



Understanding Religious Trauma Syndrome: Trauma from leaving religion

In her final article on Religious Trauma Syndrome (RTS), Marlene Winell addresses the trauma of severing connections with a faith and faith community. Follow the weblink on page 21 to the full version, which includes discussions about how RTS relates to established work in the trauma field

Losing one's faith, or leaving one's religion, 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 recognised 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 handling enormous cognitive dissonance in order to get by in the 'real world', and conforming to repressive codes of behaviour. 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.

The challenges of leaving are daunting. For most, 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, depending on their personality and the details of their religious past, it may be possible simply to 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, 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... 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 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. Everything a person has believed to be true is shattered.

'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.'

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.'



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 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 to 'blame the victim' rather than support them.

Religious counsellors, who often have little training in psychology, will redirect clients 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 counselling, but fail again and feel hopeless or evil or crazy. No one concludes that it is the religion itself that is at fault.

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 counsellor 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 retraumatised again and again through minimising 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 had been discriminated against, beaten, sexually abused, traumatised 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. Child protection agencies will aggressively rescue children who are physically or sexually abused, but the deep wounding and mental damage cause 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.

'I guess ultimately I've made my peace intellectually... emotionally I can't convince myself I'm not going to hell for every little thing.'

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 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

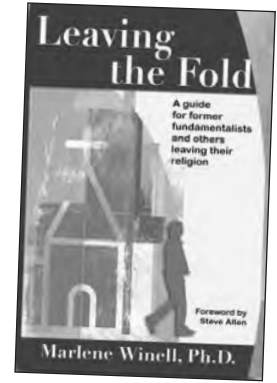


All images are taken from the art exhibition *From Holy to Whole* (<http://goo.gl/BjBbO>)



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

Dr Winell also has weekend retreats and an ongoing recovery group online 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 is open to new members. Participants are at various stages of recovery and from varied backgrounds. For more information, email journeyfree.org@gmail.com or visit www.journeyfree.org or marlenewinell.net.



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... 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 recognise the seriousness of RTS. 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.

The full length version of this - **which includes discussions about how RTS links to established work in the trauma field** - and Dr Winell's other articles can be viewed online at www.babcp.com/RTS

Dear Editor

I welcome the fact that you are publishing Dr Winell's articles in your magazine.

I would like to say that I am not a trained counsellor and have no psychological training – but I am a valid human being with worth and value. From the age of 15, I spent several years in what I consider to be a fundamentalist religious environment. In short, I can honestly say that this was the most damaging time of my life. I was the most 'Christian' person I could be – with utter devotion to a faith that trapped me into a closed system of logic. I didn't develop emotionally and never learned about healthy sexuality. In fact, because I am gay I was not allowed to continue attending one church because I refused to follow their guidance to 'change' my sexuality.

I was thankful that I experienced a time in some more liberal church environments, but unfortunately, in general, these churches do not seem to be that common. It is only recently that I saw my need to move away from Christianity altogether. I can no longer tolerate the damaging ideas and destructive messages that it taught me. I have been experiencing depression for some time now. Although I have learnt many useful techniques in therapy, there was no recognition of RTS. I believe this has led to my depression persisting. I fully appreciate that some people can benefit from religion – but this does not validate its truth. Fundamentalist churches exist right throughout the UK, whether professionals recognise it or not. The likelihood is that there's one very near to where you live. RTS exists. The likelihood is that someone nearby is suffering from it, or may do so in the future. The fact that RTS is not recognised should surely mean that professionals should be open-minded to listen in the area. If it happens to offend Christians, why should that be a reason not to raise awareness? I doubt that survivors of other abuse (such as domestic violence) would be encouraged to return to the source of their abuse, so why does it make sense for ex-Christians or Christians leaving the fold to consider Christian-based counselling?

When I looked for a counsellor to help me understand my religious trauma in the UK, I couldn't find my way. Hopefully, by raising awareness, those in the UK who provide counselling services will gain an increased awareness of the issue.

I hope that you will consider publishing my letter, so that your readers can see how this issue is real from a lay person's perspective.

Many thanks and kind regards

Aaron Dakin

(Address supplied)

Aaron is not a BABCP member