

Faith and Identity

I have always been acutely aware of my identity as a woman. I grew up in a rural, conservative area with my grandparents, and was continually instructed on what was 'ladylike' or 'acceptable' and what was not. We were a culturally Christian family; turning up to Church on special days like Christmas and Easter, and my younger brother and I would attend a watered-down Sunday school (on Thursdays).

Some people might be shocked to find out that I didn't have consistent access to the internet until the age of 14. I always used to joke that my grandparents thought that 'WiFi' was a clothing brand. Until that day when I no longer had to rely on my 2GB phone data per month, I was unaware of the complexity behind my identities- or that some of them existed at all. Once I started to properly engage with social media, I quickly became what some may call a 'social justice warrior'. I would pick fights with whoever I deemed to be anti-feminist, anti-LGBTQ and the like. Quite often, these were (self-proclaimed) Christian accounts.

As the months progressed, the internet allowed me to explore many facets of my identity. In some ways, it helped me to put into words my growing frustration with rigid gender roles, heteronormativity and acceptance of the status quo, which was welcome. In other ways, it led me to self-destructive ideas and a growing isolation. I felt like, in real life, nobody understood what I was grappling with.

This came to a head when somebody at school made a joke about my sexuality, completely unaware that I was trying to figure all that stuff out. The joke itself wasn't the issue; it's how one of my friends reacted. With discomfort and Bible quotes and everything I had quietly grown to reject. Further questioning revealed their deep-seated traditional theology: defense of Biblical female submission and even slavery. Having seen little other views on the spectrum besides theirs and my own, this was when I fully axed Christianity from my life, and swore never to return. I wasn't invited, accepted or wanted by the people- and they told me that their God thinks the same. This was a meditated decision. I had prayed and prayed that God would change my sexuality. I took- and mistook- his silence as absence.

A long, difficult five years followed. My father died; my mental health was up-and-down like a rollercoaster; countless family dramas and friendship issues played out; and I felt completely alone. Despite having a few Christian friends, I was argumentative and stubbornly disgusted by all religion. There was no going back.

One friend in particular stuck by me. She was patient, never forced conversation about religion but was always happy to talk through ideas and issues I had. Something I found particularly refreshing was that she never pretended to know everything. Just before lockdown, I joined her on an Alpha course- who would turn down free cake and a debate? All that was swimming in my head was how I had been treated before- inferior as a woman, repulsive as queer, destructive as a questioner. The group I took the course with were the nicest people, and I would report back to my friend at the end of many sessions: 'I feel... more spiritual. But not there yet.' You have to applaud her patience.

Lockdowns came and went. I started my first year of university, and was placed in a flat mostly full of Christians. I proudly announced my agnosticism, but I was worried, again. I didn't want to push anything too far and end up gaining the same response as five years before. Luckily for me, they were all super open and friendly, and I ended up attending Mass on campus a few times. And then a few more. And then I tried another Church, and some zooms, until... A few months had passed. What was I doing? Why was I committing every Sunday morning to this?

The changing point was education. I learnt that central to being a Christian is to be Christ-like. And this is really difficult, if not impossible. It means being unconditionally loving to those you disagree with or dislike or who live differently to you. It means being as non-judgemental as possible; knowing that being open and an attentive listener and patient is so much more fulfilling and important than pushing your values onto others. Especially if those values ultimately harm the Church, others, and don't reflect Jesus' actions.

The changing point was a five-minute conversation I had in a friend's kitchen after a workout.

'I think I'm at the point where I believe in a God... or something. I'm spiritual, you know? It's the Jesus thing I struggle with. Yeah, I think he existed- there are records in the Bible and whatever. But it seems a bit out-there to say he did miracles and stuff.'

'I guess. But that's the whole thing... It's about faith. It's what you believe and trust in.'

My sticking point was that I *had* trusted and put my faith in God. Remember when I prayed for him to make me straight? The coldest silence had come from that. Looking back, that silence was so needed. He placed the right people around me, and he gave them the patience, wisdom, kindness and tolerance to guide me back to faith. He didn't change me, so that I could tell this story and say with confidence that you don't need to change these things about yourself to come to God. People can come to him however they are, and he'll just be glad that you're there. Be a confident, leadership-driven woman. Be a loving person (even in a queer way). Be outside-the-box. Lord knows that Jesus never conformed to society's boundaries, and his radical inclusion of those excluded is something we should aspire to.

Hope you had a great LGBTQ+ History month!

Honey Harrop (She/They)



My baptism this summer

