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Libs 101
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Human Enigma Essay

The real transformation happens when we understand our freedom.

I grew up in a home that did not speak of a higher being. On a very rare occasion, my great grandmother would attend a dinner event and we would say a prayer before we ate, but I did not recognize at the time what was happening. It was not until the day my parents listened to the suggestion of my middle school principal and pulled me out of my neighborhood school that I learned of a god people seemed to believe in. Although I was only a child, I was going through the darkest time of my life due to bullying. My mom and dad picked me up during lunch time, took me to the store to get my new school uniform, and Wednesday morning was my first day of Catholic school. Spoiler alert: this did not last long.

My mom told me at dinner on Tuesday night that she was raised in catholic school. I asked her what catholic meant; she told me I would find out soon. When I arrived on my first day, I thought the buildings looked oddly old and different from my past schools. I learned later that day at my first mass that one of the strange buildings was a church. I had only ever been in a church at the greek festival I attend with my family every June, since my grandmother's father immigrated to America from Greece and his family had been a part of the church. I had never understood that it was a church, I simply thought Greek people met each other there.

The first thing I learned at school that day was that in catholic school, you only write in cursive. She handed me a paper and asked me to copy down the 'our father' and 'hail mary' prayers, in cursive, so I would not be confused when the class recited them each morning. I was

so nervous I could not even write my name in cursive. My teacher asked me if I was catholic, and I nodded. I did not know what that meant. She seemed excited when I nodded, and proceeded to give me a buddy to sit with in mass. I was excited to have a friend for whatever was coming next. We walked in two, single-file lines separated by gender to the church. We entered a certain way, we sat a certain way. My buddy told me when to sit and when to kneel. I was fascinated by the way everyone knew when to say certain phrases and all the words to every song. When my buddy told me to stand up and follow her, I did. She reached her hands forward like a plate, so I did. She ate the cracker when she walked back to her seat, so I ate the cracker when I walked back to my seat. It was a great first day of school.

When I got home, I was so excited to tell my parents about my new school. Everyone was so nice to me, I had a buddy for mass, I got a snack in the middle, and I remembered how to write in cursive by the end of the day. My parents laughed and my mom told me I wasn't supposed to take the cracker, which represented the body of Christ. I didn't know who Christ was. She told me I wasn't supposed to say yes to being catholic, I was supposed to say no and then learn what it meant. I told her everyone was catholic and I wanted to fit in at my new school. She understood. What was important to them was that I was happy, and I was.

As I continued learning about the catholic church, I became less and less happy. We were not allowed to sit as a class, or in friend groups, at lunch. We sat at a table of girls, and a table of boys. I got detention for pushing all the tables together one day. I hated being sent to confession, because I did not believe it mattered if god forgave my sins or not. What mattered to me was that I did what I felt was right and the person I wronged directly heard my apologies. After about a year, I had stopped pretending to be catholic and I had caused many problems challenging beliefs

instilled by the church that I did not understand, or agree with. I was only a child, and I did not appreciate the way people blindly accepted what they were told to believe. I left the school at the end of seventh grade, and went to a public charter school. Spoiler alert: it lasted an even shorter amount of time.

The charter school was for creative minds, and I had the opportunity to take fun and unique classes such as mandarin and film studies. However, I was only able to stay for one semester because it was not preparing me for a real high school. The school shut down later that year. While I was there for the semester, my parents were having a tough time deciding what school to put me in. I couldn't go back to my neighborhood public school, because it put me at risk again. I couldn't go back to catholic school because my beliefs were still unclear, but I knew those beliefs were not the right ones for me. My parents decided to try to get me into the christian school my dad graduated from. My first response: Dad didn't go to public school?

To get into Horizon Christian Academy, my family had to interview and discuss our religious background. I sat and listened to my mom talk about growing up in a catholic school, and my dad in a christian family. He talked about what graduating from the school meant for his life and his walk with god. I had never heard these things before. Of course I got in, my dad being an alumni. I had a locker for the first time, which was a very exciting moment for me. My mom told me on the way to school that I needed to pretend to be Christian since we acted like we were a religious household in the interviews. I understood, even though that had not worked out the first time in catholic school. I loved the staff and the campus; I was very excited to hopefully graduate from the same school as my dad.

The first thing we did when the bell rang was pray. My teacher asked if anyone wanted to say the prayer, and almost every student's hand shot into the air. I was surprised and confused. By the end of the day, we had started all seven periods with a prayer. Some classes also ended with a prayer. On Wednesday, all our classes were shorter so we could go to chapel during the afternoon. In chapel, the first twenty minutes was designated to worship music. I really enjoyed the music, and it made me want to listen to the speaker more. Someone spoke for the remaining time, and we were told to read certain passages in the bible. I enjoyed the whole thing. Not long after my first week at horizon, I started going to a church about half a mile away from my home. I walked there every Sunday, and my dad would drop me off and pick me up on tuesday nights for youth group. I didn't know anyone at first, I just felt that I wanted to learn more about christianity outside of my school. I read every page of the bible, I had a journal full of verses and reflections, and I knew almost every worship song. Within the same school semester, I "commit my life to jesus," and was baptized at a school event in May. I didn't tell my parents until a photo was inside of the yearbook. My mom was afraid I did not understand what my actions meant, and looking back, she was right. But at the time, my decision was made in full confidence and I was happier than I had ever been. My best friend that I had met on day one had decided to leave the school, and I did not understand why. His sister was a couple years older and was not leaving, and he never told us why he was switching.

Freshman year was the best year I had in all of junior high and high school. I was on two varsity sports teams, I was class president, and I was on at an all time high with my new walk with god. I felt full of love, since god encourages us to love our neighbors as he loves us. I was spending about ten hours a week at the church, and my social media was consumed by verses

from the bible. I was a completely different person. Then, sophomore year, I began to start seeing the flaws with the beliefs I had blindly consumed as my own. The first scientific chapel we ever had was supposed to convince me that science and religion do go together when you believe the truth, which was supposed to be christianity. Evolution was not real, god simply made the necessary changes to keep the earth running smoothly-such as removing entire bones from a whale species. While others were convinced, I was not. I started to wonder how an entire group of people could come to the same conclusion of evolution being fake. I wondered how we know Matthew and Mark actually wrote the stories in the bible, considering the bible as a whole has been translated so many times and in so many ways. I wondered why my pastor at my church had the authority to tell any stories and explain his thinking behind individual verses as the truth. I began to question the truth, which is absolutely unacceptable in a place surrounded by blind faith.

My school sent an email to the parents, inviting them to a prayer walk to keep our campus property. That was their way of informing the families that we did not have the money to buy our property again at the end of the lease. High Tech High bought the property, and planned to tear down our campus the summer before my senior year. The only thing they did to fix this problem was prayer walks, encouragement that with faith all would be well, and requesting families to pay the deposit for next year a semester early. My parents lost so much sleep figuring out what to do, but after I was picked in the lottery to choice into a different public high school, they decided to switch me at the beginning of junior year. They told me to keep it a secret that I was not returning so that I wasn't treated poorly for the remaining semester of sophomore year. I hated the way everyone blindly had faith that things would work out, without actually trying to

fix the problem. I hated the way people felt okay with their wrongdoings when god forgave them, even if the person harmed did not. I hated the way the kids whose families attended the church on Sundays were favored over the students who went to a different church, or no church at all. I stopped going to my church, I stopped singing the songs on Wednesdays, and I stopped believing in a god I was told to believe in.

When I ask my parents now why they did not teach me about god as a child, I hear their responses and respect them more as human beings. They wanted me to have my own chance to decide what I believe in. My dad was forced into a Christian household, and he never agreed with his own families beliefs. My mom went to a Catholic school, in a family that viewed the bible as a book of made up stories. They answered any questions I had as a child, such as why my grandma made me say thank you to the ceiling before I went to sleep at her house. They gave me an opportunity to learn for myself, and thanks to them I had the opportunity to learn about multiple religions and decide as my own person what my beliefs are.

It wasn't until years later that I found out why Kevin left Horizon before high school. He had come to terms with his sexuality as a gay man, and wanted to be able to be his true self. When he had decided he wanted to go public, he was not allowed to attend the school or be a part of the church. How can a religion as a whole encourage us to love one another, but exclude entire groups of people? People are blindly believing the bible and the words inside, not even thinking about the consequences or the possibility of the truth not being the truth. People read the bible, or don't and just listen in church, and believe that the Earth was created by god and everything that dwells within it. Every origin story is different, which creates even more division and hate between groups of people. We learned about Kimmerer and her beliefs, including the

origin story she believes about skywoman. Hearing people in seminar question her beliefs with their own beliefs as evidence was interesting to me, mostly because I know how easy it is to blindly accept something as the truth. Just because the church tells you it is the truth, does not mean you can't research and learn and decide for yourself.

The danger of a single story is that once that single story is decided, it is the only story. Other countries do not allow their citizens the freedom to choose their religion. As an American, I am privileged in the sense that I get to decide what my beliefs are. When people are believing in their religion as a single story, they are not utilizing their right in this country to discover. Parents who decide the religion of their children for them are impacting their way of thinking, seeing, and believing without them even knowing. In the matrix, there were two options. The red pill, to discover the truth and live in a complete reality. Or the blue pill, to live in ignorance and comfort. I feel that to follow blind faith without question is to take the blue pill in life. Taking the red pill is to learn more about the world and make your decisions based on what you know.

You may have noticed my lack of capitalization when referring to god. This was intentional, and not meant to go unnoticed. Assata impacted me with her use of capitalization, and lack of. I wanted to try the same technique in order to emphasize my personal belief that despite what you believe about origin stories and saviors, the focus on god and the afterlife is not as important as bettering the society we are in now and passing down to future generations. We cannot focus our entire lives on maintaining a relationship with a mysterious god in order to secure a spot in heaven while we destroy the planet we live on now. Don't choose the cave, choose the truth.

