THE CULTURAL CATHOLIC WHO MAY NOT BE CATHOLIC: LATINAS, EDUCATION, AND ATTITUDES TOWARD RELIGION

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ABSTRACT

Seventy percent of Latinos identify as Catholic (Guzman, 2003). Until recently, cultural critiques of Latinos and Catholicism have not examined the relationship between education and religiosity. Recent observations suggest that Latinas who have acquired a post-secondary education reject institutionalized religion (Rodriguez, 2002). This study focuses on this relationship through the words of nine Latinas who possess at least a baccalaureate degree and who, at the time of the study, were enrolled or employed at a major research university in the Pacific Northwest. The self-identified Latinas shared their experiences with religion and education. I examine their relationship to organized religion, and how they self-perceive their individual spirituality. Several of the participants chose to leave organized religion. Although difficult to measure, this study reveals the relationship between Latinas, Catholicism, and education and how these Latinas renegotiated their space.

INTRODUCTION

Research on Latina feminist spirituality has commonly looked at the ways in which U.S. Latina women create space in organized religions. Typically Latinas have been cast as “behind the scenes” workers who have struggled to find a piece of religion to call their own. With time, Latinas have not always remained part of organized religion, but rather have sought an individual spirituality that takes into account their experiences and serves their needs as individuals. This research adds to the still young but growing field of research related to Latina feminist theology. More specifically, it provides, in their words, the perspective of Latinas who for the most part create their own definitions of spirituality in order to fulfill their needs.

It is important to understand the link between religion and culture that affects the lives of many Latinas, while also examining the way in which organized religion often cannot meet the needs of present day Latinas. At this time, we find women trying to negotiate a space within organized religion to find ways to gain equality. It could be argued that spirituality is a key component in many women’s lives. Often it provides a way to reclaim women’s history through, for example, the Goddess religion or Eastern philosophy, which allows women’s lives and experiences to be in the center. For Latinas, this negotiation is not so clear. Typically born into Catholicism, as both religious and cultural practice, little room is left to address their needs. The latter includes, for example, the “double shift.” The “double shift” particularly affects Latinas because of the responsibility of caring for her immediate as well as extended family in addition to

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1A 2000 survey by the Hispanic Churches in American Public Life (HCAPL) reveals that 70 per cent of Latinos are Catholic, 22 per cent Protestant (includes Jehovah’s Witness and Mormons), and eight per cent claim “other” or no religious affiliation (see Guzman, 2003).
working outside of the home. The Church rarely addresses this aspect of Latinas’ lives in the home and offers contradictory advice by holding women accountable for the domestic sphere despite lack of money, space, time, or education. For many Latinas, organized religion becomes an “all or nothing” choice.

For those who choose not to become involved in the day-to-day aspects of the Church, organized religion may still play an important role in Latinas’ lives as a cultural identifier. Religion and religious beliefs and practices are such a major part of Latinas’ experiences and lives, it is undeniable that through the process of higher education, especially for first generation students, religion presents an important factor and adds to their daily struggles. Latinas, like other women, find themselves having to make choices about the role religion will play in their changing lives. Organized religion is also a connection to the past and home, which may become a major source of conflict and struggle in the life of a young Latina scholar.

This study examines Latinas who possess at least a baccalaureate degree and are attending a university located in the Pacific Northwest region of the United States. The focus of the study is their relationship to organized religion. The literature discusses a change in Latinas’ lives as educational level rises. I explore the effects of education on Latinas’ religious practices, including the decision to leave an organized religion to seek an individual spirituality. Based on previous research, I expect to find that many Latinas who have obtained a baccalaureate degree or above must negotiate between remaining a participant of organized religion to meet the needs that it can address and constructing their own forms of spirituality.

**LITERATURE REVIEW**

Several recent works point to important aspects of the spirituality of Latinas and the reality of their lives in gendered institutions. For example, an important article that influenced the direction of this research is Jeanette Rodriguez’s (2002) article, “Latina Activists: Toward an Inclusive Spirituality of being in the World.” A key point in this article comes from her experience with Latinas at the National Hispanic Leadership Institute. She describes the participants as “highly motivated, well-educated women committed to service and justice” (2002:115). After speaking with them she found that they reject most kinds of institutionalized religious affiliation. However, after getting to know them she witnessed a “deep, private, intimate spiritual motivation for what they were doing” (p. 115). Rodriguez writes: “As these Latina leaders grew in knowledge and confidence, they began to function as creators of their destiny, engaging in social critique and church reform” (p. 116). Similarly, I propose that as Latinas gain knowledge and confidence in academia they will search for freedom from religious structures and beliefs by turning away from organized religion and seeking an individual spirituality.

Rodriguez (2002:119) also writes about the “narrative experience,” which can be found in many other readings on both Liberation Theology and Feminist Theology. The narrative experience consists of stories that we tell ourselves and our communities and that play an important role in forming Latinas’ spirituality. Leaving organized religion and turning within to find spirituality can only happen when there is a realization of the narrative experience occurring in one’s life and one’s community. For instance, when one realizes that the Church does not exist for one’s benefit, but rather for money, growth, and the conversion of others, there is awareness that being a better “consumer” of religion and religious beliefs means first accepting the Church’s history and then turning away from it. In what follows, I hope to add to the position offered by Rodriguez, and to critique the role of the Catholic Church and organized religion in Latinas’ lives.

A second article that provides an understanding of Latina feminist theology and feminist spirituality is Maria Pilar Aquino’s (2002): “Latina Feminist Theology: Central Features.” Aquino details the central understandings of theology and the role of feminists and Latinas within its writing and concepts. She argues that challenging many forms of oppression such as lack of
access to education and exclusion from education and writing is the main goal of Latina feminist theology.

Aquino (2002:139) provides an important definition to describe Latina feminist theology: “…we seek to accompany the spiritual experience of the grassroots Latina feminist women and men who struggle for authentic liberation…” Aquino goes on to say that “…there is no doubt that religious faith is a major dimension in the life of grassroots Latinas,” and that claiming space for theological and intellectual construction is a major task of Latina feminist theology.

Aquino also discusses the Latino/a population in the U.S. and its impact on the work of Latina theologians. Latina women are one of the fastest-growing population groups in the nation. However, “poor non-white Latinas are less likely than any other minority groups to attend or graduate from college” (p. 145). Poverty, unequal access to good schools, and cultural and linguistic barriers are listed as several factors for lower educational attainment among Latinas.

Central to my research question is Aquino’s comment (2002:145) that “…the University is an unfriendly place for us.” Her response is a “…demand that we undertake a critical and rigorous feminist analysis of the power forces that prevent Latinas from access to higher education” (p. 146). Aquino argues that because few Latinas are attending and completing college, there are few Latinas creating and doing theology. While there are few Latinas in higher education, this study will look at those who do complete college and the effect of that education on their attitudes toward religion.

Sandra Guzman’s (2003) book entitled, *The Latina’s Bible*, provides additional insight into the way in which Latinas’ spirituality and attitudes toward religion shift throughout their lives. Having shared the experience of being the first to attend college with her older sister, Guzman describes how her religious life underwent dramatic changes. In her opening sentence of a chapter on spirituality she states that: “I consider myself a deeply spiritual woman, yet I don’t follow any organized religion” (p. 130). Guzman goes on to explain that “…the institutional church simply did not celebrate the free spirit and woman that I was becoming” (p. 131). This comment addresses the change Guzman recognized within herself and is closely related to her perception of how many Latinas are shaped by their multiple identities. Among others, these identities may include: feminist, mother, vegan, activist, and so on.

For Guzman, the relationship with religion that she had been taught shifted as she was able to question critically what religion in her adult life truly meant. She states that “…the Pentecostal church’s teachings started feeling oppressive to me” and most importantly that, “…[f]or many Catholic Latinas, the feeling of being “left” out of church rituals gave them a bitter taste in their hearts” (p. 132). These are important elements in the formation of Latinas’ own spirituality such as Guzman’s eclectic, or as she refers to it, “spiritual fricassee,” practice. The religious situation that Guzman presents is important to this research because it validates the distinctive experience that Latinas encounter both within higher education and in the formation of their religious beliefs.

**Hypotheses:**

Given the above, this study focuses on the following hypotheses regarding the relationship between higher education and the participation of Latinas in organized religion.

- **H1:** Latinas will negotiate conflicting messages between organized religion and higher education.

- **H2:** Educated and highly motivated Latinas will find themselves choosing between remaining a member of an organized religion and finding another form of faith or spirituality.
METHODOLOGY

Definitions: For purposes of this research I use the definition of spirituality provided by Rodriguez (2002:115): “spirituality in its broadest sense can be described as the whole of our deepest religious beliefs, convictions, and patterns of thought, emotion and behavior in respect to what is ultimate.” I define highly educated as having earned at least a baccalaureate degree. In addition, I define organized religion as any denomination of the following major world religions: Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, and Buddhism.

Participants: Subjects for the study included current graduate students as well as staff and faculty at a major research university in the Pacific Northwest. The qualifications for participation included: to self-identify as Latina, and have at least a baccalaureate degree. Participants were contacted through personal e-mail.

A total of nine Latinas participated. Their ages ranged from 26 to 50. Their educational backgrounds included one with a baccalaureate degree, five with Master’s degrees, and three with Ph.D.s. Three were currently enrolled graduate students in various departments, four were staff members, and two were faculty. Five participants were raised in a community that had a 75 per cent and higher Chicano/Latino population; the remaining four lived in a community that ranged from 0 per cent to 74 per cent Chicano/Latinos. Seven participants were born and raised in the U.S. (three from Texas, three from California, and one from Washington) and two were born and raised outside of the U.S., in Paraguay and Mexico.

Procedure: The data were collected in focus groups. Focus group participants were assigned a number for confidentiality; this number grouped all responses together to better understand the single respondent’s experiences and attitudes. I asked constructed questions and allowed approximately one and a half hours for conversation to occur among group members. The comments were tape-recorded for accuracy and then transcribed. A short questionnaire was administered at the end of each focus group discussion. A total of fifteen women responded to the e-mail though only nine women participated in the focus groups.

Focus Groups: Because there were no previously developed sets of questions on this topic, the questionnaire is original and designed to get at the core of Latinas’ attitudes about religion, and the ways in which their educational level affected their religiosity (see Appendix A). The questions were constructed with the help of my faculty advisor with individual women’s experiences in mind.

Questionnaire: This instrument contains questions about participants’ upbringing and background to provide a better understanding of the sum of Latinas’ lives (see Appendix B).

Data Analysis: I examined the connections between the level of education and the Latinas’ religiosity, reasons given for non-practicing or leaving of organized religion, and how Latinas currently incorporate faith/spirituality into their lives. I also explored the willingness of Latinas to incorporate faith/spirituality into their lives in the future, and the ways in which this is possible, in hopes to better understand how Latinas believe their education affects the way in which they both view and practice religion.

FINDINGS

Participants expressed a range of attitudes about organized religion. For instance, one respondent argued that religion: “Is multifaceted, on the one hand it provides guidance and something to turn to especially in times when things can be very difficult in life. But also, there is the other side when sometimes religion is used in destructive ways…” (Respondent 15). Another respondent illustrated the multifaceted nature of religion by arguing that: “When I hear or think of religion it encompasses various things. On the one hand, it means a sense of community but I think for me it also brings up expectations as well, not fitting in at times and it can be very organized, very structured, and also patriarchal” (Respondent 11).
In looking at the answers, we can argue that though each woman shared unique life experiences, they found areas in common that seemed to provide a certain amount of comfort throughout their lives. Interestingly, the differences allowed the commonalities to emerge during the focus groups, creating an atmosphere of camaraderie and professionalism in which they were able to express themselves comfortably as Latinas.

Three major themes developed through the focus group dialogue. Below I discuss: 1) higher education and religion; 2) Catholicism as a cultural identifier; and, 3) multiple identities, only one religion.

**Higher Education and Religion**

As most people mature in age and knowledge, changes occur in their preferences, and beliefs. Within this framework, Latinas who receive formal higher education are likely to experience an inordinate amount of change in the way they perceive the world and themselves. With this in mind, three things must be considered: 1) the role of gender as they enter the world of higher education; 2) their status as women of color; and, 3) their tie to culture-based religious ideals, morals, and way of life. When examining the focus group data, I realized that a strict relationship between these Latinas and religion was difficult to measure, for they had to negotiate their space within a subculture of Latinos in the U.S. embedded in a white working world, and white educated society.

From the focus group conversations, it appears that higher education “opened” these Latinas’ eyes and minds to new people and ideas beyond their earlier experiences. The participants shared a common experience in higher education that included being the first in the family to reach college/university and accomplish at least one formal degree. This experience affected all facets of their lives including their relationship to organized religion and their ideas about spirituality.

The role that higher education plays in every young adult’s life is noted in the accomplishments made during undergraduate work and beyond. Given their ethnic background and socio-economic status, college can be an overwhelming experience for Latinas. It opens new cultures and knowledge, and challenges not only individual but cultural, familial, and religious beliefs. An interesting aspect of this experience is that even though it allows for the attainment of jobs, careers, and societal standing, it also separates Latinas from their cultural roots and familial understanding of the way the world works. As Respondent 12 commented:

> I moved away from home so there was less expectation or in other words there wasn’t as much folks noticing that I wasn’t there at church on Sunday, so it wasn’t just education it was being away from home.

Because life choices are not informed solely by parents or family members, but also by one’s religion, the purpose of life can take on different meanings after receiving an education. As Respondent 14 commented:

> I balanced things out more during my Ph.D. when I started using the church more critically again and going and taking what I needed from the church. I think the education process ultimately gave me the confidence to look to use religion to serve my spiritual needs.

It is evident from these comments, that higher education had a major impact on these Latinas' attitudes toward religion.
Catholicism as Cultural Identifier

Though many respondents identified as Catholic, others used Catholicism as a cultural identifier even if they did not practice or attend the Catholic Church. Respondent 2 commented: “While I don’t participate in organized religion, there’s a part of me that will always be Catholic. For me, not being Catholic is like not being Latina, how can that be?” These same feelings were shared by Respondent 3: “…it’s always been an identifier…yeah, I do identify as far as culturally, but otherwise, no.”

Because Catholicism is a connection to one’s culture, home, and family some respondents expressed an unwillingness to ever leave it wholeheartedly. Respondent 7 commented: “I don’t like to move out of my comfort zone so I would never leave my comfort zone of being a Catholic person because I’m so familiar with it.” Respondent 15 agreed with this statement and added: “…there’s something familiar about being Catholic. I don’t think I would ever convert to another religion.” Common among all participants, this location, that is, the university and community, is not where home or family is. Thus, with regard to the connection to life before higher education and to sharing something in common with other Latino students and family members back home, Catholicism served as a bridge for them no matter how many miles away home might be.

Using the Catholic religion as a cultural identifier to mean “Latina” in its broadest definition helped connect this group of educated Latinas to one another. Sacraments, holidays, and mother’s and grandmother’s prayers and blessings could become a commonality among young scholars learning to assimilate to the standards of white academia while at the same time maintaining their identity. However, as maturity and knowledge develop, many Latinas begin to view the Catholic Church critically and choose not to remain part of it. Nevertheless, it remains a part of their histories.

Respondent 2 commented that spirituality represents “…the relationship between myself and the universe, all things non-human, including the relationship between me and the environment.” Spirituality, then, plays a significant role in the lives of these Latinas. It offers fulfillment by combining a number of practices such as building an altar, hiking, or meditating while remaining connected to those Catholic teachings that provide comfort and cultural identity. Respondent 12 commented about spirituality in the following way: “…I do seek it outside of a formal religion.” This suggests that organized religion and spirituality are not one in the same, nor can they serve the same needs for different people. Spirituality is what each makes it. Given the ability to transform as often as an individual does in life; it provides continuing support as needed.

One Religion, Multiple Identities

As with other women of color, Latinas adopt a variety of major roles and identities in U.S. society. These include being: members of a minority group, women of color, members of a social class and sexual beings. They also take on other identities such as feminists, vegans, scholars, activists, partners, mothers, and more. Because many of these identities are constantly evolving, it is difficult for a seemingly static religion to fulfill the needs of Latinas’ lives.

For Respondent 11, spirituality serves another important part of the diversity of Latinas, their many identities:

It’s a place where I feel integrated as far as different identities, different roles that I have. And where with religion I feel sometimes fragmented in terms of being bilingual and going to mass and having it be organized and structured, it feels very different to me. Spirituality encompasses everything so it’s more holistic for me.
In trying to understand how Latinas combine several identities and roles while subsisting in a strict religious culture, it becomes clear that developing one’s own approach and spiritual practices is one of the few outlets for all identities to be combined and functional. It is important to acknowledge the institution’s role in this occurrence, and how a lack of change and personal touch creates feelings of awkwardness in which religious expression is better met when practicing spirituality.

When asked about one specific identity, feminism, and how it relates to practicing organized religion, several respondents agreed with Respondent 2 who answered that: “I think that feminism is inconsistent with organized religion the way it is practiced today in this country. Not sure that they can go hand in hand.” Another participant linked white feminism and organized religion: "I haven't studied feminism in a while, but what I do recall, I viewed the concepts and ideals as very similar to that of a structured religion" (Respondent 12).

The participants reflected that it is difficult to have an organized religion serve both historical meaning and present day needs. Human beings have complex lives and personalities. Being divided and viewed as only one part of who we truly are can be an ineffective way to both view and practice religion. Latinas spirituality is significant because it is accommodating: “…ideally, Latina spirituality would be a place of comfort, of peace, of being holistic. Feeling accepted and loved for who you are as whole not just parts of you” (Respondent 11).

The Religious Context of Latinas’ Lives

As trends began to surface in the participant’s answers, similar backgrounds and upbringing became apparent. Being a first generation college student and graduate in one’s family played an important role in how these Latinas lives changed during their college years after leaving home, and their strategies to cope with this change.

Though Latinas may be able to stop practicing organized religion, one can see the ways in which religion has become a part of their lives, histories, and memories. Religion is the framework from which Latinas build their lives. It is within this framework that most young Latinas enter the “outside world” of higher education. The religious ideals and teachings of their parents divided the general knowledge that grammar school provided.

All participants acknowledged that they have matured when thinking about religion, and believe that like all organized religions the Catholic faith has flaws. Most agreed that Catholicism does not fulfill their religious and spiritual wants and needs and would like to see it change. The amount of change thought possible is determined by the extent to which parishioners are able to critique established thought and implement change. Respondent 15 stated her belief in this point and hopes that it might come true: “I think part of how it will come to be a better religion is by people being critical of it and becoming part of the change. I see myself as being in it to change it...”

Eight of the nine participants are first generation college students, which plays a large role in how they struggled with various changes during their time in school. Changes in views and ideas, and the ability to critique both religion and the Church made remaining within organized religion a difficult decision. To illustrate, Respondent 5 stated:

I don’t practice my religion anymore. I make sure that I follow my morals because I truly believe strongly in those values. I may have gotten some of those values from the church, but I don’t agree with all the hypocrisy that goes on in particular the way I’ve seen the church handle poverty in my country and in Latin America in general, I just can’t stand it.
Because parental, cultural, and societal expectations often determine what a “good Catholic” is or is not, Latinas are taught that in order to please your parents and fulfill your societal role you must attend church. Respondent 15 offered a good example of this circumstance:

I was very good with Catholic guilt and not going to church and having this heavy burden come Monday because I didn’t go to church on Sunday. Then I finally made this break between that it wasn’t really religion I needed to pay homage or attention to, it was my own spirituality, and sometimes this happened in mass on Sunday and sometimes it didn’t.

Higher education is an essential piece in this study when attempting to understand the link between Latinas’ attitudes and methods of combining who they are becoming with their previous religious affiliation. Though not all Latino/as are Catholic, most are and this is reflected in the background of all participants. All of the participants' parents or main caregiver’s practiced Catholicism. This played a significant role in how each woman was raised and the ideals and values that her family holds. Breaking away from one’s home and family presented new ways of thinking and living which may have differed from what they had been accustomed.

Before entering higher education, family values and beliefs provided the framework from which these Latinas viewed the world and their place within it. However, as this became questioned new ideas formed and previous ways of thinking changed. Respondent 3 provides an example of this:

I took this introduction to philosophy class and the professor asked, 'Do you believe that the universe is finite or infinite?' And I didn’t know how to answer the question so I remember I thought back to my Catholic upbringing and thought, 'it’s infinite, you know it keeps going and going’… My professor started bringing up issues of validity and fiction, and I started realizing that there’s more than the one explanation that I was brought up with.

From what the participants shared in the focus groups, age appeared to have little influence on perceptions of religion. The age range demonstrated the maturity level of the women at different points in their lives and careers. Though most participants articulated distinct descriptions about the way they view and practice religion in their lives, some variation was evident among those who were still students. For instance, graduate students were less secure in their opinions and role of religion in their lives compared to the women who had been out of school for some time. The latter displayed confidence in their definition of religion and its meaning in their lives. These quotes show that the connection between education and attitudes toward religion is compounded by kind of education, that is, B.A., M.A., etc., and experiences in life.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

The available scholarly literature that focuses on the experiences of Latinas in organized religion during and after higher education is extremely limited. Several pieces came from authors with a background and training in divinity and positioned within the church. As a result, much of this research is filtered through a lens that is not critical of the institution of organized religion and culture. As such the writers are often unable to focus on the specific struggles and changes that Latinas undergo as they move through higher education.

One limitation of the literature describing “Latina Feminist Theology” involves focusing on the Church's role in Latinas’ lives. However, the Latinas in this study described needing a personal spirituality to get them through life, without relying solely on the Church for fulfillment.
One piece of literature that was supported by several participants’ answers and experiences is Sandra Guzman’s (2003) chapter on Latina spirituality in “The Latina Bible.” Guzman’s explanation of her own spiritual practices was reflected in the focus group participants’ expressions regarding their spirituality and religious practices. The women’s struggle with the Catholic Church validated Guzman’s experience after higher education.

In this study, the focus group dialogue addressed higher education and religion in Latinas’ lives. Intriguingly, two other topic areas emerged which demonstrate that there are several variables that affect Latinas’ relationship to organized religion. All must be taken into consideration when trying to understand the complete relationship that affects Latinas in higher education.

For several participants, it was evident that organized religion cannot and does not fulfill their spiritual needs. For these women a break from Catholicism and the development of their own practices was important in maintaining a healthy existence. These women also stated directly that though they have made the decision to leave organized religion, they maintain their cultural identity by identifying with Catholic traditions and beliefs.

Other participants demonstrated that the transformation they hope will occur in the Catholic Church can only happen if those involved in the Church are present to create that change. Their participation within the Church provided comfort and the means by which to evoke change. It also served as the cultural connection that is necessary to facilitate success in their lives and goals.

I urge researchers to examine the role that higher education plays in Latinas’ lives and their religious identity in a more systematic way. More research can help develop a better understanding of the experiences of Latinas in higher education, and perhaps provide support for these women as they try to incorporate all parts of their lives while attempting to achieve higher education's expectations and challenges.

REFERENCES


APPENDIX A

Focus Group Agenda:

I. Welcome and Introduction
   - Explanation of question format
II. Confidentiality explanation and consent form
   - Contact information for participants’ questions
III. Interview questions* and open discussion
IV. Debriefing and questionnaire

*All groups were asked these questions:
1.) What is religion to you?
2.) What is spirituality to you?
3.) Do you identify with any organized religion?
4.) How has your level of education informed your relationship to religion?
5.) How would you define “Latina spirituality?” Is being part (member) of an organized
   religion important in your life?
6.) If you identify with a specific religion but do not practice it, why have you not looked for
   another form of religion or spirituality with which you feel more comfortable practicing?
7.) There are many educated Latinas who abandon organized religion because they find that
   it no longer addresses their needs, or that its practices are antiquated for today’s reality.
   Do you believe this is true? And give some reasons why.
8.) Do you identify yourself as a Latina feminist?
9.) How do these identities affect the way you view or practice spirituality?
10.) How do you express spirituality or religion in your life? Give specific examples of ways
     that you feel are important expressions in your daily life as well as larger goals.

APPENDIX B

1.) Age: _________
2.) Highest educational degree: ____________
3.) Current Employment: ________________
4.) Are you a first-generation college student?
   ______ Yes
   ______ No
5.) What religion do/did your parents practice?

6.) In what kind of community were you raised?
   ______ 75 per cent and up Chicano/Latino
   ______ 50-74 per cent Chicano/Latino
   ______ 25-49 per cent Chicano/Latino
   ______ 0-24 per cent Chicano/Latino
7.) Was that community in a:
   ______ rural area?
   ______ urban area?
   ______ suburban area?
8.) In what state did you mostly grow up? _____
    Or: In what country did you mostly grow up?_____________________
Thank you for your time and cooperation.