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**Challenging Faith and Gaining Power:
Women in Film who Reject and Subvert Religion**

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RELG-211-02: Religion and Film
Dr. Wolff
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Rejection and subversion of religion are two methods by which women can gain personal power. In this essay, rejection of faith will be examined in the films *The Little Hours* (2017) and *The Miseducation of Cameron Post* (2018). Subversion of religion will be studied through the films *Whale Rider* (2003), *Jennifer's Body* (2009), and *Transparent* (2014). A narrative analysis of women in these films will be contrasted with studies of orthodox religion as examined by Dr. Brenda E. Brasher and Dr. Mary Gerhart. The acquisition of power will be brought from fiction into reality by exploring historical examples of social change as recorded by Dr. Antionette Iadarola and Dr. Edward L. Queen. Finally, additional theory of power and perspective will be provided by Dr. Jack Halberstam and Michel Foucault. By comparing the films with studies of orthodox religion and social change, a narrative emerges which suggests that the effects of religious subversion and rejection are ultimately the same: these women gain independence, personal pride, and freedom of expression. Both methods are necessary in order to provide tailored change into the practitioner's life, and the choice to either leave or remain in their religion. Women who choose to subvert or reject religion are able to imagine and pursue ideal versions of themselves. This translates into perceived improvements at a personal level as well as re-organizations of larger power structures in organized religion.

Delineation of Religion, Limitation of Tradition, and Counter-culture Thought:

In order to understand how women reclaim power by challenging religion, a definition of religion must be created which includes all women of faith. This definition is a hotly debated topic among scholars, and ultimately conclusions can only be drawn through interfaith dialogue, which points out ubiquitous similarities in world faiths. Focusing on the Abrahamic religions would exclude other belief systems, whereas a universal definition would offer a comprehensive model with which we can analyze how women of any faith can gain power. The first step of this process requires an understanding of what constitutes as religion and what does not. While Christianity, Judaism, and Islam are easily recognized as religions due to the prevalence of a single god, we should not discount belief systems which focus on pantheons, universal forces, or even the invisible connections between human beings. The existentialist philosopher Paul Tillich defined religion as a person's "ultimate concern," the subject which receives a person's highest devotion.¹ While this definition holds for those whose piety is a central column in their life, it ignores people who identify with a religion but have more immediate passions. The American anthropologist Clifford Geertz challenged Tillich's stance when he claimed that religion is "defined by its function in human society rather than by theological content."² Geertz required that religion consist of symbols which influence human moods and motivations, i.e., behavior. In contrast to Tillich, whose definition was limiting, Geertz' theory is too wide. Following his logic, road signs are religion, as these symbols are accepted and understood by huge groups of people and affect their conduct. In order to understand how women can change their relationship with

¹ John Lyden, *Film as Religion: Myths, Morals, and Rituals*, (New York, NY: New York University Press, 2019) 17.

² Lyden, *Film as Religion* p.21

religion to gain power, a more comprehensive definition of religion must be formed. This definition must expand past the Abrahamic faiths without including societal structures which exist only at a physical level.

A lead to this definition can be found in the work of the Spanish Catholic Priest Raimundo Panikkar, who was a proponent of interfaith dialogue. His words similarly open a channel between the ideas of Tillich and Geertz. He was of the opinion that different gods and ideas of higher energy could qualify as religion without agreeing upon the same universal truth.

The Christian might understand the whole of reality through Christ but also can recognize that the Hindu may see it all through Krishna or Rama, the Buddhist through Shakya-muni Buddha or Shunyata, and so on. This does not mean that these are simply different names for the same thing. Panikkar would prefer to say that each is an aspect of the whole of reality through which the whole is understood.³

Panikkar's definition, which places religion as a method through which we can understand the "whole," exists in two parts. The first part is the "real:" factual existence of the past up to the ever-progressing present. The second part of the whole is the "ideal," the desired future which practitioners imagine through religion and strive to manifest. This definition does not require the religion to be a person's main concern, nor that religions adopt certain physical signifiers like symbols. In addition, Panikkar has evaded the common pitfall of excluding alternate religions or including structures which exist on only mundane levels. When women identify the tenets of their religion that have a hand in shaping their present and future, these women can compare what is offered to them with what they desire. Women seize power when they change their relationship with faith to envision and enable a different future.

In the context of women and religion, the "real" is the current conditions under which women live, and the "ideal" is the reality which they wish to pursue. In film, the ideal can be represented by a character's dreams and goals. Religions which stick to tradition or antiquated scripture are systems often accused of silencing and oppressing women in a way they find regressive, or deleterious to their ambitions. In her study of fundamentalist religions, Dr. Brenda Brasher noticed that, "in the intercongregational groups of Bay Chapel and Mount Olive, gender frequently functioned as a critical symbol that in itself qualified a person for or, disqualified a person from participation."⁴ In traditional religions like orthodox Judaism, denominations of Catholicism, and Maliki muslims, women are barred from positions of power. This is not a strict rule for all groups, but rather a norm for the majority of such religions. In these congregations, "males [retain] exclusive access to key authoritative posts such as the pastoral office, board membership, and eldership."⁵ The method of understanding reality offered by these religions can enforce subservience, modesty, and gender norms rooted in the scripture or advice of past leaders. Discontent arises when a woman finds that she desires a hand in leadership, or an equal voice in debates. In a more general sense, the relationship between women and religion changes

³ Lyden, *Film as Religion* p.101

⁴ Brenda E. Brasher, *Godly Women: Fundamentalism and Female Power*, (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1998) 60.

⁵ Brasher, *Godly Women* p.61

when they find that their personal values and understanding of what they want reality to be disagrees with what is presented to them.

This change, or challenge of faith tradition, is a subset of counter-culture thought, just like thought against previously unquestioned education systems, legal systems, and governmental structure. The expression of counter-culture thought and action is examined by a professor of english and gender studies in Dr. Jack Halberstam's novel *The Queer Art of Failure*. Therein, he claims that, "failure allows us to escape the punishing norms that discipline behavior and manage human development with the goal of delivering us from unruly childhoods to orderly and predictable adulthoods."⁶ He is labeling actions which defy popular behavior as failure, as in failure to measure up to what is expected of a person by their parents, figures of authority, and larger community. These actions save the dissenter from growing into the mold set for them. In his eyes, the practice of "failing, losing, forgetting, unmaking, undoing, unbecoming, not knowing may in fact offer more creative, more cooperative, more surprising ways of being in the world."⁷ Halberstam paints rebellion as creation. The point I would call into question is his use of the word failure to describe these actions. While surely the greater society may see an apostate as a failure, they need not label themselves as such. Failure is a word with ill connotation, and enforces the thought that the person is doing something wrong or unnatural. In fact, using the word failure to describe counter-culture activity only supports the idea of a greater, more factual truth. In the context of religion, Halberstam's work is applicable in saying that subversive and rejective behavior can save women from an assumed gender role. Women need not obey unthinkingly, even if it disappoints their religious leaders. I would maintain that this behavior should not be labeled as failure, but rather as a success in realizing personal values and identity. "Failing" in the eyes of pastors and parental figures is a by-product of women's rejection of religious restriction. The reward of this risk is not a real failure, as the women learn how to live more fully, or more creatively, as themselves. This personal growth is a form of power because a more realized woman is able to take control of who and what she desires to become.

Rejection and Subversion of Religion in modern Filmography:

Rejection of faith is a recurring theme in modern film media because audiences are interested in the relationships between gender, power, and cultural forms. This rejection occurs when a woman abandons her previously practiced faith. When women who live in oppressive religious systems are not able to change their public show of worship, rejection still occurs in a complete lack of conviction. In the 2017 film *The Little Hours* directed and written by Jeff Baena, the genre of comedy allows space for viewers to both laugh at and appreciate the rebellious acts of three once-nuns. By defying the tenets of their Medieval Catholic upbringing, these women are freed from strict moral codes. Rather than adhering to the rules which demand

⁶ Jack Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure*, (Durham, NC: Duke University Press Books, 2011) 3.

⁷ Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure* p.2-3

celibacy, the women have sex with each other and a male visitor to their nunnery, which displays freedom of sexuality.⁸ The character Alessandra, forced into the church by her father, gains freedom of general expression as she abandons the textile work assigned to her gender by the church. Their rejection of a previously unquestioned understanding of reality, as given by their church, enabled the women to re-imagine who they wanted to be in the present and future.

The stifling understanding of reality the nuns renounce is not merely a thing of the past. Similarly limiting religions have survived the middle ages, and thus rejection of religion continues into current day. In *The Mis-education of Cameron Post* (2017), Desiree Arkhavan comments on contemporary religion by setting her film in a 90's Christian therapy conversion camp. Similar to the nuns, eponymous character Cameron Post gains power by rejecting the view that purity can only be achieved through celibacy and heterosexuality. The actions of Cameron and other teenagers at the camp to evade the rules set by the church not only result in freedom of sexuality, but expression of gender and personality.⁹ Her narrative exemplifies gaining pride. In the traditional Christian sense, pride is a sin, the worst of the deadly seven. Cameron's story contrasts this with more modernized connotations. While pride is a word commonly associated in today's age as exclusive to queer individuals, pride extends to a sense of confidence, self-love, and assurance of worth. By rejecting the understanding of reality they were born into, women like Alessandra and Cameron are able to assess for themselves how they would like to live and what they envision for the ideal future.

If total rejection of religion means distancing oneself for clarity, subversion of religion is akin to assessing and modifying faith from the inside. Women who subvert religion alter their interpretation and practice while still identifying with the community. This option is especially feasible to women who oppose abandoning their conviction and beliefs they view as beneficial. An example of this subversion is shown in the 2002 movie *Whale Rider*, directed by Niki Caro. Therein he presents the fictional story of Paikea Apirana, a young girl who is faulted by her community for her gender. In the Māori tribe of New Zealand, tradition decreed that leaders could only be male, similar to the norms of orthodox Western religions. As the sole child of the previous heir to power, Paikea feels shame for being female and thus unable to lead according to religious tradition. A shift occurs when Paikea subverts the community's religion by attempting the tests of chieftainship given only to men.¹⁰ Her success grants her—and the other women of the community—representation in their leadership, pride in her gender, and even the personal security afforded by training with traditionally male weapons. Over the course of the story Paikea never loses or distances herself from faith, but rather interprets the understanding of the “real” in a way which allows her to improve her “ideal.” Unlike the women of *The Little Hours* and *The Miseducation of Cameron Post*, Paikea is empowered by her choice to remain inside of the religious community and subvert the faith offered to her, rather than abandon it.

Intrusion of women into male-dominated spaces is similarly shown in *Transparent*, a television show about a Jewish family and their various understandings of the faith. In the

⁸ *The Little Hours*. Directed by Jeff Baena. Produced by Aubrey Plaza and Liz Destro. Gunpowder & Sky, 2017.

⁹ *The Miseducation of Cameron Post*. Directed by Desiree Arkhavan. FilmRise, 2018.

¹⁰ *Whale Rider*. Directed by Niki Caro. Pandora Film, 2002.

episode “I Never Promised You a Promised Land,” the daughter Ali breaks religious tradition by donning a kippah and praying on the male side of the Wailing Wall in Jerusalem.¹¹ This behavior was prompted by a feeling of dissociation from womanhood, as Ali later expressed not feeling “in her body.” The general consensus held by traditionalist rabbis of the Torah is that men and women should be separated by a wall called the Mechitza during worship. By acting against this expectation during her prayer, Ali combined her religious beliefs with her gender identity. Ali was able to alter her relationship to power within religion without rejection of Judaism. Her actions bestow confidence, power of self-expression, and power of gender-expression. Regardless of the gender Ali ultimately found herself identifying with, her original understanding of reality would have decreed that she could not wear certain clothes and exist in certain places due to her sex assigned at birth and gender as perceived by others.

The genres of *Whale Rider* and *Transparent*, magical realism and dramatic realism respectively, both give rather literal examples of how women can alter religion from the inside. They are poised to have parallels in less literal movies like *Jennifer's Body*, which depict subversion through metaphor. The actions of Paikea and Ali are for the most part taken at face value, and directly applicable for audience members. While realism has its merit in portraying true-to-life subversion, television shows and movies which make use of CGI, special effects, and obviously fantastical breaks from the real world are able to add depth of symbolism which represents more abstract female subversion of religion. In the 2009 horror film *Jennifer's Body*, a variety of inhuman traits given to the possessed character Jennifer Check make her a visual representation of the power women can gain through subversion of religion. In this film, shifting her allegiance from the Christian god of her upbringing to the side of the devil gives Jennifer immense physical strength and magical abilities of seduction.¹² Her transformation from human teen to succubus is not meant to be taken at face value by audiences. The inhuman qualities are metaphors for confidence, independence from men, and freedom of sexuality. These newfound qualities comment on strict Christian beliefs of modesty and subservience. Like Paikea and Ali, Jennifer never rejects her faith, as belief in Christian Satan implies continued belief in the Christian god. These women change their interpretation of faith, their understanding of reality, in a way which allows them to continue being religious while shedding negative constraints which put them at disadvantage compared to their male peers. While the subversion of faith performed by Jennifer might at first glance seem very different from the rejection exemplified by Cameron Post, their methods work to equal ends.

Equality of Utility Between Rejection and Subversion:

Indeed, the forms of power gained by female rejection and subversion of faith are not only similar, but arguably the same. All of the characters who reject or subvert religion receive common independence, personal pride, and self expression. In other words, though the method

¹¹ *Transparent*. Season 4, episode 6, "I Never Promised You a Promised Land." Created by Joey Soloway. Produced by Andrea Sperling and Victor Hsu. Aired September 21, 2017, on Amazon Prime.

¹² *Jennifer's Body*. Directed by Karyn Kusama. Screenplay by Diablo Cody. 20th Century Fox, 2009.

of their rebellion is split between staying in or leaving a religion, the end results are equivalent. All of the women are given agency over their way of living and their pursuit of an imagined future through their action. The core of the shift between being controlled and seizing control is in the base morals which these women challenge. In his examination of shifting power structures, the philosopher Michel Foucault described ideological alteration in this manner:

A modification in the rules of formation... is not a change of content (refutation of old errors, recovery of old truths), nor is it a change of theoretical form (renewal of paradigm, modification of systematic ensembles). It is a question of what governs statements, and the way in which they govern each other so as to constitute a set of propositions.¹³

This statement at first may seem to contradict the claim that subversion and rejection change “systematic ensembles” in order to enable personal freedoms. This change does indeed occur, but Foucault views alteration of societal constructs as a more superficial or surface-level development. Changes to faith tradition are a by-product of the real goal Foucault identifies: alteration of the ideas and motivations which drive religious institutions.

To further contextualize this idea, consider how religions consist of moral tenets which shape the way believers see the real and ideal world. These morals are often represented in the teachings of a faith tradition or in base scripture such as the Bible. The Christian filmic characters Cameron Post and Jennifer Check would both disagree with the Biblical decree that Eve, representative of their gender, “shall bring forth children, yet your desire shall be for your husband, and he shall rule over you.”¹⁴ Neither of these characters, nor the other female rebels studied, would permit men to rule over them. The original Abrahamic understanding of reality and the ideal that women should be subservient wives is challenged by the actions of these women in film, which ultimately results in their newfound freedom of expression. All of these women represent what Halberstam named an “unmaking” in order to create an ideal future which appealed to them. This unmaking leads to general patterns in gaining power, specifically in the realms of sexuality, gender, and confidence. Thus, regardless of whether or not a woman leaves a religion or remains inside, she can enjoy similar benefits.

Due to their similar effects, both rejection and subversion have the potential to cause large-scale shifts of power in religious organizations. Of the two, subversion is more likely to incite gradual improvements in the balance of power between men and women. Paikea’s subversion allowed a critical change in her community which enabled women to become chieftains. The actions of women like Paikea to subvert religions that enable patriarchy have resulted in similar shifts of power. These shifts can be as slight as having an equal voice at the dinner table to earning major leadership positions. According to the historian Barbara Welter as quoted by Dr. Antionette Iadarola of Cabrini Catholic University, “nineteenth-century Americans enshrined women on a pedestal as encompassing the four feminine virtues of piety, purity, submissiveness, and domesticity.”¹⁵ These values, as defined by men, were once the standard in

¹³ Michel Foucault, *The Foucault Reader*, (New York, NY: Pantheon Books, 1984) 54.

¹⁴ *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version*, (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2001) Genesis 3:16

¹⁵ Antionette Iadarola, *Women, Religion, and Social Change*, (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1985) 457.

which women were allowed to exist. The male assumption that women would be satisfied with child-rearing and household management speaks to the lack of voice and agency women had in their own faith. While modern Christian women are not scorned for submissiveness, it is not the universal assumption of conduct it once was. This is due to the activism of women like Betty Freidan, who wrote of her disgust for “contentment . . . in endless self-sacrifice of herself to her husband” and the formation of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious in 1972.¹⁶ Criticism of traditional religion had resulted in female pastors, rabbis, and other leaders. The function towards progress is not always faultless, and a perfect solution is not assured between women and their faith. As Professor Mary Gerhart of religious studies notes, “Women’s relationship to Christianity does not reveal a linear progression: rather, a couple of steps away from the old constraints, a couple steps backwards, then a strong step forwards again.”¹⁷

In contrast to the self-contained change caused by subversion, rejection of religion has the potential to lead to the creation of new faiths. In cases of rejection, women can choose to either remain outside of religious institutions, re-join their previous group with a new mindset, or to create an entirely separate organization. This creation is done in order to enable a space where the woman’s newly realized understanding of reality and her ideal may be shared with others. Examples of this phenomena have occurred throughout history when women have designed their own faith. In 1879, Mary Baker Eddy founded the Church of Christ, Scientist.¹⁸ This religion was based not only in scripture but also in Eddy’s own writings, effectively giving her an executive amount of authority. After rejecting her upbringing as Protestant Congregationalist, Eddy was able to re-write the world the way she saw it, enacting a new “real” and “ideal” through her books. By altering her parent’s faith, she was able to create a religion which more closely matched her personal morals and understanding of reality.

The actions of individuals who challenge religion through subversion and rejection cannot be ranked in terms of worth. The use of these methods is dependent on the context in which they are utilized. That is to say, the way in which women change their perception of reality is form-fitted to their individualized experience. In his essay on power, Foucault wrote:

There are many different kinds of revolution, roughly speaking, as many kinds as there are possible subversive recodifications of power relations, and further that one can perfectly well conceive of revolutions which leave essentially untouched the power relations which form the basis for the functioning of the state.¹⁹

The revolution that Foucault studies is given wide variety in the selected movies. Some women, such as Paikea from *Whale Rider*, cause large-scale modification, which altered her religion to allow leadership roles for women. On the other hand, women like Ali from *Transparent* cause less obvious change, which is reflected in her inner self rather than touching that which Foucault called the power relations of the state. Ali’s actions were a much-liberating revolution which

¹⁶ Haddad, *Women, Religion and Social Change* p.465

¹⁷ Mary Gerhart, *Her Voice, Her Faith: Women Speak on World Religions*, (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2002) 170.

¹⁸ Edward L. Queen, *Encyclopedia of American religious history*, (New York, NY: Facts On File, 1996) 253.

¹⁹ Foucault, *The Foucault Reader*, p.64

occurred without great or immediate social change. Her actions held no less importance than Paikea's, and were tailored to her environment and personal needs. Not all women who reject and subvert religion wish to alter history, but the important thing is that they have the power and choice to do so if they wish. The critical difference between the pious women of today and of the past is that more and more often women are able to become comfortable in their faith, regardless of what change—or lack of change—they choose to make.

By examining the characters in films from *The Little Hours* to *Jennifer's Body*, patterns can be drawn which tie female rejection and subversion of religion to an increase in power. These forms of power affect the way women view themselves and their communities, which sparks social change and progressivity in larger religious groups. While some women are content to follow religion as given to them, personal agency and choice must remain so that, if change is desired, it can occur. Understanding and modifying the religions which shape our reality is the key to enabling the equality of power between men, women, and otherwise-identifying individuals. For many women, the rules set by male-written and male-led faiths are an inhibition to their idealized future, and for this reason “orthodoxy is a luxury we cannot afford.”²⁰

²⁰ Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure* p.16

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