gender. The girls themselves are aware of these limitations, and know that their father looks down on them more simply because they are girls. She knows that Nathan does not give the same opportunities to her and her sisters or allow them to do certain things:

> "There's a great holy war going on in my father's mind, in which we're meant to duck and run and obey orders and fight for all the right things, but I can't always make out the orders or even tell which side I am on exactly. I'm not even allowed to carry a gun. I'm a girl. He has no inkling." (*The Poisonwood Bible*, 244)

There is resentment present; as Orleanna never gave birth to any boys, it feels that he is frustrated with all of them for not having a son, and takes out this anger on them, physically and mentally. No matter how hard they try, they will never be good

enough for him. They can never live up to his expectations and have even less of a chance because of how they were born. Their anatomy alone impacts how he views them, and he will never treat them the same way as if he treated a son.

Leah is a Baptist like her father, and has always had faith in the same God; she wasn't just believing in Jesus because she wanted her father's approval and love. She has genuine belief (as well as fear), but starts to recognize the faults in her father's way of thinking because of her gender and the way she has been treated, acknowledges that his actions are wrong, and decides she no longer wants to be treated this way or be complicit in his actions toward others. Nathan shows no empathy or love for his family, but that is all Leah wants: to take care of others and make a positive impact on peoples' lives, changing the community around her for the better.

At a time where Leah is beginning to see things differently in regards to faith, she has a conversation with Brother Fowles, whom Nathan does not like nor approve of, due to his differing religious beliefs and the danger of allowing his daughters to have conversations that will lead them to freely think for themselves rather than do what he tells them to. They discuss "God's word," and the many ways in which it is interpreted:

> "'Have you heard the songs they sing here in Kilanga?' he asked. 'They're very worshipful. It's a grand way to begin a church service, singing a Congolese hymn to the rainfall on the seed yams. It's quite easy to move from there to the parable of the mustard seed. Many parts of the Bible make good sense here, if only you change a few words.' He laughed. 'And a lot of whole chapters, sure, you just have to throw away.' 'Well, it's every bit God's word, isn't it?' Leah said. 'God's word, brought to you by a crew of romantic idealists in a harsh desert culture eons ago, followed by a chain of translators

> two thousand years long.' Leah stared at him. 'Darling did you think God wrote it all down in the English of King James himself?' 'No, I guess not.' 'Think of all the duties that were perfectly obvious to Paul or Matthew in that old Arabian desert that are pure nonsense to us now. All that foot washing, for example. Was it really for God's glory, or just to keep sand out of the house?' Leah sat narrow-eyed in her chair, for once stumped for the correct answer." (*The Poisonwood Bible,* 247)

Brother Fowles points out that these works in the Bible have been translated and changed throughout history, and that God himself was not the one who wrote it all. And he notes how things change, the world changes, society changes, and things do not stay the same forever, but these old rules and limitations do not change with the world around them, prohibiting progression for those who are a part of certain religious organizations. Leah, who has always been so certain of her faith and where it comes from, and who has never questioned her teachings, is now beginning to ask and listen to questions that she never thought to consider before. Nathan, who walks into their home during this conversation, is furious that they have spoken to him and does not want them to have these conversations, because he wants them to continue listening to *him,* and do as *he* says. His own pride, fear, and religious views control his actions towards his family.

While Leah's character development throughout the book is one of the most significant, she is not the only one who has struggling thoughts on religion and Nathan. Orleanna, his wife, has some very conflicting views on who Jesus is: "I could never work out whether we were to view religion as a life-insurance policy or a life sentence. I can understand a tender, unprejudiced Jesus. But I could never quite feature the two of them living in the same house." (*The Poisonwood Bible,* 96) Unlike her husband, she has compassion and understanding for other people, and pictured

Jesus to be the same way, but cannot picture her husband's version, who is vengeful and judgmental, to be the same person as the Jesus she wants to believe in and understand. Orleanna does not narrate often, but she when she does, she stresses how Nathan neglects his family and also *wants* to abuse them. In the beginning of the novel, she follows Nathan's orders and does what he tells her to do, but as the story progresses, she begins to defy him more and more, gaining the courage to escape him and their dangerous life, taking her daughters with her. Throughout her relationship with Nathan, and throughout her daughter's lives, religion was never something that was loving or comforting for any of them; even if they wanted to envision a loving Jesus, the version given to them by Nathan was always an oppressive one, and caused them to undergo physical and emotional abuse for years.

One of the youngest sisters, Adah, does not speak often verbally, but from the beginning of the novel she is the one who challenges what she has been taught the most. She questions why the accident of birth prevents you from going to heaven, even if you are a good person throughout your life but just happened to never know about Jesus:

> "According to my Baptist Sunday-school teachers, a child is denied entrance to heaven merely for being born in the Congo rather than, say, north Georgia, where she could attend church regularly. This was the sticking point in my own little lame march to salvation: admission to heaven is gained by the luck of the draw. At age five I raised my good left hand in Sunday school and used a month's ration of words to point out this problem to Miss Betty Nagy. Getting born within earshot of a preacher, I reasoned, is entirely up to chance. Would Our Lord be such a hit-or-miss kind of Saviour as that? Would he really condemn some children to eternal suffering just for the accident of a heathen birth, and reward others for a privilege they did nothing to earn? I waited for Leah and the other pupils to seize on this very obvious point of argument and jump in with their overflowing brace of words. To my dismay,

> they did not. Not even my own twin, who ought to know about unearned privilege." (*The Poisonwood Bible,* 171)

When questioning the logic taught by her Baptist Sunday-school teacher, not only does the teacher punish her for it, but the other students don't even pay much mind to what she has brought up; they continue listening to what the teacher has to say and do not question what is being taught to them. She notes how confident they all are in their faith and what they believe in, and don't even *bother* asking anything important, meanwhile Adah has been questioning these things ever since she had the cognitive ability to. This is what a lot of people, including many women, who leave the church struggle with: the ideas of other people being sent to hell simply because of the accident of birth. Even if they were genuinely a good person, and didn't have the opportunity to learn about the "correct" religion and convert, they would have to suffer for eternity in the afterlife. When God is portrayed as someone so cold and unwelcoming, it is increasingly difficult to support those ideas and the people who teach them, but also just as difficult to gain the strength to walk away.

Like many women who remain in conservative religions, the Price daughters do not remain complicit to their father's actions forever, becoming increasingly more unwilling to reject his abuse throughout the novel. They support one another and wish to make a genuine change that their father cannot make with the people of the Congo, especially Leah; she wants to embrace love and compassion, and share that with others, not making them feel ashamed for not having the same beliefs or exact same way of life. As the Price family finally gathers the strength to escape their abusive father, for the first time in their lives they can do whatever it is they want to achieve,

making their own decisions regarding their careers, their partners, and their religious beliefs, gaining their own agency and varying religious identities, which is something they could never do with Nathan present in their lives.

CHAPTER THREE: *THE SECRET LIVES OF CHURCH LADIES* AND "DIFFERENT IDENTITY ACCOUNTS FOR CATHOLIC WOMEN"

Many women who leave the church, as well as women who remain because they agree with its teachings, often share similar views on what it means to be Catholic. In "Different Identity Accounts for Catholic Women Author(s)," Elaine Howard Ecklund compares thirty-seven different interviews with different women, including women who agree with their Church and its teachings, women who disagree and leave altogether, and women who still have faith but do not agree with everything that is taught. She also asks how women understand and perceive their own individual religious identities in comparison to Catholic teachings and rules in the church. Ecklund's main focus is to understand the women who are still Catholic, but do not agree with the teachings of the Catholic church. She states that they view their Catholic identity as "negotiable, finding meaning and voice in their parish and in the wider Church. This group also believes in their own abilities to make changes in the doctrines of the Church, revealing that individualist religious identities may actually foster commitment. Findings expand research on religious identities and have implications for the relationship of personal identity accounts to institutional change." ("Different Identity Accounts for Catholic Women Author(s)," 135) Like Avishai's findings in her own research, some of the women that Ecklund interviews remain in the Catholic church in order to make change happen within their community: "For some of these women, being able to negotiate the content of their identities as Catholic and find meaning and voice within Catholicism fosters loyalty in the midst of dissatisfaction and offers a particular action strategy for changes to the larger

church." ("Different Identity Accounts for Catholic Women Author(s)," 135) While there are limitations on what they can and cannot do, including taking on certain roles and positions within the church, they wish to continuously participate within their community and work together to change these rules, such as the women she spoke to who are in what are considered to be conservative religions. Now, there are some women in conservative religions who do not wish for things to change, such as having a female pastor or having a woman do the homily service during mass, and agree with the current teachings of the church in regards to women. Some felt that women have too *much* power in the church, and that they are not as good as male equivalents.

Women remaining in the church and holding onto conservative views versus women who leave entirely are examined within the short stories in *The Secret Lives of Church Ladies.* In this collection of stories about Black girls and women, Philyaw writes about each woman's own individual relationship with religion and the religious organizations they were once or currently are a part of, as well as their own internal struggles regarding their identity, including how they have been told to behave versus what they want for themselves. The story "Eula" looks at two women, Eula and Caroletta, having discussions about religious teachings and rules set specifically for women, their different views on faith, as well as their own feelings for each other (and also how they view those feelings due to their faith). Eula has more faith than Caroletta does: "Eula is a true believer. She doesn't walk around with questions lingering in her throat like I do." (*The Secret Lives of Church Ladies,* 3) And they debate about what they were taught and who taught it to them:

> "'The Bible is the inerrant word of God,' Eula whispers, as defiantly as a whisper can be. 'And you only believe that because of how another group of men interpret the first group of men. People say you're supposed to put your faith in God, not men. Do you think God wants you, or anybody, to go untouched for decades and decades? For their whole lives? Like Sister Stewart, Sister Wilson, Sister Hill, my mother after my father died – all those women at church who think they have to choose between pleasing God and something so basic, so human as being held and known in the most intimate way. If God became human once—' 'If?' Eula says, spitting out the word. '—then why would he make rules that force such a painful choice?' 'I don't question God.' 'But maybe you should question the people who taught you this version of God. Because it's not doing you any favors.'" (*The Secret Lives of Church Ladies,* 10)

While they do not have the same beliefs regarding religion, Caroletta does not tell Eula that she needs to abandon her faith, neglect it, or question or turn away from God, but she should question those who taught her this specific version of God that sets limitations for women and tells them how to behave, setting certain rules for them that result in their unhappiness. She emphasizes that the main focus of the religion they were shown is not on love and faith, but control and power and telling others how to behave based on their anatomy. For example, the two of them have feelings for each other and want to be together. But Eula does not want to be with her, not because she has no feelings for Caroletta, but because her religion has told her that she is not allowed to love another woman romantically. They have set rules for these women, telling them that they cannot have sex outside of marriage, cannot be with who they love, and have to focus on being absolutely perfect and following every single rule so that God will accept them and let them into heaven. It's once again about making people behave exactly how they want them to and how *they* will approve of others' behavior, focusing more on pleasing a very demanding God than being happy. And if these women make a mistake along the way, they will be made to feel immense guilt over their actions.

Caroletta makes an important point that leaves Eula feeling even more conflicted: why would God, who supposedly was once human just like they are, force people to make such difficult decisions that will lead them to suppress their emotions and be unhappy for years to come? And why does God have to strictly be this one way? As mentioned in *The Poisonwood* Bible during Brother Fowles and Leah's discussion, God's "word" was translated and re-translated over centuries by different people, with rules and standards that don't all apply to today's world. There are many different versions of God that people had, and the people who teach you a certain version of God have certain intentions of how they want you to perceive that God, how they want you to behave, and how they want you to think of yourself and others who do or do not have the exact same religious views and rules/standards as you.

The story "Dear Sister" is a letter written to Jackie, a sister that the other four women have never met, and they are reaching out to her because their father has died. Each woman has a different relationship with religion, one is extremely religious and strict with her views, and she argues with the others who are lacking in faith, mentioning not just their faith, but the reasons they do or don't believe:

> "'Don't you—' 'take the Lord's name in vain, blah, blah, blah. Do you realize you cling to an imaginary white daddy because your flesh-and-blood daddy wasn't shit? Well, guess what. Your imaginary white daddy ain't shit either. If he was, he would've given you a real daddy that was worth a damn.'" (*The Secret Lives of Church Ladies,* 30)

When fighting with Renee, the other women critique the way in which she is looking to God because of the bad relationship she had with her father, seeking comfort in something that she could not receive from the person who should have given her love.

They argue that if there was a God, then he would have given her a better father, and don't understand how God could let someone suffer like that:

> "'Renee,' I said. 'Stop carrying on like we're some kind of great dynasty and Stet was some kind of patriarch. And if you're going to quote Scripture, quote the whole thing. 'Honor your father and mother – which is the first commandment with a promise – so that it may go well with you and that you may enjoy long life on the earth.' Girl, I get it. You are trying to get that crown in heaven. And you wanted desperately for that man to love you back. And maybe he did. But respect the fact that the rest of us didn't want what you wanted and didn't get whatever it is you think you got from him.'" (*The Secret Lives of Church Ladies,* 32)

Renee seems to pick specific Bible quotes to justify her thoughts and to tell her sisters how they should behave, and her sisters, who have also grown up with religion, studying and interpreting scripture, tell her to stop picking what she specifically *wants* to focus on. They also note how the next verse that Renee had mentioned was about parents and their responsibilities with raising their children:

> "'And,' I said, 'if we're going to keep it really real, the next verse says, 'Fathers, don't exasperate your children; instead, bring them up in the training and instruction of the Lord.' 'In other words,' Tasheta said, 'if you weren't beating him over the head with Scripture, leave me the fuck alone about it.'" (*The Secret Lives of Church Ladies,* 32)

While Renee argues with her sisters over what she deems disrespectful behavior regarding their father, she never called her father out for not following the same rules in scripture that she does. He was allowed to do whatever he pleased, while she takes this frustration out on her sisters, holding them to a higher standard in terms of rules and how to behave, rather than her father. But her sisters do not have the same respect for him as she does, because they are aware that he never had any respect for them either.

At the funeral, she also mentions the way people may try to scare you into their religion or church: “And then he did the thing pastors always do at the funeral of someone who hadn’t darkened the church’s door in a few decades: reminded mourners of their own mortality and where they are likely to spend eternity if they don’t get right with Jesus.” (*The Secret Lives of Church Ladies,* 35) Many women struggle with these feelings within their community; they are made to feel guilty if they do not agree with every single belief that the church teaches, and feel that they are being coerced into staying out of a fear of being wrong and burning in hell. There is no encouragement to embrace faith out of love and compassion, but rather, like Nathan Price, they just want to save their own souls and feel better about themselves, without really caring about those that they pressure to convert.

Along with making people feel guilty and afraid, many women do not want to have limitations within the church based on gender, similar to the women of women-church. Ecklund explains how although women do have different roles in the Catholic Church, the “official doctrines of the Church continue to restrain their role.” (“Different Identity Accounts for Catholic Women Author(s),” 136) For example, women cannot become priests or deacons, and are often not allowed to take on other ministry roles through their parish. Ecklund states that women in the Catholic Church are a part of a patriarchal organization that has historically marginalized women, not just theologically, but sociologically as well. As a result, many end up leaving the church they were brought up in, some abandoning religion altogether, and others creating new groups that allow women to take on more leadership roles. (“Different Identity Accounts for Catholic Women Author(s),” 136) She also mentions how both

women who remain in conservative religions and women who leave both said that they thought that in order to be Catholic, you have to follow every teaching of the church: “For them, Catholic identities are fixed.” (“Different Identity Accounts for Catholic Women Author(s),” 141) They either stay and comply with every rule, or feel that their only option is to leave the church altogether, abandoning their faith because they do not want to be a part of that community and follow every rule with no exceptions. They were also never able to find a meaning in it; many were not a part of welcoming communities and were never shown different views or ways of experiencing Catholicism, only the harsh ones they grew up with that never benefitted them spiritually or emotionally. Along with these two groups, there is a third group of women who remained in the church but were not satisfied with all of its teachings, which actually resulted in even more loyalty to their parish and community. But these women did not believe every rule taught to them by the church, and wanted to use their voices within their parish to make change happen. Many of the women who stay think that they are making a difference in their own local parish and community, and they want to because of love for their faith and love for the work that they do.

In another short story from *The Secret Lives of Church Ladies* titled “Jael,” the narration goes back and forth from the points of view of two women; there are diary excerpts from a young girl named Jael, who is not very religious, as well as the excerpts of a diary from her extremely religious grandmother who is the only caretaker for her granddaughter. She has found Jael’s diary, and expresses her frustration with Jael’s actions and thoughts, while also asking God for help:

> "Every time she write in that diary, it gets worser and worser. I wish I had the right words to say. I pray to God to touch my mouth so that I can speak, and to touch her ears, heart, and mind so that she can hear. Because God knows I don't want no abomination living under my roof." (*The Secret Lives of Church Ladies,* 117)

Due to her religious views and rules, Jael's behavior with her friends, as well as her own thoughts and opinions as a young teenage girl is unacceptable for her grandmother. She also blames herself for Jael's behavior due to the name she chose for her; every woman in their family has had their name chosen from the Bible, but when choosing Jael's name, she did not closely read the story about the Biblical figure Jael:

> "The oldest woman in the family would open the big family Bible and point her finger on the page. Whatever woman's name was closest to her finger that was the name of the girl-child to be born. And we kept turning pages and pointing until we found a woman's name. All we ever birth were girls. For seven generations, nothing but girls. If I believed in luck, and if our lived had turned out better than how they did, I'd say it was a lucky seven." (137)…"I named her Jael. My finger landed on top of the name. Usually I had to look around the page until I found a name for a girl, or start over on another page. But that time, I landed right on it. I was so excited by that, thinking it was a sign that this child would be blessed. That she would be different. I didn't stop to read the story of Jael in the Bible, not till much later. Maybe if I had read it, I mighta chose a different name." (*The Secret Lives of Church Ladies,* 138)

Her grandmother blames Jael's actions and lifestyle on her Biblical name, believing that she turned out this way solely because of her name, and she may have been a better person if she had a different Biblical name. Towards the end of the story, it is revealed that Jael has murdered Jamie, a 35-year-old man who was secretly dating and sleeping with her friend Kachelle, who is fifteen. Her grandmother realizes what Jael has done, tries to understand why, and wants to protect her, while also noting how even though he was not a good person, her granddaughter's actions are still wrong: "This child thought she was doing the right thing. And yes, he was a nasty,

nasty man. But the Bible clearly say, 'Thou shalt not kill' and 'Vengeance is mine, sayeth the Lord.'" (*The Secret Lives of Church Ladies,* 143) Jael's grandmother has conflicting views on morality based on her religious teachings; she is scared for Jael and wants to keep her safe, but doesn't think that Jael should have taken matters into her own hands, and rather let God handle Jamie. However, Jael, who does not have the same devout faith that her grandmother has, does not think that the Lord will do anything about Jamie at all, and she wishes to keep her friend safe from a man who could seriously harm her. Similar to Lauren in *Parable of the Sower,* although Jael's action may not be morally good, she does not want to rely on an all-powerful being to fix all of her problems for her, because she knows that that is not always going to work; she is determined to fix her problems herself and save someone that she cares about.

"Instructions For Married Christian Husbands" contains a list of instructions for married Christian men who wish to secretly have an affair with the unnamed woman in this story. She does not reveal much about herself, stating that "The less you know about me, the better." (*The Secret Lives of Church Ladies,* 149) The list contains topics such as "Health and Wellness," "Your Religion," "Your Wife," and "Your Conscience." In the "Your Religion" Section, she states that if any of the men that sleep with her feel guilty about it, they should not try to influence her in attending church: "Don't ask me to repent, because I regret nothing. You can't save me, because I'm not in peril." (*The Secret Lives of Church Ladies,* 149) The men who have affairs with her end up trying to make themselves feel better about their actions, wanting to get the guilt off of their own consciences, and in an attempt to save their

souls, they try to convince the anonymous woman to come to church, even though she has no desire to do so. Even when they are committing adultery and are supposed to be the religious ones with upheld morals and standards, they do not hold themselves to that high standard, and attempt to transfer the blame or guilt onto someone else who is not even religious.

"When Eddie Levert Comes" shows the story of Daughter and Mama. Mama suffers from memory loss, and Daughter cares for her. Her brothers (Bruce and Rico) are not as present or helpful with Mama as Daughter is. Every day, Mama says that Eddie is coming to visit, and talks of nothing but him. While Mama is a religious woman, Daughter does not go to church anymore because of her mother's experiences:

> "Their work was done. They had led the poor unwed mother of three to the Living Water, as church folk referred to Jesus. But she wasn't their kind of people. Years later Daughter wanted no part of the church or brown liquor because they had both made her mama cry." (170) … "What Mama had was the love of Jesus – whose touch, Daughter imagined, was too ephemeral to quench anything—a quieter, more passive lover than the men she brought into her bed, but who nevertheless demanded everything." (*The Secret Lives of Church Ladies,* 171)

Mama's past experiences in the church are not specified, but she underwent some form of religious trauma and Daughter, realizing this, does not wish to be a part of that same community in which she had to witness her mother suffer from so much. Jesus is described as a very demanding and draining figure, constantly expecting more and more out of the people who devote themselves to him, similar to the short story called "How To Make Love To A Physicist," told from the point of view of Lyra, who talks about her struggles with dating and allowing herself to fully be with someone due to her own insecurities, as well as ones that were the cause of her

religious upbringing and the treatment she received from her family. Her mother continuously makes her feel guilty about her life choices based on her religious views, and tells her daughter how to behave through her own religious lens. When Lyra meets a physicist named Eric, they begin to have discussions about religion, as well as Lyra's complicated relationship with her mother:

> "'Even Einstein wasn't an atheist,' he says. 'He talked about God all the time. Now, he didn't believe in a god that was concerned with human behavior, which is the church's obsession and the reason it uses guilt and shame to enforce Christianity.' 'You don't think God cares how we treat each other and the planet?' 'I think that's the most important thing. But human beings are capable of doing that outside of the purview of the church. I've studied the Bible cover to cover. So much hinges on translation and interpretation. I grew up Catholic, and I love the ritual of it all. But I've come to understand that belief in a personal god is not essential. Not for me.'" (*The Secret Lives of Church Ladies,* 104)

During their conversation, Eric points out how the church does not always embrace love and acceptance and a real sense of community, and that the church's version of God is too focused on telling people how to behave, as well as causing people to feel guilt and shame over not being a Christian. Like Caroletta, he acknowledges that God cares about how we treat one another, but questions why God has to look the way that the church dictates. He also criticizes the way her mother practices religion, which is not in a loving way:

> "Heaven—getting into it, avoiding the alternative—is the whole point of living right, isn't it? Your mother speaks longingly of Judgment Day and the final accounting of who's allowed past the pearly gates, certain that God's accounting will mirror hers. 'It will be a very small number,' she's fond of saying. 'Only those who walk the straight and narrow path shall see the face of God.' And you realize that if God were to welcome everyone into heaven, your mother would abandon Christianity immediately." (*The Secret Lives of Church Ladies,* 105)

People like Lyra's mother, who claim to be loving Christians, enjoy judging other people, donning a holier than thou attitude. Because they follow the rules correctly and are a part of the "right" religion, they tend to have a superiority complex over other people and make them feel ashamed for not being as good enough of a person. Along with this, they are extremely certain of their rules and decisions, believing that God will agree with their actions as well. Eric notes how this version of God that they believe in is so unwelcoming and cruel, and if God actually *is* someone who is more welcoming and loving to all, these people who claim to be Christian would leave the church. Many of them enjoy judging others, and like the fact that they can use religion as a justification for their actions, and would not actually want to be part of a community that is so accepting. Like many women in real life, these conversations are difficult for Lyra, because growing up with her mother in the church is the only form of religion she has ever known, and has had huge effects on her life as an adult, including self-hatred and contempt, and difficulty with connecting with people and having genuine, lifelong relationships with them. She even stops talking to Eric for a while, thinking about what her mother would say to her if she was with her in the present moment. By the end of this story, however, she becomes tired of trying so hard to please her mother and the version of God that she was taught by the church, one that is draining her:

> "You take a moment to soak it all in. You think of your mother and the small version of God she clings to, the only version you've ever known and the one you're afraid to let go of. Then you think of how your daily calls with Eric are a kind of ritual, and how when you finally meet up again, it could be a kind of consecration. You are thrilled and terrified at this prospect. Terrified because all you've ever known of religion is that it demands more than you can ever give." (105) … "And you say, 'I'm tired of holding my breath.' Then you promise you won't come to church that way again. And you keep your word

> because you won't go to church again at all." (*The Secret Lives of Church Ladies,* 109)

Lyra is scared to make this decision, because this is the only life she has known and she knows she will get backlash for it, especially from her emotionally abusive mother. And the rules set for her in her religion are more demanding and draining than what she gives to it, taking more and more of her, telling her what to do with every aspect of her life, and causing her to be emotionally unhappy and anxious in her adult years. But she knows that if she is brave enough to walk away from this emotionally abusive environment, she can finally find joy and peace in her life and make genuine, rewarding, and uplifting relationships with people who genuinely care for and support her.

CHAPTER FOUR: TIK TOK, TELEVISION, AND PURITY CULTURE

"Losing My Religion"

On the social media app TikTok, what videos appear on your "For You" page is determined by the app's algorithm. What a user will view constantly changes based on the types of videos they are interacting with; when the app is first used, the videos that appear are random and incohesive, but after spending some time watching videos, liking some and skipping others, the TikTok algorithm learns what the user likes to see and will give them more of that type of content. Recently, as I was scrolling through my "For You" page, I saw a video of a young woman discussing why she left the religious organization that she grew up in. After watching and giving her video a like, I began to see more and more of that type of content appear: people discussing the reasons they left their church and what caused them to make that decision. There are many types of videos regarding this topic, some being three-minute-long ones that go into more detail, and others being in a shorter format that try to also include comedic jokes. Currently, there is a trend on TikTok in which the song "Losing My Religion" by American alternative rock band R.E.M. is being used in many videos as a way for people to talk about the exact moments when they questioned their faith, religious organizations, and what was being taught to them. When I started writing this chapter, there were 21,000 videos using this audio, and as of right now, there are over 25,000 videos, including hashtags such as #religioustrauma, #exvangelical #deconstruction, and #purityculture. Some are very traumatic stories, with many of them also trying to make jokes about this past trauma, as well as many greatly emphasizing how ridiculous certain rules set for them were.

Some expressed how they never felt any real connection to the faith their parents wanted them to be a part of. For example, user @not_jmooch20's video read: "Me sitting in Sunday school for 8 years wondering if anyone actually believed anything we were being told because I was just there to get confirmed for the tradition," along with the caption, "I thought we were all just there because our parents made us." While there were many videos, including those from young girls and women, sharing their experiences with their lack of connection to the faith they were told they had to believe in, there were also an abundant amount of TikToks from teenage girls and women talking about their religious trauma that they experienced growing up in the church, including negative experiences with youth pastors, religion teachers, and even their own parents. In the top video under the sound "Losing My Religion," user @mewhomeslice recounted a moment from when they were only thirteen, listening to a youth pastor talk about his unhealthy obsession with porn as well as the very violent thoughts he had of women that he confidently admitted to: "Me at the ripe age of 13 hearing the youth pastor talk about his porn addiction and how he once desired raping every woman he knew (including his mother and sisters) before finding Christ," along with the caption "he literally said this loud and proud on stage." In the comments, most people were shocked with what they had just read, saying things such as "sharing is not caring," and "those are things he should've kept to himself," and "I would not feel safe around him," with a response from the original creator, saying "I did not." There were even other people saying that they had similar experiences with their own youth pastors, saying how disappointing and scary it is that they had such a common experience in their youth in which they felt

uncomfortable and unsafe around pastors that were supposed to be there as supportive and loving figures in their lives.

There were also those who had questions for their pastors or family members such as Adah had for her religious teachers in *The Poisonwood Bible.* In one video, user @mackpackk had had a discussion with her pastor, asking if "even tiny little babies deep in the amazon forest with no access to modern technology (much less books) would still go to hell because they don't know about Jesus," to which he replied "yup" without any hesitation. And along with her original video, which now has almost one million likes and 4.8 million views, there are over 15,000 comments from other people who had similar experiences within their own parish, and differing views on what they were told. One said that this response from her parish never sat right with her, and another said that she was done with religion at the age of 10 after getting a similar answer on this topic.

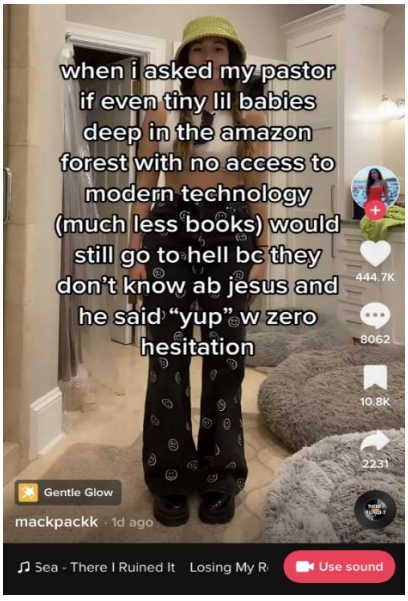

Figure 1: TikTok by @mackpackk

Like Adah, these young women do not have the same confidence in faith as their peers or pastors, and struggle to accept the idea of others being sentenced to eternal damnation because of their location and lack of knowledge about a particular faith. After hearing others so easily and confidently say that people will burn in hell for not knowing about a particular God that they believe is the correct one, it becomes difficult to remain in that religious organization, as the God they are taught about is unloving.

Along with those who lost their faith after hearing these types of responses from pastors or religious family members, there were also people in the comments expressing that they are still Christian but have their own beliefs on non-Christians going to heaven, believing that truly good and innocent people will not be punished. Similar to Nathan in *The Poisonwood Bible* who tries to convert people to his religion by making them feel guilt, shame, and a fear of being in the wrong religion leading to an eternity in hell, there are many instances of pastors portraying unwelcoming depictions of God that are often very unappealing for people. In some cases, pastors will say that no matter how good a person may be throughout their life, if they did not have faith in the "true" God or belong to the "correct" religious organization, then God will not welcome them, and, as mentioned earlier, this results in many young women leaving the church because they do not want to be a part of something that feels so hostile.

Purity Culture and Sexual Abuse

Along with videos discussing the loss of faith over differing views with pastors or religious family members, there are also many that focus on the topics of sexual

abuse and purity culture within their religious community. For example, TikTok user @ellifrfr's video had the caption: "13-year-old me being told it would be a gift to serve my future husband and to protect my purity while the boys played dodgeball outside." For her and many other young girls growing up in religious families and parishes, they were to participate in a purity ball, a religious ceremony, typically a formal dance, that requires daughters to pledge that they would abstain from sex until marriage, along with their fathers who pledge that they will protect their daughters' virginities. However, young boys in their religious community, such as brothers or friends, are not typically required to make these same vows regarding their virginity. Young girls who make these vows are also not usually taught proper sex education by adults, who tend to hold these girls to a higher standard than boys, as well as making them feel responsible for not just their own sexual behaviors, but also the sexual behaviors and emotions of boys. In conservative religious groups, although sex before marriage is frowned upon for both men and women, men are often more likely to get away with certain behaviors simply because of their anatomy ("boys will be boys"), and do not face harsh repercussions. A common phrase that is taught to young girls is that men are "visual creatures" who lack emotion, or even common sense, and these girls often feel pressures to protect the purity of the boys they are dating as well as their own. One TikTok went viral recently of a young girl filming herself dancing while showing a list of ways she protects the purity of her boyfriend, including "not wearing low cut tops, not changing in front of him, and no making out." Because of my TikTok algorithm, I did not see the original video, but rather stitches and duets by other people (by using these features, people can connect multiple videos together in

order to make a new video, showing you the original video along with their own content and thoughts) including one from @adamavitable, imitating the movements from the original poster, but with the caption, "just gouge out his fucking eyes. Matthew 5:29," referencing the Sermon on the Mount from Matthew 5:29 in which Jesus says: "And if thy right eye offend thee, pluck it out, and cast *it* from thee: for it is profitable for thee that one of thy members should perish, and not *that* thy whole body should be cast into hell." (*The King James Version of the Bible,* Matthew 5:29.) While this command of plucking an eye out is not to be taken literally, Jesus himself does not say that a woman should be blamed for a man's own desires; the man should take responsibility for his own sin, and not put this blame on anyone else. However, in many conservative religious groups, this is not the case. Young girls growing up in these religious communities and organizations are taught that their virginity is what is most valuable, therefore, having conversations about sex is difficult. Girls and women who suffer from sexual assault struggle to tell their family members, because they are raised to believe that not only are they no longer good enough without their virginity, but also that it is their fault when a man sins. User @bonniedoes on TikTok made a video explaining how she could not tell her own parents that she was sexually assaulted due to her experiences with purity culture. She did not feel safe talking to anyone in her family about what she went through; her parents taught her that her purity was her greatest gift, and conveyed that she would not be treated with the same respect if she no longer had it. She gave examples of how her father would agree with religious talk radio hosts that blamed and mocked victims of rape, and how her

mother would tell her that men cannot be held responsible for what they do to women, placing the burden of a man's actions on her own shoulders.

The "Good Girl Syndrome"

The responsibility young girls have regarding their own and boys' sexual behaviors, as well as the fear and shame surrounding the topic of sex, can often lead to what is known as the "Good Girl Syndrome." In an article written by Laura M. Brotherson, she describes the "Good Girl Syndrome" as the "negative or unproductive thoughts, beliefs, attitudes, feelings and behaviors that inhibit one's responsiveness and enjoyment of the sexual relationship in marriage." ("The Good Girl Syndrome.") After women who have remained "pure" throughout their young adult years get married are now allowed to have sex according to the rules of their religion, many find that they struggle to enjoy the experience, feeling shame, embarrassment, guilt, and discomfort instead. They feel that they are still not allowed to enjoy sex, viewing it to be something that is dirty and wrong, and think God will look down on them or be disappointed with their sexual behavior. A lack of sex education and experience also contributes to these feelings, as most young girls growing up in these environments were never taught this very vital and valuable information. Not only can this lead to shame about sex, but it can also lead to shame and self-hatred about a woman's own self and identity. For their entire childhood and teenage years, sex is used as a weapon against these girls, with parents and priests controlling their actions and influencing how they view themselves, leading to insecurities, guilt, and uncomfortable sexual experiences. Healing from this can take years for some women, while others never heal at all.

Critique of Purity Culture in Media

Along with the plethora of TikTok videos from women discussing their loss of faith and purity culture, there are also similar discussions on other forms of media, including television. I recently found an episode of *American Dad!* during my research that focused on the topic of purity culture and purity balls. In episode 11 of season 13, "My Purity Ball and Chain," Stan Smith gets his son, Steve, to forcibly join a father-daughter celibacy club to prevent him from having sex, since he does not want to have that awkward conversation with his son. Stan talks with the other fathers in the group, who explain how they "have a duty to serve as the authority and protector of our daughter's purity – mind and body…And until they marry a man we choose, they pledge themselves to us," to which Stan replies, "So…it's kind of like you're dating your own daughter?" "Only way to ensure they grow up normal." (*American Dad!*)

Figure 2: Stan and the other fathers at the purity ball in *American Dad!*

The fathers get to control the actions of their daughters, as well as the way they see themselves and how they will view sex for the rest of their lives: as something that is shameful and immoral. The show also emphasizes in this scene how

outrageous the concept is, with the line "only way to ensure they grow up normal" in a satirical way, really meaning that they in fact will not grow up to have a healthy relationship with sex at all. Not only can these girls not have sex or learn about it, but they can't even talk to their own parents about any questions they may have; their parents will simply refuse to have the conversation and will make them feel ashamed for even bringing it up due to their religious beliefs. By the end of the episode, Stan realizes how outrageous the purity ball is, and tells the other fathers that "The more we shelter them from sex, the harder it'll be for them to make good decisions on their own!" (*American Dad!)* but that group of controlling fathers does not agree, and their harmful views and rules continue to control their daughters' lives.

Another example showcasing the harmful ideas of purity culture can be seen in *Gilmore Girls*. In "Twenty-One Is the Loneliest Number," (season 6, episode 7) 20-year-old Rory Gilmore is currently living with her grandparents. She has been dating her boyfriend, Logan, for a long time, and has had a healthy sexual relationship with him, as she was not controlled by her mother or taught that sex was something that was shameful. Her mother did not hesitate to give her important sex education, advice, or support when she was eventually ready to make that decision for herself. However, her grandparents assume that Rory has never slept with Logan, and they begin to worry that she might, so they decide to invite a reverend over for dinner one night to talk with her, and she is taken completely by surprise over this interaction. He begins to tell her how precious her "virtue" is, and how it is the *most* precious gift she has that can only be given once to one man: "Once you give it it's gone, you can't regift it. If you give it away too soon to the wrong man, then when the right one does

come along, you have no gift to give. You'll have to buy him a sweater…Think long and hard about when and to whom you want to give the ultimate gift you have to give away." ("Twenty-One Is the Loneliest Number.")

Figure 3: The reverend speaking to Rory in "Gilmore Girls"

Rory is extremely uncomfortable with this situation and what she is being told, but honestly tells the reverend, "Oh dear…I'm afraid the ultimate gift ship has sailed. A while ago. It's probably in Fiji by now." There is some awkward silence between the two of them alone at the table, followed by Rory saying, "So have you seen 'The 40-Year-Old Virgin' cause you might like it!" ("Twenty-One Is the Loneliest Number.") Since Rory did not grow up living with her grandparents and doesn't really have a deep connection to any faith, while this encounter was awkward and a bit annoying for her to sit through, it did not have any big impact on her or how she will view herself, her sexual behavior, or her relationship with her boyfriend moving forward. But according to this reverend, and her grandparents who wish for her to keep her "virtue," her sexual experiences or lack thereof is the most important thing she has to offer to a partner. Certainly not personality, intelligence, mutual

interests, loyalty, character, or even her care and love for her partner. The only thing that matters is whether or not she's previously had sex. While many are aware of the damage that these ideologies have on young women, and women often have the strength and courage to walk away, these communities are still very much prevalent, and are full of families with young girls who will suffer the ramifications for years to come.

CONCLUSION

Throughout the different novels that I have analyzed and discussed, these young girls and women have all had varying experiences with religion and faith. While they are fictional, the voices of real women can be heard through these characters, showing detailed portrayals of conflicting thoughts and emotions tied to religion: women who have undergone intense religious trauma from extremely young ages, including violence and emotional abuse, women who have conflicting views on faith and fears of making the wrong decision when leaving the church, and women who just desire happiness from their religion. Along with these novels, the articles I found in my research show real women's feelings and struggles with organized religion, with many wanting to make a difference within their community and make their voices heard and understood.

While separating themselves from the church is the best decision for some women in order for them to heal and move on from the past they had to endure for years, many women don't want to abandon their faith. I was fortunate with my experiences growing up in the Catholic Church. My parents never made me afraid of Jesus or God; they were always loving figures that were accepting of everyone, reaching out to help those who needed their kindness the most. Along with this, my parents never set strict rules for me to follow, nor did they refrain from certain "taboo" topics or make me feel ashamed for having those conversations. But not everyone is that fortunate with their religious experiences, and wish to find different religious outlets. Organizations such as women-church are wonderful alternatives that focus on love and solidarity and a connection with God, abandoning power structures

that they believe to be imbalanced and unnecessary. And even women who remain in certain conservative religions do not simply comply with the rules set for them, but work together to make progress in their community, with a desire to improve the experience for everyone involved. Progress from particular movements and changes to established institutions is slow, but is still progress nonetheless.

Analyzing different literary texts, both in this thesis and throughout my English studies, have sharpened my skills and helped me to critique media as well. It is an important part of this analysis; I feel that moving from literary analysis to one on social media is a necessary connection to make, as it is an integral part of our world and how we examine and understand topics also discussed in literature and literary classes. The voices of the women in these novels can also help to inspire young women in real life; sharing their words and their experiences with others, especially online, can help women to find a community to join that helps and understands them. I would argue that TikTok is one of the most influential apps currently; the amount of people you can reach on that platform and how quickly you can do it is unlike any other social media platform I've ever seen. It's also one of the most popular at the moment, and it seems that more and more people are using it now instead of Twitter and Instagram. There are communities within the app for everything imaginable, so finding a community of people with experiences like yours is not difficult. Women who are undergoing or who are recovering from religious trauma have the ability to find solidarity with a group of people who can relate to those experiences, share their own, and offer support. These videos can also be reached to people outside of these communities; I had never really seen any videos regarding religious trauma on my

"For You" page in the past, and ended up finding thousands upon thousands of videos from young women who wanted to share their experiences, make jokes, and talk to other people going through similar things. Those who do not know much about the topic of religious trauma easily have the ability to learn. Creating discussions around these issues, encouraging more people to share their own negative experiences in the church, and suggesting what needs to change can have a great impact in the future for the mental health of young women.

All of these women, fictional and real, express their faith in different ways, and it is their right to do so. I find Lauren's story to be the most important and inspiring for me, as she was able to become the protagonist for her own religious beliefs. She magnified her own voice, defended her differing beliefs to those who criticized or doubted her, and heavily focused on creating a community of people helping one another, rather than trying to maintain power structures and control people. Her religion "Earthseed" gave her a reason to keep moving, even in the horrible conditions she was living in. That is what faith needs to be about for young women: finding joy and comfort in whatever form of faith that they resonate with, embracing love and compassion rather than feeling fear or shame. With conversations around these topics continuously occurring, and more women becoming their own protagonists for their religious beliefs, real, lasting change in established religious institutions is a possibility. It may not happen soon, but the steady and unwavering determination of women wishing to express their faith in whatever form they wish has the potential to transform the way religion is taught for future generations of women.

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