

# Religious Trauma Syndrome: It's Time To Recognise It

Marlene Winell, PhD



California based psychologist, educator and writer **Marlene Winell** has gained an international reputation for her work, in both community and academic settings, with those who have left religious communities around the world, including the UK. In the first of three articles for CBT Today, Dr Winell defines and explores what is meant by Religious Trauma Syndrome



Bound,  
by Ginny Lenoir-Spratt

*'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 (RTS). Religious trauma? Isn't religion supposed to be helpful, or at least benign? In the case of fundamentalist beliefs, most 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 years and wrote a self help book on the subject.

In my view, it is time for the mental health community to recognise 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 treatment, we need to address RTS. The internet is starting to overflow with stories of RTS and cries for help. On forums for former believers (such as exchristian.net), and on YouTube, one can see the widespread pain and desperation. In response to my presentation about RTS at the Texas Freethought Convention, a person commented:

*'Thank you so much. This is exciting because millions of people suffer from this... 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 Treating RTS

At present, raising questions about toxic beliefs and abusive practices in religion seems to be violating a taboo. 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 sanitisation of religion makes it all the more insidious. When the communities are so large and the practices normalised, victims are silenced.

As therapists, we have no real appropriate diagnosis in our manual. Even in the commonly used list of psychosocial 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 us because people are leaving the ranks of traditional religious groups in record numbers<sup>1</sup> and they are reporting real suffering.

In assessment, we seem to have a blind spot. Psychotherapists do not traditionally ask a new client much about religious background. We delve into family, medical, educational, occupational, and other areas of personal history, including alcoholism and mental illness in the extended family. Yet, if a person had to attend a mind-controlling church several times a week, go to a religious school, perhaps be home-schooled, and conform to strict codes of belief and behavior for years on end, this is hugely important.

Another obstacle in treatment 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 sufferers 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 counsellor or pastor advises more confession and greater obedience as curative, and warns that a secular

interpretation 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 do it. 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.'*

RTS 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 PTSD, which results from experiencing or being confronted with death or serious injury and causing 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 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 lifelong 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.

Key dysfunctions in RTS are:

- **Cognitive:** Confusion, difficulty with decision-making and critical thinking, dissociation, identity confusion
- **Affective:** Anxiety, panic attacks, depression, suicidal ideation, anger, grief, guilt, loneliness, lack of meaning
- **Functional:** Sleep and eating disorders, nightmares, sexual dysfunction, substance abuse, somatization
- **Social/cultural:** Rupture of family and social network, employment issues, financial stress, problems acculturating into society, interpersonal dysfunction

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

*'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.'*

*'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*

*Continued overleaf*



# Religious Trauma Syndrome: It's Time To Recognise It

Continued from previous page

*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."*

*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 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.*

The severity of RTS ranges and depends on a number of factors. Persons most at risk of RTS are those who were:

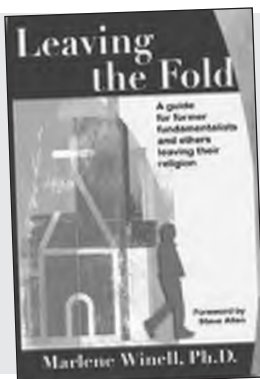
- raised in their religion
- sheltered from the rest of the world
- very sincerely and personally involved, and/or
- from a very controlling form of religion

The important thing for us to realise is that RTS is real. While it may be easier to understand the damage done by sexual abuse or natural disaster, religious practices can be just as harmful. More people are needing help and the taboos about criticising religion need to be questioned.

<sup>1</sup> The American Religious Identification Survey ([www.americanreligionsurvey-aris.org](http://www.americanreligionsurvey-aris.org)) from 2008 indicates that Americans by the millions are making an exodus from their faith. The number of people who affiliate themselves with 'No Religion' has nearly doubled from 1990 to 2008. The 18.7 million people who fall in this gap have presumably come from mainline Protestant, Baptist, and Catholic churches, which have lost 12.7 million believers during the same timeframe.



(Above) Drawings by Carol George, as part of her art therapy for recovering from RTS



**Marlene Winell** is the author of *Leaving the Fold: A Guide for Former Fundamentalists and Others Leaving their Religion*, published by Apocryphile Press and available from most online booksellers.

Dr Winell also has weekend retreats and an ongoing recovery group on-line called Release and Reclaim for people recovering from RTS and rebuilding their lives. The group is confidential, includes a forum and international conference calls, and open to new members. Participants are at various stages of recovery and from varied backgrounds. For more information, email [journeyfree.org@gmail.com](mailto:journeyfree.org@gmail.com) or visit [www.journeyfree.org](http://www.journeyfree.org) or [marlenewinell.net](http://marlenewinell.net).

## Coming up in the next two issues:

- Understanding RTS: Trauma from religion, trauma from leaving religion
- Why RTS is so invisible