What's it like to grow up in a religious sect?

A woman who grew up among revolutionary feminists, another a strict Jehovah's Witness, another a Hare Krishna. Three women describe their very unconventional childhoods

From left: Jahnavi Harrison was raised a Hare Krishna; Rachel Underhill a Jehovah's witness; Shelly Wild a revolutionary feminist Photo: ALASTAIR LEVY

By Anna van Praagh

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Jahnavi Harrison, 27, grew up in a Hare Krishna community in Hertfordshire where her father is the priest. A musician, she still lives at home

I grew up in a Hare Krishna community called Bhaktivedanta Manor, an 80-acre estate that is the biggest Hare Krishna community in Europe. My parents and younger brother and sister all live in a house nearby, and growing up we spent all day, every day at the temple.

I had an incredibly special childhood. We'd start every morning with worship and would dance and pray several times a day. Most meals were eaten communally with the 300 residents of the community. A lot of the produce for our meals came from our own farm. The estate is a very beautiful place and includes extensive woods and a lake, and there was a primary school on-site.

We were raised communally with the philosophy of simple living and high thinking. Growing up, we didn't watch TV or listen to pop music and were aware that popular culture was something that didn't sit well with our value system. The Hare Krishna movement, based on a strand of Hinduism, was founded in 1965 by AC Bhaktivedanta. The ultimate goal of Hare Krishna devotion is to attain Krishna Consciousness through ethical living and spiritual devotion. Devotees do not gamble, ingest alcohol or drugs, including caffeine, and restrain from sex except within marriage for the purposes of procreation.

I was a really happy child cocooned in this perfect world until my parents decided to send me to the local school when I was nine to prepare me for senior school. I found the experience intimidating and a huge culture shock. I was extremely worried that people would find out I was a Hare Krishna. This obsession continued throughout my teenage years. Even though most of the local people were kind to us, we did experience a lot of prejudice from some people, and I can only think this contributed to my sense of fear of people finding out I was a Hare Krishna.

My dad used to ask me to come in for morning service at the temple in my school uniform and go straight on to school, and I had to explain to him that once I put the uniform on I had to become a completely different person and I couldn't mix the two lives up. It really felt like I was living a double life.

It got so bad that I had to be hospitalised a few times with extreme stomach pains brought on by anxiety. In the end my parents decided to home-school me with other children back at the temple. I tried mainstream education again about a year later but for the same reasons it didn't work out. I did my A-levels in a year at evening college and got three As in a year and won a place at Middlesex University to study English.

When I was 19 I went on a Hare Krishna youth tour of America with 50 young people who had grown up in the religion from around the world. Being with all these people my age who were so comfortable with their identity was a huge turning-point for me. I went on to spend four years touring America with a kirtan group, which is a type of devotional music inspired by religious chanting, and I now help run a project called Kirtan London, which helps to bring mantra music to different communities and make it accessible.

My brother and sister and I still live at home and are involved in the Temple. It took me a long time to reconcile my life as a Hare Krishna with my identity in the outside world, and, although it was a difficult journey, I am now completely comfortable with who I am.

Rachel Underhill, 39, a florist who lives in Peacehaven, East Sussex, was brought up as a Jehovah's Witness before leaving the religion in her twenties

My mother was pregnant with me when she was converted on the doorstep by Jehovah's Witnesses, and within six months both my parents believed the whole thing. From the time I was born the religion dictated every single thing we could or couldn't do.

My mother was brought up a strict Roman Catholic, my father was brought up in the Salvation Army – and while they were both intelligent people, they were damaged and were both addicted to religion as something to fill a deep vacuum within them. But to me, my younger brother and older sister, it often felt like our childhoods were the price they paid for their conversion.

It's a very hard religion for children, with endless prayer meetings and lectures at the Kingdom Hall. Birthdays, Christmas and any celebrations were banned, and I quickly realised that all my friends' lives had something mine was completely lacking: fun. Instead

of going to assembly I'd have to sit on a bench outside the headmaster's office reading my Bible Stories book, which all Jehovah's Witness children have to read. The pictures in the book of Armageddon, which the elders claimed at all times was imminent – with bodies shot to the ground, cars upside-down and buildings on fire – were terrifying. Every day I lived in fear that Armageddon would come and the world would end and I wouldn't be able to find my parents.

We weren't allowed to make friends with anyone "worldly", which meant anyone who wasn't a Jehovah's Witness, or do anything outside the religion, which they called "outside the truth". It was incredibly isolating. We were brainwashed into thinking all worldly people wanted to abuse us, and this was confirmed every time we knocked on doors to try to convert people – you can't imagine the damage it does to a child being constantly yelled at to go away.

We weren't encouraged to try at school, as Jehovah's Witnesses believe that when Armageddon happens all people within the faith would go to paradise, so earthly scholarship is useless. Being told the world was always about to end wasn't only very frightening, but completely demotivating. From my late teens I no longer believed any of it but knew I would be cut off from everyone I knew if I renounced the religion, so I felt I had no choice but to pretend I did.

When I was 20 I married a Jehovah's Witness 15 years older than me, knowing even before the marriage that it wouldn't last. When I went into hospital to give birth to my twins I was told that I would need an emergency caesarean and that my babies or I might need blood. The elders made me sign a form that said in any situation I would refuse. My parents and my husband, Bob, were in the room and, looking back, that's one of the saddest moments of my life. My parents would rather have let me and my children die than challenge the elders.

A few years later, when I was 28, I finally found the courage to leave the religion. I didn't think for a second that my parents would actually turn their back on me, but they cut all ties. I forgive them because I know they've been brainwashed, but I struggle not to feel angry and bitter. I know where they live but would never go to see them – it's like they're alive and dead to me. Bob and I divorced and in 2009 I married again.

It took me a long time but I have at last found peace within myself, and am grateful every day to have escaped. My daughters are 15 now and I have devoted my life to giving them the childhood I was deprived of.

Shelley Wild, 35, an RE teacher who lives in Paulton, Lancashire, was born in a commune in Leeds run by revolutionary feminists where all the children were given the same surname and she had four separate mothers

In the 1970s my mother was a key member of the women's-lib movement and set up a commune in Leeds that explored new non-sexist ways of living. The aim was to subvert patriarchal systems of repression, and one way they did this was to get rid of the tradition of giving children the male surname.

All the children in the commune were called Wild, and we each had several different mothers co-parenting us. Ours was one of several Wild communes across the country. The idea was that non-biological parents were as important as biological ones and no child had a single primary care-giver. My mother had two other non-biological children in the commune she co-parented, as well as me, and I had four mothers looking after me – my biological mother, Rosie, Tina and Dee. My father wasn't in my life at this time.

When I was five my mother sold the commune because it had become too difficult, with abuse from neighbours and problems from some women who had begun to use it like a refuge. We moved within Leeds but continued to keep an open house for various children and female lodgers, and I still saw my other mothers as regularly as I could.

The fact my mother was a lesbian didn't bother me at all – I was very proud of her – but we suffered a lot because of it. There were often eggs thrown at the window or dog excrement on the door handle, and she would have abuse shouted at her on the street. It made life hell but she didn't let it deter her.

I remember her taking me to Greenham Common peace camp to protest and she was the founder of the Reclaim The Night marches against male violence and rape, which began in Leeds and are still ongoing.

Her own background, as the boarding-school-educated daughter of a brigadier general couldn't have been more different from the life she chose to live. She was an intellectual who believed passionately that she should provide me with a balanced view of the world, not just drive home the received thinking that men are in the positions of power and women support them. I remember when I was eight she read The Hobbit to me and changed all the male characters to female. She always tried to give me positive female role models.

As a teenager I was also very political, getting involved with everything from the Revolutionary Communist Party to the Criminal Justice Bill, but when I went to university I started to rebel and at 24 I did so in the most powerful way possible – I got married. My mother was very upset – she doesn't see the point of marriage and was horrified that I was giving up my surname. She came to the wedding, but luckily two of my other mothers got to her speech and crossed most of it out, as it was basically a political treaty against marriage.

I'm not nearly as political as my mother, but if something's wrong then I'll protest against it. When my daughter was seven weeks old I took her to march against the war in Iraq. We argue a bit. I get weary of the way my mother politicises everything, and she gets frustrated with me when I wear make-up or high heels. She doesn't think they're necessary.

I took the name Wild back when I got divorced in 2010. It's part of who I am and, if I married again, I would keep it. I still see my co-mothers, although unfortunately Rosie died in 2008, and still regard them as close family to me. I didn't realise it at the time but I was incredibly lucky to have the upbringing I did. It was only when I left home that I realised that not everyone was as loved and cherished as I was.

How we moderate