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“MY JOURNEY OUT OF...”:
HOW WOMEN NARRATE THEIR RELIGIOUS DEPARTURES

by

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B.A., St. Cloud State University, 2006
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A Dissertation
Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the
Doctor of Philosophy Degree

Department of Communication Studies
in the Graduate School
Southern Illinois University Carbondale
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DISSERTATION APPROVAL

“MY JOURNEY OUT OF...”:
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By

Angela Louise Glunz

A Dissertation Submitted in Partial
Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of
Doctor of Philosophy
in the field of Communication Studies

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AN ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION OF

ANGELA LOUISE GLUNZ, for the Doctor of Philosophy degree in Communication Studies, presented on May 8, 2017, at Southern Illinois University Carbondale.

TITLE: “MY JOURNEY OUT OF...”: HOW WOMEN NARRATE THEIR RELIGIOUS DEPARTURES

MAJOR PROFESSOR: Dr. Suzanne M. Daughton

The purpose of this dissertation is to analyze stories that don't often get told or heard. Traditionally, nonreligious people have had to keep their lack of belief to themselves out of fear of persecution. In the literature review of this dissertation, I summarize previous scholarship about leaving religion. In an effort to learn about autobiographies written by nonreligious women, I utilize storytelling as a theoretical framework, located within the rhetorical uses of personal narratives, and ask: What are the types of challenges, experiences, and topics that nonreligious women include in their stories?; How do these autobiographies invite readers to understand personal accounts of religious departure?; and How do these autobiographies invite social change and consciousness raising?

To answer these questions, I applied thematic narrative analysis, from a rhetorical perspective, as a way to discover the commonalities amongst the stories, as well as the unique characteristics that each story possesses. While each woman had a unique story, there were five common themes that emerged among the memoirs: family, intellectual, relational, sociocultural, and professional. Inspired by the language of the “women's sphere,” I labeled each of the themes as a realm in the “sphere of life” with hope that the sphere of life can help explain how religion influences a person's life. I discovered that, even though some of the women lost some relationships with family and friends, all of the women mentioned that they are happier now that they are being true to themselves. The authors also mentioned that it is important to be at peace

with who they are since this is likely their one and only life. With that in mind, it is important to have choice and authenticity in one's life. Finally, this study demonstrated the power of storytelling and how autobiographies can invite social and attitudinal change.

DEDICATION

For Kyria Abrahams, Ayaan Hirsi Ali, Karen Armstrong, Deborah Feldman, Lucia Greenhouse, Sonia Johnson, Jenna Miscavige Hill, and Valerie Tarico as well as all the nonreligious women who have paved the way and inspired this research.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION AND PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

Nonbelievers have been around for as long as religion has existed. Issues of belief and doubt have always gone hand in hand. As Jennifer Michael Hecht, philosopher and historian, writes in her book *Doubt*, “In every tradition of theistic belief there are records of questioning, doubt, and disbelief” (xi). However, atheists and disbelievers have had to keep their questioning, doubt, and disbelief to themselves due to a long history of religious persecution. Anaxagoras, one of the first known atheists, “is the earliest historical figure to have been indicted for atheism” around 467 BCE (Hecht 10). In fact, a law against atheism, and those who disbelieve in divine beings, was established around the same time Anaxagoras spoke out against religious doctrine (Hecht 10).

Since Anaxagoras, many people have been indicted for apostasy and blasphemy. Apostasy and blasphemy are still illegal in countries where theocracy is the law of the land. In May 2014, a Muslim woman in Sudan was sentenced for apostasy and faced a death sentence for marrying a Christian man (Theodorou para. 2). Also, in the past few years, many atheist bloggers have been murdered for posting blasphemous articles on the Internet. In 2015, three atheist bloggers were murdered, in different incidents, in Bangladesh (Hammadi para. 1). Even though atheism is not illegal in the United States, according to recent surveys, atheists are one of the most mistrusted minority groups (Edgell, Gerteis, and Hartmann 211). I don't mean to equate being mistrusted with being sentenced for apostasy and being murdered. I mean to point out that people who disbelieve, doubt, question, or leave religion find themselves in various types of unsafe situations where they have to decide whether they want to speak out for what they believe or keep their beliefs to themselves.

This long history of religious doubt precedes me. When I think about my identity as an atheist in a religious world, I find that I have trouble sharing this aspect of myself with others because of the negative connotations that surround the word “atheist.” I want to challenge and disrupt negative perceptions of atheists. However, I still feel hesitation whenever I talk about being an atheist because my family doesn’t know that I am an atheist. I worry about how they will react. I worry that they will be upset, sad, disappointed, angry, or something horrible that I’m unable to imagine. Even though I have publicly admitted to many people that I am an atheist, I still negotiate this aspect of my identity with colleagues, students, and continue to keep this a secret from my family.

I’m not the first person to reject religion, nor will I be the last. Every person has his or her own unique challenges when sharing something private about him or herself. Challenging the status quo can be scary. There are many unknowns. I don’t know whom I will upset when I question religious doctrine. I don’t know who will feel isolated. I don’t know whether the person I’m talking to will reject me. I don’t know how my family will react. I don’t know who might feel liberated upon finding out someone else has doubts and questions about religion. Maybe I will find a community of people who have the same questions I do and we can make each other feel comfortable to speak our minds and share our stories. People use storytelling to shape and reshape their lives, imagining what could have or should have happened, as well as what did happen and to speculate about what might happen.

As I continually negotiate sharing this aspect of my identity, I take some comfort knowing that I am not alone in this struggle. I have read many autobiographies written by women who have also rejected the religion in which they were raised, and for this study, I analyzed several such accounts. Even though every story has its own unique characteristics, there

are many common themes across these autobiographies. Even if a person doesn't identify as nonreligious, studying these autobiographies matters for anyone who has ever felt isolated and alone. This study matters for anyone who has ever felt different and unable to follow his or her own inner truth and be open about who he or she is.

Purpose and Dissertation Overview

Women who have “placed themselves on record as opposed to” religion have included some of the most remarkable people in the Western world (Gaylor 1). There is a long history of women departing from religion even though speaking out against religion can be dangerous. In her book *Women without Superstition: “No Gods – No Masters”*: *The Collected Writings of Women Freethinkers of the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries*, Annie Laurie Gaylor, co-founder of the Freedom from Religion Foundation, outlines the history of secular women in the United States who fought and are fighting to be free from religious oppression. According to Gaylor, “Women have played such a crucial role in the move away from religious belief and dogma because organized religion has been the principle enemy of women’s rights” (3). Even though women have been socialized to be quiet and submissive, women have had to take risks and be outspoken against religion. Gaylor says it best when she writes, “Out of sheer self-defense, women have been among the most impassioned critics of the church, and among the most ardent supporters of the constitutional principle of the separation of church and state” (3). In the United States, some of the women from the first wave of feminism, who were the most outspoken against religious dogma, included atheist Ernestine Rose, agnostic Susan B. Anthony, and freethinker Matilda Joslyn Gage (Gaylor 8). All of these women were nonreligious and yet that aspect of their identity isn't usually mentioned when discussing their contributions to the woman's movement. According to Gaylor, “Many women freethinkers have sought to ‘save’

women – from religion” (11). Elizabeth Cady Stanton is quoted as saying, “My heart’s desire is to lift women out of all these dangerous, degrading superstitions, and to this end I will labor my remaining days on earth” (Gaylor 11). More recently, Sonia Johnson once commented, “One of my favorite fantasies is that next Sunday not one single woman, in any country of the world, will go to church” (Gaylor 11).

Women have been socialized to be submissive and silent. So, when a woman tells her story and speaks out against the institution of religion, she often finds herself in risky territory. Sonia Johnson was excommunicated from the Mormon Church for challenging the church’s stance on the Equal Rights Amendment. Jenna Miscavige Hill was stalked multiple times by a member of her church when it was leaked that she was considering leaving the Church of Scientology. Taslima Nasrin had to go into hiding and flee her home country of Bangladesh after being “condemned to die by holy men because of her poetry and fiction” (Gaylor 2). Ayaan Hirsi Ali experienced many death threats after she started speaking out against Islam in 2002. As of this writing, Hirsi Ali still experiences death threats and travels with bodyguards when she makes public appearances.

However, storytelling can invite social change, raise awareness, educate, and improve the life of the woman telling the story. Elizabeth Cady Stanton once mentioned that the happiest period of her life had been since she “emerged from the shadows and superstitions of old theologies, relieved from all gloomy apprehensions of the future, satisfied that as my labors and capacities were limited to this sphere of action, I was responsible for nothing beyond my horizon, as I could neither understand nor change the condition of the unknown world” (Gaylor 14). In short, storytelling can heal.

Literature Review

There are many women and men throughout history who have spoken out against religion and publicly expressed their lack of religious belief. Even though the most popular voices in the new atheist movement have been from men such as Richard Dawkins, Christopher Hitchens, and Sam Harris, women have been some of the most outspoken people against organized religion because of the fact that religious doctrine almost universally oppresses women. Almost four hundred years ago, in 1634, Anne Hutchinson was considered a threat to the Christian church “when she began holding discussion groups for women in her home, daring to critique the sermons and theology of male ministers” (Gaylor 4). Hutchinson was excommunicated from the church for heresy and many of her supporters also experienced persecution (Gaylor 4).

Speaking out against religion can be especially difficult for women, considering that (for example) Christian doctrine teaches that women are supposed to be silent. For instance, in the *King James Bible*, 1 Corinthians 14:34-35 reads, “Let your women keep silence in the churches; for it is not permitted unto them to speak; but they are commanded to be under obedience, as also saith the law. And if they will learn anything, let them ask their husbands at home; for it is a shame for women to speak in the church.” Another *King James Bible* excerpt reinforces this expectation of silence in 1 Timothy 2:11-14. It reads, “Let the woman learn in silence in all subjection. But I suffer not a woman to teach nor to usurp the authority over the man, but to be in silence. For Adam was first formed, then Eve. And Adam was not deceived, but the woman being deceived was in the transgression.”

Sexism doesn't exist only in Christianity though. Sexism is present, in various ways, within all of the major religions in the world. For instance, Orthodox Jewish men are supposed to recite the morning prayer, “Blessed are you, Lord our God, Ruler of the Universe, who has not

made me a woman” (Hart para. 1). This prayer is a daily reminder that men are considered superior to women. In Hinduism, only men are allowed to chant the mantra of Rudram which is a hymn in praise of Lord Shiva (Narayan para. 4). In Islam, a woman’s testimony is worth half of a man’s testimony (Arlandson para. 17). Buddhism is the only major world religion that doesn’t seem to have explicitly sexist doctrine that teaches that women are less than men. However, bhikkhunis, also known as nuns, are given more rules than bhikkhus, otherwise known as monks (Buddhism and Misogyny para. 15). The extra rules for the women primarily dealt with protecting the nuns; however, the rules were problematic. For instance, a bhikkuni was attacked and raped while walking through a forest by herself, so Buddha made a rule that a bhikkuni was not allowed to walk through the forest by herself (Buddhism and Misogyny para. 15). Rules such as this resulted in limitations on women’s freedom and self-determination, thus, in effect, punishing the victim rather than the perpetrator.

When the woman’s movement started in the Western world, the Bible excerpts of 1 Corinthians and 1 Timothy were “the rule of the land” (Gaylor 4). Caught between believing this doctrine to be true and the fear of persecution from speaking out, women have remained silent for a long time. After Anne Hutchinson’s persecution, it was nearly two hundred years before another woman dared speak publicly to an audience of men and women in the United States (Gaylor 5). Elizabeth Cady Stanton was one of those women who spoke in public about the negative effects of religious doctrine. Stanton is best-known for her work as a suffragist and abolitionist during the early woman’s movement in the 19th century. Stanton was responsible, along with Lucretia Mott, for establishing the Seneca Falls Convention in 1848, which was the first conference dedicated to discussing the rights of women. This conference was the first opportunity for many women to speak in public about their concerns about equal rights.

In the latter half of the 20th century, many women wrote about the women's history of the world and the marginalization of women. In 1949, French philosopher Simone de Beauvoir released her book *The Second Sex*. In *The Second Sex*, de Beauvoir wrote about the treatment of women throughout history and argued that the doctrine of Christianity was used to oppress women. In 1974, feminist philosopher Mary Daly released the book *Beyond God the Father: Toward a Philosophy of Women's Liberation*, which explored religion as a major contributing cause of women's oppression over the last few millennia. Merlin Stone, professor of art history, published *When God Was a Woman* in 1976. Stone's book provides a history of religion, going back thousands of years, that reveals a time before modern patriarchal religions when matriarchal Goddess traditions existed. In 1981, Annie Laurie Gaylor released her book *Woe to the Women: The Bible Tells Me So*, which called attention to all the biblical laws in the *King James Bible* that pertain to oppressing women. In 1987, cultural historian Riane Eisler released the book *The Chalice and the Blade: Our History, Our Future*. Like Stone, Eisler provided a look at the history of matriarchal religions, but Eisler also included the argument that humanity would be destroyed if we continue living in the mode of patriarchy. Then, in 1988, Rosalind Miles released the book *Who Cooked the Last Supper? The Women's History of the World*, which examined how women have been represented throughout history. All of these books argue that religion and patriarchy have been the common denominators for women's oppression. Critiquing religion has a long and rich history; however, limited scholarly research has been completed to explore the effects that leaving religion has on a person and the effects that leaving a religion has on his or her relationships. In this literature review, I will summarize the current scholarship that addresses religious departure.

Since 2007, many of the major religious groups in the United States have exhibited a decline in their populations (Pew Research Center para. 1). At the same time, a growing segment of the population is moving away from religious affiliation and identifying as nonreligious, atheist, or agnostic (Zuckerman 3). However, “atheists are less likely to be accepted, publicly and privately, than any others from a long list of ethnic, religious, and other minority groups” (Edgell, Gerteis, and Hartmann 211). With the stigma that surrounds atheism, an atheist must decide whether he or she is going to share this aspect of his or her identity with others. The stakes are high when disclosing nonbelief to family members. Many atheists have reported “experiencing discrimination not only within society generally, but also within their own families” (Zimmerman, Smith, Simonson and Myers 1). Religion is a widespread cultural influence across the world, with approximately 84% of the world’s population identifying as religious (“The Global Religious Landscape” para. 1). Regardless of whether one is raised in a religious family or not, one is still exposed to the influence of religion via school, friends, and society in general.

Before a person can tell others that he or she is an atheist, that person comes to realize that he or she doesn’t believe what so many others believe. There are many reasons why someone may decide that he or she isn’t religious. A study of fifty ex-Christians discovered that people deconverted from Christianity because of intellectual and theological concerns, their sense of God’s failures, and unhelpful interactions with Christians (Wright, Gionavelli, Dolan, and Edwards 3). Upon reading the Bible, many university students found themselves questioning church teachings and realizing that they didn’t believe what they were being taught (Wright, Gionavelli, Dolan, and Edwards 3). Another explanation for deconversion includes individuals becoming disillusioned with God’s failure to intervene with negative situations in their lives

(Wright, Gionavelli, Dolan, and Edwards 3). This disillusionment leads to “severing social bonds” with the religious movement (Wright, Gionavelli, Dolan, and Edwards 3). A third explanation for deconversion is moral doubt regarding the perception of the members of the church (Wright, Gionavelli, Dolan, and Edwards 3). For instance, some people leave the church because they believe that church leaders and regular church attendees are hypocrites in regards to their moral beliefs and behaviors (Wright, Gionavelli, Dolan, and Edwards 3).

There are many reasons why an atheist may decide to keep his or her lack of religious belief to him or herself. First, atheists are considered one of the most hated groups in the United States (Edgell, Gerteis, and Hartmann 211). One of the most common stereotypes about atheists is that they lack a moral compass (Keene and Handrich 50). Approximately 40% of United States respondents “believe that atheists do not at all agree with their vision of society” (Edgell, Gerteis, and Hartmann 216). These beliefs have been reinforced by famous people. For instance, George H.W. Bush is quoted as saying “No, I don’t believe that atheists should be considered as citizens, nor should they be considered patriots. This is one nation under God” (PositiveAtheism.org). Pat Robertson also had unkind words for atheists when he wrote in his book *The New World Order*, “How can there be peace when drunkards, drug dealers, communists, atheists, New Age worshippers of Satan, secular humanists, oppressive dictators, greedy money changers, revolutionary assassins, adulterers, and homosexuals are on top?” (PositiveAtheism.org). Also, as recently as November 29, 2012, Bill O’Reilly compared atheists to fascists during his television show *The O’Reilly Factor* --while he was interviewing the president of American Atheists (Michael Stone para. 1). I grant that these three statements may be considered extreme; however, these three men have great power and the ability to reach millions of people, potentially influencing others’ views of atheists. And sadly, the statements

from Bush, Robertson, and O'Reilly only support what many United States citizens already believe about atheists.

Several studies have supported the previously-cited findings, including examples of how atheists have been discriminated against (Gervais; Goodman and Mueller; Hammer, Cragun, Hwang, and Smith; Keene and Handrich; Mueller; Smith; Swan and Heesacker; and Zuckerman). A professor being considered for a department chair position was identified as an atheist by the local newspaper. The college president investigated the claims and the professor ultimately withdrew his candidacy because his nonbelief was made visible and as a result, his ability was questioned (Pollitt para. 1). In 2012, a teenage girl was the victim of death and rape threats after she challenged her public school to remove a prayer banner from the auditorium (Kasparian para. 5). These are just a couple of high-profile cases that were popular on social media when the stories were released. Additionally, atheists have reported being shunned by family, losing friends, being harassed at school, being fired from jobs, and experiencing property damage (Hammer, Cragun, Hwang, and Smith 45).

In 2012, communication scholar W. Benjamin Myers published an article in *Qualitative Communication Research* about the moment he told his religious parents that he was an atheist. Myers wrote about the fear he experienced as he considered whether or not to tell his parents. His fear was so intense that he experienced panic attacks and insomnia for months leading up to the revelation (198). He didn't see any other option than to be honest, because he didn't want to lie to his son about "why we prayed before meals when we went to Oma and Opa's house or why we went to church when they visited but not any other time" (198). Myers planned this conversation for several months with his spouse and his brother who are also atheists. The conversation did not go well, but it went as he expected it to go. His mother was heartbroken and

his father rarely spoke during the conversation. Myers's mother was sad and asked questions about what he thought happened after people die. Before she ended the conversation, she mentioned that she was not going to let anyone take her joy and her belief away from her. Then she physically left the room and wouldn't talk to them for the remainder of the evening. From that moment until the date of the essay's publication (and perhaps beyond), Myers and his parents had not had another serious conversation about religion (206). Awkward conversations continued to occur whenever the topic of religion was brought up, which was usually when Myers's parents wanted to pray before meals or bring their grandson to church. However, even though there was still tension in his relationship with his parents, at the time of his essay's publication, Myers noted that being open about being an atheist made him happy because he had made a "decision not to live in the shadow of a childhood stolen by fundamentalist religion" (206).

Myers's experience "coming out" to his parents shares some similarities with other atheists who have come out to their families. In 2015, a study published by Zimmerman et al. looked exclusively at familial relationship results of coming out as an atheist. Zimmerman et al. interviewed eighty atheists and discovered a blend of positive and negative outcomes. Zimmerman et al. also investigated supportive and unsupportive reactions that atheists experienced after revealing their atheist identity to family members. On one hand, relational quality "tended to be preserved during the coming out process when families exhibited a moderate level of closeness" and cohesiveness even when family members held varying religious opinions (Zimmerman et al. 9). On the other hand, relationship quality also suffered when family members reacted with "anger, rejection, despair, or an inability to relate to one another after a family member came out" (Zimmerman et al. 9). Zimmerman et al. also discovered that

participants experienced either family members who were respectful and adapted to this new information or family members who were dismissive and disrespectful upon learning about their family member's atheist identity (Zimmerman et al. 9). Finally, with regard to communication dynamics, some participants reported being able to speak openly with family members about their atheism while other participants mentioned that they came to an agreement with family members that it may be best to avoid the subject in the future (Zimmerman et al. 9). Even though topic avoidance is generally seen as something negative, Zimmerman et al. discovered that topic avoidance is a technique that some family members apparently find acceptable when considering uncomfortable topics that don't have any immediate effects on the relationship (9).

As I mentioned before, there are many reasons why an atheist may decide to keep his or her lack of religious belief to him or herself. However, disclosing this personal information about oneself is arguably a positive experience. In April 2014, Greta Christina¹ published the book *Coming Out Atheist: How to Do It, How to Help Each Other, and Why*. Christina most often writes about atheism, sexuality and LGBTQ issues, and what the atheism movement can learn from the LGBTQ movement ("About Me"). Christina, with her history of talking and writing about LGBTQ issues, noticed parallels between the two types of narratives, but she also noticed some differences, so she felt compelled to write a book dedicated to the issues that atheists face when it comes to "coming out." Christina based this book on over four hundred "coming out atheist" stories. Christina gathered many narratives directly, by posting an invitation on her blog, asking people to tell her how they had "come out" and specifically asked "who they told, how

¹ In the section that follows, I will be citing primarily the work of Greta Christina, who graduated from Reed College in 1983 and whose work places her centrally within my area of interest. According to her blog, she is not a professional academic, but has been writing professionally since 1989, and has been a full-time freelance writer and speaker since 2012.

that went, what happened right away, what happened weeks or months or years later, what they would do differently if they could do it over again, what they think they did right and would do exactly the same” (location 67)². Christina also collected “coming out” stories from the websites of the *Coming Out Godless Project*, the *Clergy Project*, the *Military Association of Atheists & Freethinkers*, and *Reddit* (67).

Christina starts by making an argument for why a person, if he or she identifies as atheist, should “come out.” Christina argues that coming out: can make your life better, helps other atheists, cultivates other atheists, and creates a better world. Christina suggests that the most important reason to come out as an atheist is that it will, most likely, make the atheist’s life better (84). Christina discovered that the lives of most atheists improved (according to their own perceptions) after coming out even if they lost friends and family during the process. The common thread across these stories is that there is “an initial period of trauma, just as there often is when people become atheists in the first place” (Christina 93). However, once that trauma has passed, most atheists report that they are happier after coming out. Even if a person has regrets about how he or she came out, the person still finds that he or she is happier now that he or she is no longer keeping a secret. Generally speaking though, atheists, like others who find themselves living in the closet, fear discrimination and bigotry, which is why a person might choose to stay in the closet for a long time. Bearing the weight of such a secret is stressful and emotionally taxing. An atheist often finds him or herself balancing a secret life and worrying about what will happen if he or she makes a mistake and family members find out. But, even if relationships are

² The book I have access to, *Coming Out Atheist: How to Do It, How to Help Each Other, and Why*, by Greta Christina is a Kindle version. The page numbers I cite are “locations.” This Kindle version has 6768 locations. From this reference and on, I will only cite the number.

shaky after coming out, an atheist is generally relieved that he or she is no longer carrying the weight of the secret (Christina 104).

Christina also writes about how coming out helps to cultivate other atheists. Creating other atheists may not be a person's end goal for coming out but Christina argues that religion "relies on social consent to perpetuate itself, and coming out atheist denies it that consent" (234). In other words, remaining silent or in the closet as an atheist is also working to provide consent for religion to continue its cultural foothold. Basically, religion can only exist through social consent and coming out as an atheist denies that consent by demonstrating to people that there are other options besides believing in religion (Christina 254). The disclosure of atheism starts a conversation, encouraging people to start talking about religion and asking questions about religious doctrine.

Another theme Christina discovers is that coming out atheist helps to create a better world. Coming out works to decrease the misinformation and disinformation that is perpetuated against atheists. Once a person realizes that he or she knows an atheist and that that atheist is what he or she thinks of as "a good person," the bigotry hurled at atheists is reduced. Christina shares an example of a man who came out as an atheist in his workplace after his religious co-workers kept asking him to join a bible study group. He went to the study group and listened and then shared his beliefs with the group. The experience was positive and everyone listened to each other. Afterwards, the leader of the group thanked him for sharing his perspective and was grateful to learn more about atheism since she had never known an atheist. This conversation is a positive example of how coming out can help reshape how people perceive atheists. With that in mind, coming out is a major component of what reduces bigotry against atheists (Christina 329). Therefore, coming out makes the world better for atheists. But, coming out also helps make the

world a better place in general because it makes people question and hopefully remove any bigoted opinions they may have towards marginalized groups.

Christina also acknowledges that coming out as an atheist for people who are members of multiple marginalized groups can be exceptionally challenging. Christina comments about the complexities and challenges of intersecting identities when it comes to the specific set of stigmas connected with atheism and other –isms, such as racism, sexism, and classism (4072). Christina then goes on to dedicate a section about the unique challenges that women experience and how such challenges potentially prevent women from coming out as atheist.

In general, women are marginalized in many societies and are excluded from, or have limited access to, participating in political and economic power structures-- even though women are half of the world's population. Within atheist groups, women are an even smaller percentage of the population. As of 2014, people who self-identify as atheist are only 3.1% of the United States population (“America’s Changing Religious Landscape”). Meanwhile, only 32% of self-identified atheists are women (Pew Research Forum para. 21). The difference between the number of men identifying as atheist and the number of women identifying as atheist can possibly be explained considering the immense pressure placed on women to be religious. In cultures that equate morality with religion (which is most of the world), “the job of raising children and teaching them values is primarily seen as women’s work and that includes the job of teaching children to be religious” (Christina 4208). Many of these same religions also teach that women are the reason for the sin in the world; according to these teachings, women are morally weak and unable to be “the ultimate leaders of traditional organized religion, but women do a huge amount of running things on the ground day-to-day, and they get a lot of respect and admiration for it. So, being religious isn’t just pressured onto women – it can actually be very

appealing” (Christina 4221). Christina ends this section by reminding the reader that, “Tradition and morality are human traits, and treating them as women’s work insults and dehumanizes men, even as it oppresses women” (4262).

Even though Christina’s project is not particularly associated with academia, I have cited her book heavily because the subject matter is situated so centrally within my study. Christina’s book is unique because she compiled a large pool of “coming out” stories. In doing so, Christina discovered the pattern that atheists are almost always glad that they have revealed this information about themselves (67). Given what Christina discovered, I expect to find similar results; however, I plan to go in depth to find more specific characteristics from each woman’s story to learn how she describes growing up in a religious family and the consequences she faced in leaving religion.

In this section, I reviewed the literature that surrounds coming out as an atheist in a religious world. Ultimately, what many authors of this research suggest is that those who can “come out,” should. Atheists face a unique stigma in society but coming out helps to reduce the negative connotation that surrounds atheists and atheism. Women face a unique challenge when it comes to publically resisting religion, but when they do, it can create positive, constructive change for other women and for people in general. The autobiographies that I analyzed also explore the topics discussed in this literature review. In the next chapter, I summarize recent scholarship about storytelling and the power of sharing personal narratives. I will also outline the method I used for data analysis.

CHAPTER 2

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

In the following section, I explore current research on personal narratives and the relationship between narration and narrator empowerment. I will address the power of personal narratives as a rhetorical strategy that serves to raise awareness, invite social change, and humanize the authors of the autobiographies. When discussing personal narratives and storytelling as a rhetorical strategy, I will draw primarily from *Storytelling in Daily Life* written by communication scholars Kristin Langellier and Eric Peterson, and *Taking Narrative Risk: The Empowerment of Abuse Survivors* written by communication scholar Lori Montalbano-Phelps, since I see both works as foundational in storytelling literature. Along the way, I will include additional storytelling literature that supports and extends the works of Langellier, Peterson, and Montalbano-Phelps.

Narratives and storytelling are found everywhere in culture in the form of autobiography, fiction, newspapers, history, politics, magazines, television, and film (etc.) (Langellier and Peterson location 41)³. Langellier and Peterson reveal the power of storytelling when they write, “People make sense of their experiences, claim identities, interact with each other, and participate in cultural conversations through storytelling” (41). Telling a story about one’s lived experience is a “narrative act, event, and discourse – a site for understanding and intervening in the ways culture produces, maintains, and transforms relations of identity and difference” (Langellier and Peterson 63). Simply stated, storytelling “focuses on doing things with words and asking what difference(s) it makes to do it” (Langellier and Peterson 63).

³ The book I have access to, *Storytelling in Daily Life* by Kristin Langellier and Eric Peterson is a Kindle version. The page numbers I cite are “locations.” This Kindle version has 4253 locations. From this reference on, I will only cite the number.

Montalbano-Phelps demonstrates the power of storytelling and “asking what difference(s) it makes to do it” in her research about personal narratives from abuse survivors. Storytelling provides the narrator with the opportunity to understand everyday life experiences (Montalbano-Phelps 3). Storytelling gives agency to the narrator and provides the narrator with a method for bringing “change in the teller’s self-perception” (Montalbano-Phelps 3). For instance, Montalbano-Phelps quotes one interviewee who reflected on living through abuse and telling her family, “I don’t know how I expected them to save me, they didn’t know how to save themselves, it happened to them. So, I thought maybe telling people would do it” (Montalbano-Phelps 1). Research on personal narratives “suggests that narrating one’s experience can contribute to the narrator’s ability to cope with difficult situations” and may ultimately empower the narrator with the strength to avoid potentially dangerous relationships in the future (Montalbano-Phelps 1-2).

Personal narratives also provide the storyteller with a chance to educate and inspire social change. In Montalbano-Phelps’s research she argues that “successful narration could garner help from social workers, police, and medical personnel, which may be necessary for the victim’s ultimate survival” (3). Thus, the telling of personal narratives can affect the life of the teller in significant, positive ways (Montalbano-Phelps 3). In addition to improving the teller’s life, sharing a personal story with diverse audiences can help facilitate change in the lives of other abuse victims (Montalbano-Phelps 3).

Storytelling is a powerful tool that provides people with the opportunity to accomplish change and “alter the ways we view mundane everyday events” (Riessman 63). Storytelling is both a reversible and reflexive process (Langellier and Peterson 71). For instance, “Storytelling is reversible in that an audience can ‘take’ his or her consciousness of the storyteller’s experience

and ‘in turn’ become a storyteller and make it an experience for another audience” (Langellier and Peterson 71). Basically, stories are told by a teller and interpreted by a listener, who then has the opportunity to tell the story to another listener. However, it is important to note that storytelling is also a reflexive process, in that “storytellers begin as audiences to themselves and others before becoming storytellers. It is the reflexivity of the storyteller that makes it possible for him or her to shift from audience to storyteller and storyteller to audience” (Langellier and Peterson 78). In other words, a storyteller is a witness to the culture in which he or she lives and acknowledges an event or events that he or she wants to make sense of and share with others. With that in mind, storytelling is both socially and culturally reflexive (Langellier and Peterson 78).

Langellier and Peterson argue that, “because it is reflexive, any particular storytelling event has the potential to disrupt material constraints and discourse conventions and to give rise to new possibilities for other storytelling events and for how we participate in performing narrative” (78). Basically, Langellier and Peterson acknowledge the power of storytelling to challenge and disrupt the status quo and invite social change. Langellier and Peterson extend this argument when they write that storytelling has the potential for productive creativity, resistance, and the “capacity to reinscribe conventional meanings and relations” (85). Moreover, Langellier and Peterson contend that sharing personal narratives is also a “site of *intrapersonal* contact. The storyteller tells about something that happened and brings to consciousness a past experience” (Langellier and Peterson 195). Furthermore, since personal narratives are inherently tied to, and reflections of, the culture in which the teller was raised, any themes that are mentioned in the narrative “will inevitably expose certain relationships between the teller and the teller’s culture or frames of reference” (Stahl 20).

In the book, *Using Narrative Inquiry as a Research Method: An Introduction to Using Critical Event Narrative Analysis in Research on Learning and Teaching*, Leonard Webster, director of Educational Development at Monash University, and Patricie Mertova, research fellow, further support the current research on personal narratives, arguing that narrative inquiry is particularly well-suited to address “the complexities and subtleties of human experience” (1). Webster and Mertova argue that, “We all have a basic need for stories, for organizing our experiences into tales of important happenings” (10). Storytelling is beneficial because it provides people with an opportunity to record “human experience through the construction and reconstruction of personal stories” (Webster and Mertova 1). Stories are often being restructured in light of new events “because stories do not exist in a vacuum but are shaped by lifelong personal and community narratives” (Webster and Mertova 2). Also, in keeping with Langellier and Peterson’s argument that storytelling is socially and culturally reflexive, Webster and Mertova acknowledge that in sharing personal narratives “our voices echo those of others in the sociocultural world, and we observe cultural membership both through our ways of crafting stories and through the very content of these stories. Personal narratives should not be looked upon as separate from real life, but as forming meaningful connections to that life” (2). Additionally, Webster and Mertova write that stories “can tap the social context or culture in which this construction takes place. Just as a story unfolds the complexities of characters, relationships and settings, so too can complex problems be explored in this way” (4). Webster and Mertova also allude to the power of storytelling when they write that storytelling is liberating and provides us with an opportunity to “give meaning to ourselves and others and the world at large” (7). Finally, “Reflecting critically on the stories that we read, hear, live and tell

may help us to understand how we can use them more responsibly and creatively and free ourselves from their constraints” (Webster and Mertova 7).

This section included a summary of the most current research on storytelling and personal narratives. Storytelling is a process that hopefully can help “transform the present and shape the future so that it will be richer or better than the past” (Webster and Mertova 2). Furthermore, storytelling empowers a person to reclaim his or her experiences and to contemplate the effects of his or her actions, and to alter the direction of his or her life (Montalbano-Phelps 1). Finally, storytelling is “our way of experiencing, acting and living, both as individuals and as communities” (Webster and Mertova 2). As Mary Karr wrote in her book, *The Art of Memoir*, “I feel awe for the great courage all of us show in trying to wring some truth from the godawful mess of a single life. To bring oneself to others makes the whole planet less lonely” (217-218). Understanding storytelling as a rhetorical strategy is particularly useful in my analysis of women’s autobiographies because storytelling is a valuable and insightful tool for how women make sense of their lives.

METHODS FOR DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS

In the next section I will describe the process I used to select autobiographies to analyze, as well as the method I used: thematic narrative analysis. My plan for analysis was drawn primarily from *Narrative Methods for the Human Sciences* by sociologist Catherine Riessman, *Taking Narrative Risk: The Empowerment of Abuse Survivors* by communication scholar Lori Montalbano-Phelps, and *Using Narrative Inquiry as a Research Method: An Introduction to Using Critical Event Analysis in Research on Learning and Teaching* by Leonard Webster and Patricie Mertova. I also took a broadly rhetorical approach, using procedures common to

thematic narrative analysis, in order to understand how the authors invite readers to respond to the memoirs.

Data Collection

In order to explore women's autobiographies about religious departure, I searched the Internet for any stories from women who have written about their experience leaving the religion in which they were raised. I found anthologies, documentaries, blog posts, and more autobiographical books. For the purpose of this study, I limited my analysis to autobiographies that have been released as books. I believe that books provide a depth and breadth of information that cannot be found in other media. I started my search having already selected the books *The Spiral Staircase* and *From Housewife to Heretic* because those books were recommended to me after discussing my research interests with my advisor. I purchased *The Spiral Staircase* on my Kindle and found the other six autobiographies in the "Recommended" section as provided by Amazon.

In order to provide diversity and avoid a potentially homogenous culture of stories about Western religions, I made sure I searched for autobiographies about religious departure from all of the world's major religions, including but not limited to: Christianity, Judaism, Islam, Buddhism, and Hinduism. I found multiple autobiographies from women who have written about their departures from Catholicism, Islam, and Orthodox Judaism. Julia Sweeney created a one-woman show about her departure from Catholicism but, since that was a video, I decided her show didn't fit this particular project. Joanne Howe wrote about her departure from Catholicism in her book *A Change of Habit* but, since she still identifies as religious, her story did not align with my criteria for selection. Taslima Nasrin published a memoir about her experience growing up in the Muslim faith but her memoir focused on her life in general and only discussed religion

in one chapter. Deborah Feldman published a second book about what her life has been like since her departure from Orthodox Judaism but I decided to analyze her first memoir since it focused on her upbringing and also included the moments after her departure.

I found only one autobiography for each of five religious denominations. That is, I only found one autobiography discussing departure from Jehovah's Witness, Christian Science, Mormonism, Scientology and Evangelical Christianity. In addition to these five autobiographies, I found memoirs discussing departure from Catholicism, Islam, and Mormonism. Once I found these eight autobiographies, I searched specifically to find religious departures from Buddhism and Hinduism but couldn't find any autobiographies. I found anonymous accounts of departures from these religions on blogs but nothing published in a book. To allow breadth as well as depth in my analysis, I have limited my rhetorical artifacts to one autobiography per religious denomination.

The religious denominations that were identified in the autobiographies I analyzed include: Jehovah's Witness, Islam, Catholicism, Orthodox Judaism, Christian Science, Mormonism, Scientology, and Evangelical Christianity. The autobiographies I analyzed are: *I'm Perfect, You're Doomed* by Kyria Abrahams (Jehovah's Witness); *Infidel: My Life* by Ayaan Hirsi Ali (Islam); *The Spiral Staircase* by Karen Armstrong (Catholicism); *Unorthodox: The Scandalous Rejection of My Hasidic Roots* by Deborah Feldman (Orthodox Judaism); *fathermothergod: My Journey Out of Christian Science* by Lucia Greenhouse (Christian Science); *From Housewife to Heretic* by Sonia Johnson (Mormonism); *Beyond Belief: My Secret Life Inside Scientology and My Harrowing Escape* by Jenna Miscavige Hill (Scientology); and *Trusting Doubt: A Former Evangelical Looks at Old Beliefs in a New Light* by Valerie Tarico (Evangelical Christianity).

Data Analysis

Thematic Narrative Analysis

I utilized thematic narrative analysis to determine what types of themes exist in the artifacts. Thematic narrative analysis is a particularly useful method for this study since I focused on the content of the autobiographies. Of course any narrative inquiry study is concerned with the content or “what” is “said, written, or visually shown” but thematic narrative analysis focuses exclusively on the content (Riessman 53). For example, Maria Tamboukou, feminist studies scholar and co-director of the Centre for Narrative Research, used thematic narrative analysis to examine the “life writings of women teachers in late nineteenth century England” (Riessman 63). Tamboukou’s research is similar to my study because she analyzed autobiographical documents written by women about their personal experience and how they made sense of themselves in the culture and world in which they lived (Riessman 63). Tamboukou discovered that the women teachers often wrote about wanting their own personal space. Tamboukou then decided to further investigate how the women negotiated the “thematics of space” in self-writings (Riessman 63). Tamboukou referenced and applied Foucault’s theories about space, power, and genealogy (Riessman 63). My research is different though, because Tamboukou worked with a specific research question concerning space, whereas I asked more general questions that cover a larger spectrum of categories and topics.

Riessman described thematic narrative analysis as a standard approach that researchers from different fields may draw on for working with archival documents such as autobiographies (63). The main function of thematic narrative analysis is to discover common themes across the narratives, while simultaneously recognizing how the narratives are situated within a specific historical context, and addressed to (or created for) a particular audience. In any thematic

narrative analysis, the research must draw on prior theory “as a resource for interpretation of spoken and written narratives” (Riessman 73). Ultimately, the primary focus of a thematic narrative analysis is “what content a narrative communicates, rather than precisely how a narrative is structured to make points to an audience,” although several studies challenge this boundary (Riessman 73). For instance, some researchers also analyze “how stories function socially to create possibilities for group belonging and action” by examining how “stories of resistance actually generate collective action in social movements” (Riessman 73).

Following this model, then, the first step of my analysis involved reading through each story in order to gain familiarity with the story as a whole, as well as to discern the “general contextual knowledge” in which the story was written (Riessman 63). As I was reading each story, I highlighted the narrative themes, specifically focusing on how the woman shaped her nonreligious identity. In order to determine what to highlight, I used a critical events approach to narrative, as outlined by Webster and Mertova. Webster and Mertova define a “critical event” as a pivotal moment in a story that “reveals a change of understanding or worldview by the storyteller” (73). I found that I wanted to highlight the majority of the text but the critical events approach helped me to determine where I should put my focus. As I read each story, I began to pay attention to its unique language and characteristics (Montalbano-Phelps 36). During this stage of analysis, I circled and highlighted words and phrases that struck me and started to notice similar topics being discussed across each of the autobiographies. The final stage involved interpreting the autobiographies using critical probes as guides. During this stage of analysis, I searched the texts “for additional statements that relate in a general way” to the overall theme of the autobiographies (Riessman 64). Additionally, I conducted a “close rhetorical reading of the

word choice, phraseology, and position of the emergent themes within the narratives, which is used by the narrators to describe their experience” (Montalbano-Phelps 36).

I used three research questions to guide the thematic narrative analysis:

- R1: What are the types of challenges, experiences, and topics that nonreligious women include in their stories?
- R2: How do these autobiographies invite readers to understand personal accounts of religious departure?
- R3: How do these autobiographies invite social change and consciousness raising?

In addition to thematic narrative analysis, I approached the study from a rhetorical perspective. As Hart and Daughton note, “There is a logic to storytelling” (88). Stories are often complex and spring from “deep cultural roots” (Hart and Daughton 88). Additionally, narratives are rhetorical in that “they awaken within audiences dormant experiences and feelings, and they thereby expose, subtly, some sort of propositional argument” (Hart and Daughton 88). As a woman shares her story about her experience with religion, and subsequent departure, she may evoke an emotional response and awaken “dormant experiences and feelings” in the reader.

At the same time, when a person tells a story, even if that story is based on real life events, he or she gets to decide what to include in the story, which necessarily makes the story rhetorical. So, even though a narrative can appear to be free of persuasion, “When narrative is onstage, then, the critic is wise to look offstage” (Hart and Daughton 92). As such, when reading the autobiographies about religious departure, I examined what propositional content the narratives are designed to reveal and mask. Hart and Daughton explain that “behind any narrative lie primitive rhetorical decisions for the rhetor: Which facts to stress and which to

ignore? Which characters to mention, which to amplify? When to start the story, and when to stop it” (91)? Furthermore, Edwin Black argues that, “Narration entails a narrator intervening between the action and auditor” (147). Meaning, “the audience of a narrative is conscious of a mediator – the teller of the tale – who lives in a time of the narrator’s own, and who recounts for the audience events that have occurred at a time other than the narrator’s” (Black 147). With that in mind, critics are encouraged to “inquire into the underlying purpose of the narrative at hand” which can provide insight into what the narrator decided to do and not to do (Hart and Daughton 91).

In this chapter, I have provided a theoretical framework as well as a description of the methods for data collection and analysis. In the next chapter I answer the first research question: What are the types of challenges, experiences, and topics that nonreligious women include in their stories?

CHAPTER 3

THE SPHERE OF LIFE

I was not prepared for the emotional whirlwind I experienced while reading these autobiographies. As a person who no longer identifies as religious, I thought I knew what to expect from the autobiographies. I have read articles written by Valerie Tarico about psychology and religion. I have listened to interviews and watched Ayaan Hirsi Ali debate about religious topics. I watched a Ted Talk delivered by Karen Armstrong about compassion and religion. I have been researching religious departures, in some form, for over five years but I have been thinking about this my whole life. I suppose that explains my affective response to this research. As such, each of the following sections will also include a brief anecdote from my own life that demonstrates my connection to this research.

I read each autobiography one at a time and the first thing I noticed is that the majority of the content focuses on the time the woman was living within the religion in which she was raised. Women face many challenges upon leaving the religion in which they were raised and those challenges were acknowledged in the autobiographies. However, the emphasis in the autobiographies focused on the time when the woman was living within the religion. This could be an indication of the pressure women experience to participate in religion. Traditionally, the woman's role has been as a homemaker and caretaker of the private, domestic sphere. Tracy Fessenden, philosopher and historian of religious studies, summarized the nineteenth-century ideology of the woman's sphere and discussed the ways "industrialization, religious establishment, and other social dislocations of the early nineteenth century severed economic and spiritual partnerships between women and men and recast their domains as separate spheres" (453). Women were legally denied the ability to participate in the public sphere; thus, women

were “removed from economic productivity and other aspects of worldliness” (Fessenden 453). So, many women found a place where they were able to devote themselves to the “home as a haven of tranquility and spiritual value and became avid consumers of the magazines, advice literature, sermons, and novels that trained them in their primary roles as selfless and pious guardians of the family state” (Fessenden 453-454). To challenge those traditional roles would be to challenge a long history of the expectations women experience. So, it’s no surprise that the authors of the autobiographies included an emphasis on the time they were living within the religion with their families. With that in mind, I found five themes that were discussed across the autobiographies that will answer the first research question: What are the types of challenges, experiences and topics that nonreligious women include in their stories? Inspired by the terminology of the woman’s sphere, I will describe each of the themes as a realm and, in each of these realms, I will demonstrate how these women’s lives were affected by religion. The sphere includes five realms: family, intellectual, relational, sociocultural, and professional. Some of the examples I provide may be able to fit within multiple realms so I included the examples into the realm which I felt was most appropriate.

Family Realm

About ten years ago my mother created an account at Ancestry.com and started researching her family history so that she could organize a family reunion. I found myself fascinated with the growing list of family members I had never heard of but who were closely related to myself. Around the same time, I learned that someone related to my father had made a Glunz family history book. I became fascinated with my family history and soon discovered that my ancestors from both sides of my family immigrated to the United States around the same time approximately 140 years ago. I started doing more research about my ancestors and learned that,

again, both sides of the family have a long history of belonging to the Catholic Church. This knowledge made me feel strongly connected to the Catholic Church even though, at the time, I had already dissociated myself from the Church. However, I couldn't deny that a long history of Catholic roots preceded me and has influenced who I am today.

I share this story because many of the women began their autobiography by acknowledging the *long history and also the "high connections"* that their family members have within their religious affiliation. These connections create an interesting and difficult dynamic for a person who may be experiencing questions and doubts about what he or she believes. A family's historical connection to a religion continues to impact relationships throughout one's life. Additionally, the ties are especially strong when one's family members hold respected positions within the church.

For instance, Jenna Miscavige Hill wrote, "Everyone I knew was in the Church, and as a third-generation Scientologist, my life was Scientology" (7). Three generations may not seem like much but, when one considers that Scientology was founded in 1954, three generations goes back to the beginning of the religion's establishment (Miller 140). Also, Miscavige Hill's uncle, David Miscavige, is the current leader of the Church of Scientology. Miscavige Hill spends much of her autobiography writing about her unique experience within the church, considering that other members looked up to, and sometimes feared, her uncle (353).

Sonia Johnson wrote about her controversial decision to not get married in the Mormon temple and how upset her parents were. Johnson wrote, "It was simply not acceptable in certain strata of the church – my family's strata because of Dad's job as a seminary teacher for the church, Mother's church positions, the strictly orthodox backgrounds of both their families as far into the Mormon past as we could see – not to be married in the temple" (38). Johnson's decision

to not get married in the Mormon temple was based on the fact that her fiancé had not been baptized into the Mormon faith. However, Johnson was ultimately married in the Church because, as she wrote, “my parents, who had high connections in the church, were able to get permission for us to be married in the temple” (37).

Ayaan Hirsi Ali shared her family’s origins with Islam. Hirsi Ali wrote, “Later, as I grow up, my grandmother will coax and even beat me to learn my father’s ancestry eight hundred years back, to the beginning of the great clan of the Darod” (3). This is an impressive account of her family’s religious and cultural ties, considering that Islam was established approximately 1400 years ago by the prophet Muhammad (Esposito). Hirsi Ali further shared, “My grandmother warns me, ‘The names will make you strong. They are your bloodline. If you honor them they will keep you alive. If you dishonor them you will be forsaken. You will be nothing. You will lead a wretched life and die alone’” (3).

Deborah Feldman wrote about being raised by her grandmother who would often remind Feldman that her great-grandfather “was a *Kohain*...He could trace his legacy all the way back to the Temple priests” (12). Since I’m not familiar with Orthodox Jewish history, I researched “Kohain” and “Temple priests” and learned that this lineage goes back approximately to the year 408 BCE (Morgenstern). Also, Feldman’s paternal grandfather, Zeidy, is well-respected in their tight-knit community. Feldman wrote, “Zeidy is considered both a scholar and a businessman in this community. Immersed in financial reports by day and the Talmud by night, he is a jack of both trades” (40). These four women share prime examples of how deeply connected one can be to a religious faith from the moment one is born.

In addition to writing about the long family history with a certain religion, many of the women wrote about how their *lives were absorbed* by the church. Kyria Abrahams, raised as a

Jehovah's Witness, had to be careful about whom she was friends with because her parents were strict about her hanging around "worldly" people who weren't Jehovah's Witnesses. When she told her parents about her crush on Ricky Schroder, Abrahams father said, "He's worldly, Kyria. Do you want to end up with a worldly boy?" (61). Abrahams reflected, "This is how it worked. Jehovah's Witnesses fell in love with other Jehovah's Witnesses and dated only as preparation for marriage. Eleven-year-olds couldn't get married and therefore didn't need to have crushes. Especially not on worldly boys" (61). Furthermore, Abrahams didn't feel comfortable telling her friends, who were mostly Jehovah's Witnesses, about her worldly friend, Samantha. Abrahams wrote that they "didn't know about Samantha, the worldly girl I befriended at school. Hanging out with worldly kids was just not done. 'Bad associations spoil useful habits,' we were told – end of story" (47). Abrahams also reflected on how being discouraged from worldly associations affected her well-being:

It takes a lot of malicious energy to stop your children from having friends, to look them in the eye and tell them you'd rather they sit in their bedroom alone instead of going to a pool party. My parents wanted to live forever in paradise, but they weren't sociopaths. Instead, I got a nudge, a wink, and the knowledge that my friendship with Samantha was wrong. (47)

Abrahams shared that when she would argue about wanting to hang out with Samantha, her mother would remind her, "Do you think Brother Pendlebury would let his children have worldly friends? Be grateful you're not his daughter. If you were the daughter of an elder, you wouldn't even be seeing Samantha at all" (47). Later, when Samantha surprised Abrahams with a Ouija board, Abrahams was scared that demons would find her. Abrahams told her mother about the game and her mother made her write a letter to Samantha, quoting appropriate bible verses and

*The Watchtower*⁴ references, declaring an end to their friendship. Abrahams shared multiple stories about being terrified that Armageddon was going to happen at any time and so, even though she lost her worldly friend, she was relieved that she resisted the demonic “unseen voices from the spirit realm” (50).

When Lucia Greenhouse was in fourth grade, her father quit his job to become a Christian Science practitioner, which is a position of authority within the Church (20). Before this moment, Greenhouse’s family would often attend Church meetings but now they were more fully immersed within the teachings of the Church. When Greenhouse was thirteen years old, her parents told her and her siblings that they were moving from Minnesota to London (55). Greenhouse’s father told her that they were moving so that they (Greenhouse and her siblings) would be able to attend Christian Science boarding schools. There was a boarding school for girls called Claremont and a boarding school for boys called Fan Court (56). Greenhouse and her siblings were shocked and upset. Regardless of their refusal, the Greenhouse children were required to move to Europe where they attended boarding school and were only allowed to interact with other Christian Science members.

Jenna Miscavige Hill wrote about her life being immersed in the Church of Scientology. At an early age, Miscavige Hill lived in a boarding school with about eighty kids whose parents were executives of the Church (1). One day, two Scientology recruiters went to her school and explained that the official motto of the Sea Organization⁵ and Scientology is “REVENIMUS” which is Latin for “we come back” (1). The recruiter further explained that Scientologists believe in reincarnation but, in order for that to happen, the members have to sign a contract. The

⁴ *The Watchtower* is an illustrated religious magazine which is published monthly by Jehovah’s Witnesses.

⁵ The Sea Organization is Scientology’s most elite body comprised of its most dedicated members (Miscavige Hill 1).

recruiter told Miscavige Hill, who was seven years old at the time, that, “We come back lifetime after lifetime. You are signing a billion-year contract” (2). Miscavige Hill wrote that she was taught that her spirit had already lived for millions of years and that she would continue to do so with or without a body if she signed the contract dedicating her life to Scientology (2).

Miscavige Hill was excited, in the moment, to sign the billion-year contract because her parents were so committed to the Church. Miscavige Hill wrote, “I was all too willing and ready to commit myself to the cause that was so dear to my parents. Being in the Sea Org had meant so much to them that when I was six, they had placed me at the Ranch so they could dedicate all their time to the Church’s mission. They only saw me for a few hours on the weekends” (2). When Miscavige Hill was a teenager, she didn’t see her mother for over a year because her mother was being punished, by the Church, for having an affair (200).

Deborah Feldman also discussed her experience of having a contract with God and being absorbed in her religion. Feldman grew up in an Orthodox Jewish neighborhood in Williamsburg, New York. Not only did she trace her Jewish ancestry back to 400 BCE but, she was taught that “every Jewish soul was present when the Torah was handed down to the chosen people, and that means that even if we don’t remember it, we were there, and we chose to accept the responsibility of being a chosen one” (59-60). Feldman reflected, “I wonder how old my soul has to be to have been present at Mount Sinai. Did I say yes because I wanted to fit in? Because that sounds like me, afraid to think differently out loud” (60). In modern day, Feldman claimed that she would be tied to the community of Williamsburg for her entire life because her grandfather, Zeidy, had made a pledge with a Rabbi fifty years ago. Feldman wrote, “Zeidy pledged his allegiance before he even knew what it entailed, and in doing so he tied his whole family, and all of its future generations, to this community. Back in Europe, Zeidy’s family

didn't live like this. They weren't extremists" (60). Feldman's life was so insulated that she wasn't aware of the events of 9/11 until late in the day even though she lived less than five miles away from the site of the attack. Feldman, who was in high school at the time, remembered being told to go home for the day but wasn't told why. At home, she recalled being confused that her grandfather was listening to the radio because radio and television were forbidden (103). Only then did Feldman learn about the terrorist attacks.

Another common theme in the family realm is that almost all of the women acknowledged that *other families practice their religion differently*. For instance, as mentioned previously, Abrahams acknowledged that her parents allowed her to have a friend who wasn't a Jehovah's Witness even though their fellow community member Brother Pendlebury wouldn't allow his children to have "worldly" friends. Abrahams' family may have been more flexible in their interpretation of their religious doctrine; however, Deborah Feldman described her grandparents, specifically her grandfather, as being extremely literal in their interpretation of the Torah. For example, Feldman wrote about meeting a Jewish girl, Stephanie, in a park and playing with her. Before Feldman and Stephanie parted ways, Stephanie gave Feldman a Hershey's chocolate bar. Feldman had never seen a Hershey's candy bar before and she was fascinated with the packaging. Before Feldman had a chance to eat it, her cousin grabbed the candy bar from her and declared, "You can't eat that chocolate! It's not kosher" (16). Feldman was upset and told her cousin that she got it from a Jewish person so it must be okay. Feldman's cousin told her, "Because not all Jews keep kosher. And even the ones that do, it's not always kosher enough. Look, see the mark on the wrapper? It says OUD. That means it is kosher dairy. It's not *cholov Yisroel* dairy, which means the milk that went into it didn't have the proper rabbinical supervision. Zeidy would be horrified if you brought this into his house" (16). After

this encounter, Feldman thought to herself, “How can you be Jewish and not keep kosher? How can you know the aleph-bet⁶ but still eat Hershey’s chocolate? Doesn’t she know any better?” (16).

In addition to Feldman’s experience with different family practices, Ayaan Hirsi Ali shared examples of when her father would break away from traditional Islamic expectations. When living with her mother and siblings (while her father was away), Hirsi Ali was raised to believe women are supposed to pray behind men and never next to them. When Hirsi Ali was eight, she moved from Somalia to Saudi Arabia with her mother and two siblings. When Hirsi Ali’s father was finally able to join them in Saudi Arabia, she was excited to see him because he had often been away fighting in Somalia’s rebel army. The first day he was with his family in Saudi Arabia, he woke everyone up for morning prayer. The women’s prayer mats were placed behind the men’s prayer mats as per tradition. Hirsi Ali and her younger sister moved their mats next to their father’s mat and this upset their mother. Hirsi Ali’s mother said it was forbidden for women to pray next to men. Hirsi Ali’s father responded that, “We pray together as a family. This is how God wants it” (44). Additionally, her father relaxed some of the other rules, like washing before every prayer because it was a “waste of water and Allah wouldn’t want that” (45). Also, he told his children that they didn’t have to change their robes before praying. When Hirsi Ali’s mother began to protest this change in behavior, her father responded, “Asha, you know, it’s not the rules, it’s the spirit” (44).

Regardless of whether their family practiced their religion differently from other families, many of the women wrote about how they were *physically abused* by either their parents or a

⁶ Aleph-bet is a word for the Hebrew Alphabet.

leader in their Church. Often times the physical abuse was justified by the abuser by quoting religious doctrine about corporal punishment. For instance, Kyria Abrahams wrote about how she fought with her younger brother, which frustrated her mother to the point that her mother would shout, “Don’t make me get the yardstick” (4)! Abrahams wrote that, “There was a yardstick balanced above each of our bedroom doors for easy-access discipline” (4). Also, Abrahams added, “When we misbehaved, we received a meaningful slapping about the backs of the thighs. My father’s implement of choice was a ruler, while my mother preferred the electric cord” (91). Later in her memoir, Abrahams wrote, “According to Jehovah, the best way to raise your children is with loving attention and timely discipline. We even had a song about it: ‘They are gifts from God. He says use the rod.’ It was one of my mother’s favorite Kingdom Melodies” (90). Abrahams wrote that corporal punishment was a common experience for children at her Kingdom Hall to the point that the boiler room in the Kingdom Hall was “known to us kids as ‘the beatin’ room.’ At least once during every meeting, you’d look up to see a blur of feet as a screaming kid was carried into the back of the Kingdom Hall to be given a little alone time with the Lord’s Rod” (90).

Ayaan Hirsi Ali also disclosed that she was often physically abused by her mother and grandmother. Hirsi Ali wrote, “To my mother, corporal punishment was a reasonable and necessary part of bringing up a child” (41). Hirsi Ali mentioned that both her sister and she were often abused by their mother and grandmother, but that their brother was not beaten. Hirsi Ali also mentioned that, since she was the oldest daughter, she was expected to do more chores than her younger sister. Whenever Hirsi Ali and her sister argued with her mother about their chores they would be beaten. Hirsi Ali wrote, “When we were disobedient, we were beaten. My mother would catch me, pull my hair, fix my hands behind my back with rope, and put me on the floor,

on my belly. She tied my hands to my ankles, and then with a stick or a wire she would beat me until I begged for mercy and swore I would never do it again” (70). Later in her memoir, Hirsi Ali shared a graphic moment of being abused when she wrote, “At around midnight she and Grandma finally managed to get me down. They tied me up, and I said to my mother, ‘Go on. Get it over with – kill me. And if you don’t do it now, I’ll do it myself when you’ve let me go.’ My mother beat me – really beat me – and then she said, ‘I’m not going to untie you. You can sleep on the floor tonight’” (75).

Jenna Miscavige Hill wasn’t physically abused by her family, but she wrote about the harsh working conditions she endured while attending the Scientology boarding school which was known as “The Ranch.” Miscavige Hill revealed that, “we were a group of children who devoted hours of every day to doing the kind of physical labor that no child should have to do. We got calluses and blisters. We had cuts and bruises. Our hands lost feeling when we plunged them into the frigid water of the creek bed for rocks...any kind of questioning was instantly met with disciplinary action” (63). The children at “The Ranch” were required to renovate the buildings that were ultimately going to be the rooms for their schooling. Miscavige Hill shared an insight into her life at “The Ranch” when she wrote that it was “a lot like a military boot camp, with grueling drills, endless musters, exhausting inspections, and arduous physical labor...The fact that my uncle was the head of Scientology didn’t protect me or offer me any special treatment” (49). In fact, Miscavige Hill devoted three chapters (out of 34) in her memoir about the physical labor and the emotional and mental abuse that she experienced at “The Ranch.”

Another theme that I noticed across the autobiographies is the difficulty that, once they had grown and married, women experienced when it came to *wanting and getting a divorce*.

Divorce is a stigmatized subject in many religions, with varying levels of punishment that accompanies getting a divorce. Kyria Abrahams wrote that if a Jehovah's Witness gets divorced he or she will also get disfellowshipped.⁷ Behaviors that will get a person disfellowshipped include but are not limited to: associating with disfellowshipped people, blood transfusions, drug use, military service, political involvement, apostasy, and adultery (Grundy). Abrahams wrote that her mother and her friend's mother both wanted out of their marriages but, "As much as they hated their husbands, neither woman wanted to risk losing it all by getting disfellowshipped" (51). Later, Abrahams shared that she desperately wanted to get out of her marriage but she feared being disfellowshipped. Abrahams said that she was dependent on her husband for rent, didn't have access to any money or credit cards, and she didn't know anyone who would let her stay with them while she figured out how to get out of her marriage (275). Abrahams asked her husband for a divorce but he wouldn't agree to sign the papers. Ultimately, Abrahams committed adultery hoping that that would get her husband to agree to a divorce. After the affair, she found people outside of her religious community who let her stay with them as she tried to figure out how to officially leave her husband. Eventually Abrahams' husband sent her a divorce summons but only after telling her that he was also declaring bankruptcy (316).

Deborah Feldman wrote about the challenges that she and other Orthodox Jewish women often experience if they want a divorce. Feldman's marriage was arranged by her grandfather and her Aunt (since she wasn't raised by her biological parents). Feldman was seventeen when she got married to Eli. During their first year of marriage, they weren't able to consummate their marriage with sexual intercourse, which ended up creating an unmanageable amount of tension

⁷ "A disfellowshipped person is to be shunned by all family and friends, usually for the remainder of their life" (Facts About Jehovah's Witnesses, Disfellowshipping and Shunning)

in their relationship. After Feldman attended sexual counseling, she was able to have intercourse with her husband. Feldman got pregnant the first time she ever had sex. After a few years of marriage, when their son was three years old, Eli suggested that he and Feldman get divorced. This is what Feldman wanted but she worried, “If my husband divorces me, I will have no home, no friends. I will probably never be able to remarry” (182). Feldman was also worried that she would lose her son because she had heard so many stories of Hasidic women losing their children in custody battles (250). Feldman was determined to keep her child and wrote, “Through a combination of careful planning, risky legal strategy, and fiercely leveraged publicity, I managed to obtain both a religious and civil divorce and custody of my son” (249-250). Feldman doesn’t describe exactly what her strategy was, but says that her circumstances were rare and she didn’t know of many women who left the Hasidic community because divorce is often a quick road to poverty (250).

Through all the pain that many of the women experienced, many of the women also displayed *compassion for the people who hurt them*. Ayaan Hirsi Ali had a complicated relationship with her mother; however, Hirsi Ali sympathized with her mother’s circumstances. Hirsi Ali had this to say about her mother’s abusive actions, “I knew it was not hatred for us but because she was so unhappy, and I pitied her. Our mother had been abandoned in a foreign country that she scorned” (67). Even after her mother fractured Hirsi Ali’s skull, she wrote, “It was while I was in the hospital that I saw for the first time that my mother did, truly, love me, deep in her heart, and that all the abuse wasn’t really directed at me, but at the world, which had taken her rightful life away...every time she visited she would cling to me and tell me she loved me and cry. I had never seen her so vulnerable” (77). Hirsi Ali reflected further, “I thought

about my father's succession of wives and children; how he had abandoned his first children, and then us...I felt a sudden wave of compassion for Ma" (92).

Karen Armstrong struggled with how she was treated while she was a nun living in a convent. Armstrong revealed that, upon entering the convent, the women had to endure a training regimen, that would be an initiation, which was supposed to make them self-reliant. Armstrong wrote, "Our training had been an initiation. We too had been segregated from the world, deprived of normal affection, and subjected to trials that were designed to test our resolve. The training was designed...so that we no longer needed human love or approval. We were told that we were to die to our old selves" (27). However, this training did not work for Armstrong. In fact, the training backfired. Armstrong reflected, "Instead of being full of courage, fearless, active, and protective of others, I was scared stiff. Unable to love or to accept love, I had become less than human. I had wanted to be transformed and enriched; instead I was diminished. Instead of becoming strong, I was simply hard" (28). Armstrong shared how mentally exhausted she felt when she lived at the convent when she wrote, "When we were punished, it seemed like a cosmic event; when we were lonely or miserable, there was no possibility of comfort. The atmosphere was frigid, and sometimes frightening. At night in our long dormitory we often heard one another weeping, but we knew that we must never ask what was wrong" (26). In retrospect, though, Armstrong recognized and shared her appreciation for one of her superiors who was supportive of her when she wrote, "Years later, while I was having my breakdown, I learned that Mother Greta had been very anxious about the way we were being trained, had voiced her disapproval, and had been overruled" (33).

Intellectual Realm

For as long as I can remember, I have questioned and had doubts about the religion in which I was raised. I remember learning about “Original Sin,” when I was in second grade, and the story didn’t ring true for me. I wanted to ask questions about what I was learning but I was also concerned that I would get in trouble. I kept my questions and concerns to myself because I thought I was alone in my doubt. I trusted the adults and thought something was wrong with me. Also, I never knew that not believing in religion was an option. Everyone I knew was either Catholic or Lutheran. It wasn’t until I went away to college that I learned about other religions besides Christianity. I also learned that there are people who don’t identify as religious which helped me to realize that something isn’t wrong with me, but that I just have different beliefs from what I learned as a child. All of this insight hasn’t helped me to feel comfortable telling my religious family members that I am not religious, though. However, reading these autobiographies has helped me to remember that I’m not alone in my questions. I believe it is helpful to know that other people have similar intellectual questions about religion.

For instance, many of the women also wrote that they thought *something was wrong with them or it was their fault* when they realized that religion wasn’t working for them. Ayaan Hirsi Ali wrote about her internal struggle with being asked to try and convert her Christian classmates. Hirsi Ali decided to ask her teacher, Sister Aziza, her question, “If we were created by Allah, and before our birth He had already determined whether we would come to rest in Heaven or Hell, then why would we take the trouble to try to convert these girls, who were also created the way they were by God” (86)? Hirsi Ali explained that she wasn’t able to understand Sister Aziza’s theological explanation for predestination which was, “Besides the path that Allah had already determined for us in the womb, there was a further dimension, which was that we

had free will, and if you bent your will to the service of God instead of Satan then you pleased God” (86). Hirsi Ali noted, “It wasn’t very convincing, but I thought it was my fault that I couldn’t understand her” (86).

Jenna Miscavige Hill wrote about how much she struggled to keep up with the physical labor that was required of the students at “The Ranch.” Miscavige Hill wrote that the hard labor she endured was supported in the doctrine of Scientology. For instance, Miscavige Hill explained that, “In the eyes of Scientology, we weren’t kids; we were Thetans, just the same as adults and capable of the same responsibilities. The only difference was that our bodies were younger. We were not necessarily younger, just our bodies were. So, the fact that we were children was irrelevant” (63). The repercussions for not following the rules or being able to keep up with the physical labor were harsh and Miscavige Hill did everything she could to avoid punishment; however, as hard as she tried she couldn’t always do the work and would think to herself, “When I felt like it was just too hard or too much, I figured there was something wrong with me and that I would need to toughen up” (63). Miscavige Hill wrote that her insecurities were reinforced when the adults and the older children would call her a slacker and tell her to toughen up (63). Additionally, Miscavige Hill shared that she wanted to share her misery with her parents but, “As much as I wanted to tell them the truth, I was hesitant, not because I was afraid of getting in trouble, but because I was terrified that the problem wasn’t with the Ranch, but with me” (82). She further shared that, “All around me, other kids were completing their tasks, and the fact that I, along with a few others, was struggling made me feel like there was something wrong with me” (82).

In addition to thinking something was wrong with themselves, five of the women wrote about secretly *reading books that they weren’t allowed to read*. Deborah Feldman was an avid

reader; however, she wasn't allowed to read non-religious texts. She also wasn't allowed to read the *Talmud* because no women, that she knew, were allowed to read the holy text. According to Feldman, "In Bubby's house the only books around are prayer books. Before I go to sleep, I say the Shema prayer" (11). Feldman later revealed that the entrance to the local library was strictly forbidden to her high school classmates and herself (89). Even though the library is near their school, many of Feldman's classmates go out of their way to avoid walking by the library. Feldman, on the other hand, felt as though she was being pulled into the library. She would often go into the library and read books that had been selected for display. Feldman specifically recalled reading the book *Matilda* which is about a young girl who has magical powers and lives with horrible people. Feldman identified deeply with Matilda and fantasized about a person coming into her life who would save her like Miss Honey saved Matilda. When Feldman was finally able to get a secret library card, she would hide her library card and the paperback books under her bed. Feldman revealed that her grandfather was firmly opposed to her reading books but also opposed to her speaking in the English language. Feldman was taught that "the English language acts like a slow poison to the soul" and that if she read it too much her soul would become tarnished to the point where "it is no longer responsive to divine stimulation" (89). Feldman was never caught reading her books but she would often get in trouble when she was caught speaking English to her cousin.

Perhaps these books *inspired questions and encouraged doubt* towards religious doctrine because many of the women also wrote about the moments in which they wondered about the truth of what they were being taught about religion. For instance, when Ayaan Hirsi Ali learned that her father had abandoned them and found another wife, she felt betrayed. Hirsi Ali explained that, "I told myself that I would never be dependent on anyone in this way. My mother had so

little control over her own life that she hadn't even known when her husband had gotten married again" (93). This betrayal opened her eyes and Hirsi Ali wrote, "I was beginning to rebel internally against women's traditional subjugation. I tried to still my mind so it would become a simple vessel for the will of Allah and the words of the Quran. But my mind seemed bent on being distracted from the Straight Path" (93). Hirsi Ali further reflected, "Even as a child, I could never comprehend the downright unfairness of the rules, especially for women. How could a just God desire that women be treated so unfairly? When the *ma'alim* told us that a woman's testimony is worth half of a man's, I would think, *Why*" (93)? Furthermore, Hirsi Ali wrote, "Inwardly, I resisted the teachings, and secretly I transgressed them. Like many of the other girls in my class, I continued to read sensual romance novels and trashy thrillers, even though I knew that doing so was resisting Islam in the most basic way" (93).

In addition to Hirsi Ali's internal dissonance towards religious doctrine, Kyria Abrahams reflected on a seemingly simple moment in her childhood that made her call into question what she was being taught. As a Jehovah's Witness, Abrahams was raised not to celebrate birthdays because of their pagan origins. So, when Abrahams was playing at her "worldly" friend's house she was terrified when she realized she was at a birthday party for her friend's younger brother. Abrahams wrote that, "The only birthday that is mentioned in the Bible is King Herod's feast, at which point John the Baptist is beheaded. Since everything in the Bible is there for a reason, celebrating your birthday, for Jehovah's Witnesses, is akin to ordering a beheading" (107). Abrahams was worried that, even though it was unintentional, she was sinning. However, as the birthday party progressed, she realized she was having fun and nothing terrible was happening. Abrahams wrote, "I watched a happy family, heads fully intact, licking icing from pink plastic forks" (107). Abrahams decided not to participate in singing the birthday song but she did have

cake. After the party was over, Abrahams reflected, “Having survived an actual ‘happy’ birthday, I became a changed woman. I secretly began to think that things I’d always seen as *very* wrong were only *slightly* wrong” (108).

In addition to having an internal struggle with their religion, some of the women spent much of their autobiography *pointing out the hypocrisy* that they observed in their religion. Many of the women didn’t necessarily share their observations at the time but found the freedom to share these reflections in their memoirs. However, Sonia Johnson was outspoken about her disdain about the Mormon Church’s position against the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA). In the late 1970s, Johnson, a life-long Mormon, became well-known as an advocate for the ERA. Johnson’s position on the ERA was a controversy in the Mormon Church. As Johnson was fighting to get the ERA approved, she was also summoned to a hearing with the Mormon Church leaders to determine she should be excommunicated. During the hearings, Johnson had many supporters who were also Mormon women. One woman confessed to Johnson that she didn’t think she was a good Mormon because she smokes and doesn’t go to church. Johnson asked her, “What is a ‘good Mormon’” (192)? The woman didn’t have an answer but Johnson then pondered, “It was beginning to occur to me that those members who thought of themselves as ‘good’ but allowed the leaders of the church to direct the church into anti-human rights paths were not doing the church a service at all, not being really ‘good’ Mormons” (192). One of Johnson’s main arguments throughout her memoir was that the members of the Church were uncritically following the will of the Church leaders. Before the Mormon Church took an official position about the ERA, many men and women vocally supported it, but as soon as the Church made an announcement in opposition to the ERA, many of the members retracted their support and actively started protesting against the amendment.

Ayaan Hirsi Ali was also often outspoken about the hypocrisy that she observed in religious doctrine. When Hirsi Ali was going to an all-girls' Muslim school, she often struggled internally about what she was learning about women's roles in society. Hirsi Ali wrote, "I needed to get to the core of what I believed in. I needed my belief system to be logical and consistent. Essentially, I needed to be convinced that Islam were true. And it was beginning to dawn on me that although many wonderful people were sure it was true, there seemed to be a breakdown in its consistency" (102). Hirsi Ali continued to struggle with her belief system though, because she disapproved of the double standards that women experienced. For instance, Hirsi Ali wrote, "If God was just, then why were women so downtrodden? Clearly, in real life, Muslim women were not 'different but equal,' as Sister Aziza maintained. The Quran said 'Men rule over women.' In the eyes of the law and in every detail of daily life, we were clearly worth less than men" (102). As Hirsi Ali was studying her religion she noted that she finally stood up and asked, "'What about men? Shouldn't they cover? Don't women also have desire for male bodies? Couldn't they be tempted by the sight of men's skin?' It seemed logical to me, but the whole room fell about laughing. There was no way I could go on with my objections" (102).

Another common theme in the internal realm is the fact that five of the women have *attempted suicide*. In her memoir, Valerie Tarico didn't share many personal stories about her time growing up in the Evangelical tradition. Tarico focused mostly on what she learned and also included a history of many Christian faith traditions. However, Tarico shared the struggles that she had with bulimia that ultimately led to a suicide attempt. Tarico framed this disclosure in terms of what it means to be a good Christian and a bad Christian. Tarico wrote, "As a desperate bulimic college student, I made a suicide attempt. After I recovered, a woman who had been my Bible study leader...sat down with me and my parents and apologized for having counseled me

as a Christian when obviously I was not. I didn't react well to her apology" (160). Not only is suicide highly stigmatized in most major religions but, in this moment, Tarico was in a vulnerable state and shattered from being told that she wasn't Christian because a "real Christian" wouldn't attempt suicide (160).

Finally, a few of the women wrote about how hopeful they were that they would be *free from the constraints of religion* if certain circumstances changed. For example, Deborah Feldman had always considered herself an outsider in her Orthodox Jewish world but didn't know how to remove herself from the community. Feldman wrote that one of the only times she felt free as a child was when she was reading books that she "shouldn't" have been reading. Feldman often fantasized about how she would escape the strict environment. After she graduated high school, she started working as a teacher at the school in which she had just graduated. As Feldman began her new job, she reflected that, "I have more freedom now than I did when I was in school. I'm a working girl, which means I have earned the right to spend time unsupervised without having to account for it" (119). However, as she started working at her new job, her grandfather began making arrangements for Feldman's marriage. Feldman accepted the fact that her marriage was to be arranged and wrote, "I want someone who will let me read books and write stories and take the subway to Union Square so I can watch the street musicians play" (119). In fact, Feldman was excited to be married after she met the person her grandfather found for her because she learned that he wanted to travel the world. Feldman wrote, "Perhaps Eli and I might go to Europe together; I've always wanted to see the world. To think that marriage might be my plane ticket to freedom is suddenly enticing" (130). However, Feldman did not end up travelling with her husband after they got married. In fact, her husband ended up

being stricter and more devoutly religious than her grandparents. She ended up feeling as trapped as she did when living with her grandparents.

Relational Realm

As I am writing this, the state of Texas is in the process of defunding Planned Parenthood which provides family planning and women's health services to low-income women (Ura para. 2). Denying access to reproductive health services is one of the many topics in today's political climate that demonstrates the pervasive sexism that still exists in the United States. The contributing factor for limiting rights and funding for reproductive health is generally based on a religious expectation that women be modest and virgins until they are married. Also, many religious faith traditions teach that abortion is immoral. I find it interesting, though, that abortion, or the act of intentionally terminating a pregnancy, isn't mentioned anywhere in any of the translations of the Christian bible or the Hebrew Scriptures (Gaylor 87). The expectation of modesty is, however, portrayed in the bible. In 1 Timothy 2:9-10, in the *English Standard Version* of the Bible, it reads, "Likewise also that woman should adorn themselves in respectable apparel, with modesty and self-control, not with braided hair and gold or pearls or costly attire, but with what is proper for women who profess godliness – with good works" (Smith para. 3). The stigma that surrounds women's sexuality and the expectation of modesty are found in the majority of the autobiographies in this study.

Many of the women, in their memoirs, *described the clothes* that they were expected to wear. For instance, in Ayaan Hirsi Ali's autobiography, she described the different coverings that are common in Muslim cultures, "The hijab I draped over my scrawny frame was overwhelmingly enveloping: there was simply nothing left to see except a small face and two hands" (86). Hirsi Ali further explained how happy her mother was about her modest attire,

“And the delight in my mother’s eyes when she saw me in that garment! It was the silver lining to the long dark cloud of her life. Finally I was doing something right” (86). Later, Hirsi Ali explained that there are many different ways for Muslim women to dress: “There are so many variations in exactly how you must cover yourself; the form of veil that now spread among the Somali fundamentalists was called a *jilbab*, a thick cloth covering everything from the head to below the knees and another thick skirt underneath. All of a sudden, my black cloak seemed too thin and revealing” (103). Additionally, Hirsi Ali observed the effect that the influx of religious fundamentalism had on the way women dressed in her community when she wrote, “Women who used to wear colorful *dirhas* with seductive petticoats underneath and Italian sandals...began to cloak in the *burka*. They shrouded themselves in dark brown, black, and dark blue cloth of the roughest cotton fabric possible, with only a little bit of their faces visible. Some even began to cover their faces” (103).

In another instance, Deborah Feldman wrote about a moment when she was *shamed for not wearing appropriately modest clothing*. One day, when Feldman was in eighth grade, she overslept and quickly dressed so she could get to school on time. She knew she wasn’t dressed according to the rules and explained what happened, “I’ve forgotten to put a shirt on beneath my shirt sweater. There’s a new rule about no knits directly on the body. Now that we’re growing up, my teachers say, we have to be careful to avoid clingy fabrics” (30). Feldman barely arrived to school on time and she wrote that the secretary sighed in disapproval when she saw her but allowed her to enter the school. However, after the morning prayer session, her teacher shouted at her, “You’re not wearing a shirt under your sweater. Don’t even think about going to your desk. You’re going straight to the principal’s office” (31). In the principal’s office, Feldman was told, “Your teacher says you’re having trouble following the rules. I don’t understand why you

can't be like everyone else. No one else seems to have any problems wearing shirts under their sweaters...Go home and change. And don't let me catch you breaking the modesty rules again" (33). Later, Feldman wrote about the daily modesty lessons she and her classmates received. Feldman included a story about Rachel, wife of Akiva, "a truly righteous woman, but she was also an exceptionally modest person, to the point where she once stuck pins into her calves to keep her skirt from lifting in the breeze and exposing her kneecaps" (36). Feldman shared that her teacher wrote the word *ERVAH* on the chalkboard and explained that, "*Ervah* refers to any part of a woman's body that must be covered, starting from the collarbone, ending at the wrists and knees. When *ervah* is exposed, men are commanded to leave its presence. Prayers or blessings may not be uttered when *ervah* is in sight" (36). The teacher continued to explain how important it is for the women to maintain their modesty when she said, "Every time a man catches a glimpse of any part of your body the Torah says should be covered, he is sinning. But worse, you have caused him to sin. It is you who will bear the responsibility of his sin on Judgment Day" (Feldman 36). In this excerpt, the reader clearly sees how much pressure is put on women to make sure they follow the rules because they will be blamed for causing a man to sin.

One of the few themes that I noticed in every autobiography was the discussion of *the sexist doctrine* that each of the women experienced in their respective faith traditions. For the majority of her memoir, Sonia Johnson wrote about her experience as a Mormon supporting the Equal Rights Amendment and the subsequent excommunication she experienced for supporting the amendment. Johnson shared detailed information about conversations she had with the male leaders of the Mormon Church and often pointed out the hypocrisy that Mormon women experienced. For instance, Johnson wrote that Mormons are supposed to pray to Father in

Heaven but she would pray to Mother in Heaven who, in Mormon doctrine, was the wife of God the Father. However, praying to Mother in Heaven was a controversial act. When Johnson was being considered for excommunication, she had a conversation with the head Mormon bishop of her ward, Jeffrey Willis, about praying to Mother in Heaven. Willis warned Johnson not to pray to Mother in Heaven because it is dangerous. Johnson wrote that:

If I prayed to a Mother in Heaven I would surely end up praying to my earthly mother after her death. Instead of deity, I would think of my mother and that would be idolatry. I asked him if he prayed to his dead father. And why it was any more likely that women would pray to their dead mothers than that men would pray to our dead fathers when we said, ‘Our Father in Heaven’? He had not thought of that. (242)

This example is one of the many times Johnson asked the leaders of the church to be accountable for the sexist double standards that she noticed in the actions of the Church leaders.

In addition to Johnson’s memoir, both Deborah Feldman and Ayaan Hirsi Ali mentioned that women, in their faith traditions, were explicitly taught the importance of silence. Feldman wrote that the divinity of God is so powerful that she must surrender herself each morning, body and soul, for God. Feldman’s teachers told her, “I must learn silence so that only his voice can be heard through me. God lives in my soul, and I must spend my life scrubbing my soul clean of any trace of sin so that it deserves to host his presence” (30). Ayaan Hirsi Ali also wrote about silence when she wrote that, “A Muslim girl is trained to be docile. In Islam, becoming an individual is not a necessary development; many people, especially women, never develop a clear individual will. The goal is to become quiet inside, so that you never raise your eyes, not even inside your mind” (94).

Along with the sexist doctrine came an *ingrained fear of sexuality* that was present in the autobiographies of four of the women. Kyria Abrahams wrote that she learned about what was appropriate and inappropriate behavior with regards to sex when her parents caught her masturbating when she was seven years old. At the time, Abrahams didn't know anything about sex, or masturbation, and didn't think she was doing anything wrong. One day, her mother caught her and immediately yelled at her, "What are you doing? Kyria, this is dirty and not something Jehovah approves of. This is masturbating. This is a sin. It's filthy. Let's pray to Jehovah God for forgiveness" (63). Her mother took Abrahams' hands in hers and prayed to Jehovah for forgiveness. By the end of the prayer, Abrahams was crying and her mother said, "Don't cry, sweetie. We've prayed for forgiveness now and what's done is done" (64). Abrahams reflected, "I was forgiven. I would not die at Armageddon and God still loved me. The next time I masturbated, I closed the door and ended with a prayer" (64). Being caught and disciplined didn't change her desire but it did change her approach to the activity and how she felt about herself afterwards.

Sociocultural Realm

The main challenge I have as a nonreligious person, living in a religious culture, is deciding whether or not I should let people know that I am not religious. I worry about the social and cultural consequences that I might experience, considering that atheists are one of the most mistrusted demographics. The authors of the autobiographies I studied shared many moments from their lives when they experienced negative consequences either from speaking out against religion, or from leaving the religion in which they were raised. In the majority of the memoirs, the women focused on the time in which they lived within their respective faith traditions and

believed in the religion; however, they still experienced difficulty abiding by cultural cues and experienced social repercussions for challenging expectations.

For example, four of the women wrote about the expectation within their religious community that they *weren't supposed to talk about their religion* with others. When Karen Armstrong was living in a convent, she had to follow many strict rules when it came to interacting with her family during visiting hours. First, Armstrong was only able to visit with her family once every six months and had only been allowed to write to them once every four weeks (25). Then, when her family would visit, Armstrong recalled how awkward the visits were because nuns weren't allowed to eat with "seculars" so there would be times when her family had to wait around in the convent while Armstrong ate her lunch (25). But, mostly, Armstrong was "never allowed to speak of what happened inside the convent" and since she never left the convent, she had little to talk about when her family visited (25). Ultimately, Armstrong struggled immensely with the strict environment of the convent and was left unable to talk to anybody about her experiences (25).

At the same time, three of the women wrote about how they were *shamed when they would publicly speak out* or challenge religious leaders. For instance, Deborah Feldman was branded a *mechitsef*, an insolent one, by her teachers because she would often talk back to the teachers in class (21). Feldman wrote that she learned from family and religious leaders that, "An empty vessel clangs the loudest. The louder a woman, the more likely she is to be spiritually bereft, like the empty bowl that vibrates with a resonant echo. A full container makes no sound; she is packed too densely to ring" (21). Feldman reflected that she would try to keep her opinions to herself but she couldn't help her "natural impulse to talk back" (21). Feldman wrote, "It's not smart, I know, for me to always want to have the last word. It results in a world of trouble that I

could easily save myself from, if I could only learn to keep quiet. Yet I cannot allow another's mistake to pass by unnoticed. I must comment on the misquotations of my teachers out of an unexplained duty to the truth" (21). This tendency to speak out of turn often got Feldman in trouble because, as Feldman described, the teachers were quick to discipline her since she came from a broken family and wasn't raised by her biological parents.

In addition to the expectations surrounding what a person should or shouldn't talk about with regards to his or her religion, a few of the women wrote about their experience with *physical harm* that was warranted by their religious doctrine. For instance, Lucia Greenhouse began her memoir with a story about the time her older sister got sick with the chicken pox. When Greenhouse wanted to ask her mom what chicken pox are her mother explained that, "In Christian Science we know that there is no illness. No disease. No contagion. Olivia is not sick. She is God's perfect child. We are all going to work very hard to keep our thoughts elevated" (3). From that moment forward, Greenhouse and her siblings were instructed to never say "chicken pox," because they were taught that they were not supposed to name an illness "because by naming something, we are giving in to the lie about it" (4). Greenhouse then asked her father if she was going to get sick too and her father told her, "Mary Baker Eddy says we must put on *the panoply of Love*. A *panoply* is a full suit of armor. So if we think of God's love as a suit of armor, protecting us, we can never be hurt or sick" (5). Later, Greenhouse dedicated almost half of her memoir to reflecting on her mother's illness, which would ultimately end Greenhouse's relationship with her father. Greenhouse wrote about her mother being brought to Tenacre Foundation, a Christian Science care facility, after experiencing stomach pain. When Greenhouse and her younger brother went to Tenacre to see their mother they had a conversation with Mrs. Childs, a Christian Science caretaker, who denied the condition of Greenhouse's

mother. Greenhouse and her brother were upset that their mother wasn't receiving medical attention and Greenhouse exclaimed, "I guess I don't understand the point of all this. What's wrong with trying medicine? Maybe Mom's condition requires a minor operation, or some...pills" (130). Mrs. Childs responded with, "Mrs. Eddy teaches us that every illness is mentally conceived. By treating the material manifestation of a problem, you are really only dealing with the symptom, not the root cause. If your mother goes to a doctor for treatment of this...foreign growth...she will still have to overcome the *real* problem" (130-131). Greenhouse then blurted, "Our mother isn't even fifty! If she were to go to the doctor and be treated with medicine, she could have another thirty, forty years to deal with the – with the *spiritual* problem" (131). During this conversation, Mrs. Childs labeled their mother's stomach pain, cancer, and then asked them if they ever knew anyone with cancer who had ever been cured by medicine. Greenhouse was in shock and unable to answer except to say, "A lot of people are treated by radiation and chemotherapy. And surgery" (131). The conversation ended after Mrs. Childs said, "We all have to know that your mother is going to get her healing. That Divine Love will triumph over error" (131). After Greenhouse and her brother left the office, they were both able to list many people who had recovered from cancer "but in the practitioner's office, we could not come up with one" (132).

Ultimately, Greenhouse's relationship with her father was damaged when she learned that her father had been lying to her about her mother's health. He had been saying she was getting better when, in fact, her health continued to degrade. Shortly before her mother passed away, Greenhouse's maternal uncle, who also was a medical doctor, visited his sister at Tenacre and asked an employee if he could examine his sister's health. He was given permission and discovered that she had an ulcer from a bedsore and, in an interview with Greenhouse, told her

that, “She was lying in a puddle of feces. There was no wall between...her vagina and bowel. The cancer had completely eroded it. There was nothing but a...a...void where her bowel should have been” (292). Greenhouse was devastated after learning this information. She decided to write her memoir because she was determined that her mother’s story should be told. Greenhouse felt helpless when her mother was sick and sharing her memoir was her way of letting people know the truth of what happened since her parents had cut ties with their extended family. Also, Greenhouse strongly believed that her mother could have had many more years but, because of the specific circumstances surrounding her religious beliefs, she didn’t obtain medical assistance.

Another sociocultural expectation that I noticed in four of the memoirs was their experience with *fasting*. Some of the women had a negative experience with fasting while others had positive experiences. For instance, Deborah Feldman wrote about her disdain for fasting. Feldman wrote about her first fast, and how women in her community begin fasting, “Last week before Yom Kippur Zeidy advised me to repent so I could start the year anew, magically transformed into a quiet, God-fearing young girl. It was my first fast; although according to the Torah I become a woman at age twelve, girls start fasting at eleven just to try it out. There is a whole world of new rules in store for me” (12-13). However, she didn’t particularly enjoy fasting or the guilt that comes along with being taught that she is inherently evil and must repent. Feldman explained, “Everyone will spend the entire fast day praying for mercy. I am not a good faster, and standing in the shul all day hardly distracts me from my gnawing hunger. In school I was taught that if I don’t atone, Hashem will exact his own justice” (106).

On the other hand, Sonia Johnson embraced the act of fasting. When Johnson was upset about rumors she heard about her then-fiancé, Rick, she decided to pray and fast for spiritual

guidance. Johnson wrote, “I’d begun fasting the day I arrived because I wanted all the help from heaven I could get, and I believed as I’d been taught by my parents and church leaders, that fasting intensified the effectiveness of prayer. My mother was always a great faster. (Rick turned out to be one, too)” (36). Later in her memoir, Johnson shared her experience with a personal health complication. After she had two children, she began to experience arthritic symptoms in her hands. She went to a doctor who told her that the bones in her hands were almost hollow and that the pain was going to get progressively worse. She was prescribed medication to help with the pain. She also decided to see her bishop so he could anoint her. In preparation for the anointing, she asked her family to fast and pray on her behalf. She also fasted and said she made a deal with the Lord; she wrote, “If I can only be allowed to rear these children – that’s all I ask. Just let me keep my hands long enough to get them out into the world” (52). She further wrote, “Aside from the deal making, I prayed and fasted as hard as I ever have in my life. I knew God was there and I knew healing was possible” (52). After Johnson and Rick prayed and fasted for two days, they joined their bishop who then prayed with them; she wrote that Rick’s prayer had been like “rain on my parched heart” (52). Ultimately, after fasting with Rick, and praying with their bishop, Johnson wrote that her pain went away. Johnson shared that, “Although I have never been free of indications that all is not perfectly sound in my joints, I am hardly ever conscious of having arthritis and am no longer terrified of the physical future. I expect that to be regarded as some kind of miracle” (53).

Professional Realm

All of the autobiographies I studied were published after the women left their respective faith traditions. However, as many of the women were transitioning from religious life to non-religious life, they found themselves using either their speaking or writing skills to help them

establish their lives outside of the religion. This is an opportunity that these eight women had which is not easily accessible to most people. However, with the internet, people have the ability to share their stories with others who may be facing similar experiences. For instance, there are websites for ex-Jehovah's Witnesses, ex-Mormons, ex-Scientologists, and many more websites that are devoted to providing an online community for people who no longer identify with the religion in which they were raised.

In the eight autobiographies I studied, the women mentioned, near the end of the memoirs, what they were doing in their *professional lives that helped them establish their new lives*. For instance, Sonia Johnson was invited to appear on the "Donahue Show" on December 13, 1979, after she was excommunicated from the Mormon Church. After her appearance, Johnson received a lot of hate mail from Mormons who, as Johnson explained, "were angry it seems from their letters, for two reasons: I appeared to good advantage, and I did not appear with a spokesperson from the church. They had hoped that I would look and act like an apostate; they had hoped when they saw me they would immediately understand why the church had excommunicated me" (359). After her excommunication, Johnson went on to write more books about feminism.

In addition to Johnson, Ayaan Hirsi Ali appeared on television many times and found herself in dangerous situations due to what she had to say about Islam. In 2003, Hirsi Ali was elected to be a member of the House of Representatives of the Dutch Parliament. This position put her in the spotlight and, due to her public opposition to Islamic doctrine, she was assigned two bodyguards, by the Dutch Parliament, to protect her at all times. After one particular television appearance, Hirsi Ali was supposed to meet friends at a hotel restaurant. As Hirsi Ali and her friends were beginning their meal, the bodyguards suddenly approached her, took her

hands, wrapped themselves around her and told her they had to leave. After they were safely away from the hotel, she was told that cars packed with Muslim men had begun arriving at the hotel one after another. Hirsi Ali wrote, “They were dropping people off in the hotel parking lot and then heading off to get more people. Someone must have seen me walking into the hotel and cell-phoned his friends. The guards said they weren’t equipped to deal with such numbers. I saw nothing, but now I was frightened” (292). There was no evidence mentioned in the memoir that these men were dangerous or that the arrival of Muslim men at this hotel was out of the ordinary. However, the arrival of the men was treated as a potential threat and this was the moment that Hirsi Ali started to fear for her life. Hirsi Ali continued as an outspoken critic of Islam and still, ten years after her memoir was published, had bodyguards with her when she made public appearances.

The only women who didn’t appear on television were Deborah Feldman, Kyria Abrahams, and Lucia Greenhouse. However, these three women seem to have established their lives outside of their respective religions. Feldman published a second book about her life after her departure from Orthodox Judaism. Abrahams moved from the East Coast to Colorado and has established herself as a photographer. Lucia Greenhouse has a blog that was created when she was promoting her memoir, but the blog hasn’t been updated since 2015. Greenhouse’s Facebook page had three posts in 2016, two of which were dedicated to remembering her mother. Each of the women, though, wrote a memoir, something they created outside of their religion, that helped to free themselves from their respective faith traditions, which inherently affected all of the other realms that I previously mentioned.

In this chapter, I have outlined the specific challenges, experiences, and topics that nonreligious women included in their autobiographies. I discovered five themes that are part of

what I call the sphere of life. I categorized the themes into five realms: family, intellectual, relational, sociocultural, and professional. Within each of the realms, I described the types of experiences and relationships that these nonreligious women have with their religious friends, family, and community. I also revealed the cultural and social implications of challenging and/or leaving faith traditions, as illustrated by these women. Many of the examples I provided could be intertwined within different realms which I believe demonstrates the complexity of studying these issues. The complexity of these examples will be further examined in the next chapter when I answer the final two research questions. Specifically, I will complete a rhetorical analysis of how the autobiographies invite readers to understand personal accounts of religious departure. I will also analyze how these autobiographies invite social change and consciousness raising.

CHAPTER 4

STORYTELLING CHANGES THINGS

After reading eight autobiographies, written by women who no longer identify as religious, I can't help but be inspired by the risk these women take in sharing their stories. Their autobiographies helped to shift my own experience with religion into a new light. As I was reading their personal stories, I felt encouraged to reflect on my life and religious upbringing. At times I laughed and felt connected to the women sharing moments from their religion classes. At times I was horrified when I read about the physical abuse that many of the women experienced, which was often justified with religious doctrine. At other times I felt sad, and also deeply connected to the authors, when they would blame themselves for not being able to believe what they were being taught. The insight that most powerfully affected me, after reading the autobiographies, was that so many women have come before me, to lay the groundwork, to speak out against harmful religious doctrine. Even though I often feel alone with regard to this aspect of my identity, I just have to look at the eight books on my desk to remind myself that I am not alone. I owe the women who came before me so much gratitude. I cannot understand my own story without learning about those who paved the way. As Annie Laurie Gaylor wrote in her collection of biographies about nonreligious women, "Many women freethinkers have 'dared all things for the truth.' Everyone featured in this collection has a life story worth remembering, as well as thoughts worth reading. Largely untold have been not only their stories but the history of women fighting to be free of religious strictures" (2-3). Every autobiography I read for this study featured a woman whose life is worth noting and learning from.

I also see how important these stories are when I learn about politicians trying to take away women's rights, and funding for Planned Parenthood, while using their religious beliefs as

their justification. Additionally, sexism is still a pervasive problem that is being passed down generation to generation. In February 2017, Jameis Winston, a popular NFL quarterback for the Tampa Bay Buccaneers, was at an elementary school in Florida, giving a motivational speech, when he shared this problematic message:

All my young boys, stand up. The ladies, sit down. But all my boys, stand up. We strong, right? We strong! We strong, right. All my boys, tell me one time: I can do anything I put my mind to. Now a lot of boys aren't supposed to be soft-spoken. You know what I'm saying? One day y'all are going to have a very deep voice like this [with a deep tone]. One day, you'll have a very, very deep voice. But the ladies, they're supposed to be silent, polite, gentle. My men, my men [are] supposed to be strong. I want y'all to tell me what the third rule of life is. I can do anything I put my mind to. (Rogers paras. 5-7)

This message is problematic for all of the students involved. The boys are being told that they aren't supposed to be soft-spoken. The implication is that being soft-spoken is to be feminine. Then, the young girls are being told they are supposed to be silent, polite, and gentle. This message is the result of a long history of expected silence and submission of women.

With that in mind, the women who wrote these autobiographies took a risk when they shared their stories. The women risked losing their family, friends, and community. They risked death threats and being excommunicated, disfellowshipped, and stalked--which is what Ayaan Hirsi Ali, Sonia Johnson, Kyria Abrahams, and Jenna Miscavige Hill experienced. However, in taking that risk, all of the women share what they have learned and what others can learn from their personal stories. This brings me to my two remaining research questions:

R2: How do these autobiographies invite us to reflect on our own nonreligious experiences, or on the lives of people we know who are nonreligious?

R3: How do these autobiographies invite social change and consciousness raising?

In this chapter, I will answer these research questions, providing examples from each of the autobiographies, as I expand on the sphere image that I developed in the previous chapter. In an attempt to address these questions from a rhetorical perspective, I will apply Hart and Daughton's critical narrative probe: What propositional content is the narrative designed to reveal (91)? Chapter Three points out the themes that were revealed in the autobiographies. In this chapter though, I will extend what the autobiographies were designed to reveal by inquiring into what the authors presumably wanted the audience to think and feel after reading the narrative.

Family Realm

When my students and I discuss where we learn social expectations and cultural norms, my students always mention that we first learn about what is right and wrong from our family and our guardians. So, it is no surprise that all of these women began with a story explaining their family dynamics. Four of the women began their autobiographies with a positive memory about their family from when the women were young. For example, Jenna Miscavige Hill wrote about how her life was good until her father decided to have her family move to California to dedicate their lives to Scientology. Miscavige Hill mentioned that her family was living in New Hampshire where her parents had "built their dream house, a four-bedroom, two bathroom wood-and-glass home on a parcel of land. Mom and Dad both had well-paying jobs at a local software company...On the outside, my family had all the markings of a normal, suburban

existence” (7). However, all of that changed in 1985 when Miscavige Hill’s father visited a Scientology Base and suddenly decided to move their family to California to dedicate their lives to Scientology (7). Miscavige Hill reflected that her parents had been happily living as public Scientologists during the ‘70s which meant that they could live independent lives free from the rigorous demands that came with living on a Scientology Base. Her parents, however, became rededicated to the Scientology cause after her father visited a Scientology Base in Florida. Miscavige Hill wrote, “Later, my parents would tell me that their decision was made spontaneously, without much thought, and in hindsight it was the worst decision of their lives” (11). Miscavige Hill explained that, “They were motivated by the Church’s mission and they wanted to be involved in something bigger. One thing is clear to me: That decision was when normal stopped having a place in our lives” (12). In these statements, Miscavige Hill is likely inviting the reader to value the importance of being with his or her family. In fact, Miscavige Hill spent much of her memoir reflecting on being separated from her parents while attending the Scientology boarding school, “The Ranch.” Near the end of the memoir, she revealed that her mother had moved to California to be closer to her grandchildren. Miscavige Hill wrote about her mother, “She is a doting grandparent, eager to make up for what she missed out with me” (391). Miscavige Hill ended her memoir noting how important her family is to her and how happy she is that she and her spouse were able to leave Scientology when they did, so that they could begin their own family; if they had stayed working at the Scientology Base, they wouldn’t have been allowed to get married and have children.⁸

⁸ Members of Scientology’s Sea Organization are strongly discouraged from getting married and having children because children are viewed as a distraction from the mission of the Church. When David Miscavige took over as the leader of Scientology he implemented the rule that “Sea Org couples were no longer allowed to become new parents. If a Sea Org woman did become pregnant, the couple had to leave the Sea Org and go to a non-Sea Org

On the other hand, Kyria Abrahams began her memoir with a story that described the antagonistic environment in which she lived with her family. Abrahams wrote about when she was eight years old and was preparing for a presentation at the Kingdom Hall of Jehovah's Witnesses. Abrahams shared a conversation with her younger brother who told her that their father had told him that he was smarter than his sister. Abrahams and her brother began arguing with each other and their mother yelled from the other room, "Don't make me get the yardstick!" (4). Then, her father was brought into the story when she wrote, "At this, my father was summoned...If we continued fighting, he'd reach his hand up to the wood molding, grab the long ruler, and officially end the quarrel" (4). In this example, Abrahams provided a brief description of the different relationships within her family members. For her entire childhood, Abrahams had a combative relationship with her brother and they stopped seeing and talking to each other after Abrahams moved out when she was eighteen. Her relationship with her parents continued to be strained as she got older and started rebelling against the teachings of Jehovah. This example sets the tone of Abrahams' memoir and her relationship with her family. Ultimately, after Abrahams decided to leave the Jehovah's Witness community, she had trouble supporting herself since her friends and family wouldn't talk to her. Abrahams did, however, find a new support system. Abrahams wrote, "These worldly, godless poets had loaned me money when I hadn't asked for it and had given me a place to stay. When the people I'd known for 23 years stopped talking to me, the people I'd known for 23 days helped me move" (328). This insight potentially invites readers to contemplate who they consider their family. Abrahams invites readers to consider that one's

mission, which was a demotion" (Miscavige Hill 27). According to Miscavige Hill, several people had also been told to "make a choice between an abortion or the Sea Org" (353).

family isn't necessarily composed of those who are biologically related but rather those who provide support when it is most needed.

Regardless of whether the women shared an inspiring or troubling story at the beginning of their memoirs, all of the stories had one thing in common: religion. In the happy stories, the women argued that their lives were good until they became absorbed by the Church. In the unhappy stories, the women argued that their lives were made difficult because of their family's religious commitments. Miscavige Hill explicitly made this connection when she wrote about her parent's spontaneity, "That decision was when normal stopped having a place in our lives" (12). Lucia Greenhouse implied this in her memoir when she wrote, "The announcement – that Dad had quit his insurance job at Marsh & McLennan and was going to be a Christian Science practitioner – would draw out many complicated feelings over time" (21). The women began their memoirs by framing how religion had affected their lives, and for all of these women, the effect had been negative.

When these women share these deeply personal stories about their family and their upbringing, the reader is encouraged to reflect on his or her own experience with religion and also on the lives of people he or she knows who are nonreligious. Whether his or her experience with religion is mostly positive, mostly negative, or something else entirely, the reader learns about the complicated and nuanced lives that these women have lived. When these women say that they no longer identify with the religion in which they were raised, a person may wonder "why?" The answer appears in these memoirs. The reader is given insight into the women's lives and then learns where these women are coming from. For that reason, these autobiographies invite social change because they may change how nonreligious people are perceived. As mentioned in chapter one, atheists are one of the most mistrusted minority groups (Edgell,

Gerteis, and Hartmann 211). People mistrust atheists for many reasons: one of the main reasons is that many people equate morality with religion and, so, it is assumed that if you are not religious, you are not moral; and if you are not moral, you are not a good person. However, these memoirs demonstrate that life is more complicated than that.

Mary Karr said it best when she wrote about the power of memoirs, “The books are held together by happenstance, theme, and (most powerfully) the sheer, convincing poetry of a single person trying to make sense of their past” (190). These memoirs are powerful examples of how we can learn from other people’s experiences and how their reflexivity can also help us learn how to make sense of our own past.

Intellectual Realm

I had so many questions about religion when I was growing up. I wondered, “If Moses parted the Red Sea, Lot’s wife turned into a pillar of salt, a snake talked to Adam and Eve, and water turned into wine, then why doesn’t that miraculous stuff happen anymore?” I wondered, “Why aren’t there any women in the ‘begat’ section of the Bible? And, furthermore, if we’re not allowed to eat meat on Fridays, during Lent, then why is it okay and encouraged to eat fish?” I kept these questions to myself because I figured there was something about me that couldn’t understand the lessons. Later in life, when I was a graduate student at the University of Northern Iowa, I had a conversation with a fellow nonbeliever and I told her about these questions that I had. Her response was, “Oh, I always interpreted those stories as allegories meant to teach us some kind of lesson.” I remember being annoyed and envious. I was annoyed because I was taught that those miracles actually happened. I was envious because she didn’t have years and years of internal struggle.

In this study, many of the women had similar experiences with internal doubt and a sense that something was wrong with them. In fact, “doubt” is the main theme of Valerie Tarico’s memoir. Tarico began her memoir with the sentence, “When I first started having misgivings about my faith, I did what any good Evangelical would: I prayed. I was fifteen at the time, earnest and devout” (1). Tarico further explained her experience with doubt when she wrote that Evangelicalism “was a world view with clean lines and clean answers, not always simple, but solid. Now parts seemed a little fuzzy, dubious. I didn’t like the feeling and I certainly didn’t trust it” (1). Tarico continued, “If I said that these doubts made me uneasy, I would be lying by omission. In actuality they terrified me at times. I remember kneeling one night on the floor of my bedroom, crying, pleading for God to take them away, and then crawling into bed with some sense of relief” (2). It wasn’t until Tarico started attending the Evangelical Wheaton College that she began to trust her misgivings with religion. Tarico wrote:

The sheltering walls of faith at Wheaton College were farther apart than those I had grown up in. They were less confining, and yet, at the same time, they were close and familiar enough to be secure. It was this combination, I think, that ultimately encouraged my path of inquiry...I came to accept that some differences in doctrine or interpretation of the Bible were reasonable, in spite of what I had been taught. (6)

Through discussions with professors and classmates, Tarico was finally able “to ask and resolve questions rather than struggling to suppress them” (6). This was the first time she began to trust her doubts. Tarico likely wanted to encourage readers to trust their own doubts and misgivings so that they don’t have to experience years of internal doubt like she had.

One of the few things that all of the women had in common, throughout the memoirs, was that they acknowledged that they had many moments of doubt in their lives. When I reflect on my own nonreligious experiences, and on the lives of people I know who are nonreligious, I realize that being nonreligious isn't "just a phase," which is what so many nonreligious people are told when they first share their doubts with a friend or a family member. When Greta Christina compiled religious departure narratives from online sources, as well as conducting her own interviews, she learned that many, perhaps most, nonreligious people are told that they are just going through a phase (1250). However, in each of these autobiographies, we see that the women thought deeply about what they believed, for a long time. A lot of thought took place before the authors finally had conversations with family and friends or published their thoughts in a memoir. Consequently, this encourages readers not to dismiss or discount others' reported experiences.

These women also invite social change and consciousness-raising by encouraging readers to reflect on any moments of their own when they doubted something they were taught. This reflection doesn't have to focus solely on religious doubt. These autobiographies invite the reader to think of any time they doubted something they were taught. This could include any time the reader might have questioned any aspect of his or her identity. As mentioned earlier in this chapter, we first learn about social and cultural expectations from our family and guardians. Then, when we start going to school, we continue to learn what is considered appropriate and not appropriate from teachers, friends, and strangers. So, if there is something about our identity that doesn't align with what is expected of us, we may worry that something is wrong with us. However, these autobiographies, as well as many other autobiographies in which we learn about someone going against the status quo, remind us that we are not alone. You are not alone even

though it feels that way when you're sitting in your bedroom after your Wednesday night religion class. The Internet is a tool where people can find others who are having the same misgivings and, even though you may still be physically alone, you know that there is at least one other person in this world who supports you. In fact, part of the reason Valerie Tarico wrote her memoir was that she wanted to add her voice to the conversation "as an ordinary ex-Evangelical who thought too much about questions that wouldn't go away" (9). Tarico acknowledged the long journey of doubt and questioning that finally brought her to a place where she felt comfortable and she reflected, "I had come to a place where I now live. It is a place of freedom, the freedom to accept the evidence of my senses and my mind. It is difficult to describe the peace that comes with giving yourself permission to know what you know" (8). And, I'd argue, this sentiment can be extended to giving yourself permission to be at peace with who you are.

Relational Realm

There is a long history of women being the legal property of men. Historically it was common for women "to have either arranged marriages or to be purchased by their future husband[s]" (Malburg para 3). In those days, a woman was known to be the property of her father until a legal transfer was made to the groom on the wedding day (Malburg para 4). Arranged marriages are still practiced today. Additionally, the practice of a father "giving away" his daughter on her wedding day is also commonly practiced although it is often approached as symbolic rather than as a legal requirement. The relational aspects of women's lives have been controlled for as long as the patriarchal system has been the established social practice.

In many of the autobiographies I analyzed, the women wrote about how their relationships were controlled by their fathers and the men in their lives. Karen Armstrong

decided to join a convent, in 1962, because she was told that young girls, within reason, “could do anything they wanted: they could study, travel, and have a career – until they got married. But even though I shrank from the appalling prospect of being an old maid, marriage did not look particularly appealing either, since most of the women I knew spent their lives ceaselessly cleaning, baking, and washing, chores that I detest to this day” (2). Armstrong continued, “By contrast, the nuns seemed remarkably unencumbered. They had no men to tell them what to do, ran their own lives, and were presumably, engaged in the higher things in life. I wanted that radical freedom” (2). Unfortunately, Armstrong soon discovered that the convent wasn’t what she imagined and she didn’t experience that “radical freedom.”

Both Deborah Feldman and Ayaan Hirsi Ali experienced, and then wrote about, arranged marriages. Feldman accepted an arranged marriage as her fate because this was something that everyone experienced both in her family and her neighborhood. Feldman wrote that her grandfather, Zeidy, was in charge of talking to the matchmaker to determine a proper match. Feldman wrote, “Zeidy will want someone pious, someone with a strong Satmar family background, someone he can be proud to be associated with. After all, marriage is about reputation. The better the match, the better the family name” (119). However, Feldman mused, “I want someone who will let me read books and write stories and take the subway to Union Square so I can watch the street musicians play” (119). Feldman was concerned when she met her future mother-in-law and noticed that she was wearing a *shpitzel*⁹. Later, when she met her future husband and his family, she was shocked to see that her future father-in-law was wearing a *plotchik*.¹⁰ According to Feldman, “a plotchik is a sign of an Aroiny, a follower of the rabbi’s

⁹ A shpitzel is a head covering that is worn by some married Hasidic women. Feldman suggested that only the most conservative Hasidic women wear shpitzels.

¹⁰ A plotchik is a wide hat with flat velvet and a short rim and is worn by some Hasidic men.

eldest son, Aaron. Zeidy would never marry me to an Aroiny! Our family are Zollies through and through. We believe the rabbi's third son, Zalman Leib, is the true successor to the Satmar dynasty" (128). Feldman reflected, "I am completely flustered, but I can't say anything, not when everyone is here, watching me" (128). Later, during Feldman's first conversation with her future husband, she learned that he had recently traveled to Europe to visit the gravesites of famed rabbis and wanted to go back for sightseeing that didn't include cemeteries. Feldman was excited upon hearing this and wrote, "Perhaps Eli and I might return to Europe together; I've always wanted to see the world. To think that marriage might be my plane ticket to freedom is suddenly enticing" (130-131). Unfortunately, after Feldman and Eli got married, she quickly realized that her life was more constrained and controlled than before because, according to Feldman, Eli was more conservative than her grandparents.

Unlike Feldman, Ayaan Hirsi Ali was never hopeful about arranged marriage. Her father spontaneously visited her, one day in 1992, and announced, "Ayaan, my daughter, I have good news for you – the best news – my prayers are answered! Today in the mosque a blessed man came to me with a proposal of marriage, and I offered him your hand!" (170). Hirsi Ali was terrified at the thought of marrying a stranger but her father consoled her with the fact that Osman Moussa (the future husband) is her cousin because he is also an Osman Mahamud.¹¹ Moussa also lived in Canada, with his extended family, and her father thought it would be great for the Magans¹² to have relatives in Canada. Hirsi Ali's father agreed to let her meet him the next day. After the meeting, Hirsi Ali was disappointed and wrote, "I was in a panic, but I wasn't crying. I rarely cried in those days. I could just see, very clearly and dispassionately, the bars

¹¹ Osman Mahamud is a Somali sub-clan.

¹² Magan is Ayaan Hirsi Ali's original surname. She changed her name to Hirsi Ali when she fled to Holland so that people wouldn't be able to find her.

closing in on me” (171). Hirsi Ali noted that the marriage was set for six days after their first meeting. During the second meeting with him, she learned more about his personality and his aspirations. She learned that “the man was an idiot. He thought the Osman Mahamud were the chosen people; he was dull, trite, and a bigot, a dyed-in-the-wool Brotherhood type” (173). Hirsi Ali argued with her father that they were not compatible. Her father said to her, “I can’t accept a no from you for something you haven’t even tried” (174). Hirsi Ali responded, “You mean I can’t say no before I get married?” (174). He responded with, “Of course not. Everything is all arranged” (174). Hirsi Ali rebelled and said she wasn’t going to attend the *nikah*¹³ ceremony. He responded, “You’re not required to” (Hirsi Ali 174). Hirsi Ali further explained that, “Neither my presence nor my signature was required for the Islamic ceremony” (176). A few days later, the *nikah* ceremony took place and she was legally married to Osman Moussa even though she wasn’t present at the ceremony. Osman Moussa went back to Canada and she was supposed to go to Canada a week later. Instead, after she got off the plane in Germany, for a layover, she decided to travel to Holland and seek asylum as a religious refugee. Hirsi Ali eventually gained citizenship in Holland and lived there until 2006.

In these autobiographies we see how the women’s concerns were not considered with regard to their marriages. Even though Hirsi Ali expressed her discontent about who was being selected to be her spouse, in the end, her family did not honor her choice. Feldman was too worried to mention her concerns to her family and, by the time she had met Eli and his family, she knew it was too late and that she didn’t have a say in the matter. However, these autobiographies invite us to reflect on the resilience of these women, and their ability to find

¹³ In Islam, the *nikah* ceremony is the moment when you become legally bound to your spouse (Hirsi Ali 174).

another path in their life, thanks to their imaginations and the fact that they read books that they weren't allowed to read.

When Hirsi Ali landed in Germany, before she was supposed to continue on to Canada, she had a sudden thought and wrote, "But that first afternoon in Bonn, a new idea crept up on me: I didn't even have to go to Canada. I could disappear here. I could escape it all, hide, and somehow make my own way, like someone in a book" (186). When Hirsi Ali was attending high school, she read a lot of books including: *1984*, *The Thirty-Nine Steps*, and *Huckleberry Finn*. She also read what she described as sexy books from the authors Barbara Cartland and Danielle Steele. Hirsi Ali's reaction to these books was that, "All these books, even the trashy ones, carried with them ideas – races were equal, women were equal to men – and concepts of freedom, struggle, and adventure that were new to me...An entire world of Western ideas began to take shape" (69). From these books, she read about different ways of living and learned about different cultures where people were treated equally. Had she not read these books, it is possible that she may not have found a way out of her marriage. It is also possible that, had she not been married to a man who lived in a different country, she would not have been able to escape her marriage.

Deborah Feldman also referenced the books that she read and gave credit to the books for expanding her understanding of the world. Feldman was particularly fascinated with *Pride and Prejudice* by Jane Austen. Feldman reflected about her connection to *Pride and Prejudice* and wrote, "What story could be more relevant to me than a young girl of marriageable age rejecting the choices others make for her and exerting her own independence? To think that once upon a time the whole world was like this, and I wouldn't have been the only one dissatisfied with my circumstances" (111). Feldman further wished, "If only Elizabeth were here to give me advice,

to explain to me how the rebellion that comes off so gracefully in the book could be pulled off in real life” (111). In a way, Elizabeth was with her, through the words on the page that were then contemplated in Feldman’s imagination.

We see, though, that both women managed to leave their marriages and their religious lives. In fact, all of the women, even though they had different circumstances, explained the events leading up to their religious departure. Thus, these autobiographies invite us to reflect on the lives of these nonreligious women. These autobiographies reveal to us the complexity of the women’s lives and how they got to where they are. There is courage and resilience that comes with leaving your marriage and subsequently your religion. There’s a lot to lose in this situation. Feldman wrote that she was concerned about getting divorced, even though she wanted it, because divorce is often “the quickest road to poverty” and she wondered if she was ready “to take that giant leap into the frightening unknown world of single motherhood without any support to fall back on” (25). Kyria Abrahams shared a similar sentiment when she wrote about her marriage, “The only problem with deciding to leave my husband was that I lived with my husband. I was dependent on him for rent and cable...All my credit cards were in his name. In a most unfortunate turn of nepotism, I also worked at the same company with him and his family” (273). At this point in her life, Abrahams didn’t have any ties to her biological family and she didn’t have anyone to ask for help. Feldman also acknowledged a similar response, “the family and community I had known all my life would be lost to me forever the moment I left” (250). As for Ayaan Hirsi Ali, she was in the process of running from her new family, and her biological family, so she didn’t have anyone to go to for help.

Furthermore, we see how these autobiographies potentially invite social change and consciousness raising. These women were inspired, by the books they read, to take charge of

their lives. Their stories have the potential to inspire others, just as they were inspired by the stories they read. We learn that Feldman used her education to find her way out of her marriage, while managing to keep custody of her son, which was something that no other Orthodox Jewish woman in her neighborhood had done until that point. Hirsi Ali remembered that she knew a person living in Holland (someone she went to school with) which is how she was able to follow through and get herself to Holland and seek refugee status. On a personal note, I know that these stories have inspired me to be more confident with who I am, but they have also inspired me to be more considerate and mindful that everyone has unique circumstances that brings them to where they are today.

Sociocultural Realm

I remember sitting in my first graduate course as a doctoral student, *Introduction to Communication Research*, at Southern Illinois University Carbondale. I remember being told that our main paper assignment for the semester was to write a literature review that would hopefully find its way into our dissertation. I remember having trouble deciding what to write about. I knew I wanted to write about atheism and identity but I also didn't want to reveal that about myself, during my first semester, at a new institution. For days I went back and forth as I decided what to do. My final decision was, "Since I don't want to talk about it, I should talk about it. If this topic makes me nervous than that means that this is something important to explore." Since I've started writing about this subject more often, my anxiety surrounding the topic has eased and I have received a lot of support from colleagues. I have also received a few sidelong looks but those are few and far between. I do, however, still have anxiety when it comes to letting my family know what I'm writing about. I mentioned this earlier and the fear is still present. The fact that relationships with my family might be strained is a risk. In my heart, I

sincerely don't think my family would mind but I'm afraid to take the risk. The fear of taking that risk is not uncommon for anyone who has a stigmatized identity.

Many of the women directly addressed this risk, and the consequences of speaking out, in their memoirs. As I mentioned in chapter three, many of the women were told that they weren't supposed to talk about their religion with others. Karen Armstrong was explicitly told that she wasn't allowed to speak about what happened in the convent. Jenna Miscavige Hill was taught to stay away from non-Scientologists. Miscavige Hill wrote, "We had been led to believe the outside world was filled with ignorant people whom we called *Wogs*, short for 'Well and Orderly Gentlemen.' Wogs were to be avoided because they liked to ask a lot of questions. We were led to believe that they would find our lifestyle alarming" (50). Additionally, many women were shamed when they would publicly speak out or challenge religious leaders. When Ayaan Hirsi Ali finally decided to ask the questions, "What about men? Shouldn't they cover? Don't women also have desire for male bodies? Couldn't they be tempted by the sight of men's skin?" the whole room started laughing (110). Hirsi Ali felt too embarrassed to continue with her objections (110).

These autobiographies included many lessons but one of the main lessons that many of the authors presumably wanted the audience to consider after reading their memoir was the idea that this life is their one and only life. The authors invited us to reflect on our experiences, how we spend our time and what we dedicate our lives to. Kyria Abrahams finished her memoir with this insight:

No longer holding back and waiting for a perfect earth, I now needed to teach myself how to survive on the actual, existing one. I had a whole backlog of learning experiences to get through...I needed to fuck up and I needed to start

fucking up soon. What else could I do but keep moving forward? After all, this life is the only one we've got. (330)

This was an incredible insight, considering that Abrahams spent much of her memoir writing about how she was taught that Armageddon was going to happen at any time and that her “destiny was to live forever in God’s perfect paradise” (327). Abrahams seems also to be encouraging readers to live their lives to the fullest, considering that the last sentence of her memoir was addressed to the collective “we.”

Jenna Miscavige Hill dedicated the last chapter of her memoir to the idea that we only have one life. Miscavige Hill wrote, “The longer I was out, the more I came to understand that my life had been owned by the Church” (387). Miscavige Hill continued, “It was a huge adjustment of perspective to realize that the life I am living may be my one and only. However, having one life also allows me to see the beauty of it, what a miracle it is that we can live, and how important it is to be an individual” (390-391). Realizing that she may be living her one and only life was an amazing insight, given that she was taught that the soul of a Scientologist lives for millions of years: she was required to sign a billion year contract with Scientology. If a person truly believes this, like Miscavige Hill said she did as a child, this affects how a person lives his or her life. Miscavige Hill also shared her concern for all of the people she knows who are still in the Church: she worries that they “may be wasting the only life they have” (391). Miscavige Hill presumably wants the reader, and also her friends who are still in Scientology, to see the beauty of life that she has only recently learned to appreciate.

Now, these women are dedicating their lives to speaking out, which was something that none of them had been encouraged to do, growing up. Religion is so ingrained in society that it is all around you even if you weren’t raised with a religion. To speak out about religion is difficult

because many people are deeply connected to their religious faith; they may take any criticism personally, not being able to see that the critique of a religion is not necessarily a critique of the practitioners of that religion. These women make it clear that they are talking about the harm they experienced in the name of religion and that they don't want others to experience that harm.

With that in mind, these autobiographies invite social change and awareness because of the fact that they are taking a risk by speaking out. That risk is not without its consequences. There were many negative consequences that came with leaving religion and speaking out, including being stalked, disfellowshipped, excommunicated and receiving death threats. On the other hand, there were also many positive outcomes. Deborah Feldman wrote, "I'm finally free to be myself, and that feels good. If anyone ever tries to tell you to be something you're not, I hope you too can find the courage to speak up in protest" (261). Feldman further exclaimed, "Leaving a religion, a community, and a family comes at a high price. I had to learn to find peace even in the face of hate and abuse coming from my former community...I found friends and family to replace the ones I lost. I now feel loved and cherished in a way I never thought possible" (251). Feldman's words encourage readers, as Abrahams did, that they will find new family, friends, and community who are supportive of them, in the event that they lose relationships after they leave their religious communities.

Valerie Tarico was worried about talking about her nonbelief with anyone until her therapist asked her, "Among all the Christians you know, who is the most approachable and clear thinking?" (231). Tarico thought about her brother and decided to talk to him. She told him about all the misgivings and questions she had about her faith and asked him to respond. He responded with, "Well, those are good questions. They are some of the reasons I no longer call myself Christian" (231). After this interaction, Tarico mentioned that she wasn't sure whether she felt

relieved or dismayed by her brother's response. She presumably felt some relief because she connected to her brother in a new, encouraging way. She also likely felt dismayed because she had previously mentioned that she had remained silent about her disbelief for a long time because she "was concerned about offending believers and harming relationships" (231). Even after the conversation with her brother, Tarico mentioned that she continued to remain silent about her disbelief because she felt it was "wrong to risk damaging the faith of those who found genuine comfort, community, and happiness in their own beliefs" (231). Tarico models respect for individual choice, and even for religion when it provides comfort rather than stress in an individual's life.

The act of speaking out had provided challenges but also created a positive change in the women's lives. Feldman felt free to be herself and Tarico learned that her brother isn't religious. Both of these experiences are not uncommon for people who decide to leave religion. Greta Christina discovered through her research that, "Coming out atheist can make your life better, coming out helps other atheists, coming out cultivates other atheists, and coming out creates a better world" (78). Christina wrote that, "Coming out atheist is what changes believers' minds about atheists. It's what makes people realize they've been fed lies about us, and that we're not who they've been told we are by their pastor or their parents or the media. It's what shakes loose people's bigotry against us. And a less bigoted world is a better world" (309). These examples from the women's stories support the research that suggests that coming out makes your life better, helps other atheists, cultivates other atheists, and creates a better world.

Professional Realm

These women decided to break their silence and share their experience with and departure from religion. In doing so, they put their lives and bodies on the line. Along with these

risks, as soon as they published their memoirs, their stories were publicly available to be called into question. As Langellier and Peterson wrote, “As a communication practice, performing narrative makes conflict over experience, speaking, and identity concrete and accessible. The danger of performing narrative, then, is that it is political, it is open to legitimation and critique” (456). After many of these women had the opportunity to share their stories on television, the risk they took was heightened and they experienced backlash and criticism from their respective communities. For instance, Sonia Johnson was invited to appear on *The Phil Donahue Show* on December 13, 1979 to discuss her position on the Equal Rights Amendment. After her appearance, she received “furious Mormon mail” (Johnson 358). Johnson wrote that many people in the Mormon community were angry because, “I appeared in good advantage, and I did not appear with a spokesperson from the church. They had so hoped I would look and act like an apostate; they had hoped that when they saw me they would immediately understand why the church had excommunicated me” (359). In this example, it seems that Johnson is encouraging readers to reflect upon their perceptions of nonreligious people, and to reconsider any negative stereotypes they may have towards those who are nonreligious.

Additionally, Deborah Feldman wrote about the reaction people had to her memoir, “When *Unorthodox* was first published in February 2012, it unleashed a furious backlash from ultra-Orthodox Jews. On message boards and websites established to discredit and attack me, Hasids posted rants in which they accused me of lying and proclaimed that I had embarrassed the global Jewish community by airing our dirty laundry” (249). Feldman continued, “One Hasidic editorial compared me to Joseph Goebbels and warned that I could be a catalyst for another Holocaust. I have been called the next great anti-Semite” (249). Feldman further explained, “Few of my critics had actually read the book, but it didn’t matter to them as much as the fact that I

was a woman who had dared to speak out. The truth is, I'm among the first to lift the lid on a very insular Jewish sect; its members are highly motivated to keep the nature of their lifestyle secret" (249). These quotations encourage the reader to understand the controversial nature of this memoir. Additionally, these examples demonstrate how rare it is for Orthodox Jewish women to speak out against their faith and their community.

In addition to Johnson and Feldman, Jenna Miscavige Hill also experienced backlash from her community when she started to speak out. In 2008, after Miscavige Hill co-founded a website for ex-Scientologists, she began to be recruited by the media to tell her story. Miscavige Hill wrote, "I did an interview with *Nightline*'s Lisa Fletcher. It was the first time I had publicly told my entire story. Right before *Nightline* was getting ready to air the piece, its producers called the Church for comment. The Church was extremely threatening, causing ABC to hold off airing the story" (380). Afterwards, two representatives from the Church visited Miscavige Hill and her husband and tried to negotiate with them about getting *Nightline* to pull the interview for good, and to refuse to do additional interviews. After discussing the deal that the representatives had offered, Miscavige Hill and her husband came to the agreement that, "It would mean that once again, the Church would have power over our lives. There was something about giving the Church the satisfaction of that, which made us feel like we'd be enabling them to do more to us and others. In the end, we decided against it" (381). After this conversation with the Church representatives, Miscavige Hill and her husband began to be followed by someone in a white Ford Sedan. This person followed them on multiple occasions. Finally, after they managed to get a picture of the license plate, the stalking stopped. These examples may chill readers with the power of the Church of Scientology and its ability to coerce people into silence.

Also experiencing backlash from her community was Ayaan Hirsi Ali. Hirsi Ali started receiving death threats, after she began appearing on television in Holland, because she would often speak out against Islam. Hirsi Ali learned that her father had been receiving phone calls and warnings that “if you don’t do something fast to rein in your daughter, she is going to be killed” (285). These warnings weren’t necessarily death threats. The people could have been concerned for Hirsi Ali’s safety. However, after appearing on television a few times, and participating in debates about women in Islam, she began receiving unambiguous death threats. When Hirsi Ali was supposed to appear on another television show, the hosts of the show called her and said “they had received a threatening phone call about my appearance, and the police were taking it seriously” (287). On a different day, when she participated in a televised debate, she recalled being verbally harassed by many of the Muslim men in the audience and wrote, “All around me were men, and as the show went on, they began barking at me: screaming, shouting, cutting me off. Then one man yelled, ‘But you’re not Muslim! You said you’re not a Muslim!’” (288). After the show, the moderator told Hirsi Ali, “You’re not safe walking out of here by yourself” (289). After this television appearance, she was told by a friend, “What you’re doing is wrong for you. You’re putting yourself in danger. Try to find something else to talk about” (289). Then, in 2004, a man was arrested after he posted Hirsi Ali’s address on the internet and called on “all the Followers of the Oneness of Allah to rejoice; because having shadowed her movements they had finally, with the help of God, acquired her address” (317). Not only did he publish her address, but he said that Hirsi Ali and her friend, Theo, with whom she had made the documentary, *Submission*, must die (317). Unfortunately, these were not idle threats: Theo was murdered. The murderer shot Theo four times, cut his throat, and then “stabbed a five-page letter onto Theo’s chest. The letter was addressed to me” (Hirsi Ali 260).

After this incident, the Dutch Parliament encouraged Hirsi Ali to go into hiding and assigned security guards to keep her location a secret. In sharing these threats and the shocking and tragic story of Theo's murder, Hirsi Ali presumably wanted readers to understand both the risks and the urgency of speaking out in support of their beliefs. Hirsi Ali was told by her friends that what she was doing was dangerous and that she should find something else to talk about. However, Hirsi Ali wrote that she considers silence to be an accomplice to injustice. She began her memoir by reflecting on her friendship with Theo and made it clear that Theo was told by many people not to have his name on the documentary. Reflecting on his personality, she wrote, "Theo knew it was a dangerous film to make. But Theo was a valiant man. He was also very Dutch, and no nation in the world is more deeply attached to freedom of expression than the Dutch. Theo once said, 'If I can't put my name on my own film, in Holland, then Holland isn't Holland any more, and I am not me'" (xxii). In that sense, Hirsi Ali likely felt that she had a responsibility to speak out, not only for herself, but for Theo. With these statements, Hirsi Ali invites readers to view speaking out as a noble act of courage, integrity, solidarity—and even sacrifice.

However, despite the varying levels of backlash and threats, their professional and public appearances helped these women to establish new lives. These autobiographies encourage the reader to reflect on the lives of these women and the risks they took in speaking out. Each woman also made it clear to the reader that she had decided to share her story because she wanted to raise awareness and encourage social change. Specifically, these authors wanted to speak out against the mistreatment and abuse that is often justified by the perpetrators in the name of their God. For instance, Hirsi Ali wrote in the introduction of her memoir that, "It is the story of what I have experienced, what I have seen, and why I think the way I do. I've come to see that it is useful, and maybe even important, to tell this story. I want to make a few things

clear, and also tell people about another kind of world and what it's really like" (276). Hirsi Ali further explained that, "Some things must be said, and there are times when silence becomes an accomplice to injustice" (267). Valerie Tarico shared a similar sentiment and wrote, "As I watched Evangelicalism become even more radical – by fostering not only misunderstanding but actual hatred (of infidels, of gays, of Muslims), by distorting and opposing practical solutions to human suffering, – I came to feel that silence was complicity. And I came to believe it was my duty to speak out" (231). Additionally, Deborah Feldman shared the reason she published her autobiography. Feldman declared, "Why did I decide to speak up? Someone had to do it, and it turned out to be me. I am glad I published *Unorthodox*. I no longer have to struggle with the shame and anxiety that come with being an ex-Hasid. Instead, telling my story has empowered me. It feels good to come clean, and to know that I am inspiring other people to do the same" (249). In Feldman's description, we also see the relief she experienced from publishing her memoir. To my mind, Jenna Miscavige Hill encapsulated what all of the authors likely experienced when deciding to write their memoir. Miscavige Hill wrote, "Being the lone voice of dissent is hard and almost always inconvenient and there isn't usually instant gratification. However, if you don't speak up, you will most likely regret it and will have to live with the results" (394).

In a recent podcast episode of *This I Believe*, Eve Ensler spoke about trauma and violence and the importance of sharing your story. Ensler said, "I believe as each woman tells her story for the first time she breaks the silence and, by doing so, breaks her isolation, begins to melt her shame and guilt, making her experience real, lifting her pain. I believe one person's declaration sparks another, and then another." As Jenna Miscavige Hill was attempting to leave Scientology, she co-founded the website, *Ex-ScientologyKids*, which is a forum for people who have left

Scientology and are looking for support. Many people have come forward on this site to share their stories and offer guidance and support for other ex-Scientists.

Before Deborah Feldman published *Unorthodox*, she created an anonymous online blog called *Hasidic Feminist*. After the success of her book, her blog became a popular site for other Hasidic people to voice their support and also their grievances with Hasidic Judaism. Feldman wrote, “It was wonderful to watch as fellow rebels came forward after the book’s publication, some writing insightful articles in support of education reform, others consenting to be interviewed about abuse. I’m encouraged by their efforts, and I know that this is just the beginning” (249-250).

We can’t change something if we don’t know that there is a problem. These women argued that we must talk about the overlap between religion and abuse even though it is an uncomfortable topic to approach. Greta Christina said it best when she wrote, “If you think religion is a harmful idea, and you’d like to see fewer people think it, then coming out is a powerful way to help make that happen because religion relies on social consent to perpetuate itself. And coming out atheist denies it that consent” (240). I’d argue, though, that one doesn’t necessarily have to declare that one is an atheist to deny religion the social consent it needs. Miscavige Hill addressed the idea of social consent when she wrote, “In my experience, often, the only reason that the church was allowed to get away with its abusive behavior is that people failed to say no. But, in the long run, many others will appreciate your courage, even if silently, and someday it may lead to them mustering up the courage to stand up for themselves” (394). This quote doesn’t acknowledge the power imbalance between Church leaders and followers, and how difficult and intimidating it can be to speak out against religious hierarchies. However,

if all of these women hadn't spoken up, who knows whether other people from their faith traditions would have found the courage to also speak up.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I addressed the second and third research questions by answering how these autobiographies invited us to reflect on our experiences and on the lives of people we know who are nonreligious, as well as how these autobiographies invite social change and raise awareness. First, I extended the sphere of life image, as originally presented in chapter three, into this chapter to help address the research questions by providing further examples from each of the autobiographies. I addressed the research questions from a rhetorical perspective by answering what the autobiographies were designed to reveal, inquiring into the lessons that the authors presumably wanted the audience to learn from their narratives. In the final chapter, I will offer my interpretations about what this study has accomplished and what we have learned from these memoirs. In doing so, I will outline specific limitations of this study and make recommendations for future studies.

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION

Summary

Elizabeth Cady Stanton once said, “The Bible and the Church have been the greatest stumbling blocks in the way of women’s emancipation” (Gaylor, “Woe to the Women” 9). In the United States, women’s social circumstances have come a long way since Stanton was advocating for women’s rights. Thanks to the work of Stanton and other suffragists, each generation of women continue to progress forward. However, when it comes to women in religion, and in the Bible, and even women leaving religion, we don’t often hear stories about strong female role models. As Annie Laurie Gaylor pointed out in her book, *Woe to the Women – The Bible Tells Me So*, “The Book of Ruth and the Song of Solomon are commonly cited in evidence of the Bible’s benevolent view of women. Upon closer examination the role models offered the religious woman prove stereotyped, conventional, and inadequate. The few Bible heroines to be found in it are generally glorified only for their obedience and battle spirit” (11). As for women out of religion, Netflix recently released an original movie called, *The Most Hated Woman in America*. This movie is about Madalyn Murray O’Hair, a well-known atheist who served as an activist during the 1960s, ‘70s, and ‘80s, until her murder in 1995. O’Hair was the founder and president of the *American Atheists* foundation and was infamous for being outspoken against religion and religious indoctrination. O’Hair was also responsible for removing officially-sponsored Bible reading in public schools.

In this dissertation, though, I have studied the lives of eight women who are now speaking out and have emancipated themselves from their respective religious traditions. Even though they are not completely free from religious constraints that are imposed by politicians,

they no longer identify with previously held religious beliefs and have changed the direction of their lives. As Montalbano-Phelps wrote about sharing stories, “storytelling empowers a person to reclaim his or her experiences and to contemplate the effects of his or her actions, and to alter the direction of his or her life” (1). In doing so, some of the women lost relationships with family and friends (Abrahams, Hirsi Ali, Feldman, Greenhouse, and Johnson) while some repaired previously-strained relationships (Miscavige Hill and Tarico). However, all of the women mentioned in their memoirs that they are happier now that they are being true to themselves. Additionally, many of the women mentioned that they had found a new community of friends and family who support them. Also, many of the women, once free from their religious communities, were able to establish romantic relationships of their own accord. Furthermore, in writing their memoirs and speaking out, many women mentioned that they now trust themselves and encourage others to trust their instincts and doubts, as well as to live their truth. Moreover, each of the women has developed a professional life that allows her to dedicate her time to writing and speaking out, to encourage social change and consciousness raising.

The overall purpose of this research was to analyze and discover how women narrate their religious departures. I included a literature review that summarized previous scholarship surrounding religious departures and nonreligious identities. Then, using thematic narrative analysis from a rhetorical perspective, I analyzed eight autobiographies written by women who left the religion in which they were raised. In telling their stories, these women shared the types of challenges, events and topics that they experienced. Additionally, I have shown how these autobiographies invite social change and consciousness raising by encouraging the readers to understand personal accounts of religious departure. This study accomplished many things but it

is not without its limitations. So, in this final chapter, I summarize the accomplishments, the limitations, and provide ideas for future research.

Accomplishments of the Study

This study accomplished several things of note. I believe the main accomplishment is that this study is the first of its kind. In the past, researchers have interviewed people, conducted surveys, and compiled brief religious departure narratives from the Internet, but autobiographies have not been explored until now. Annie Laurie Gaylor edited the anthology, *“No Gods – No Masters”*: *The Collected Writings of Women Freethinkers of the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries*, which included brief biographies of women throughout history who spoke out against religion. Even though this anthology inspired my writing, these biographies and other previous research, did not include the acute details that can be provided by telling one’s own story.

The lack of detail in previous research brings me to the next accomplishment. During the analysis of the autobiographies, I began to notice that many of the memoirs were addressing similar topics. After reading all of the autobiographies, I noticed that five themes emerged. I organized the themes into what I introduced as the sphere of life. The sphere of life has five realms: family, intellectual, relational, sociocultural, and professional. I put the realms in this particular order because this is how we generally experience life and how many of the women wrote about their lives. First, we begin life with our family. Then, we start to learn about the world and have questions about how and why the world works the way it does. As we continue to grow, we develop relationships with people and begin to learn what is expected of us. We are taught what we should and shouldn’t do based on cultural expectations. The relational realm blends into the sociocultural realm, which is where many of the women noted that they started experiencing consequences for speaking out against religion. Finally, the professional

realm was being established as the women were writing their memoirs. The sphere of life model can be used to help us understand how religion permeates our lives.

The final accomplishment of this study is that it helps readers understand how women narrate their religious departures. Stories tell us what society values. Stories share and preserve our history. When a person lives in a society that values religion and he or she doesn't identify as religious, that person can feel isolated, alone, unwelcome, or even threatened. The same is true for anyone with a stigmatized identity. In reading these memoirs, we can begin to understand the power of storytelling to further social justice, to raise awareness, and to invite readers to understand personal accounts of religious departure. As Greta Christina wrote, "Coming out is a major component of what reduces bigotry against atheists" (329). However, coming out also helps make the world better because it leads people to question and hopefully overcome any bigoted opinions they may have towards marginalized groups. If enough people speak out, maybe people will start listening, and maybe those who were too afraid to say anything will now have the courage because they know that they aren't alone. Also, with the autobiographies, in this particular study, readers have a framework for understanding how other women have left religion, and so they may find a way out that works for them. As Montalbano-Phelps wrote about narrative and abuse victims, "In addition to improving the teller's life, sharing a personal story with diverse audiences can help facilitate change in the lives of others" (3). In the meantime, if a person isn't able to speak out, for whatever reason, hopefully he or she may be able to find comfort in these memoirs, knowing that he or she isn't alone.

Limitations and Future Research

While this study accomplished many things, it is not without its limitations. The first limitation is that all of these autobiographies were published, which is a privilege that is not

afforded to everyone. Furthermore, five of the eight women have experience in higher education, which is another privilege that is not accessible to everyone. Valerie Tarico wrote in her memoir that she wanted to add her voice to the conversation as “an ordinary ex-Evangelical.” However, Tarico has a doctorate in psychology. When I researched the statistics for people who have a doctorate in the United States, I discovered that, as of 2015, only 0.77% of women over the age of 25 have a Ph.D. (Bureau). In that sense, Tarico is an extraordinary, rather than an ordinary, person.

Also, these autobiographies were likely published because of the sensationalism of their stories: these women experienced extreme circumstances, which is another limitation of this study. Generally speaking, the experiences faced by many of these women are quite rare. Ayaan Hirsi Ali fled Somalia and sought refuge in Holland. Upon gaining citizenship in Holland, she became a member of the Dutch Parliament. Sonia Johnson became well known as an outspoken advocate in support of the Equal Rights Amendment. Since Johnson was also publicly critical of the Mormon Church’s position of the Equal Rights Amendment, she received a great deal of media attention when it was discovered that the Church was going to excommunicate her. Karen Armstrong chose to live in a convent and then chose to leave it after experiencing a mental breakdown. Finally, Jenna Miscavige Hill experienced a side of Scientology that not many Scientologists even experience. Many of the Scientology schools that existed when Miscavige Hill was a student, are no longer open. Also, the fact that Miscavige Hill is the niece of David Miscavige, the current leader of Scientology, sets her apart from the average Scientologist and adds the frisson of celebrity to her narrative.

The final limitation of this study is the lack of diversity with regard to the authors. All of the women, with the exception of Ayaan Hirsi Ali, are white with European heritage. Six of the

eight women were born and raised in the United States. The different states of origin identified in the memoirs were California, Idaho, Arizona, Minnesota, New York, and Rhode Island. As I'm listing the states, I also realize that none of these states are part of what is considered the American South, generally considered to be one of the most religious areas of the country.

Even though this research has a handful of significant limitations, some of these shortcomings can be addressed in future research. First, I would like to further develop and support the sphere of life with more examples. Preferably, I would like to include autobiographies from more people from each faith tradition explored in this study. I know that there are other autobiographies that include religious departures from Catholicism, Islam, Scientology, and Orthodox Judaism. I would also like to add religious faith traditions that I haven't explored yet. After I started this study, I found five autobiographies by women who wrote about their experiences with Fundamental Christianity, the Independent Fundamental Baptist Church, the Westboro Baptist Church, the Quiverfull sect of Christianity, and the Fundamentalist Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints. I would like to read their autobiographies and include the themes from their stories into the sphere of life.

Another future research possibility would be to include more diversity. I tried to find autobiographies from people with diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds. I found two autobiographies from women of color. I included Ayaan Hirsi Ali's autobiography in this study but I decided to exclude Taslima Nasrin's autobiography, *Meyebela: My Bengali Girlhood*, because it appeared that Nasrin discussed religion in only one chapter. Also, I didn't want to over represent one religious faith tradition (in this case, Islam) in this study. I didn't want it to seem that I was focusing on or critiquing one religion more than others. However, after I revisited Nasrin's autobiography, I realize that it is well-fitted for this research.

In general though, I would like to include more stories from people with multiple marginalized identities. As Greta Christina wrote, “If, in addition to being an atheist, you’re part of another marginalized group – a group that’s pushed to the edges of society, seen as second-class or ‘other,’ treated with bigotry or discrimination or disempowerment – coming out as an atheist can be an extra challenge” (4068). This would also include people from the LGBT community. Even if these published autobiographies don’t exist, I know that the stories do. I know people of color and people in the LGBT community who identify as atheist. Perhaps it will be a matter of interviewing people from these communities and asking them how religion has influenced their lives and identities.

Another future research opportunity would be to hear from people who were never religious. I know some people who weren’t raised within a particular faith tradition and are outspoken atheists because they don’t like how the Church and the State are so intertwined. I am curious to learn more about their motivations and experiences since they do live in a religious society. I’d also be curious to hear stories from people who weren’t religious but then identified as religious later in life. In my research for this study, I came across memoirs from Mary Karr and Anne Lamott. Both of these authors have written about finding religion later in life and acknowledge that they previously identified as nonreligious.

As I have been writing this dissertation, I have continually reflected on my own nonreligious identity and all of the events that have brought me to this moment. These autobiographies have inspired me to continue doing this research. In addition to potentially presenting my research at conferences, I want to create a reference site that includes resources for people who are either nonreligious or questioning their beliefs. There are many resources like this on the Internet but I want to add my findings to those resources and keep all the references in

one place. I want everyone to have access to these stories and hopefully be inspired, as I have been.

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