

Gendered and Embodied Un/learning among Women Disengaging from Faith in the UK and Finland

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 VERTAISARVIOITU
KOLLEGIALT GRANSKAD
PEER-REVIEWED
www.tsv.fi/tunnus

Women often embody the central values and practices of their religious tradition. When they leave their community, women find a part of the “religious tapestry” remaining with them long after their disengagement. In this article, we draw from research in the UK and Finland to explore women’s efforts to unlearn parts of their former religious belonging. We draw on in total thirty-five interviews with women who disengaged from the Mormon Church, Jehovah’s Witnesses and Conservative Laestadianism. We conceptualize un/learning as a multi-layered process consisting of both unlearning and re-learning. We explore women’s narratives about negotiating bodily limits, conduct and belonging, and understand these as suggesting experiences of a threefold un/learning: gendered, spatial-social and epistemic. We argue that examining gendered and embodied un/learning helps to understand women’s disengagement processes from minority Christian traditions in Western and Northern European secularized contexts such as the UK and Finland.

Introduction

Tracing the body’s movements, enactments, and practices, especially at points where words fail, provides another means of deconstructing religion. (Gaddini 2022, 72)

Belonging to a religious group often creates a sense of community since faith is individually and collectively embodied through lived experiences. As a number of feminist

scholars in religion have pointed out, religious piety and observance provide many women with an understanding of themselves, and their place in time, community and tradition, and embodied ethical ways of being in the world. These studies have been crucial in criticizing the implicit secular/religion binary in gender studies and its subsequent one-sided assumption about religious women as “oppressed”, by exploring the richness, nuances and contradictions of women’s religious lives (Mahmood 2005; Avishai 2008; Bracke 2008; Hoyt 2007). At the same time, other feminist scholars from a variety of disciplines have focused on what they consider the dangers posed by conservative religious movements for women’s rights and sexual diversity (Al-Ali and Yuval-Davis 2017; Szwed and Zielińska 2017; Page and Low 2022). One way of taking up an original position in these debates is by starting from women’s experiences of leaving religion. Without assuming that women’s former religious lives lack nuance, richness and joy, we are interested in what it means for those women who lose faith and leave the religious community that has been formative for an important part of their lives. So far, there has been surprisingly little attention paid to this topic. An interesting excep-

tion is the work of the sociologist of religion Katie Gaddini (2022), who explored, against the backdrop of contemporary culture wars, how single Evangelical women in the US and the UK choose to leave or remain in environments that constrain them. We take up her suggestion of tracing the body's movements, enactments and practices (2022, 72) as a way of understanding women's disengagement from religion.

Women losing faith and leaving their religious community often desire to unlearn some of the perspectives and practices of their former religious life and make space for new ways of belonging and being. Especially when women disengage from Christian minority traditions and communities in Northern and Western Europe that emphasize distinctions between "us" and "the outside world", they find themselves on a "metaphorical threshold" (Kirk, Bal and Janssen 2017) between their former religious tradition and the world. In this context, un/learning is considered essential but also challenging as it is premised on major life changes. For many women, these changes can be simultaneously liberating, confusing and frightening due to their lack of social experience or networks outside of the religious tradition or community. Therefore, their disengagement can be at times anxiety-ridden (see Vliek 2019).

In this article, we explore women's gendered and embodied un/learning after disengagement from their religious traditions. As feminist scholars in gender studies and the study of religion and gender, we are interested in former religious women's un/learning practices that shape how they renegotiate their lives. We understand faith as manifesting discursive traditions informing the construction of piety through embodied and sensory practices (Gabrys and Pritchard 2018; Keller and Rubinstein 2017; Isherwood and Bellchambers 2009).

We define un/learning religion as consisting of both un-learning and re-learning. Un/learning is a multi-layered process involving gradually repudiating cognitive perspectives and embodied practices, but also a relocatory reparative phase in which one becomes accustomed to new perspectives and ways of living (Hamzic 2012, 170). Moving away from religious life is a non-linear process of un/learning with experiences that could be called liminal. Liminality, in the context of this article, refers to women's framing of their experiences as "in-between" and not belonging (Turner 1967) in which un/learning leads to changing familial and intimate relations but also to transformations in women's bodies, conduct and emotions.

The main question is therefore this: how does women's embodied un/learning shape their disengagement processes? To grasp the gendered and embodied implications of leaving religion, we discuss in this article the experiences of former Mormon and Jehovah's Witness women in the UK and former Conservative Laestadian women in Finland. The article is designed as follows: first, we further conceptualize un/learning to approach the narratives of women disengaging from Conservative Laestadianism, the Mormon Church and Jehovah's Witnesses. Second, we briefly introduce our research projects and data. Third, we examine women's narratives in terms of their experiences of a threefold un/learning: *gendered*, *spatial-social* and *epistemic*. We focus on women's negotiations of femininity, sexuality and belonging. We argue that our analysis of *gendered and embodied un/learning* helps us understand how women leave their religious traditions, and more specifically, what it means for women to disengage from Christian minority traditions and communities in Northern and Western European countries.

Approaching gendered and embodied un/learning

In this article, we consider women's trajectories of disengaging from religious life as a type of un/learning, because they involve non-linear processes of both unlearning and re-learning as ways of thinking, feeling and doing. We examine these processes of un/learning as gendered and embodied, affective and ontological experiences. Un/learning often takes place in-between communities, identities or spaces. The in-between space, community or identity is regularly considered a positive, transformative and empowering place, akin to what has been called a position or space of resistance (Riches 2011; Clark 2011), a "transformative space" (Prior and Cusack 2008), a "space of their own" (Frenkel and Wasserman 2022) or a "third space" (Moosavinia and Hosseini 2018). However, interstitial spaces can also be spaces of exposure, vulnerability and violence, which becomes explicit in Karen Turner's (2019) study on female converts to Islam in Australia. According to Turner, women's fervour in the early stages of conversion is "an embodied response to liminality and the perceived incompatibility between Islam and the West" (p. 73).

In this article, we understand un/learning as an experience of being and moving in-between, and referring to the journey of transitioning from one place or community to another. Similarly, the process of un/learning is liminal as it seems temporary, being-in-transition or on the move. We stress the fluidity of any religious and societal territories, since we do not consider religion, religions or non-religion as necessarily essentially different spaces, experiences or communities (i.e. Lim, Macgregor and Putnam 2010). Neither do we perceive these women's narratives as being in-between a religious position and

a presumably tolerant and flexible secular societal mainstream (Kupari and Tuomaala 2015).

Disengagement often means a re-forming of subjectivity, which involves ethical labour (Fadil 2011). It is this period of re-formation that many women seem to experience as being in-between. This in-betweenness is explicit in women's narratives as *gendered*, *spatial-social* and *epistemic challenges* that offer an opportunity for transformation. Moreover, experiences of transformation are intrinsically embodied, during which interconnected relations between religion, gender and sexuality are refigured. As scholars of religion and gender have argued, gender and sexuality are crucial to how religion is embodied (Page and Pilcher 2021; Gaddini 2022). This is exemplified in how former Laestadian, Mormon and Jehovah's Witness women narrate their bodies' movements, enactments and bodily practices as means of deconstructing their former belonging, faith and ways of being. We understand women's narratives therefore as performative, as they echo women's experiences of disengaging from religious belonging, and at the same time, contribute to the processes of rebuilding a sense of self and belonging. In the main part of the article, we analyse women's narrations of disengaging as *narratives of three-fold un/learning*. We do this with a focus on gendered affective-embodied transitions in faith, family and intimate relationships, belonging and sexuality.

Women leaving Christian minority communities

During the 1800s, a number of new religious movements were established in North America, including The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (more commonly known as the Mormon Church)

and The Bible Study Movement (the foundation for Jehovah's Witnesses). The ascetic, millenarian Jehovah's Witnesses are a highly visible, and frequently controversial, worldwide religious organization. Despite this fact, historians, sociologists and ethnographers have paid relatively little attention to the Jehovah's Witnesses (Holden 2002; Knox 2011). Whereas the Jehovah's Witnesses have transcended their American origins to become an international movement, Mormonism continues to be considered an American religion that is also found in other countries. Research as well as popular knowledge about Mormonism relies heavily on a Utah standpoint (Halford 2020a). However, the oldest continuous Mormon congregations in the world are in Britain. Researching British (former) Jehovah's Witness and Mormon women's lived experiences thus means recognizing voices from the margin and foregrounding regional variety and experiences. Both the Mormon Church and the Jehovah's Witnesses can be considered contested Christian minority traditions in the UK that at times meet with ignorance and negative perceptions due to a long tradition of derogatory literature and anticriticism (Decoo 2015) and indirect forms of religious discrimination in the European Court of Human Rights (Scolnicov 2016; Ó Néill 2017). The increasing de-churching of British society is likely to reinforce Mormon and Jehovah's Witness practices as different from and counter-cultural to its secular/Christian mainstream realm.

The Conservative Laestadians¹ are part of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland and form the largest revivalist

movement in Finland. There are approximately 35,000–40,000 adult members, though the total number of Conservative Laestadians is a few times higher, since the majority of Laestadians are children and adolescents (Hurtig 2013). Conservative Laestadianism has a strong religious-cultural influence especially in the Northern Ostrobothnia region (Talonen 2001). The movement is characterized by large families, and the teaching of exclusive salvation. Sunday schools, Bible classes and frequent communal gatherings educate Laestadian children in the religious teachings and the communal culture. Growing up in a large family with strictly defined patriarchal gender roles is typical for Laestadian childhood and adolescence. The movement is known for its conservative values, such as a negative attitude towards pre-marital sex and a ban on the use of contraceptives (Hintsala and Kinnunen 2013; Nissilä 2013; Wallenius-Korkalo and Valkonen 2016).

In her research in the UK, van den Brandt collected twelve life stories of self-identified women who formerly belonged to the Mormon Church and Jehovah's Witnesses. These data emerge from a larger data set collected as part of her 2022–24 EU-funded Marie Skłodowska-Curie Individual Fellowship for a research project on women leaving Jewish, Christian and Islamic traditions and communities in the UK and the Netherlands. At the moment of writing, she collected sixty life stories from women of various ages and religious backgrounds, including Anglican, Catholic, Evangelical and Sunni Islamic backgrounds, Calvinist Reformed traditions and the Apostolic Community. The four life story interviews done with British women who left the Mormon Church and the additional eight done with women who left the Jehovah's Witnesses were among the first after the project commenced. In

1 In this article we refer to Conservative Laestadian women and Conservative Laestadianism with the term Laestadian women and Laestadian/ism.

these life stories, the grey area of leaving a religious tradition or community is recurrently emphasized. Leaving the Mormon Church or the Jehovah's Witnesses is often not narrated in terms of a clear break or a clear distinction between being in or out. Leaving, instead, must be understood in terms of moving, of being on the move, of embodied transformation. Leaving is a process, often without a clear end or goal. In this process of transformation, women feel the need to unlearn specific elements of their religious upbringing they consider ingrained but unhelpful in their everyday ways of thinking and behaviour.

In her research in Finland, Rantala conducted twenty-three conversational online open-ended interviews in the spring of 2021 with former Laestadians, who all identified as women.² The interviews explored the ways in which former Laestadian women articulate their relation to their bodies, bodily limits and the reproductive politics of their former Laestadian faith after disengaging from the movement. Interviews took place via Zoom, most of the time with video connection; two were done with audio only. Additionally, the interviewees were given tasks such as to re-imagine their childhood and to map their relation to nature by employing creative methods: the women produced photos, drawings, paintings and embroidery. The interviewees came from various parts of Finland, have diverse educational and professional backgrounds, and ages ranging between 23 and 49 years. Interviewees were, for instance, university students, young

2 At the time of the interview, one of the women still belonged to Laestadian faith. Despite her great difficulties and the fact that she was not planning to leave the movement she still wanted to be part of the research project.

mothers, professionals in their 30s or care workers with twelve children. At the time of the interview, some women had left the movement ten or more years ago, whereas others were at the beginning of their disengagement process. Leaving the movement was the main turning point in all women's lives and often led to a major crisis. For most, this turning point took place during teenage years, or when becoming a mother for the first time. All women interviewed sought professional help after leaving the Laestadian movement.

By bringing in the narratives of women who left the Mormon Church and Jehovah's Witnesses in the UK and those who left the Laestadian movement in Finland, we highlight women's experiences of religious traditions and movements that are not mainstream in Western and Northern Europe, and therefore often less well known. Bringing data together from two projects risks flattening the specificities of the individual projects, and their methodologies, slightly different foci and methods. However, our collaboration helped us push thinking about the role of gendered embodiment in leaving religion further. We argue that our main collaborative insight lies in thinking about gendered embodiment in leaving religion as a threefold experience of gendered, spatial-social and epistemic un/learning.

Women's experiences of un/learning

In the following sections, we will focus on the three layers of un/learning that emerged from our respondents' narratives: gendered, spatial-social and epistemic. We will distinguish these layers analytically – however, it is important to keep in mind that in the narratives themselves they often overlap, intersect and co-constitute each other. At the level of women's everyday experience, they are likely difficult to disentangle.

Gendered and embodied un/learning: in the remake of femininity and sexuality

Rethinking and redoing femininity and sexuality touch upon a variety of experiences that include notions of individuality, modesty and reproductive rights. These topics, as we will show, are narrated as impacting on the level of individual embodiment – but they often emerge from the ways in which respondents talk about intimate relations with others and communal life (Furey 2012; Huygens 2023; van den Brandt 2023; van den Brandt forthcoming). For instance, some women find individual decision-making a profoundly challenging process. Many women hail from patriarchally structured families and communities and have grown up with men as religious authorities, heads of households and primary decision-makers. Some women struggled and fought battles for change from within. For several women, shaping feminist critiques became an incentive to leave their community, or these were developed in hindsight.

The Laestadian, Mormon and Jehovah's Witnesses communities are often described as close-knit and high-demanding as they demand time, presence and participation on the part of their members. All three traditions have negative attitudes towards the use of alcohol and pre-marital sex. They endeavour to regulate the leisure and dating practices of especially their adolescent female members in ways that set them apart from many of their peers. Mormon doctrines expect the faithful to have children but allow the practice of birth control. However, elective abortion is considered contrary to the commandments of God. Jehovah's Witnesses see having children and practising birth control as personal decisions and responsibilities. Contraception is allowed, but not elective abortion.

Since women give birth and are considered primary care-givers nurturing their families, the centrality of the family to Mormon (Halford 2020b; Halford 2021; Proctor 2003) and Laestadian (Hintsala and Kinnunen 2013; Hurtig 2013; Pelkonen 2013) life leads women to having to negotiate the ideals, expectations and affects of motherhood. Explicit Laestadian encouragement for large families particularly puts a strain on women's bodies. The former Laestadian women's narratives echo the need felt to find alternative ways of relating to their bodies beyond reproductive expectations. One of the former Laestadian women, Oili, 27 years old and single, commented on future expectations for women to become mothers that "it wasn't that kind of future which I could see myself in and the only option for me was that I was never going to have a relationship". During the interviews, former Laestadian women were asked if they could re-imagine a new childhood for themselves, and what would it be like. Onerva, 23 years old, responded:

I wish that there was no Laestadianism at all ... I wish I didn't have to be careful what to say or do and I could have grown freely and in peace ... already as a child I wished I was born into a normal family ... because of that I was often crying at night. I see myself as a physical being and I feel this was taken away from me ... for instance, dance ... the joy was removed from it, and shame and guilt was brought in and I was taught that moving to the music was wrong.

The former Laestadian women were all happy to have been able to make the decision to leave the community. Some said they would probably have stayed if they had had more freedom as women in deciding

whether, how many and when to have children without feeling pressured. Women in their forties often regretted they had not been able to leave before getting married and having children, and not having been able to decide about their own future. Most of the younger women had made their decision to leave already as teenagers. Nonetheless, years ahead, they still found it hard to forget about some of their experiences and settle to a life of their own making. Many women sought novel approaches to their body through arts, dance, yoga and sports, which were seen as liberating and balancing, and as improving their self-esteem. Onerva described her journey of finding her long-lost body again, which was not hers but belonged to the community, faith and doctrine. Conversations with other former Laestadian women enabled many to explore more accepting attitudes towards their own body. Crucially, women often emphasized reproductive freedom – the ability to use contraception and to decide whether and when to have children – as the most rewarding experience of having disengaged from the Laestadian movement (see also Rantala 2019, 2022; Toivio 2013). Oivi, a mother of seven, described having been in a loving romantic relationship after leaving the Laestadian community and how the sense of being freed from reproductive expectations helped her regain her feeling of self-worth and explore her sexuality. She stated that “I am pleased that I am able to enjoy and accept something that used to make me sick because it reminded me of the past obligations required from my body.”

Especially former Laestadian and Mormon women spoke of having grown up with gendered notions of modesty, meaning that keeping pre-marital virginity and spousal fidelity is a burden primarily placed on the shoulders of girls and young

women (Wallenius-Korkalo and Valkonen 2016; Rantala 2019, 2022, Blakesley 2009). Laestadian women are expected not to approve of the use of make-up, hair colour or contraceptive methods. According to Florence, a 30-year-old woman, who left the Mormon Church, part of what she needs to unlearn is to let go of the modesty codes she feels are ingrained in her body, and also her young daughter’s body. She explained that she feels she has to learn ways of being in her body beyond notions of female humility and modesty. She spoke about how she is gradually learning to be confident in dressing differently and having to “find her own version of things”. In this embodied and gendered experience of liminality, Florence uses notions such as “transition” to point to herself and her body becoming “different now”, while simultaneously, she underlines the idea that she is definitely “still the same person” after all.

Former Jehovah’s Witness women seemed less concerned with gendered notions of modesty and reproductive rights. Some stressed gendered notions of authority and a lack of self-confidence as potentially particular hurdles for women to negotiate. Several former Jehovah’s Witness women (involuntarily) left and broke with the community at a young age. Crucially, they pointed to specific vulnerabilities because of this. Just as in the Mormon Church and the Laestadian movement, monogamous marriage between one man and one woman is a religious requirement. For Jehovah’s Witnesses, divorce may result in excommunication, which happened to some women upon leaving their abusive marriages. Often lacking the knowledge, skills and resources to build sustainable lives outside their former communities, young former Jehovah’s Witness women have experienced vulnerability and dependency on the few people they knew.

This issue of belonging will be unravelled further in terms of spatial-social liminality in the following section.

Some of our respondents felt they had to negotiate the heteronormative norms of their former communities. These women express a relief with the fact that their children do not have to grow up in environments that would be hostile towards their queerness. Only one former Jehovah's Witness woman, Grace, 63 years old, explained that she particularly liked the modesty expectations of her former community. Even more, as she identifies as aromantic and asexual, the modesty codes suited well with the way she wanted to be in her body.

Un/learning boundaries: belonging and being in-between

This section will further explore what losing faith and leaving one's religious community means for women's intimate relationships and sense of belonging. In other words, while the section above emphasized gendered embodied transitions, this section foregrounds the spatial-social consequences of leaving religion.

For many former Mormon, Jehovah's Witness and Laestadian women, leaving close-knit communities is an important spatial-social change in terms of whom to spend time with and what activities to engage in. For many women, it means a partial or total break with their former social life. Many have experienced rejection by their family and friends after leaving their religious tradition or community, which for some led to mental-health-related problems. At the moment of the interview, Florence, 30 years old, felt a lack of belonging after leaving the Mormon Church and was still looking for a new community. Millie, a 64-year-old woman who left the Mormon Church, was concerned about how her unravelling faith and

increasing critique of church dogmas and history would affect her relationship with her husband, adult children and grandchildren. Due to this insecurity and her fear of tearing apart her relationships with significant others, she kept silent about her struggles for some time. When her husband left the Mormon Church later as well, she became less lonely in negotiating difficult family and community relationships. As she puts it:

I mean, we've been through a phase where we actually wondered whether our relationship with our believing family was over and whether that would ever be able to carry on. ... Yeah, so in some ways, I feel like we've managed to carve out a space for ourselves. Maybe a little Switzerland, a little neutral ground. But I think if we pushed it too much, I think we would lose family and friends for sure, and I think we have lost some for sure as well. I think it's changed relationships, friendship, relationships, because we have been more outspoken.

Former Laestadian Olivia, 25 years old, depicted her disengagement in her teens as a disappointment for her parents:

I was just turning 16 and I had thought about it for a long time before I told my family and for them it was very sudden as I think they saw me as the perfect Laestadian. The hardest thing was to speak about my decision to my parents ... I was the first in my family to leave the movement ... and I was so young and still lived at home so it was a real challenge.

Similarly, Onerva, 23 years old, regarded leaving her Laestadian community as the

hardest experience in her life: “I would be happy if this [separation] was going to be the hardest thing in my life as it has been a long process and still is as I still have so many negative thoughts and feelings concerning the doctrine.”

Leaving the community and being rejected or abandoned by family and friends has been a traumatic experience for many former Laestadian women. Building a new life without a self-evident safety net of family and community can be challenging. This change brings forth feelings such as anger, distrust and anxiety in committing to new relationships. Many women experienced alienation and loneliness due to their estrangement from siblings, family and friends (Pelkonen 2013). Shifting from “unlearning” what they now consider harmful traditions to embodying joy is an important element of women’s disengagement process: many women turned their separation from their family and community into gratitude for their “new life”, and some articulated gratitude as well for their past. Many still avoid building new personal relations, intimacy and sexuality, since they felt that their bodily boundaries had been violated in the community. For former Laestadian women, freedom meant among other things the possibility of finding new forms of belonging: establishing friendships with non-Laestadians, choosing one’s partner, starting new education programmes or careers, and exploring new hobbies without seeking the approval of their Laestadian family and friends (Rantala 2022). Some found that they were able to improve their family relations after having left the Laestadian movement.

The extent to which spatial-social un/learning is experienced is partly dependent on the circumstances of leaving, and how much control respondents felt they had. Former Jehovah’s Witness women

who were disfellowshipped appeared to find the leaving process more challenging than those who left voluntarily (Ransom, Monk and Heim 2021, 2468). Being thrown out of one’s religious community is without exception described as a heart-breaking experience, both for those who are forced to leave, and loved ones who stay behind. Some respondents experienced the latter and witnessed how fellow community members were excommunicated and shunned, and they critiqued these practices in hindsight. For women who were themselves excommunicated, their spatial-social unlearning was amplified since they were forced into it. The break with their community was more sudden than those of other women. So, while other respondents spoke about belonging in various ways, those who are thrown out of their communities face an instant crisis of belonging. By bringing in these varied experiences, we show the full spectrum of spatial-social unlearning as it emerged from our data.

The Jehovah’s Witnesses excommunicated Daisy, 36 years old. She explained how she used to be a “model Witness” but was disfellowshipped when she was 23 years old upon divorcing her abusive husband, against the advice of the Elders in her Kingdom Hall. This excommunication was a disruptive life experience, as it meant a sudden and total break with her family and community, its members obliged to shun her. For women to be excommunicated makes them feel rejected and lacking agency, or as Daisy emphasized: “it wasn’t my choice to leave”. Moreover, such a clear break caused by *others* often means women are still fully accepting of the main doctrines but are barred from participating in what they continue to perceive to be the community of truth and salvation. This results in a strong sense of alienation: one is not in the right place, that is, one is outside

the Jehovah's Witnesses community and its places of gathering and activities. Moreover, as a consequence of the construction of boundaries between "us" and "others", one has come to be placed in the realm of the others. This alienation can be anxiety-ridden. Daisy insightfully explained that "I still believed, and I was afraid of the outside world I was now a part of". For her it felt, as she put it, as if she was forced to move to "a foreign country". This spatial-social un/learning rests on constructions of notions of "us" versus "them", an epistemological and material divide that we will delve into further in the next section.

Epistemic un/learning: experience and knowledge

Many women we interviewed have learned to view "the world" as a place of sin and danger. Former Mormon, Jehovah's Witness and Laestadian women's narratives echo a divide between "the chosen ones" or those living in/from faith and those living in sin. The religious realm is the one of moral righteousness, while the secular, mainstream Christian and worldly realm is one of immorality and temptation. Laestadians, Mormons and Jehovah's Witnesses live in "the world" but are not supposed to consider themselves to be part of "the world". When women leave their religious community, this means that from a faith perspective, they become members of "the world". This can be a confusing and lonely experience of "existential stress and ontological insecurity" in women's lives (Brooks 2019), in which ontological transformation often takes place.

Former Laestadian women regularly face complex ontological questions that draw mostly on conflicts between Laestadian teachings and the values of Finnish society in general (Hintsala and Kinnunen 2013; Rantala 2022). Mental-health-related

problems experienced by many of these women were often due to women's tendency to doubt the truthfulness of their own faith, feelings and thoughts, instead of questioning Laestadian faith tenets and practices. Others are more comfortable in directly criticizing the Laestadian movement. Oili, 27 years old, a single woman, comments on elements of the Laestadian worldview:

My reasons to leave derive from the way of thinking ... within the movement ... there are things I couldn't agree with, as for instance that "our people" are the only righteous and eligible group of people that deserve to go to heaven, and I just couldn't believe that way.

Similarly, Onerva, 23 years old, admits having always been sceptical of the Laestadian teachings and her own faith: "Not believing ... for me it was very clear very early on that I don't believe and therefore I don't want to be part of this movement ... I just don't get anything out of it and what it does is actually just restrict [my life]."

Daisy, 36 years old, was disfellowshipped by the Jehovah's Witnesses, and stressed she felt forced to move to "a foreign country". She did not physically move to another country; instead her statement can be read as referring to her being forcibly relocated to another episteme. The ingrained notion of "us" versus "them", in combination with a continuing belief in the soon-to-take-place Armageddon, explains Daisy's initial fear and anxiety, something she had to unlearn and overcome. Daisy felt torn between epistemic realms, and it took her eight years to "unpack" her beliefs, a period of her life she calls a "limbo-period". Rosie, 54 years old, was

disfellowshipped at the age of 18. Shunned by her family and community, she was thrown out of her parental home. A firm believer in the upcoming Armageddon, she described herself as “physically out and mentally in” during the next fifteen years of her life. As Rosie put it, she was “a refugee” experiencing displacement. Most former Jehovah’s Witness women, whether they left voluntarily or not, spoke of having had to unlearn their expectation of the arrival of Armageddon. Some, such as Rosie, use the terminology of having been “mentally in” and “physically out” and describe this as an unbearable state of being.

Both former Mormon and Jehovah’s Witness women recurrently use phrases that indicate mind versus body distinctions, which is probably related to their familiarity with Anglo-Saxon therapeutic and anti-cult discourses that distinguish between the mental/cognitive and the physical and stress the need to achieve “wholeness” of the two.³ A split of the mind and the body is presented as undesirable, something that has to be overcome in order to feel a whole individual again. Especially women who were disfellowshipped by Jehovah’s Witnesses use the phrase “mentally in” and “physically out” to convey their sense of being torn and split between two discursive systems. To solve this tension, they had to make sure to eventually get “mentally out” as well. But other former

3 Van den Brandt traced the language of POMI (physically out, mentally in) and PIMO (physically in, mentally out) in grey literature and anti-cult discourses that thematise (ex-)Jehovah’s Witnesses’ experiences. In her research, she came across the use of this terminology among some former Mormon women as well, which may point to convergences of various anti-cult activisms. See e.g. Leger 2020, AvoidJW 2020 and Spooner 2021.

Jehovah’s Witness women as well as one former Mormon woman related that they experienced a period during which they were “mentally out” and “physically in”. This refers to them having remained in the community for some time, while they had lost their faith in the doctrines, church or organization. Also this was presented as a situation that needed to be overcome, and this had to be done by eventually getting “physically out” as well. Millie, 64 year old, who left the Mormon Church, explained it as follows:

You’ve got an eternal family to nurture, so at that stage, you’re kind of torn. So, I guess you’re leaving, you’re intellectually leaving, in fact, there’s a saying in the post-Mormon groups. They call them PIMOs: physically in, mentally out. P-I-M-O. So, people who were still going to church, but they checked out mentally. It’s not working for them any more. But it’s so hard to leave a religion like that because it’s your community, it’s your family and there are all these theological threads that are binding you in and you really need to start cutting the threads. ... You start to think, actually, I don’t agree with that, or I don’t agree with this. You start to separate.

As Millie’s explanation shows, the positing of mind/body distinctions demonstrates an overlap between experiences of spatial-social and epistemic un/learning. This mind/body divide aims to overcome the distinction it initially sets out. What is implicitly and explicitly presented as the desired state of being is that of wholeness, an all-encompassing sentient embodied being. Some women who leave their religious tradition or community seem to be ultimately striving for ontological security

(Brooks 2019): namely the overcoming of the collapse of the system of meaning and practices upon which their sense of self had been built, and replacing it with a new system of meaning and practices. However, women's use of the terminology does emphasize the importance of the mind over the body: it is considered particularly painful when the physical location does not correspond with the mental outlook.

For former Laestadian women, the embodied implications of disengagement are feelings of shame and guilt. These emerged from women's transitioning to a life they have long been thought to consider a sinful life of enjoyment, including using make-up and jewellery, dancing, having sex and drinking alcohol. As one of the women, Orvokki, 33, a mother of two, eloquently put it: "I have experienced it [Laestadianism] strongly as a whole-body religion, as I got to use make-up and colour my hair only after leaving the community even though I have always thought myself to be a colourful personality." Many women valued how, by separating from their family and community, they were able to offer their children a life based on knowledge, values and the making of community they themselves believe in and live by.

Conclusion

Our exploration of the narratives of women who left the Mormon Church and Jehovah's Witnesses in the UK, and the Conservative Laestadianism in Finland, was led by the following question: how do women's gendered and embodied processes of un/learning shape their disengagement from their former faith? We conceptualized un/learning through *gendered*, *embodied* and *epistemic* layers of women's experiences of losing faith and leaving their community. For former Mormon, Jehovah's Witness and Laestadian women, the experience of

being in-between and on the move involves un-learning knowledge and practices considered harmful or unhelpful, and re-learning new knowledge and practices to live life away from their former religious environments. This transformative un/learning is an intrinsically embodied process. Our analysis has raised questions about how to hold on to the body, find ways to reconnect with it by letting go elements of its past and leaping towards new connections, or reconnecting with elements that were felt to be there to begin with but were lost for a while.

Women's narratives refer to various embodied issues they consider as in need of letting go, overcoming or making anew, such as gendered expectations about femininity and sexuality, notions of belonging, and the affective negotiation of disengagement. By collaborating and thinking together, we pushed our understanding of gendered embodiment in leaving religion further. Moreover, bringing data together from our research in the UK and Finland, we were empirically able to point to some shared concerns for women leaving conservative Christian minority faiths and communities. An example of such a shared concern is modesty, even though experiences of modesty are not the same for all respondents in the research. Another shared concern is the epistemic negotiation of having become part of "the world", which for many women meant facing existential anxiety and ontological insecurity. Together, we were moreover able to reveal a spectrum of experiences of belonging. Many women spoke about belonging as a struggle but this was amplified especially for those who did not leave their family and community voluntarily. Of course, thinking together about our data also led us to recognizing specificities. For instance, the issue of reproductive rights seems to be

negotiated especially by former Laestadian women, even though their experiences of sexual embodiment demonstrate connections with other women. And the issue of excommunication is specific for some former Jehovah's Witness women, but even though their negotiating belonging and having become part of "the world" is abrupt and brusque, other women experience relatable challenges.

In this article we have therefore sought to understand how women experience loss of faith and leaving their religious communities by focusing on the Mormon Church, Jehovah's Witnesses and the Conservative Laestadians. We suggested considering un/learning as an interlaced and non-linear gendered, embodied spatial-social and epistemic process. Women's experiences of in-betweenness, of being on the move and transformation, reveal the possibility of unlearning, relearning and transformation. As we have shown, studying women's narratives of their experiences emerging from lesser-known Christian minorities requires situating and contextualizing the specific religious traditions and communities at play. But we also argue for the need to explore leaving religion through the analytical lens of embodied un/learning. Through this lens, we were able to show the importance of intimate relationships, sexuality, belonging and emotions for women's experiences of leaving religion. Further research should look more into the specificities of minority gendered and embodied experiences, and the ways in which leaving religion is shaped by race, sexuality and class. ■

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Nella van den Brandt

is a Marie Skłodowska-Curie Individual Fellow at Coventry University, UK. Her current research project explores women's life stories of leaving religion. She is interested in comparative religious studies, gender

studies and the study of religion, race and the secular, feminism, representation, bodies and embodiment. Her main publications include the 2023 article "Lost Daughters: Affective Framings of Women Embracing Islam" in the

Journal of the American Academy of Religion. Her monograph *Religion, Gender and Race in Western European Literature and Culture: Thinking through Religious Transformation* is forthcoming in 2024 with Routledge. Photo: Mandip Singh Seehra.

Teija Rantala is a post-doctoral researcher (gender studies) at the Turku Institute of Advanced Studies (TIAS) at the University of Turku, Finland. Her current TIAS project is titled “Embodied Reproductive Politics, Arts-based Methods and Former Conservative Laestadian Women”. Her research focuses on feminist body politics, reproductive ethics and ethics of care which are studied within feminist new materialist methodology and posthuman philosophy. She has published, co-published and lectured extensively on feminist methodology, for example her book *Exploring Data in Motion: Fluidity and Feminist Poststructuralism* was published in 2019 by Myers Education Press. She is a docent (associate professor) in cultural studies (gender studies) at the University of Eastern Finland.



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