Part 1: RTS – It's Time To Recognize It

by Marlene Winell, Ph.D.

I'm really struggling and am desperate never to go back to the religion I was raised in, but I no longer want to live in fear or depression. It seems that I am walking through the jungle alone with my machete; no one to share my crazy and sometimes scary thoughts with.

After years of depression, anxiety, anger, and finally a week in a psychiatric hospital a year ago, I am now trying to pick up the pieces and put them together into something that makes sense. I'm confused. My whole identity is a shredded, tangled mess. I am in utter turmoil.

These comments are not unusual for people suffering with Religious Trauma Syndrome, or RTS. Religious trauma? Isn't religion supposed to be helpful, or at least benign? In the case of fundamentalist beliefs, people expect that choosing to leave a childhood faith is like giving up Santa Claus – a little sad but basically a matter of growing up.

But religious indoctrination can be hugely damaging, and making the break from an authoritarian kind of religion can definitely be traumatic. It involves a complete upheaval of a person's construction of reality, including the self, other people, life, the future, everything. People unfamiliar with it, including therapists, have trouble appreciating the sheer terror it can create and the recovery needed.

My own awareness of this problem took some time. It began with writing about my own recovery from a fundamentalist Christian background, and very quickly, I found out I was not alone. Many other people were eager to discuss this hidden suffering. Since then, I have worked with clients in the area of "recovery from religion" for about twenty-five years, and I wrote a self-help book called *Leaving the Fold* on the subject.

In my view, it is time for society to recognize the real trauma that religion can cause. Just like clearly naming problems such as anorexia, PTSD, or bipolar disorder made it possible to stop self-blame and move ahead with learning methods of recovery, we need to address Religious Trauma Syndrome. The internet is starting to overflow with stories of RTS and cries for help. On forums for former believers (such as exchristian.net), one can see the widespread pain and desperation. In response to my presentation about RTS on YouTube, a viewer commented:

Thank you so much. This is exciting because millions of people suffer from this. I have never heard of Dr. Marlene but more people are coming out to talk about this issue – millions – who are quietly suffering and being treated for other issues when the fundamental issue is religious abuse.

Barriers to Getting Help for RTS

At present, raising questions about toxic beliefs and abusive practices in religion seems to be violating a taboo, even with helping professionals. In society, we treasure our freedom of speech, freedom of assembly, and freedom of religion. Our laws and mores reflect the general

principle that, if we are not harming others, we can do as we like. Forcing children to go to church hardly seems like a crime. Real damage is assumed to be done by extreme fringe groups we call "cults" and people have heard of ritual abuse. Moreover, religious institutions have a vested interest in promoting an uncritical view.

But mind-control and emotional abuse is actually the norm for many large, authoritarian, mainline religious groups. The sanitization of religion makes it all the more insidious. When the communities are so large and the practices normalized, victims are silenced.

Therapists have no real appropriate diagnosis in their manual. Even in the commonly used list of psychological stressors, amidst all the change and loss and disruption, there is no mention of losing one's religion. Yet it can be the biggest crisis ever faced. This is important for therapists to be aware of because people are leaving the ranks of traditional religious groups in record numbers[1] and they are reporting real suffering.

Another obstacle in getting help is that most people with RTS have been taught to fear psychology as something worldly and therefore evil. It is very likely that only a fraction of people with RTS are even seeking help. Within many dogmatic, self-contained religions, mental health problems such as depression or anxiety are considered *sins*. They are seen as evidence of not being right with God. A religious counselor or pastor advises more confession and greater obedience as the cure, and warns that secular help from a mental health professional would be dangerous.

God is called "The Great Physician" and a person should not need any help from anyone else. Doubt is considered wrong, not honest inquiry. Moreover, therapy is a selfish indulgence. Focusing on one's own needs is always sinful in this religious view, so RTS victims are often not even clear how to get help. The clients I have worked with have had to overcome ignorance, guilt, and fear to make initial contact.

What is RTS?

I suffer with guilt and depression and struggle to let go of religion. I am also battling with an existential crisis of epic proportions and intense heartache... I feel like I am the only person in the world that this has happened to. Some days are okay, but others are terrible. I do not know if I will make it through this.

Religious Trauma Syndrome is the condition experienced by people who are struggling with leaving an authoritarian, dogmatic religion and coping with the damage of indoctrination. They may be going through the shattering of a personally meaningful faith and/or breaking away from a controlling community and lifestyle. The symptoms compare most easily with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), which results from experiencing or being confronted with death or serious injury which causes feelings of terror, helplessness, or horror. This can be a single event or chronic abuse of some kind. With RTS, there is chronic abuse, especially of children, plus the major trauma of leaving the fold. Like PTSD, the impact of RTS is long-lasting,

with intrusive thoughts, negative emotional states, impaired social functioning, and other problems.

With RTS, the trauma is two-fold. First, the actual teachings and practices of a restrictive religion can be toxic and create life-long mental damage. In many cases, the emotional and mental abuse is compounded by physical and sexual abuse due to the patriarchal, repressive nature of the environment.

Second, departing a religious fold adds enormous stress as an individual struggles with leaving what amounts to one world for another. This usually involves significant and sudden loss of social support while facing the task of reconstructing one's life. People leaving are often ill-prepared to deal with this, both because they have been sheltered and taught to fear the secular world and because their personal skills for self-reliance and independent thinking are underdeveloped.

Individuals can experience RTS in different ways depending on a variety of factors. Some key symptoms of RTS are:

• Confusion, difficulty making decisions, trouble thinking for self, lack of meaning or direction, undeveloped sense of self

• Anxiety being in "The World," panic attacks, fear of damnation, depression, thoughts of suicide, anger, bitterness, betrayal, guilt, grief and loss, difficulty with expressing emotion

• Sleep and eating disorders, substance abuse, nightmares, perfectionism, discomfort with sexuality, negative body image, impulse control problems, difficulty enjoying pleasure or being present here and now

• Rupture of family and social network, loneliness, problems relating to society, personal relationship issues

These comments from people going through it may be the best way to convey the intensity of RTS:

I get depressed and upset. Jesus no longer saves me. God no longer created me. What purpose is there? What am I left with? What do ex-Christians fill the hole with? So we are here for no reason, no divine plan. From nothing – into nothing; reality is harsh. Plus I'm pissed that I was so brainwashed for so long – smashing CDs, burning books, rebuking Satan... it's like having your entire world turned upside down, no, destroyed.

There is a lot of guilt and I react to most religion with panic attacks and distress, even photos, statues, or TV.... I guess although I was willing it was like brainwashing. It's very hard to shake... It's been a nightmare.

I felt despair and hopelessness that I would ever be normal, that I would ever be able to undo the forty years of brainwashing.

My form of religion was very strongly entrenched and anchored deeply in my heart. It is hard to describe how fully my religion informed, infused, and influenced my entire worldview. My first steps out of fundamentalism were profoundly frightening and I had frequent thoughts of suicide. Now I'm way past that but I still haven't quite found "my place in the universe."

I feel angry, powerless, hopeless, and hurt – scars from the madness Christianity once had me suffering in.

It took years of overcoming terrific fear as well as self-loathing to emancipate myself from my cult-like upbringing years ago. Still, the aftermath of growing up like that has continued to affect me negatively as a professional (nightmares, paranoia, etc.).

The world was a strange and frightening place to me. I feared that all the bad, nasty things that I had been brought up to believe would happen to anyone who left the cult would in fact happen to me!

Even now I still lack the ability to trust very easily and becoming very close to people is something I still find very alien and hard to achieve.

After 21 years of marriage my husband feels he cannot accept me since I have left the "church" and is divorcing me.

My parents have stopped calling me. My dad told me I'm going to hell (he's done this my whole life!).

I had to move away from my home because I just could not be in the environment any more. My entire family is Christian and I struggle to explain to them what I am going through. I feel extremely isolated and sometimes I wonder if I am going insane. I am extremely lonely and I suffer from intense depression at times.

I lost all my friends. I lost my close ties to family. Now I'm losing my country. I've lost so much because of this malignant religion and I am angry and sad to my very core… I have tried hard to make new friends, but I have failed miserably… I am very lonely.

Many of us feel that we cannot relate to the "outside world" as the teachings we were brought up on are all we know and our only frame of reference.

My new secular friends wouldn't understand. My Christian friends either have abandoned me or keep praying for me.

My attempts to think outside the Christian box are like the attempts of a convict to escape Alcatraz prison – tunnel through hundreds of feet of stone and concrete, outsmart gun-carrying guards, only to maybe make it to the choppy freezing cold water and a deadly swim to safety. This may be a little dramatic, but true to my heart. I now continue to try to rebuild my soul from the abuse it's endured.

RTS can range in severity, depending on specific teachings and practices of particular churches, pastors, or parents. Persons most at risk of RTS are those who were:

• raised in their religion,

• sheltered from the rest of the world,

• very sincerely and personally involved, and/or

• from a very controlling form of religion.

The important thing to realize is that Religious Trauma Syndrome is real. While it may be easier to understand the damage done by sexual abuse or a natural disaster, religious practices can be just as harmful. More and more people need help and the taboos about criticizing religion need to be questioned.

Part 2: Understanding RTS – Trauma From Religion

by Marlene Winell, Ph.D.

The kind of religion that causes damage is that which requires rigid conformity in order to survive in the group or have hope for the afterlife. Such a fundamentalist religion has a closed system of logic and a strong social structure to support an authoritarian worldview. It can be a comfortable environment as long as a member does not question. Children learn very early on to repress independent thinking and not to trust their own feelings. For truth, believers rely on external authority – Scripture and religious leaders. With the consequences of disbelief so severe, leaders are able to demand acceptance of far-fetched claims at the expense of personal observation or scientific evidence. The culture rewards individuals who contribute in religious ways. Proselytizing is generally expected, even for children. Obedience is the highest value and personal development truncated.

Clearly, psychological problems can develop long before the additional trauma of leaving the fold. I'll use the example of Bible-based fundamentalisms. True to the definition of trauma, survivors of these report feelings of terror, helplessness, and horror in facing death and injury – the horror of Jesus' death (along with other atrocities in the Bible), the terror of hell for oneself and everyone else, and the helplessness of being a frail human in a wicked world, a tiny player in an overwhelming cosmic drama.

Toxic Teachings

There are different churches in this category with beliefs and practices that vary but core doctrines are consistent. All of the major authoritarian religions have enormous psychological control because they are based on fear, which is the most primitive and powerful human emotion. Secondly, they emphasize shame; humans are bad and need redemption. So the basic meme complex passed on to each generation of children is that you need religion in order to survive and in order to be acceptable.

Eternal punishment. The first key doctrine is eternal damnation (or annihilation) for all unbelievers. This is the terrifying backdrop for the salvation message presented to all newcomers and all children born into the faith. The Bible is quoted, including the words of Jesus, to paint a horrifying picture of hell as a lake of fire, a fire of eternal torture impossible to quench despite any pleading. Mormons describe a hell of "outer darkness" that is cold and just as terrifying. Jehovah's Witnesses threaten the horror of dying forever at Armageddon and missing out on Paradise.

Small children can obviously visualize these things while not having the brain capacity to evaluate the message. Moreover, the powerful social context makes rejecting these teachings impossible. Children are completely at the mercy of religious adults.

The salvation formula is offered as a solution of course, but for many, it is not enough to ward off anxiety. How does one really know? And what about losing one's salvation? Many adults remember trying to get "saved" multiple times, even hundreds of times, because of unrelenting fear.

I feel like much of my life was lived in fear. I am reading all I can to continue to find peace from what I've been taught. I still fear and I am 65.

I feel little hope, because I don't know how it is remotely possible for me to ever let go of my fear of hell. If I give up my belief system, I'll go to hell. Even though my whole life has been so unhappy

in the church – it has brought me nothing but turmoil and heartbreak and disappointment and unanswered questions and dissatisfaction.

"Left behind" terror. Another horrible fear is about missing "The Rapture" when Jesus returns. I have heard many people recount memories of searching for parents and going into sheer panic about being left alone in an evil world. Given that abandonment is a primary human fear, this experience can be unforgettably terrifying. Some report this as a recurring trauma every time they couldn't find a parent right away.

During my freshman year in college, I started having nightmares. In my dreams, The Rapture would happen and I would be left behind, or worse, sent to hell. Several times I woke up just before I was tossed into the flames, my mouth open, ready to scream. My mind was crying out, "Please, Jesus! Forgive me! I'm sorry I wasn't good enough! I'm sorry!

After twenty-seven years of trying to live a perfect life, I failed... I was ashamed of myself all day long. My mind battling with itself with no relief... I always believed everything that I was taught but I thought that I was not approved by God. I thought that basically I, too, would die at Armageddon.

Surrounded by threat. Believers simply cannot feel safe in the world if they take to heart the teaching about evil everywhere. In the fundamentalist worldview, "The World" is a fallen place, dangerously ruled by Satan and his minions until Jesus comes back and God puts everything right. Meanwhile, it's a battleground for spiritual warfare and children are taught to be very afraid of anything that is not Christian. Much of "The World" is condemned at church, and parents try to control secular influences through private or home schooling. Children grow up terrified of everything outside the religious subculture, most of which is simply unfamiliar.

I was raised on fire and brimstone, [speaking in tongues](#), believing the world was a dangerous and evil place, full of temptation and sinners seeking to destroy me/drag me down.

Some groups place more emphasis on literal teachings about demons, and believers learn to be afraid of evil spirits lurking everywhere. Being saved is a "covering" and one must put on the "whole armor of God" to go about ordinary life. A frequently quoted verse with a terrifying image is I Peter 5:8, "Be sober, be vigilant; because your adversary the devil, as a roaring lion, walketh about, seeking whom he may devour."

Self as bad. Second to the doctrine of hell, the other most toxic teaching in fundamentalist churches is that of "original sin." Human depravity is a constant theme of fundamentalist theology, and no matter what is said about the saving grace of Jesus, children (and adults) internalize feelings of being evil and inadequate. Most of these churches also believe in demons quite literally, some to the point of using exorcism on children who misbehave. One former believer called it "bait-and-switch theology – telling me I was saved only to insist that I was barely worth saving."

I've spent literally years injuring myself, cutting and burning my arms, taking overdoses and starving myself, to punish myself so that God doesn't have to punish me. It's taken me years to feel deserving of anything good.
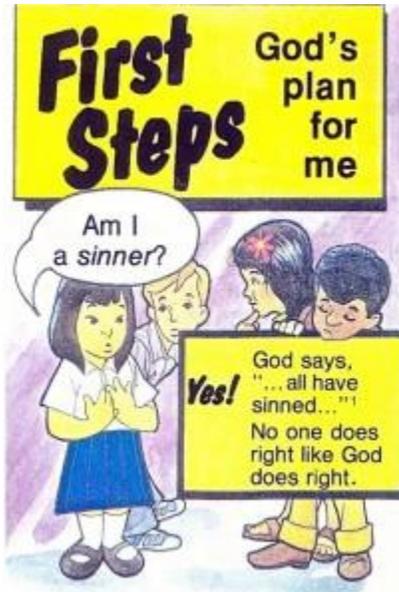
 Believers can be understood to be in the crazy-making situation of a double bind – having heavy personal responsibility to adhere to religious rules but not having the ability to do so. Never is God blamed for not answering prayer or empowering the faithful as promised.

I spent most of my life trying to please an angry God and feeling like a complete failure. I didn't pray enough, read enough, love enough, etc.

To think you are good or wise or strong or loving or capable on your own is considered pride and the worst sin of all in this religious worldview. You are expected to derive those qualities from God, who is perfect. Anything good you do is credited to God and anything bad is your fault. You are expected to be like Him and follow His perfect will. But what if it doesn't work? Fundamentalist Christianity promises to solve all kinds of personal problems and when it does not, it is the individual that bears the paralyzing guilt of not measuring up.

I have tried to use this brand of Christianity to free myself from the depression and addictions that I have struggled with from childhood, and have done all the things that "Christianity" demanded I do. I have fasted, prayed, abstained from secular things, tithed, received the spirit, baptized in the spirit, read the Bible, memorized Scripture, etc. etc. None of it has worked or given me any lasting solution. . . I have become so desperate at times, that I have wanted to take my own life.

Demon possession. A special form of abuse occurs when children are actually accused of being demon-possessed. This can happen when children misbehave, parents are incompetent, or children's behavior is misinterpreted in spiritual ways, often with the help of clergy. I have heard many stories of this kind of labeling, which is of course the ultimate in both shame and fear.

Forced exorcisms are also all too common, even in this modern day, and certainly qualify as trauma, lasting into adulthood.

When your parents exorcised you and said you had "unclean" spirits, that was very very wrong. To believe a child can have demons just shows how seriously deluded your parents really were. You have spent your whole life being scared... being scared of your dad, of God, of hell, The Rapture, the end of the world, and death as well as the dark.

Cycle of abuse. A believer can never be good enough and goes through a cycle of sin, guilt, and salvation similar to the cycle of abuse in domestic violence. When they say they have a "personal relationship" with God, they are referring to one of total dominance and submission, and they are convinced that they should be grateful for this kind of "love." Like an authoritarian husband, this deity is an all-powerful, ruling male whose word is law. The sincere follower "repents" and "rededicates," which produces a temporary reprieve of anxiety and perhaps a period of positive affect. This intermittent reinforcement is enough to keep the cycle of abuse in place. Like a devoted wife, the most sincere believers get damaged the most.

I prayed endlessly to be delivered from those temptations. I beat my fists into my pillow in agony. I used every ounce of faith I could muster to overcome this problem. "Lead me not into temptation, but deliver me from evil" just didn't seem to be working with me. Of course, I blamed it on myself and thought there was something wrong with me. I thought I was perverted. I felt evil inside. I hated myself.

I do not want to give up my faith in Christ or God but I have NEVER been able to hold onto my own decisions or to make them on my benefit without IMMENSE PAIN re: God's will which I was supposed to seek out but could not find.

Don't think, don't feel. Fundamentalist theology is also damaging to intellectual development in that it explicitly warns against trusting one's own mind while requiring belief in far-fetched claims. Believers are not allowed to question dogma without endangering themselves. Critical thinking skills are undervalued. Emotions and intuitions are also considered suspect so children learn not to trust their own feelings. With external authority the only permissible guide, they grow up losing touch with inner instincts so necessary for decision making and moral development.

Fundamentalism makes people crazy. It is a mixture of beliefs that do not make sense, causing the brain to keep trying to understand what cannot be logical.

I really don't have much experience of decision making at all. I never made any plans for my adult life since I was brought up to believe that the end of the world would come.

I suppressed a lot of my emotions, I developed cognitive difficulties, and my thinking became increasingly unclear. My whole being turned from a rather vibrant, positive person to one that's passive and dull.

Abuses of Power

Added to these toxic aspects of theology are *practices* in the church and religious families that are damaging. Physical, sexual, and emotional harm is inflicted in families and churches because authoritarianism goes unchecked. Too many secrets are kept. Sexual repression in the religion also contributes to child abuse. The sanctioned patriarchal power structure allows abusive practices towards women and children. Severe condemnation of homosexuality takes an enormous toll as well, including suicide.

I had so many pent up emotions and thoughts that were never acknowledged... Instead of protecting me from a horrible man, they forced me to deny my feelings and obey him, no matter what. It's no wonder I developed an eating disorder.

So while the religious community can appear to offer a safe environment, the pressures to conform, adhere to impossible requirements, and submit to abuses of power can cause great suffering, which is often hidden and thus more miserable. More sensitive personalities are more vulnerable as well as those who sincerely believe the dogma. Individual churches, pastors, and parents make a big difference too, in the way they mediate the messages of the religion.

Note: There is much more to be said about the practices of religious child-rearing and I recommend Janet Heimlich's book, *Breaking Their Will.* There is also more information about physical and sexual abuse, illness rates, and results of sexism, among other things, largely hidden by the network of Christian professionals comprising an alternative economy, e.g. doctors who do not report bruises or rehab centers with drug use we never hear about.

Part 3: The Trauma of Leaving Religion

by Marlene Winell, Ph.D.

Religious Trauma Syndrome (RTS) is a function of both the chronic abuses of harmful religion and the impact of severing one's connection with one's faith and faith community. It can be compared to a combination of PTSD *and* Complex PTSD (C-PTSD). In the last article of this series, I explained some of the toxic aspects of authoritarian religions that cause long-term psychological damage (Bible-based religions in particular). In this writing, I will address the trauma of breaking away from this kind of religion.

With PTSD, a traumatic event is one in which a person experiences or witnesses actual or threatened death or serious injury, or a threat to the physical integrity of self or others. Losing one's faith, or leaving one's religion, is an analogous event because it essentially means the death of one's previous life – the end of reality as it was understood. It is a huge shock to the system, and one that needs to be recognized as *trauma*.

What it means to leave

Breaking out of a restrictive, mind-controlling religion is understandably a liberating experience. People report huge relief and some excitement about their new possibilities. Certain problems are over, such as trying to twist one's thinking to believe irrational religious doctrines, handling enormous cognitive dissonance in order to get by in the "real world," and conforming to repressive codes of behavior. Finally leaving a restrictive religion can be a major personal accomplishment after trying to make it work and going through many cycles of guilt and confusion.

However, the challenges of leaving are daunting. For most people, the religious environment was a one-stop-shop for meeting all their major needs – social support, a coherent worldview, meaning and direction in life, structured activities, and emotional/spiritual satisfaction. Leaving the fold means multiple losses, including the loss of friends and family support at a crucial time of personal transition. Consequently, it is a very lonely "stressful life event" – more so than others described on Axis IV in the DSM. For some people, depending on their personality and the details of their religious past, it may be possible to simply stop participating in religious services and activities and move on with life. But for many, leaving their religion means debilitating anxiety, depression, grief, and anger.

Usually people begin with intellectually letting go of their religious beliefs and then struggle with the emotional aspects. The cognitive part is difficult enough, and often requires a period of study and struggle before giving up one's familiar and perhaps cherished worldview. But the emotional letting go is much more difficult since the beliefs are bound with deep-seated needs and fears, and usually inculcated at a young age.

Problems with self-worth and fear of terrible punishment continue. Virtually all controlling religions teach fear about the evil in "The World," and the danger of being alone without the group. Ordinary setbacks can cause panic attacks, especially when one feels like a small child in a very foreign world. Coming out of a sheltered, repressed environment can result in a lack of coping skills and personal maturity. The phobia indoctrination makes it difficult to avoid the stabbing thought, even many years after leaving, that one has made a terrible mistake, thinking, "What if they're right?"

It is truly amazing the pain I went through due to what was inputted into my mind... All I know is it took such a toll on me that I did not care if I died and went to hell to escape the hell I was in and the immense fear it put into my life.

Depression, anxiety, fatigue, insomnia, etc. ... you name it. It sucks. Probably from years of guilt being a Christian and a sinner, and thinking people I love are in hell.

Making the break is for many the most disruptive, difficult upheaval they have ever gone through in life. To understand this fully, one must appreciate the totality of a religious worldview that defines and controls reality in the way that fundamentalist groups do. Everything about the world – past, present, and future – is explained, the meaning of life is laid out, morality is already decided, and individuals must find their place in the cosmic scheme in order to be worthwhile. The promises for conformity and obedience are great and the threats for disobedience are dire, both for the present life and the hereafter. Controlling religions tend to limit information about the world and alternative views so members easily conclude that their religious worldview is the only one possible. Anything outside of their world is considered dangerous and evil at worst, and terribly misguided at best. So leaving this sheltered environment is bursting a bubble. Everything a person has believed to be true is shattered.

My foundation has truly dropped out from under me. Despite being told I am courageous, tenacious, and this is rugged work, I consistently find wave after wave of grief that overwhelms me. I can hardly believe how upended it has made my life.

My whole sense of purpose, value, and meaning was wrapped tightly around my Christian faith... I kept my doubts buried and crucified, and I tried hard not to think about the troubling things of faith... A year ago, I abandoned evangelicalism... the pain I feel is deep and raw.

The impact can create problems with day-to-day functioning.

The amount of inner turmoil during this time was overwhelming. It affected my daily life and many days I didn't want to get out of bed. I was depressed and anxious at the same time. Being in college was difficult. I could hardly focus on class.

I am utterly confused and at the moment my whole life is ruined as I don't know what to think. I've been off work a month with anxiety.

I have – for about three years – been dependent on drinking alcohol every night for a very long time.

Shattered assumption framework

In the study of trauma, certain developments are highly relevant to understanding RTS. One is the shattered assumption framework, or "loss of the assumptive world"(Kauffman, 2002). It has been used to understand traumatic loss such as death of a loved one, but can easily be applied to loss of faith. According to Beder (2004), "The assumptive world concept refers to the assumptions or beliefs that ground, secure, stabilize, and orient people. They are our core beliefs. In the face of death and trauma, these beliefs are shattered and disorientation and even panic can enter the lives of those affected."

The most damaging traumas are those that are human-caused and involve interpersonal violence and violation (DePrince and Freyd, 2002). (In my opinion, this would describe indoctrinating children in fear-based religion.) This approach names three basic assumptions held about the world that are shattered with these traumas: the world is benevolent, the world is meaningful, and the self is worthy (Janoff-Bulman, 1992). A fourth is sometimes included, which says that others are trustworthy (Roth and Newman, 1991). This model applies well to religion: if one thinks of the "world" as that created and maintained by the religious group. The religious version of "self is worthy" is usually a paradoxical view of the self which is both sinful and special. That is, an individual has nothing intrinsic to be proud of but can have great purpose, and can play a role in a cosmic, spiritual drama.

These researchers explored the way schema and other cognitive factors lead to humans' cognitive conservatism and resistance to changing basic assumptions. Another line of research indicates negative responses in the brain when a person is confronted with information that conflicts with strongly-held beliefs (Shermer, 2011). Traumatic experiences shatter basic assumptions and beliefs. Conversely, a shattering of beliefs is traumatic. Coping and healing from trauma requires an individual to reconcile their old set of assumptions with new, modified assumptions (DePrince & Freyd, 2002). The trauma is understood to have both affective and cognitive components.

Loss of faith, or leaving one's religion viewed through this lens, helps to explain the intensity of the trauma. A religion contains a large and complex set of assumptions held to be true by the group. Rejecting the "meme complex" that has been passed on through generations is a major cognitive disruption as well as a risk of social rejection. Panic about being helpless in a meaningless world can result.

Never have I experienced such confusion, pain, grief, loss fear, anxiety, depression, paralysis. All because of religion, faith, God.

It is noteworthy that all of the most controlling, authoritarian religions make sweeping, ultimate promises along with demands for devotion. Individuals who were most sincere, devout, and

dedicated seem to be the ones most traumatized when their religious assumptive world crumbles. This would make sense from Kauffman's (2002) perspective that shattered assumptions cause the self to fragment into pieces. As he puts it, "The assumptive world order is the set of illusions that shelter the human soul."

Some days are better than others of course but most days are blighted by some form of dark cloud. The real tragedy for me is that I love life – in all of its hues, shades, problems and challenges – I just can't see life through a prescribed formula any more.

I feel in total crisis, panicked, and terrified of facing a future alone. No confidence in my own decision making if it isn't in line with Christianity, and inability to find fulfillment from within.

For many people who leave their faith, it is like a death or divorce. Their "relationship with God" was a central assumption, such that giving it up feels like a genuine loss to be grieved. It can be like losing a lover, a parent, or best friend who has always been there.

It is like a death in the family as my god Jesus finally died and no amount of belief could resurrect him. It is an absolutely dreadful and frightening experience and dark night of the soul.

When I left, it felt like I was losing a friend or even a spouse – it was definitely "traumatic." Now, as an outsider, I see how crazy-making and damaging it was to me.

Betrayal trauma theory

This approach has challenged the traditional focus on fear as the primary response to trauma. PTSD has been assumed to be an anxiety disorder, requiring the individual to experience intense fear, helplessness, or horror in response to a traumatic event. Treatment has emphasized corrective emotional processing.

Understanding post traumatic distress in terms of shattered assumptions and betrayal can shed light on effects not related to fear or terror. Freyd (1996) studied the impact of childhood abuse, or the betrayal of a trusted caregiver, on memory, and concluded that a low awareness of violation appears to have survival value. These theories indicate that a cognitive appraisal which raises awareness of violated assumptions can be traumatic.

The concept of betrayal is important in that it changes the whole context of understanding trauma that is human caused. First of all, society is resentful of the ways in which victims of trauma shatter our illusions of safety and often engages in victim blaming in order to order to maintain basic assumptions (Van der Kolk, McFarlane, and Van der Hart, 1996). The letter to the editor printed in the previous issue shows the way society resists recognizing that religion can do any harm.

Secondly, and especially in the case of Complex PTSD, which refers to ongoing, repeated abuse, it makes a huge difference to shift the focus to relational issues. As explained by DePrince and

Freyd (2002), mainstream psychology has focused on fear and tended to pathologize trauma survivors' reactions. In this approach, responsibility for the experience of fear is placed on the individual survivor; implicitly or explicitly. Cognitive-behavioral therapies are focused on treating the individual's anxiety symptoms.

When betrayal is included as an important reaction to trauma, research and treatment questions are placed in a relational and social context. The pathology is not just in the mind of the survivor. Relevant questions include who did the betraying, what the betrayal was about, the relationship to the perpetrator, and the societal response to the events. With a betrayal framework, these authors say that closer attention is paid to the relationship between the perpetrator and victim in interpersonal violence. (Regarding religious indoctrination, a case can be made for emotional and mental abuse, which is also violent with long-term effects). This framework allows for a historical context in which there may be inter-generational transmission of trauma.

Betrayal may also come in the form of response the survivor receives from others following the event, such as disbelief, minimizing, or otherwise devaluing the individual's experience. A view of trauma that recognizes the sociocultural forces at play helps us go beyond individual emotions and consider the community's role in addressing the transgression. Recognizing interpersonal betrayal in trauma requires that we confront the reality of the harm humans can cause one another (DePrince and Freyd, 2002).

Shattered faith

As an example of "loss of the assumptive world," losing one's religion is a special and potentially extreme case. A shattered belief system can be devastating and cause cognitive and affective problems, including an acute sense of betrayal. Many ex-believers have anger about the abuse of growing up in a world of lies. They feel robbed of a normal childhood, honest information, and opportunity to develop and thrive. They have bitterness for being taught they were worthless and in need of salvation, yet never able to be sure they were good enough to make it. They have anger about terrors of hell, the Rapture, demons, apostasy, unforgivable sins, and the evil world. They resent not being able to ever feel good or safe. Many are angry that the same teachings are inflicted on more children continuously. They have rage because they dedicated their lives and gave up everything to serve God. They are angry about losing their families and their friends. They feel enormously betrayed.

The following comments support the theories of trauma involving shattered assumptions and betrayal.

As a child I had an awful fear of hell, and I used to fall asleep crying cause I thought I wasn't saved. Irrational fear leads to irrational decisions. Now with my career in the tank, having lost contact with friends and family over my leaving the church, I am trying to put my life back together.

So now at the age of 43, I feel that my youth was wasted. I think about all the fun I lost out on, all the women I rejected, and the education I could have had. I think about all the worry, guilt and fear I've had to endure for 31 years.

I've been feeling a mixture of anger, sadness, and desperation regarding my former 'life of faith'... I spent about 20 adult years as a "serious Christian"... trying to live out "radical Biblical obedience to God"... The fact is I could NEVER totally please God. "He" made impossible demands of me and it was a fantasy to think that he provided the actual resources necessary to fulfill them.

RTS as Complex PTSD

The definition of Complex PTSD is interesting in light of religious indoctrination: "A psychological injury that results from protracted exposure to prolonged social and/or interpersonal trauma with lack or loss of control, disempowerment, and in the context of either captivity or entrapment, i.e. the lack of a viable escape route for the victim" (Wikipedia). Small children who are subjected to toxic religious teachings and practices are trapped and dependent on their dysfunctional families. Pete Walker (2009) has developed an approach in psychotherapy that considers emotional flashbacks to be the key symptom of Complex PTSD. Because of the prolonged nature of the trauma, he says Complex PTSD can be even more virulent and pervasively damaging in its effects. (Complex PTSD has not yet been included in the DSM; nor has RTS). This seems to be true for many who have left religion.

When asked to describe my past, overwhelming emotions sap my body of positive energy... Flashbacks assault my subconscious in vicious nightmares after dredging up this damage.

I remember many dark nights trying to sleep being fearful of many things in life, lying there in bed worrying while trying to sleep while considering all the nasty things that might happen to me as a sentence from god for my suggested bad/evil choice of leaving. The worry and lack of sleep made life and work that much harder to handle. I even got headaches from thinking and worrying so endlessly.

A lonely trip into the unknown battling that what you have been taught, questioning over and over again that what might be true or untrue. Feelings of guilt and fear of daring to trust your own natural human instincts or reasoning. A pathway of uncharted waters, supposedly booby trapped by devils and monsters.

I had a nervous breakdown as the beliefs that I was being taught were not really helping me develop as an individual. I have spent the last 5 years in and out of hospital for suicide attempts and things were gradually getting worse... Every day became a nightmare, I became immersed in a depression that had only one way out... suicide. I didn't want to kill myself, however life was so miserable that suicide seemed like a reasonable option.

I have just woken up from another nightmare. My husband says I cry out in the night and cry in my sleep. I was in an empty room with no escape. Totally alone and so so scared.

Why RTS is so invisible

With RTS, the social context is completely different from other trauma recovery situations. Natural disaster experiences, childhood sexual abuse, or family violence are all understandable to friends and professionals who are likely to be sympathetic and supportive. In the case of religious abuse, a person is often hounded by family and church members to return, and reminded in many ways that they are condemned otherwise. In essence, they are pressured to return to the perpetrator of their abuse. Their suffering is not seen. In fact, they are made pariahs when they do not return and this social rejection is an added layer of serious injury absent from other varieties of trauma.

A survivor of religious trauma is also surrounded by potential triggers, especially in more religious communities. Symbols of sexual abuse are not celebrated, but someone with RTS is expected to enjoy Christmas and Easter, or at least be quiet. Religion holds a place of privilege in society. Churches are everywhere and prayers and hymns are ubiquitous. In many communities, to not believe the prevailing religion makes one a deviant, putting one at risk of social rejection, employment problems, and more.

Anger for other kinds of abuse is considered normal and acceptable, whereas ex-believers are supposed to forgive and "not throw the baby out with the bathwater." They are called too sensitive or accused of taking religion the wrong way. People understand nightmares about wartime combat but not about Armageddon. Expressing feelings is usually dangerous. Too often, the result is a shaming attack rather than support, i.e., "blaming the victim."

From an orthodox, conservative point of view, people who have left their religion and are suffering are seen as failures – they simply haven't done it right. A fundamentalist Christian view is that they have been "rebellious" and brought about their own problems. Depression and anxiety are often considered sins or even demonic attacks. Personal misery is seen as a natural result of rejecting God; being apostate brings God's punishment.

A religious counselor will redirect a client back to the religion, typically with biblical guidelines to repent and become more devout. The client suffering with RTS is then likely to try harder to meet the impossible demands of the religion, much like returning to a situation of domestic violence. They will do this because of the authoritarian nature of such counseling, but fail again and feel hopeless or evil or crazy. No one concludes that it is the religion itself which is at fault. (And religious counselors often have very little training in psychology while getting exempted from standard licensing requirements).

In many seemingly secular settings, religious views are still considered "normal" and even advocated in aggressive ways. In medicine and in treatment for drugs and alcohol, professionals assume that pushing religion is acceptable. Yet people struggling with RTS-related substance abuse simply cannot stomach the religious tone of Alcoholics Anonymous, for example, and get very little sympathy.

In one case, a client of mine who was in a psychiatric ward because of panic attacks due to RTS told me that a doctor told her she needed to get right with God. Imagine giving parallel advice with some other kind of abuse. I also had a call from a veteran who was searching for an alternative because his counselor at the VA said he preferred working with people who believed in hell because he could get them to behave.

In many ways, a person with RTS can be retraumatized again and again through minimizing and denial. This can cause regression to an earlier state of fear by triggering the phobia indoctrination. One person wrote about the unequal social status of religious abuse:

If I were to say that Christianity took my childhood, filled me with fear, paralyzed me with anxiety, annihilated my Self, robbed my body of feeling, stole my future, gave me an unequal marriage role, and cost me thousands of dollars, Christians would dismiss it with "You were in the wrong church, you take things too seriously, or you made your choices based on your own free will."

It is no better when I talk to those raised outside of Christianity. They gently suggest that I'm over sensitive or making a big deal out of nothing or that I don't understand who Jesus really was or that it couldn't have been all that bad since I turned out to be such a nice person.

Why is it so hard for people to understand that Christianity completely messed up my life?!?!?!

If I had been discriminated against, beaten, sexually abused, traumatized by an act of violence, or raped, I would be heard. I would receive sympathy. I would be given psychological care. I would have legal recourse and protection. However, I am a trauma victim that society does not hear.

RTS victims feel very alone because, except on certain online forums, there is virtually no public discourse in our society about trauma or emotional abuse due to religion. This gap was noticed by a young man who wrote to me about his YouTube deconversion series:

I've been working on the 4th part, focused on trauma, for better than a month now and having a hard time with it. I've been reading a lot about trauma and finding myself amazed by how closely what we attribute to trauma and PTSD align with my experience of deconversion. No one talks about religion and trauma. Not in the scientific journals, not on trauma resources... I thought maybe I would be the only one to address it.

Child Protective Services will aggressively rescue children who are physically or sexually abused, but the deep wounding and mental damage caused by religion, which can last a lifetime, does not get attention. The institutions of religion in our culture are still given a privileged place in many ways. Criticism is very difficult. Parents are given undue authority to treat their children as they wish, even though the authoritarian and patriarchal attitudes of religion, along with too much respect for the Fourth Commandment to obey parents, has resulted in harsh and violent parenting methods. Even the sexual misdeeds of the Catholic clergy have been amazingly difficult to confront. Children are treated like the property of parents or parish, and too much goes on behind closed doors.

Multiple issues

Space considerations prevent a full description of all the challenges a person faces over a lifetime of recovering from religious indoctrination and living in a religious environment. Cognitive problems can be serious because decision-making for oneself is difficult and critical thinking skills are undeveloped. A person healing and recovering needs to unlearn many dysfunctional ways of thinking and behaving and then rebuild. They are faced with reconstructing reality, in essence. The old assumptive world is gone and a new one must be built. A new sense of self has to be developed, and personal responsibility for life has to be accepted. The existential crisis can be enormous when one feels entirely groundless and must start over.

One of my biggest problems has been the inability to trust my own intellect.

I strained everyday to get rid of the old beliefs, but they never seemed to go away.

I guess ultimately I've made my peace intellectually. I've been reading and learning religious history, philosophy, etc. for almost a decade. But I wonder... emotionally I can't convince myself I'm not going to hell for every little thing. Does it ever get easier? Does 20 years of intimidation, coercion, fear mongering, and bigotry take just as long to disappear?

Adding to the challenge is the all-too-common rejection from family and friends. For most people from a religious family, they must also reconstruct an entire social structure, while learning to view other people and the world in completely new terms. This can even require new employment. Marriages suffer when only one partner leaves the faith, and divorce is not uncommon.

I left the church and told my family almost two years ago; they are sure I am going to hell and taking my 3 small children with me. All friends were Christians and are no longer around. My community is deeply religious, and I feel isolated and afraid. I think I need counselling, but don't know where to turn.

I have been associated with the religion of my parents since birth. I am now in my fifties. If I leave openly I will be disfellowshipped and WILL lose all my family and friends. I suffer from OCD and severe depression. What should I do?... if I go, my wife will stay – I foresee nothing but grief ahead for me.

In conclusion, I believe it cannot be overstated that mental health professionals need to recognize the seriousness of Religious Trauma Syndrome. Religion can and does cause great personal suffering, fractured families, and social breakdown. There are many individuals needing and deserving recognition and treatment from informed professionals. We need to let go of making religion a special case in which criticism is taboo. It is our ethical responsibility to be aware and our human obligation to be compassionate.

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