

I would not say I was raised in an agnostic or atheist family, but a family that never introduced or even discussed the idea of religion. Before visiting several churches and temples in the Bay Area, I had only stepped foot in a church three times in my entire life. It wasn't until recently that I have become curious of the purposes and practices of religion. What is it like to be completely devoted to a religious faith?

Stained glass is an incredibly notable artistic style in places of worship. The design of my piece represents different elements and concepts of faith. For each finger, I took designs from various religious iconographies, starting from the left: Buddhism, Christianity, Islam, and Judaism each are represented. The thumb of the hand represents the forgotten, "shameful" religious ties of cults. Cults present themselves as faiths, but in reality, often abuse and manipulate their followers. For the center of the hand, I took inspiration from the stained glass I viewed at several churches and temples I visited.

I made this piece to ask questions of the viewer's personal views on faith, religion, society, and life as a journey. The faux stained glass has no particular message about whether religion is bad, good, or arbitrary. Each individual their own relationship with faith or value in no faith at all.

Ev J.

Walking down a busy city street, you can easily pass a Christian woman, a Mormon missionary, a Scientologist on level OT VII, a passionate Buddhist, and an oblivious cult member all down the stretch of two blocks. Religion and the search for answers is a prominent staple in everybody's everyday life whether they are aware of it or not. While virtually every person is on a quest to find the answers to questions they propose about life, death, and the meaning of their existence, a large portion of the population finds comfort in going to a spiritual source have these questions answered for them. Although nearly all known religions have the same basic ideals, such as don't do bad deeds, do good deeds, care for one another, and be the best you can be, one's experience in each religion is very different. In every sector of each religion, there are usually different sets of rules and a different holy book to turn to to practice faith, among many other things. For people who are not religious and know little to nothing about religion, like me, it is hard to grasp what it is like to be completely under the thumb of a faith.

I can very easily say that, my entire life, I have never been religious. Although I believe my parents did a very good job raising me and my sister, they left a lot of seemingly important subjects out of what they introduced to me as a child. Of course my mom and dad told me how I should dress, what to do and what not to do when talking to people, and other things that improve the development of a child, but they didn't tell me directly how I should think, such as most parents do with their young children. Instead of forcing their opinions and views upon me, they left it to me to create an understanding of parts of life that were essentials I had to find out for myself. I was never told what career I should have when I grow up, how I should do my hair, or what religion I should practice.

When I was a child, all of my friends in elementary school were proudly and prominently members of religious congregations. Because of this, I felt as if maybe I was missing out on something. When I got home from school, I sat in my sister's room with her and looked through a book of Catholic sect religions that I could possibly fit into. As we flipped through this book of confusing rules and scriptures that seemed meaningless and arbitrary to an eight year old, we stumbled upon Protestantism. This church appealed to an eight and nine year old because of "correction of errors in the Christian faith." Schisms of Christianity were disagreements seemingly unfair elements other than basic doctrine in church practices<sup>1</sup>, but to an eight and nine year old, it meant there were less rules to follow! I identified with this church for years, but never actively practiced the faith or went to church, nor had been to church ever before in my life.

In third grade, a friend had invited me to come to a "cool church event" the following morning after a sleepover we had. Of course, I would not pass up the opportunity to come to a fun event with my best friend, so I happily accepted the offer. Little did I know, her mom had mistook the date for a different event, so she just took me to church with their family instead. All I can remember from that dull Sunday morning stuck in church with a family I didn't know very well was a lousy Christian faith band playing the kind of rock songs I couldn't stand. This was the first of the three times I have ever set foot in a church, even just for 10 seconds. I claimed to identify with this religion for about two years until I realized I was not following this faith whatsoever and shouldn't be following a path I didn't care about.

During middle school, I solidly identified as an atheist. To me, this was an arbitrary choice. With very little knowledge of any religions or their practices, I didn't feel as if there was any other option than atheism for me.

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<sup>1</sup> The Editors of Encyclopædia Britannica. "Schism." Encyclopædia Britannica Online. Accessed May 01, 2016. <http://www.britannica.com/topic/schism>.

In middle school, while I was more confident about my feeling on religion, but I still did not fully comprehend others'. My best friend from fifth to eighth grade was, and still is, a practicing Mormon. I remember feeling pity for her about how she couldn't have coffee, have a sip of her dad's wine, or hang out on Sundays. I didn't understand that these sacrifices were second nature to her and were completely worth it for the practice of her religion. Unlike me, she was raised Mormon since birth and religion was part of her everyday life. It was important for her to work towards being as faithful as she could be her entire life. This was incredibly foreign to me. However, since she was my best friend, I tried my best to accept this part of her life, even with the seemingly ludicrous rules she was forced to follow.

After more education on atheism and ideals of many religions, I feel very similar today as I did in middle school. Although I classify myself as an overly logical thinker and do not believe in any spiritual figures, which is why I identify with atheism, I completely respect other's beliefs and their practice as long as it does not hurt others or themselves.

Practically my entire life, I have viewed religion from a third party stance. I have never considered myself religious nor had any personal connection to any religion. Because of this disconnection, I have been fascinated by religion and people who have completely devoted their entire lives to their faith. Is it because of their search for answers? Because they want to belong to a very tight-knit community? Because this religion has given them the words that they always wanted to hear to change their whole lives? These questions have always been on my mind and I have not had the chance to answer them. Living in a very laid-back household in a very 'money is the most important thing' town, I can't comprehend what it is truly like to be devoted to a faith. The least I can do to cure my curiosity is to sit down with missionaries, watch strange movies, and visit as many places of worship as I physically can at a boarding school program.

Christianity is by far the most popular religion in the United States. Contrary to the first amendment of the separation between church and state<sup>2</sup>, most of America is extremely visibly Christian. Even with the founding fathers agreeing to not want faith to overtake the United States, Christians have been fighting for the right to have faith be prominent in every aspect in the America. Religion has influenced abortion, the education of youth, and whether or not people have the right to get married. The last president, George W. Bush, was an outwardly Christian man, the words "God bless America" are written on our currency, and there are many different biblical theme parks such as *The Holy Land Experience* in Florida, *The Ark Encounter* in Kentucky, and *Heritage USA* in South Carolina. 70.6% of the United States population has claimed to be Christian<sup>3</sup> and 65% of Christians support the idea of prayer in public schools<sup>4</sup>. Although most teachers do not teach Creationism and other scholastic religious subjects in school, Christianity is nevertheless nudging its way into everybody's life. The monopoly that Christians have on the majority of the United States is frightening from the standpoint of a non religious person.

I see the purpose of religion as a source to answer unanswerable questions such as life after death. From what I have heard from conversation with religious people, before finding their

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<sup>2</sup>"First Amendment." LII / Legal Information Institute. Accessed May 01, 2016. [https://www.law.cornell.edu/constitution/first\\_amendment](https://www.law.cornell.edu/constitution/first_amendment).

<sup>3</sup>"America's Changing Religious Landscape." Pew Research Centers Religion Public Life Project RSS. 2015. Accessed May 01, 2016. <http://www.pewforum.org/2015/05/12/americas-changing-religious-landscape/>

<sup>4</sup>"Survey: 65 Percent of Americans Support Prayer in Public Schools." Christian Post. Accessed May 01, 2016. <http://www.christianpost.com/news/survey-65-percent-of-americans-support-prayer-in-public-schools-48969/>.

place in their congregation, they describe themselves as “lost” or “in a bad place”. After taking on the path of their chosen religion, they claim to have found their heart and had the ability to lead a better life as people with religion, but cannot comprehend that idea. However, without religion, they have just as much as an ability to lead a happy and fulfilling life. From an observational stance, the reason these characters have been able to find themselves in faith is due to the answers and demands these religions hand them. First, they give followers an interesting and captivating story to read along to, then a list of guidelines to apply to their life. These guidelines are basically what people should and shouldn’t do to be a decent person. Some rules include to not steal and to not kill, but to the Christian’s beliefs, God has put a metaphorical hand on a follower’s shoulder and turned them from the wrong path to the righteous path. This is so liberating to some that they feel the need to preach the word of God and convert everyone they know to this life of happiness through faith because of its effects on them personally. Although this sounds like a reasonable approach, it can actually be fairly harmful. Children are a very big target for religious conversions. In the film, *Jesus Camp* by Rachel Grady and Heidi Ewing, pastor Becky Fischer is seen running a camp for children between the ages of six and thirteen that is devoted to preaching the Christian Evangelical message to American youth through lecture and exercises. While watching the film, it is very obvious that the purpose of this camp is to indoctrinate kids to be overcome with this faith and devote their whole lives to the word of God. While to the preachers, this is “opening their eyes” to God, from an outside view, they are forcing a group of confused children to hear and see things from a faith they do not fully understand. A scene in *Jesus Camp* that caught my attention was at a point where Becky Fischer was being shown scenes from the previous meeting of a group of 200+ children and parents. While watching clips from filming the congregation from earlier that day, Fischer had turned to the camera and said, “I can go into a playground of kids that don’t know anything about Christianity, lead them to the lord in a matter of just no time at all. And just moments later, they can be seeing visions and hearing the voice of God ... They’re so usable in Christianity.” This statement is similar to a confession that she uses children and manipulates them to be devoted to Evangelical Christianity.

Such as the Evangelical Church, there are many other Christian schism churches that have created their own set of rules and their own group of people, while still keeping the main figures of Christianity such as Jesus Christ of Nazareth, God, and the Holy Spirit. A very popular church of Christianity is The Church of Latter-Day Saints, also known as Mormonism. The reason for the publicity Mormonism has had is not for the legitimate faith, but for its wild practices and stereotypes. In Mormonism, followers who are very devoted to the religion can volunteer to be sent to a city anywhere in the world to spread the Mormon faith and baptize new Mormons they have converted in their time as a missionary. Because missionaries are virtually everywhere, I decided to go on mormon.org and contact a missionary near me. Although the meeting with Elder Zimmerman and Elder Dresser, two very clean and tightly wound men, was slightly uncomfortable due to their efforts to convert me, I realized the extent of backlash they get for believing in their religion. Contrary to my thesis of being devout to a religion at an early age because of childhood conversion I developed after watching *Jesus Camp*, both missionaries proved me wrong. They had both known of Mormonism when they were children, but their parents left the church in their teen years. They chose to stay with Mormonism at their own will. Zimmerman had explained to be how he used to be in a “very bad place” before he looked for the Mormon church for help. He then explained how converting to the Mormon faith was the push that made his life a happy and healthy existence because of the voice of Jesus. Both Elders

are so immersed in the good they have seen in the Church of Latter-Day Saints that they both agreed to travel hundreds of miles from home, have little to no ability to contact their family, and spend months solely studying Mormonism. Although they have chosen to devote their lives to their church, it is not a very easy journey. It is very clear that each missionary, as well as each member of the church, has dealt with stereotypes and misinterpretations of the Mormon religion. Some stereotypes include polygamy (sister wives), needing to have a large amount of children, that they are Amish, they will burn non Mormons, and they have horns on their head. It takes a great deal of courage and perseverance to devote one's life completely to a religion and the spread of their word with the amount of adverse that Mormons face.

Unlike Christianity, other religions do not preach ideas of complete devotion and telling their followers what or how to think, but rather to think inside themselves in order to find the answer to their questions. A perfect example of this is the practice of Buddhism. Buddhism is a religious practice that does not follow a God that is meant to judge its followers, but rather an extremely enlightened man and his path to happiness through meditation. To be devoted to a religion such as Buddhism is to feel eternal happiness through a step by step path with self guidance<sup>5</sup>. In Buddhism, the passion and the faith is inside of you and it is upon you to figure out what your life will become before and after death. As well as in Buddhism, other religions are more dependent on one's personal growth instead of being given their growth. Christianity is known for providing the answers for their followers and creating scenarios that give their followers the peace they want. Although both Christianity and Buddhism promise to lead you to the answers you need, they have two very different methods of gaining one's inner peace.

A scary factor of virtually every major religion is the similarities between the practices and rules of cult groups. The purpose of cults is to draw vulnerable people in, impress them with their member's happiness, religious stability, and answers to all of their questions. After this, they proceed to dupe people into letting the church take all of their money and brainwash them into devoting their entire consciousness to a religious figure. There are many current cults who claim to be a religion similar to Christianity, Judaism, or Buddhism, but inside the cult, it is considered a normal religion. The exact definition of the word cult is "a small religious group that is not part of a larger and more accepted religion and that has beliefs regarded by many people as extreme or dangerous."<sup>6</sup> The dangerous activities in cults include violence based punishment, collection of extreme amounts of money, and dehumanizing its followers. A very mainstream example of a modern-day cult is the Church of Scientology. A former science-fiction writer, L. Ron Hubbard, came to the conclusion that the only way one can really make money is to start a religion because of the tax-exemptions on the church income. Hubbard firstly wrote the book *Dianetics The Modern Science of Mental Health* (Dai-through, nous-mind), which explains how negative experiences in your past cause your mind to depart from rational thought and behavior without you even knowing it. The book claims it has the ability to enable your best self: confident, rational, productive, and creative: something that everyone wants to be. This factor has drawn hundreds of thousands of people into the religion.

To be able to achieve these personal goals, each member needs to do a series of "audits". Auditing occurs when two people sit down together with an E-Meter (imaged above)<sup>7</sup>. The

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<sup>5</sup>"What Is the Buddhist Noble Eightfold Path to Enlightenment?" Religion & Spirituality. Accessed May 01, 2016. <http://buddhism.about.com/od/theeightfoldpath/a/eightfoldpath.htm>.

<sup>6</sup>Merriam-Webster. Accessed May 01, 2016. <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/cult>.

<sup>7</sup> <http://www.xenutv.com/blog/wp-content/uploads/2012/08/e-meter.jpg>

person who is being audited holds on to two metal tubes that claim to measure brain waves of thoughts while they talk about everything in their lives. By doing this, the auditor records fluctuations in brain waves to detect essences of past lives and their ties to this personal mental stability while recording everything they say in extreme detail. This is just one of the steps to achieve “the clear”: a state of mind where you are completely stable and are free of any unhappiness in your life. The goal of Scientology and *Dianetics* is to be Clear.

Due to his foundation of making money through the cult, he had charged people fees to attend his classes, teaching the public on *Dianetics*. As time went on, the religion grew into its title of Scientology. Scientology expanded and gained new, very popular members such as John Travolta and Tom Cruise. With this publicity, ranks in Scientology were created, and with these ranks, more and more information was spilled about Scientology to only people on the the higher ranks. Through auditing with your E-Meter and giving hundreds of thousands of dollars to the church, anyone could up their rank and gain this information. When one reached the level of OT III (Operating Theron 3), they would receive a paper that gave a detailed story of Lord Xenu and the Galactic Confederacy who, 75 million years ago, brought billions of his people to Earth, earlier known as Teegeeeack, and stacked them around volcanoes and killed them with hydrogen bombs. The spirits of these people are Thetans that adhere to humans at birth, causing them spiritual harm until they can rid their souls of the spirit.

After becoming so involved in this story and ridding oneself of your Thetan to become spiritually serene, the elements of cults come into play. The Church of Scientology starts to inflict disconnection of families, extreme punishments, harassment from fellow Scientologists, cruel psychiatric treatments, high prices to achieve different levels of the religion, and manipulation. An extreme form of



punishment that was recently released to the media is a place called “The hole,” a place of confinement and humiliation for Scientology officials. “Cook testified that Miscavige wanted Marc Yager and Guillaume Lesevre, two of his longest-serving and highest-ranking officials, to confess to having a homosexual affair. The men were beaten until they made some forced admissions. When Cook objected to what was happening, she herself was made to stand in a trash can for twelve hours while insults were hurled at her, she was called a lesbian, and water was dumped on her head.”<sup>8</sup> Scientology is a dangerous and high costing religious practice, as are most other cults. The connections of the practices of cults like Scientology and ones of major religions are uncanny and off putting. Both sections of belief offer answers to followers and require small to massive donations. The religious figure’s word is usually to put down the spirits of it’s followers in the possibility to build it back up only using the religion, and the complete devotion after dipping a toe into the ocean of faith.

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<sup>8</sup>“Scientology’s Concentration Camp for Its Executives: The Prisoners, Past and Present.” Village Voice. 2012. Accessed May 01, 2016. <http://www.villagevoice.com/news/scientologys-concentration-camp-for-its-executives-the-prisoners-past-and-present-6714390>.

To be completely devoted to a religion means to put your entire life in the hands of a book, idea, or person. Faith is meant exactly what the definition of the word is, “The assent of the mind to the statement or proposition of another, on the ground of the manifest truth of what he utters; firm and earnest belief, on probable evidence of any kind, especially in regard to important moral truth.”<sup>9</sup> Someone who has faith is a strong believer in what they have faith in, and has decided this is the path they want to lead on for the rest of their lives. It is up to each individual to judge and create their own future personal existence.

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<sup>9</sup>“Faith.” Online Dictionary and Translations. Accessed May 01, 2016. <http://www.webster-dictionary.org/definition/Faith>.