

The Crazy-Making in Christianity:

A look at real psychological harm

By Marlene Winell and Valerie Tarico

I am 30 years old and I am struggling to find sanity. Between the Christian schools, homeschooling, the Christian group home (indoctrinating work camp) and different churches in different cities, I am a psychological, emotional and spiritual mess. --A former Evangelical

If a former believer says that Christianity made him depressed, obsessive, or post-traumatic, he is likely to be dismissed as exaggerating. He might describe panic attacks about the rapture; moods that swing from ecstasy about God's overwhelming love to suicidal self-loathing about repeated sins; or an obsession with sexual purity. A symptom like one of these clearly has a religious component, yet many people instinctively blame the victim. They will say that the wounded former believer was prone to anxiety or depression or obsession in the first place—that his Christianity somehow got corrupted by his predisposition to psychological problems. Or they will say that he wasn't a real Christian. If only he had *prayed in faith believing* or loved God *with all his heart, soul and mind*, if only he had really been saved—then he would have experienced the peace that passes all understanding.

But the reality is far more complex. It is true that symptoms like depression or panic attacks most often strike those of us who are vulnerable, perhaps because of genetics or perhaps because situational stressors have worn us down. But the reality is that Christian beliefs and Christian living can create those stressors, even setting up multigenerational patterns of abuse, trauma, and self-abuse. Also, over time some religious beliefs can create habitual thought patterns that actually alter brain function, making it difficult for people to heal or grow.

Christians like to talk about the benefits of faith. Testimonies are filled with miraculous transformations: drug abusers go sober; compulsive gamblers break their addictions, guilty lonely people feel flooded with forgiveness and love. So, it is hard for many Christians to

imagine that the opposite might also be true—that Christianity sometimes traps people in a cycle of self-doubt, self-criticism and self-punishment that can drive vulnerable children and adults to mental illness or suicide. There are “crazy-making” aspects of this thought system that are quite serious.

I've been told that I may suffer from hadephobia (a condition that is the fear of hell) and that I should seek medical advice. What should I do? I worry that people I love will burn in hell. Is this normal?

The best research available, taken together, shows a modest positive correlation between religious involvement and mental health.¹² That said, this research is correlational, with some studies showing positive associations, some showing negative associations, and some showing none at all. This is likely due to the wide variety of ways in which religious involvement and mental health are measured, but also to the enormous variations in religion itself.

While the born-again experience can provide dramatic and sometimes instantaneous relief from psychological symptoms or addiction, a similar transformation occurs in many religions and secular self-help intensives. Flo Conway and Jim Siegelman explore this process in their now classic book, *Snapping: America's Epidemic of Sudden Personality Change*³. In fact, people leaving a restrictive religion have described their experience in similar terms—a sudden flood of freedom, joy, and purpose. Some call their deconversion being “born again again.” Here is one of them:

¹ Hackney, Charles H. Sanders, Glenn S. "Religiosity and Mental Health: A Meta-Analysis of Recent Studies." *Journal For The Scientific Study Of Religion* 42, no. 1 (March 2003): 43-55.

² Gene G. Ano and Erin B. Vasconcelles. “Religious coping and psychological adjustment to stress. A meta analysis.” *Journal of Clinical Psychology* 61, no 4 (April 2005): 461-480.

³ Flo Conway and Jim Siegelman, *Snapping: America's Epidemic of Sudden Personality Change*, 2nd Ed. (New York: Stillpoint Press, 1995).

Add me to the list of people whose depression and self-doubt and self-loathing and etc. etc. etc. all got better after the huge weight of religious oppression was lifted. I am now beginning to feel that "peace that passes all understanding" that Christians are always talking about (but never seem to find). Irony – Xphish

It is common to consider religion a private affair. Yet beliefs are not just personal when they motivate action that affects other individuals or public policy. Religious beliefs can compel good people to behave horribly—to shun friends, beat their children, or kill gays, because in the mental universe created by belief those bad things are the lesser evil. Most often though, the harm is psychological and the victim is the believer himself.

The purveyors of religion insist that their product is so powerful it can transform a life, but somehow, magically, it has no risks. In reality, when a medicine is powerful, it usually has the potential to be toxic, especially in the wrong combination or at the wrong dose. And religion is powerful medicine!

In this chapter, we will discuss why Christianity is so powerful and how it causes psychological harm—how it can stunt child development, why females are particularly at risk, what religious trauma looks like, and how former believers can reclaim their lives and health. For the purpose of this discussion, we will focus on the variants of Christianity that are based on a literal interpretation of the Bible. These include Evangelical and fundamentalist churches, the Church of Latter Day Saints, and other conservative sects. These groups share the characteristics of requiring conformity for membership, a view that humans need salvation, and a focus on the spiritual world as

superior to the natural world. These views are in contrast to liberal, progressive Christian churches with a humanistic viewpoint, a focus on the present, and social justice.

It is important to understand that Christianity is not just a religion. It is a broad, encompassing lens through which believers experience the world. It also permeates Western civilization. As such, it can be as difficult to examine as the air we breathe, and just as important. Christian assumptions based on symbols, laws and nomenclature are so ubiquitous in our culture as to blind even many nonbelievers to the harm done in the name of God.

Religion Exploits Normal Human Mental Processes.

To understand the power of religion, it is helpful to understand a bit about the structure of the human mind. Rationalism, a 350-year-old theory of mind sees humans as rational beings, guided by conscious thought and intention. Findings in cognitive science say otherwise.

Psychologist Daniel Kahneman won a Nobel Prize in 2002 for his pioneering work on decision making.⁴ At the time Kahneman began, scholars believed that human beings were “rational actors,” especially in the economic sphere, and that most of our own motives and beliefs were available to our conscious minds. Kahneman and his colleague Amos Tversky showed that this is far from true. Instead, as it turns out, much of our mental activity has little to do with rationality and is utterly inaccessible to the conscious mind.

⁴ Daniel Kahneman, *Thinking Fast and Slow*. (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, New York, 2011)

The preferences, intentions and decisions that shape our lives are in turn shaped by memories and associations that can get laid down before we even develop the capacity for rational analysis. Daniel Siegel is a clinical professor of psychiatry at the UCLA who researches and writes about trauma.⁵ He explains that we have both “explicit” and “implicit” memories stored in our brains, regardless of conscious awareness. The implicit memories go back to birth and include our attachment experience, which has a lifelong impact.

Cognitive linguist George Lakoff is known for the concept of *frames*, popularized through a small book called *Don't Think of an Elephant*.⁶ “People use frames – deep-seated mental structures about how the world works – to understand facts. Frames are in our brains and define our common sense. It is impossible to think or communicate without activating frames, and so which frame is activated is of crucial importance.”⁷

Frames are acquired unconsciously and operate unconsciously but determine the shape of conscious thought. According to cognitive linguistics, words link to images, memories, and related concepts that are tangled together via neural networks. As a consequence we make sense of the world

⁵ Daniel Siegel, *The Developing Mind: How Relationships and the Brain Interact to Shape Who We Are*, 2nd Ed. (New York: Guilford Press, 2012).

⁶ George Lakoff, *Don't Think of an Elephant!: Know Your Values and Frame the Debate--The Essential Guide for Progressives* (Chelsea Green Publishing, Vermont, 2004).

⁷ George Lakoff, *Thinking Points, Communicating Our American Values and Vision* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2006) P. 10.

through metaphors that let us evaluate unfamiliar situations based on those that are more familiar. For example, when political conservatives and liberals envision a healthy society they both use the family as model for how government should work. But where conservatives try to replicate a “strict father” or authoritarian model, liberals incline toward a “nurturing parent.” These “deep frames” lead to very different social priorities. An understanding of frames helps us understand why religious thinking can seem so alien to outsiders, for people with different deep frames think differently and reach different conclusions with the same facts.

Aspects of cognition like these determine how we go through life, what causes us distress, which goals we pursue and which we abandon, how we respond to failure, how we respond when other people hurt us—and how we respond when we hurt them. Religion derives its power in large part because it shapes these unconscious processes: the frames, metaphors, intuitions and emotions that operate before we even have a chance at conscious thought.

Some Religious Beliefs and Practices are More Harmful Than Others.

The social sciences offer insight into universal cognitive and social processes that underpin religion broadly, but when it comes to questions of benefit and harm, huge differences emerge. More rigorous research is needed, but mounting case study data suggest that, when it comes to psychological damage, certain religious beliefs and practices are reliably more toxic than others.

Janet Heimlich is an investigative journalist who has explored religious child maltreatment, which describes abuse and neglect in the service of religious belief. In her book, *Breaking their Will*,⁸ Heimlich identifies three characteristics of religious groups that are particularly prone to harming children.⁹ Clinical work with *reclaimers*, that is, people who are reclaiming their lives and in recovery from toxic religion,¹⁰ suggests that these same qualities put adults at risk, along with a particular set of manipulations found in fundamentalist Christian churches¹¹ and biblical literalism¹².

⁸ Janet Heimlich, *Breaking Their Will: Shedding Light on Religious Child Maltreatment* (Amherst, New York: Prometheus, 2011).

⁹ Valerie Tarico, "The Fragile Boundary Between Religion and Child Abuse," Awaypoint.wordpress.com, (May 8, 2011).

<http://awaypoint.wordpress.com/2011/05/08/the-fragile-boundary-between-religion-and-child-abuse/>

¹⁰ Marlene Winell, "Reclaimers" July, 2012 (Online at Exchristian website:

http://new.exchristian.net/2012/07/reclaimers.html?utm_source=Exchristian.net-EncouragingEx-christians&utm_medium=Exchristian.net-EncouragingEx-christians&utm_campaign=ExChristian.Net+---+encouraging+exChristians&utm_content=ExChristian.Net+---+encouraging+ex-Christians#.Uv66BPbMe8x)

¹¹ Marlene Winell, *Leaving the Fold: A Guide for Former Fundamentalists and Others Leaving Their Religion* (Apocryphile Press, Berkeley, CA, 1993, 2007).

¹² Edmund D. Cohen, *The Mind of the Bible-Believer* (Amherst, New York: Prometheus, 1988)

1) Authoritarianism, creates a rigid power hierarchy and demands unquestioning obedience. In major theistic religions, this hierarchy has a god or gods at the top, represented by powerful church leaders who have power over male believers, who in turn have power over females and children. Authoritarian Christian sects often teach that “male headship” is God’s will. Parents may go so far as beating or starving their children on the authority of godly leaders. A book titled, *To Train Up a Child*, by minister Michael Pearl and his wife Debi,¹³ has been found in the homes of three Christian adoptive families who have punished their children to death.

2) Isolation or separatism, is promoted as a means of maintaining spiritual purity. Evangelical Christians warn against being “unequally yoked” with nonbelievers in marriages and even friendships. New converts often are encouraged to pull away from extended family members and old friends, except when there may be opportunities to convert them. Some churches encourage older members to take in young single adults and house them within a godly context until they find spiritually compatible partners, a process known by cult analysts as “shepherding.” Home schoolers and the Christian equivalent of madrassas cut off children from outside sources of information, often teaching rote learning and unquestioning obedience rather than broad curiosity.

3) Fear of sin, hell, a looming “end-times” apocalypse, or amoral heathens binds people to the group, which then provides the only safe escape

¹³ Michael Pearl and Debi Pearl, *To Train Up a Child: Turning the Hearts of the Fathers to the Children* (Pleasantville, TN: No Greater Joy Ministries, 2011)

from the horrifying dangers on the outside. In Evangelical *Hell Houses*, Halloween is used as an occasion to terrify children and teens about the tortures that await the damned. In the *Left Behind* book series,¹⁴ the world degenerates into a bloodbath without the stabilizing presence of believers. Since the religious group is the only alternative to these horrors, anything that threatens the group itself—like criticism, taxation, scientific findings, or civil rights regulations—also becomes a target of fear.

Psychologist Margaret Thaler Singer, author of the now classic *Cults in Our Midst*,¹⁵ spent years analyzing the dynamics of groups that systematically manipulate social and psychological influence, including religious sects and some self-help groups. Any former Evangelical will readily see their church in her analysis. Like Heimlich, Singer identified authoritarianism and separatism as core dynamics of groups that cause the most harm. Such groups often claim simply to attract “seekers.” In reality, they engage in sophisticated recruiting activities, and by doing so they are able to draw in people who are often are intelligent, educated, and otherwise psychologically healthy.

While in the group, members may take on what Singer calls a “pseudopersonality.” Upon breaking free, former members may experience disorientation, guilt, anxiety, depression, and even panic. But gradually their individuality and their capacity for curiosity and delight re-emerge. Hundreds

¹⁴ Tim Lahaye and Jerry B. Jenkins, *Left Behind* series of 12 adult books and 40 young adult books (Carol Stream, IL, Tyndale House Publishers, 1995-2004)

¹⁵ Margaret Thaler Singer, *Cults in Our Midst: The Continuing Fight Against Their Hidden Menace* (Hoboken, NJ: Jossey-Bass, 2003)

of testimonials at websites like ExChristian.net bear witness to this process, making it clear that it is not just “cults,” or fringe groups that use powerful tactics of mind control. In fact, of the thousands of believers currently leaving mainstream Christian churches,¹⁶ many who seek help with recovery wrestle with the same issues as former “cult” members.

Half a century ago, psychiatrist Robert Lifton¹⁷ studied totalistic political regimes that were engaged in the process of thought reform, in particular the communist regimes of China and North Korea. He identified eight psychological themes associated with destructive mind control. As subsequent scholars have pointed out, many are used by controlling religious sects:

1. *Milieu control* scripts communications among insiders and discourages communication with outsiders.
2. *Loaded language* creates a form of “group-speak” and constricts thinking. It provides soothing mantras and labels for dismissing criticism or doubt.
3. *Demands for purity* mean that thoughts and behavior get measured against an ideological ideal, the One Right Way.

¹⁶ Pew Research Religion and Public Life Project. “‘Nones’ on the Rise.” The number of Americans who do not identify with any religion continues to grow at a rapid pace. One-fifth of the U.S. public – and a third of adults under 30 – are religiously unaffiliated today, the highest percentages ever in Pew Research Center polling. (Oct. 9, 2012. Available at:

<http://www.pewforum.org/Unaffiliated/nones-on-the-rise.aspx>)

¹⁷ Robert Lifton, *Thought Reform and the Psychology of Totalism*, pp. 419-425.

4. *Confession rituals* elicit moral emotions like shame and guilt and create a heightened sense that someone is always watching.
5. *Mystical manipulation* makes people think that new feelings and thoughts have arisen spontaneously. It creates the illusion that members are there by their own choice.
6. *Doctrine over person* means that people see their own personal history through the lens of ideology. Over time, they may become convinced that they were bad, addicted, or mentally ill prior to joining the group despite evidence to the contrary.
7. *Sacred science* is the mechanism by which groups seek to justify and rationalize their belief system by tying it loosely to what is known about the natural world, philosophy or social science.
8. *Dispensing existence* gives the group the power of life and death—or eternal life. Members typically believe that they are a part of a chosen elite while outsiders are lesser beings.

Each of these psychological mechanisms can be applied for either secular or religious purposes. When coupled with a charismatic authority figure, the legitimizing stamp of an ancient text, and socially sanctioned religious structure, their power cannot be overstated.

Bible Belief Creates an Authoritarian, Isolative, Threat-based Model of Reality

In Bible-believing Christianity, psychological mind-control mechanisms are coupled with beliefs from the Iron Age, including the belief that women

and children are possessions of men, that children who are not hit become spoiled, that each of us is born “utterly depraved”, and that God demands unquestioning obedience. In this view, the salvation and righteousness of believers is constantly under threat from outsiders and dark spiritual forces. Consequently, Christians need to separate themselves emotionally, spiritually, and socially from the world. These beliefs are fundamental to their overarching mental framework or “deep frame” as Lakoff would call it. Small wonder then, that many Christians emerge wounded.

It is important to remember that this mindset permeates to a deep subconscious level. This is a realm of imagery, symbols, metaphor, emotion, instinct, and primary needs. Nature and nurture merge into a template for viewing the world which then filters every experience. The template selectively allows only the information that confirms their model of reality, creating a subjective sense of its veracity.

On the societal scale, humanity has been going through a massive shift for centuries, transitioning from a supernatural view of a world dominated by forces of good and evil to a natural understanding of the universe. The Bible-based Christian population however, might be considered a subset of the general population that is still within the old framework, that is, supernaturalism.

Here are some basic assumptions of the supernatural Christian model of reality:

1. Humans live in a world of sin and danger, dominated by Satan since the Fall of Man.

2. Earthly life is taking part in “spiritual warfare,” along with real spiritual entities of good and evil.
3. There is a timeline for all existence set by God, starting with Creation and ending with the earth’s destruction and Final Judgment,.
4. Values, morals, and all things important are eternal and unchanging, authored by God who answers to no one.
5. Humans are sinful by nature, guilty and needing salvation, but lacking any ability to save themselves except to repent and subject their will to God.
6. Human life on earth is unimportant in the cosmic scheme. Pleasure is for the afterlife, and the “flesh” is sinful. Life’s purpose is to serve God.
7. Ultimately God is in control and will have justice. Humans do not need to understand His mysterious ways, only have faith and not question. Attempts to control are sinful.

This Christian model of reality has built within it mechanisms for its own survival: fear and dependence, circular reasoning, threats for leaving, social supports for staying, and obstructions that prevent outside information from reaching insiders, especially children. Thus, believers not only get hurt, they get stuck.

Here I am, a fifty-one year old college professor, still smarting from the wounds inflicted by the righteous when I was a child. It is a slow, festering wound, one that smarts every day—in some way or another.... I thought I would leave all of that “God loves... God hates...” stuff behind, but not so.

Such deep and confusing fear is not

Children are Targeted for Indoctrination Because the Child Mind is Uniquely Vulnerable.

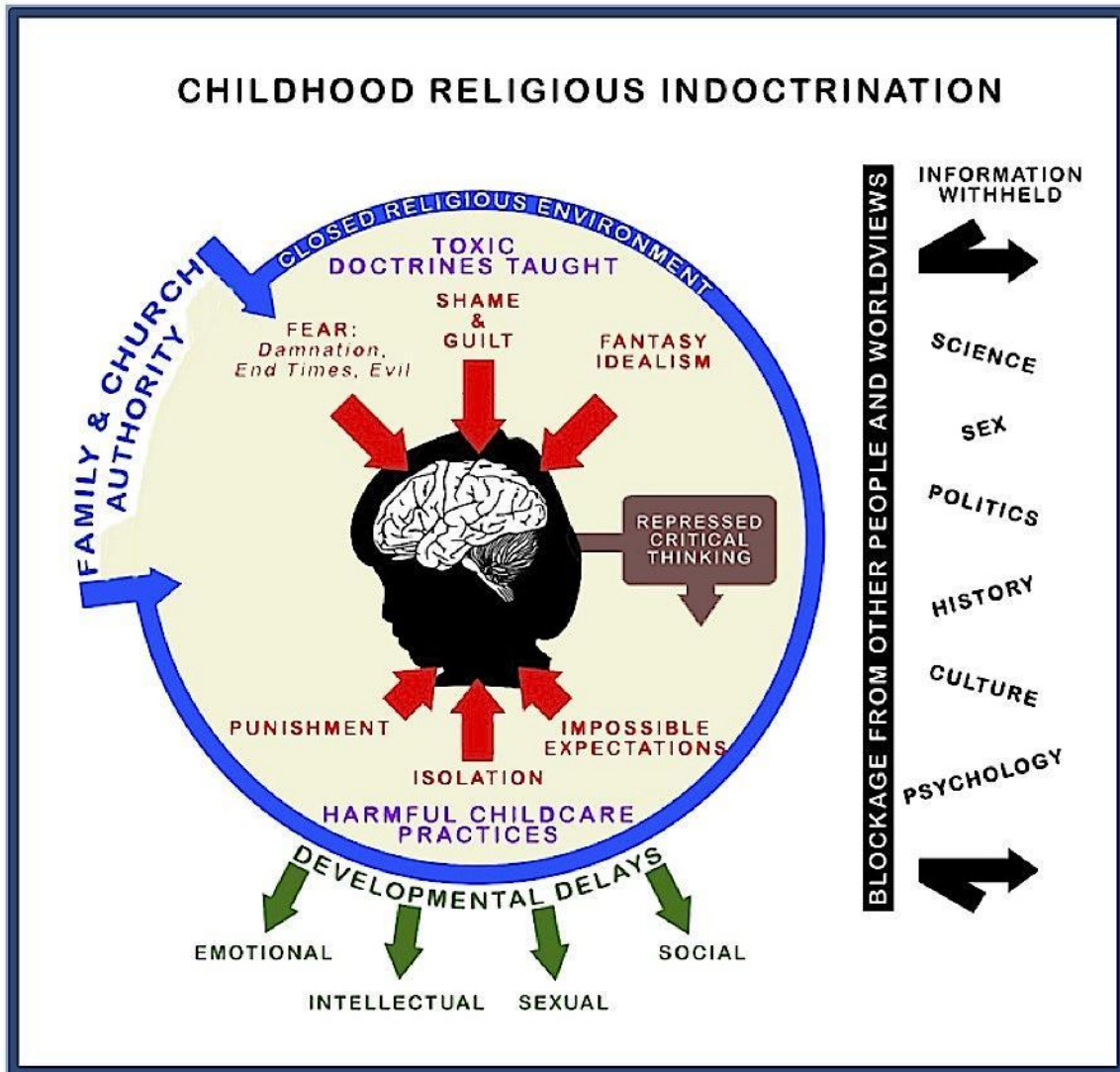
Nowhere is the contrast of viewpoints more stark than in the secular and religious understandings of childhood.¹⁸ In the biblical view, a child is not a being that is born with amazing capabilities that will emerge with the right conditions like a beautiful flower in a well-attended garden. Rather, a child is born in sin, weak, ignorant, and rebellious, needing discipline to learn obedience. Independent thinking is dangerous pride.

Because the child's mind is uniquely susceptible to religious ideas, religious indoctrination particularly targets vulnerable young children. A child's mind does not process information in the same way as an adult's because the brain is not fully formed.¹⁹ Cognitive development before age seven lacks abstract reasoning. Thinking is magical and primitive, black and white. Also, young humans are wired to obey authority because they are dependent on their caregivers just for survival. Much of their brain growth and development has to happen *after* birth, which means that children are extremely vulnerable

¹⁸ Valerie Tarico, "Why Bible believers have such a hard time getting child protection right," AwayPoint (October 21, 2013), <http://awaypoint.wordpress.com/2013/10/21/why-bible-believers-have-such-a-hard-time-getting-child-protection-right/>.

¹⁹ Jean Piaget, (1977). Howard E. Gruber, Jean Jacques Voneche (Eds.) *The Essential Piaget*. (New York: Basic Books, 1977).

to environmental influences in the first few years when neuronal pathways are formed.



The experiences of infancy and early childhood provide the organizing framework for the expression of a child's intelligence, emotions, and personality. Consequently, children who suffer early abuse or deprivation endure repercussions into adolescence and adulthood. When children are exposed to chronic, traumatic stress, their brains overdevelop the fear

response and automatically trigger that response later on. This is called *hyperarousal*²⁰. Maltreatment may also permanently alter the brain's ability to use serotonin, which helps produce feelings of well-being and emotional stability.²¹ The Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE) study is a large-scale, long-term study that has documented the link between childhood abuse and neglect and later adverse experiences such as physical and mental illness and high-risk behaviors.²²

Fundamentalist Christianity puts a young child at risk for this kind of damage because:

1. The parents and church community have a view of the child as sinful and will communicate this in verbal and nonverbal ways, producing a degraded sense of self-worth. Coupled with the fear of punishment, this creates an impaired ability to think critically.
2. The parenting style of discipline is Bible-based, which means it interprets much of normal child behavior as "willfulness" and "rebellion" and emphasizes obedience. Corporal punishment is an expected part of parenting.

²⁰Bruce Duncan Perry, "The Neurodevelopmental Impact of Violence in Childhood" in Diane Schetky & Elissa Benedek (Eds.), *Textbook of Child and Adolescent Forensic Psychiatry* (Washington, DC: American Psychiatric Press, Inc., 2001) Pp. 221-238.

²¹ Jane Healy, *Your Child's Growing Mind: Brain Development and Learning from Birth to Adolescence* (New York: Broadway Books, 2004).

²²Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (n.d.). *Adverse Childhood Experiences Study*. (Retrieved August 2009 from www.cdc.gov/nccdphp/ACE/)

3. Christian doctrines (especially the fear of damnation and hell) are taught that the child can understand only in the most primitive manner, which produces intense and potentially traumatizing emotion.

4. The child is not exposed to outside information for comparison. Instead, the religion is taught as the only Truth, delivered by powerful authorities with dire consequences for disbelief. Education and science are limited and filtered.

5. The immersion in Christian doctrine and mindset while being separated and deprived of growth opportunities creates serious developmental delays.

By age five a child's brain can understand primitive cause-and-effect logic and picture situations that are not present. Children at this age are credulous, meaning they trust what people in authority tell them. They also have a tenuous grip on reality. They often have imaginary friends; dreams are quite real; and fantasy blurs with the mundane. To a child this age, it is eminently possible that Santa Claus lives at the North Pole and delivers presents if you are good *and* that 2000 years ago a man died a horrible death because you are naughty. Adam and Eve, Noah's ark, the Rapture, and hell, all can be quite real. The problem is that many of these teachings are terrifying.

Developmentally, a child of five or six is just beginning to imagine another person's point of view. This is why the manipulative presentation of Jesus undergoing grossly horrible suffering is such a violation of the child's burgeoning ability to feel for others. Then the child is blamed for making the

death necessary, and the child's new ability to connect cause and event makes the horror complete.

When assaulted with such images and ideas at a young age, a child has no chance of emotional self-defense. Christian teachings that *sound true* when they are embedded in the child's mind at this tender age can *feel true* for a lifetime. Even decades later former believers who intellectually reject these ideas can feel intense fear or shame when their unconscious mind is triggered, as we shall show shortly.

For many years, one conversion technique targeting children and adolescents has been the use of movies about the "End Times." This means a "Rapture" event, when real Christians are taken up to heaven leaving the earth to "Tribulation," a terrifying time when an evil Antichrist will reign and the world will descend into anarchy. Dylan Peterson is a horror film reviewer who was introduced to the genre of horror as a child in church, watching a film called, *A Thief in the Night*.²³ He writes:

The whole congregation was there on a dark, foggy night. . . . Christian horror film night. . . . To an 8 year old, a claymation inter-dimensional monster isn't nearly as frightening as the thought of having your parents swept up by a Jesus in the clouds who is leaving you on a violent and godless earth to fend for yourself until the universe explodes. . . . The film is about 10 percent theology, and 90 percent

²³ Dylan Peterson, "A Thief in the Night Keeps Me Awake" (April 30, 2009, movie review at the website:

<http://dylanclub.blogspot.com/2009/04/thief-in-night-keeps-me-awake.html>)

old-school horror. . . . to those who have weak wills, and to children, this film is truth.

Another adult, recalling a scene in which the main character, Patty, is beheaded by guillotine, says she was so young that she remembers it as if it really happened, and to this day gets triggered at the sight of a white van, which in the movie, took people away to be tortured.

Because children so are impressionable, young children are the target of aggressive "child evangelism," including "Good News Clubs" posing as benign after-school programs for children. According to Eric Cernyar, who is part of a group that is alerting the public, over 4,000 Good News Clubs in America's public schools teach 5-12 year-olds that they are sinful from birth and deserve to die and go to Hell. Children are warned not become close friends with non-Christian classmates and to avoid thoughts or scientific facts that displease God.²⁴

In his book, *Authoritarian Conditioning*, Bob Altemeyer describes how Christians groom children to become "authoritarian followers."²⁵ Cernyar discusses this as part of the Good News Clubs and the damage that can result.

²⁴ Eric Cernyar, "The Good News Club: Not Safe for Children" (www.intrinsicdignity.com)

²⁵ Bob Altemeyer, *The Authoritarians* (Winnepeg, 2006. Entire text available at <http://members.shaw.ca/jeanaltemeyer/drBob/TheAuth>

Despite the fact that I've intellectually broken from Christianity, however, I cannot seem to let go of my beliefs. Every single day is a nightmare, plagued with mild panic attacks, de-realization, doubt, OCD, etc. Sometimes I think "Oh, but this is exactly what they warned me about, the world can't be trusted, and it doesn't matter what reason says, the fact is that Christianity is true no matter what and even if it flies in the face of all reason, REASON IS UNRELIABLE, AND YOU JUST HAVE TO KEEP BELIEVING." I know this is illogical, but every time I

Over time, this authoritarian conditioning breeds a sense of personal inadequacy and endangerment. The traumatized self becomes angry, hostile, and resentful. However, because the religion that produces, legitimizes, and represses the trauma is beyond question, the traumatized individual remains blind to its causes.

This description parallels psychologist Alice Miller's view of unconscious rage in a multi-generational cycle of abuse.²⁶ Miller is careful to clarify that by "abuse" she does not only mean physical violence or sexual violation, she is also concerned with psychological abuse perpetrated by one or both parents on their child.

Damage from religious abuse is exacerbated by the nature of the teachings themselves. The self is bad and incapable, independent thinking is sinful, feelings are untrustworthy, and a hierarchy of powerful authority extends all the way up to God. Questioning what one has been taught is dangerous, with threats of abandonment and eternal torture.

Individuals who have suffered abuse of this kind have the grave disadvantage of lacking the critical thinking skills and self-confidence to examine their indoctrination. The abuse disables the very mechanisms that would empower disengagement and freedom. Thus a person emerging from the fog can feel like a small child in a frightening and bewildering world.

Harms Range From Mild to Catastrophic.

²⁶ Alice Miller, *For Your Own Good: Hidden Cruelty in Child-Rearing and the Roots of*

Violence, 3rd Ed. (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2002)

One requirement for success as a sincere Christian is to find a way to believe that which would be unbelievable under normal rules of evidence and inquiry. Christianity contains concepts that help to safeguard belief, such as limiting outside information, practicing thought control, and self-denigration; but for some people the emotional numbing and intellectual suicide just isn't enough. In other words, for a significant number of children in Christian families, the religion just doesn't "take." This can ultimately rejection or abandonment.

Others experience the threats and fear too keenly. For them, childhood can be torturous, and they may carry injuries into adulthood.

Still others are able to sincerely devote themselves to the faith as children but confront problems when they mature. They wrestle with factual and moral contradictions in the Bible and the church, or discover surprising alternatives. This can feel confusing and terrifying - like the whole world is falling apart. As explained in Valerie Tarico's book, *Trusting Doubt*,²⁷ the need to reexamine core values of love and truth is critical because biblical dogma twists these words beyond recognition.

I'm so wounded and traumatized from all the empty promises and circular reasoning. Twisting myself into a pretzel to make my life fit into the Christian world. I want freedom from the anxiety and guilt, I want to enjoy the good things that are happening in my life and not feel stained and dirty.

A number of factors affect the degree of impact, including individual differences and variations in family dynamics, churches and communities. For

²⁷ Valerie Tarico, *Trusting Doubt: A Former Evangelical Looks at Old Beliefs in a New*

Light (Independence, VA: Oracle Institute Press, 2010).

some people the impact can include significant psychological symptoms and ruptured families. For others, life satisfaction is diminished by the need to struggle with “leftovers” from Christianity such as sexual repression, fear of death, or trouble enjoying this life. For virtually everyone leaving a Bible-based Christian faith, the adjustment brings stress and challenge.

Delayed Development and Life Skills. A person who spends childhood or young adulthood immersed in a fundamentalist version of reality may miss out on skills that allow adults to flourish in the world outside. One example is the ability to think critically and independently. One reclamer in therapy exclaimed, “I never had an original thought!” Those who have been taught to repress ungodly feelings like anger or sadness may lack practice in identifying, regulating, and expressing emotions.

Normal sexuality can be problematic when the “flesh” has been considered sinful prior to marriage, including masturbation and fantasy. Children may grow up with negative body images, ignorance about sexuality or guilt and shame about sexual impulses. Stories abound about sexual problems in adulthood, including tragic wedding nights because there is no switch to turn on the magic of good sex.

Many Christian parents seek to insulate their children from “worldly” influences. In the extreme, this can mean not only home schooling, but cutting off media, not allowing non-Christian friends, avoiding secular activities

I always felt separated from the rest of humanity and Christianity was telling me that I should. I felt shame and it encouraged that. I was indecisive and this is a virtue because we aren't allowed to think for ourselves. I lost pleasure in things because nothing mattered but Jesus and the kingdom but Christianity didn't fulfill me either

like plays or clubs, and spending time at church instead. Children miss out on crucial information— science, culture, history, reproductive health and more. When they grow older and leave such a sheltered environment, adjusting to the secular world can be like immigrating to a new culture. One of the biggest areas of challenge is delayed social development.

Religious Trauma Syndrome. Today, in the field of mental health, the only religious diagnosis in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual* is “Religious or Spiritual Problem.”²⁸ This is merely a supplemental code (V Code) to assist in describing an underlying pathology.²⁹ Unofficially, “scrupulosity,” is the term for obsessive-compulsive symptoms centered around religious themes such as

²⁸ The DSM V diagnosis, V62.89, for Religious or Spiritual Problem reads: “Examples include distressing experiences that involve loss or questioning of faith, problems associated with conversion to a new faith, or questioning of spiritual values that may not necessarily be related to an organized church or religious institution.” This diagnosis has been part of a discussion in developing the recent edition of the DSM manual to consider spirituality a part of culture. The V-Codes have been framed as “diagnoses in the context of life markers and socio-cultural conditions.”

²⁹ James W. Ellor, “Religion and Spirituality Among Older Adults in Light of DSM-5” (*Social Work & Christianity*, Vol. 40, No. 4, 2013) Pp. 372–383.

blasphemy, unforgivable sin, and damnation.³⁰ While each of these diagnoses has a place, neither covers the wide range of harms induced by religion.

Religious Trauma Syndrome (RTS)³¹ is a new term, coined by Marlene Winell to name a recognizable set of symptoms experienced as a result of prolonged exposure to a toxic religious environment and/or the trauma of leaving the religion. It is akin to Complex PTSD, which is defined as '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'.³²

Though related to other kinds of chronic trauma, religious trauma is uniquely mind-twisting. The logic of the religion is circular and blames the victim for problems;

Suddenly all of my fears about hell and the wrath of God has returned to me. . . . I've been completely nauseated and vomiting and shaking The fear that the God of the Bible is real, and the fear that the logic that leads me to believe Christianity just isn't right actually comes from the Devil--or at least from my ever sinful nature--has left me totally doubting my perceptions.

³⁰ Steven J. Seay, "Scrupulosity" (Feb 8, 2012, Available

<http://www.steveseay.com/scrupulosity/>) (Also available at:

<http://www.nacsw.org/RC/49990263.pdf>.)

³¹ Marlene Winell, "Religious Trauma Syndrome: It's Time to Recognize It" (Published as a series in 3 issues of *Cognitive Behavioural Therapy Today*, London, 2011; also available online at: babcp.com/rts)

³² Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia, "Complex post-traumatic stress disorder" (available at http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Complex_post-traumatic_stress_disorder)

the system demands deference to spiritual authorities no matter what they do; and the larger society may not identify a problem or intervene as in cases of physical or sexual abuse, even though the same symptoms of depression and anxiety and panic attacks can occur.

RTS, as a diagnosis, is in early stages of investigation, but appears to be a useful descriptor beyond the labels used for various symptoms – depression, anxiety, grief, anger, relationship issues, and others. It is our hope that it will lead to more knowledge, training, and treatment. Like the naming of other disorders such as anorexia or Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD), the RTS label can help sufferers feel less alone, confused, and self-blaming.

Leaving the Fold. Breaking out of a restrictive, mind-controlling religion can be liberating: Certain problems end(!), such as trying to twist one's thinking to believe irrational doctrines, and conforming to repressive codes of behavior. However, for many reclaimers making the break is the most disruptive, difficult upheaval they have ever experienced. Individuals who were most sincere, devout, and dedicated often are the ones most traumatized when their religious world crumbles.

Certain areas of trauma research are especially relevant to understanding this experience. One is the shattered assumption framework,³³

³³ Ronnie Janoff-Bulman, *Shattered Assumptions: Towards a New Psychology of Trauma*, (New York: Free Press, 1992).

or 'loss of the assumptive world'.³⁴ According to Beder,³⁵ "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."

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.

Rejecting a religious model of reality that has been passed on through generations is a major cognitive and emotional disruption. For many reclaimers, it is like a death or divorce. Their 'relationship' with God was a central assumption of their lives, and giving it up feels like an enormous loss to be grieved. It can be like losing a lover, a parent, or best friend. As one

I was free for the first time in my life to do whatever I wanted, free from a stifling religion. But then I'd wake up in the morning crying because I miss my family.

³⁴ Jeffrey Kauffman, "Safety and the Assumptive World" in *Journal of the Assumptive World* (New York: Brunner-Routledge, 1992) p. 10.

³⁵ Joan Beder, "Loss of the Assumptive World – How We Deal with It" (Omega, 50(4), 2004-2005) Pp. 255-265

My parents have stopped calling me. My dad told me I'm going to hell. After 21 years of marriage my husband feels he cannot accept me since I have left the "church" and is divorcing me.

person put it, "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."

On top of shattered assumptions comes the loss of family and friends. For reclaimers rebuilding their lives, dealing with family rupture is easily one of the most agonizing aspects. The dilemma is to achieve personal integrity while keeping intimacy. Living in a congruent manner, means "coming out" in one's most important relationships and risking serious loss. In fact, some gay reclaimers have said that atheism has been their harder coming out process. Family responses vary, of course, and time helps. Churches also vary, even with official doctrine about rejection. The Mormon Church, for all the intense focus on "family forever," is devastating to leave, and the Jehovah Witnesses require families to shun members who are "disfellowshipped."

The rupture can destroy homes, splitting spouses and alienating parents from children. Holidays can be excruciating.³⁶ If life was structured around the church community, the loss a reclaimer experiences can encompass his or her entire social circle.³⁷ Losing friends and family at a crucial time of personal upheaval, leaves a person alone in a world they have been taught is cruel and meaningless.

³⁶ Marlene Winell and Valerie Tarico, *Heretic Holidays: Tips from Two Religious*

Renegades (Amazon Digital Services, 2012)

³⁷ This is a recording from the Texas Freethought Convention of October, 2010 when

Marlene Winell first presented Religious Trauma Syndrome. (Available at:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Id70RLR4GeE>

Many reclaimers struggle with the emotional aspects of letting go long after they stop believing intellectually. Coming out of a sheltered, repressed environment, the former believer may lack coping skills. Ordinary setbacks can cause paralysis or panic. Phobia indoctrination makes it difficult to avoid the stabbing thought, even years after leaving, that one has made a terrible mistake. Problems with self-worth and fear of punishment can linger.

I am sixty years old and I still feel the guilt of Jesus' death on the cross for my sins and the fact that I was born a lousy sinner. Sadly I have been chronically ill for seven years. Not a day goes by that I am not thinking that I will not get better, because I do not deserve to get better, as a sinner.

Many former believers feel anger about growing up in a world of lies.

They feel robbed of a normal childhood and opportunity to develop and thrive. They have bitterness for being taught they were worthless and in need of salvation. They have anger about terrors of hell, the 'rapture', demons, apostasy,

I have a churning cauldron of rage and hatred inside of me. I will not ever forgive what was done to me in the name of God.

unforgivable sins, and an evil world. They resent not being able to ever feel good or safe. Many are angry that the same teachings are still being inflicted on more children. 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.

Betrayal trauma theory advocates recognizing sociocultural forces at play, not just the pathology of individual trauma survivors.

If I had been beaten, sexually abused, traumatized by an act of violence, or raped, I would be heard. However, I am a trauma victim that society does not hear. . . Christianity took my childhood,

According to researchers, DePrince and Freyd, the most damaging traumas are those that are human-caused and involve interpersonal violence and violation.³⁸ They suggest asking questions about who did the betraying, the nature of the betrayal, and the societal response.

DePrince and Freyd say 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. This is the experience of many reclaimers.

RTS sufferers feel particularly alone because, except in online forums, there is virtually no public discourse in our society about trauma or emotional abuse due to religion. Criticizing religion directly is still taboo.

For Women, Psychological Costs of Belief Include Subjugation and Self-loathing.

Christianity poses a special set of psychological risks for people who, according to the Iron Age hierarchy found in the Bible, are unclean, heathens, or property—and we would like to illustrate this by discussing the plight of women. One woman tells of her sister's wounds:

When Kathy's husband first started showing a pattern of controlling rage, she sought counsel from her Conservative Baptist minister who gave her some biblical advice: pray and stay. After all, the

³⁸ Anne P. DePrince & Jennifer Freyd, "The Harm of Trauma: Pathological Fear, Shattered Assumptions, or Betrayal?" in Jeffrey Kauffman (Ed.), *Loss of the Assumptive World* (New York: Brunner-Routledge, 2002) Pp. 71-82.

Bible says, "Wives submit to your husbands as unto the LORD" (Ephesians 5:22). After all, "the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church" (Ephesians 5:23), and "God will not tempt (aka test) you beyond what you are able to bear" (1 Corinthians 10:13). And didn't Jesus say "a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh" (Matthew 19:5)? So, she stayed and prayed while he threw out the photo albums of her childhood. She stayed and prayed when he became so wildly angry about a pregnancy that she aborted it (despite her belief that this was a terrible sin), which made him even angrier. She stayed and prayed when he ended one argument by cleaning his gun and "accidentally" discharging it. She stayed and prayed while her social support and mental health deteriorated.

In the biblical code, the set of rules that govern a woman's worth and treatment are property laws, not person rights. Like children, slaves, and livestock, women are assets that belong to men. A woman belongs first to her father and then to her husband, and her most valuable and sacred function is to produce offspring of known pedigree. That is why a father can give his daughter in marriage or sell her into slavery. It is why a rapist can be forced to purchase and keep the woman he has violated, but a woman who damages her own worth by having unsanctioned intercourse should be killed. The misogynist practices that most horrify Westerners when they look at Islam are sanctioned in the Bible including rape, forced marriage, child marriage, honor killings, and trafficking.

Even in the New Testament, which reflects the cultural consensus several centuries after the Leviticus code, no writer ever suggests that a woman's consent is needed or even desired prior to sex. Women are advised to submit to their husbands just as slaves are advised to submit to their masters. A woman who wants to learn should ask her husband questions in the privacy of their own home (I Corinthians 14:33-36).

Over the centuries, the fathers and leaders of the Christian church have taken the secondary status of women to heart, and vile quotes pepper their writings in every epoch from the New Testament era to the present.³⁹ Tertullian, the "father of Latin Christianity" waxed eloquent on the subject: "In pain shall you bring forth children, woman, and you shall turn to your husband and he shall rule over you. And do you not know that you are Eve? God's sentence hangs still over all your sex and His punishment weighs down upon you. You are the devil's gateway."

So did Protestant reformer Martin Luther: "The word and works of God is quite clear, that women were made either to be wives or prostitutes." So did

³⁹ Valerie Tarico, "Fifteen Bible Texts Reveal Why God's Own Party is At War With Women," Awaypoint, (March 9, 2012).

<http://awaypoint.wordpress.com/2012/03/09/15-bible-texts-reveal-why-gods-own-party-is-at-war-with-women/>

Valerie Tarico, "Twenty Vile Quotes Against Women By Church Leaders from Augustine to Pat Robertson," Awaypoint, (July 1, 2013).

<http://awaypoint.wordpress.com/2013/07/01/mysogynistquoteschurchfathers/>

the American patriarchs such as Puritan John Dod: "The second duty of the wife is constant obedience and subjection."

And so do modern fundamentalists like mega-church superstar Mark Driscoll: "Women will be saved by going back to that role that God has chosen for them."

In the German society that spawned the Protestant Reformation the role of women became known as *the three k's*: 'Kinder, Kuche, Kirche', meaning children, kitchen, church. Some Christians protest that Jesus himself treated women with dignity and equality, but that is far from the truth. The Jesus of the Gospel writers continues to refer to God as male. He says he has come to fulfill the law—without making an exception for its horribly misogynist dictates. His twelve disciples are all male. He never once suggests that sex should be consensual.

Anecdotal evidence suggests that the combination of denigration and subservience takes a psychological toll on women in Christianity as it does in Islam.⁴⁰ Not only do women submit to marital abuse and undesired sexual contact, some tolerate the same toward their children, and men of God sometimes exploit this vulnerability, as in the case of Catholic and Protestant child sexual abuse. But most of the damage is far more subtle: lower

⁴⁰ Leisa Crawley, "Physical and Mental Health of Muslim Women Across the World: Does Culture and Religion Affect the Health of Muslim Women", Yahoo Voices, September 29, 2010.
<http://voices.yahoo.com/physical-mental-health-muslim-women-across-6872652.html>

self-esteem, less independence and confidence; abandoned dreams and goals. A few years back, a pair of desperate parents wrote to the *Military Religious Freedom Foundation*. Their smart strong daughter was at the Air Force Academy and had been on path to become an Air Force pilot. But through a campus ministry called Cadets for Christ she had gotten wooed into a Christian sect and was now on path to become a submissive housewife.⁴¹ They were seeing the “pseudo-personality” described by Margaret Thaler Singer earlier.

Why Harm Goes Unrecognized. What is the sum cost of having millions of people holding to a misogynist, authoritarian, fear-based supernatural view of the universe? The consequences far-reaching, even global, but many are hidden, for two reasons.

One is the nature of the trauma itself. Unlike other harm, such as physical beating or sexual abuse, the injury is far from obvious to the victim, who has been taught to self-blame. It’s as if a person black and blue from a caning were to think it was self-inflicted.

The second reason that religious harm goes unrecognized is that Christianity is still the cultural backdrop for the indoctrination. While the larger society may not be fundamentalist, references to

⁴¹ Chris Rodda, “Cadets For Christ: Women, Evangelicals, &

Huffington Post, December 26, 2010.

<http://www.huffingtonpost.com/chris-rodda/cadets-1>

I've been in and out of counseling. I've cried out for help to anyone who would listen, only to have my cries fall on deaf ears and turned backs.

Thomas Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (Univ. of Chicago Press, 1962).

God and faith abound. The Bible gets used to swear in witnesses and even the U.S. president. Common phrases are "God willing," "God bless," "God helps those that help themselves," "In God we trust," and so forth. These lend credence to theistic authority.

Religious trauma is difficult to see because it is camouflaged by the respectability of religion in culture. To date, parents are afforded the right to teach their own children whatever doctrines they like, no matter how heinous, degrading, or mentally unhealthy. Even helping professionals largely perceive Christianity as benign. This will need to change for treatment methods to be developed and people to get helped.

Recovery Means Learning to Live in a Whole New World.

"Re-examine all you have been told... Dismiss what insults your Soul."

– Walt Whitman

The personal growth of an individual recovering from fundamentalist Christianity involves a transformation unlike healing from other kinds of trauma. This is because this kind of "deep frame" touches every aspect of reality. For the most devout believers and the most indoctrinated, change can set off emotional break-down or complete existential crisis. Because social supports often fall away and professionals don't understand, it can be a lonely time as well – a dark night of the soul requiring courage and stamina. That said, the end result when a person weathers the storm is a new construction of identity and framework for living life with meaningful new commitments. In essence, an individual goes through a personal *paradigm shift*.

The concept of paradigm shift was famously developed by philosopher Thomas Kuhn⁴², as a way of understanding scientific progress. According to Kuhn, a paradigm is a "constellation of beliefs shared by a group" in a scientific context. A shift happens when "anomalies" appear, leading to questioning of the paradigm and the development of a broader science. Shifts like this have happened many times in the history of science, such as the Copernican revolution, the Darwinian revolution, or Einstein's Theory of Relativity.

For individuals going through the collapse of their religious model of reality, there are striking similarities. Their initial worldview of Christian faith is, like a paradigm, a tightly knit system of core assumptions. The believer experiences stages of doubt and questioning when "anomalies" challenge what is assumed to be true. Gradually contradictions accumulate, and a crisis is reached. To reestablish integrity, the individual must release the old paradigm and embrace a new one.

In the case of individuals leaving Christianity, the personal paradigm shift is embedded within a much larger societal shift underway as science reveals the natural world and erodes a supernatural cause and effect framework:

- *The Supernatural Paradigm* from antiquity posits the existence of an unseen spiritual world to explain the material world. The unseen is beyond human understanding but has ultimate power over human destiny. Human

42

response to this condition is generally passive, while seeking guidance and mercy from an external deity and waiting for a better existence.

- *The Natural Paradigm* views the universe as unitary and natural, vast but available for human investigation. Explanations are sought within the natural order. Human agency is the preferred method of improving the world.

This giant change has been going on for hundreds of years, creating enormous conflict. We might call the transition from supernaturalism to naturalism a “meta-paradigm” shift because it is so comprehensive and encompasses many smaller shifts. It is no less than a transformation in the way humans understand the nature of reality.

For Western civilization, the Enlightenment marked a leap from supernatural to natural explanations that substantially diminished the role of religion. The Christian Church no longer rules Europe and cannot burn witches for causing epidemics. At least in public, gods and demons are less often used for explaining natural disasters, crop failures, or disease. While Christianity tries to cling to mind-body dualism, secular science has abandoned the split as a more viable viewpoint. However, despite progress, the world is still in the agonizing middle stages of the meta-paradigm shift, a bit stranded in a wasteland where religionists will shout scripture while hard scientists scratch their heads.

Why is this important? For the reclaimer, the individual and the culture are going through painful throes of revolutionary change in tandem. The context of cultural paradigm shift makes personal transformation anything but easy or clear.

Even so, many former believers are forging ahead, reclaiming their lives, constructing naturalistic frameworks for living, and finding support in each other. To do this, new images and metaphors are needed. For example, instead of standing on a "rock of ages," a bird can perch on a branch, not concerned about it breaking because it trusts in its own wings. Over time, the recovering person acquires new information, and new skills. Areas of human knowledge can be freely explored, even if they challenge the Bible.

One of the most useful concepts in the new natural paradigm is understanding humans as animals. To be part of the animal kingdom, belonging to the earth, enjoying nature, and living fully in the present, is a new approach to life. Without the concept of sin at the center of everything, the reclamer can transform his or her view of self and others. This is an exciting discovery. Answers may not be simple, or even forthcoming, but living with questions has its own kind of wonder. Uncertainty implies mystery, and impermanence brings a kaleidoscope of change.

The person without supernatural beliefs seeks to be fully alive in the here and now. As one put it:

I am a stronger, better person because I am an atheist. I face reality as it is - even the most unpleasant parts of it - and I am good and moral because that's a part of who I am as a person, not because I am trying to please God or because I am living in fear of him. I have discovered how wonderful it is to face life on its own terms, free of religious myths and lies!

Alan Watts once compared life to listening to music.⁴³ He said we don't sit waiting for the music to end in order to do something better; we enjoy the music while it is playing, remembering to sing and dance while we can. In working with former Christians, it has been a pleasure to share this most amazing, healing metaphor.

We Need to Understand This Process Better.

In the 1980's one could obtain a Ph.D. in counseling psychology without taking a single course on the psychology of belief or the relationship between religion and mental illness. By 1994, guidelines for psychiatry residencies required some form of training on "religious or spiritual factors that can influence mental health." But even today such training often focuses on the benefits of religion, not its power to harm. Nurses, doctors, and mental health professionals who want to understand and heal harm done by religion have nowhere to turn for specialized knowledge, training or certification.

Based on anecdotal evidence, the need may be enormous. That said, we need real research to find out exactly how many people are being harmed by toxic religion and how best to help them.

Getting real numbers is challenging in part because religious teachings can mask the extent of the damage. When conservative Christians develop mental health problems, they often are encouraged to seek pastoral counseling rather than psychological or psychiatric care. Many fundamentalist

43

sects perceive psychotherapy as a threatening alternative to faith. A Christian woman from Texas put it this way:⁴⁴

Our faith is our connection to God. Once we break that connection, there is no faith. Why do Christians feel a need to seek the advice or help of another person, when Christ should be all that we need? We don't need psychiatrists to fix us or depression medication to relieve us. There is deliverance in the Word of God. There is breakthrough in the Word of God. There is healing in the Word of God. Every situation that we endure, there is a word for us. To seek out these other methods is to not trust God.

Beliefs like these add an extra barrier for those suffering mental illness, whether that illness was caused by religion itself or by the wide variety of situational and biological factors that can leave a person floundering. Fortunately, many Christian denominations now recognize that not all psychological symptoms are spiritual symptoms. Fortunately, too, a host of resources have sprung up both for those who are struggling within faith

⁴⁴Diana Bridget “Christianity and mental health: Have we lost our faith?” Christian Post, January 14, 2013.

<http://www.christianpost.com/news/christianity-and-mental-health-have-we-lost-our-faith-88270/>

communities and those who are in the process of leaving their religion.⁴⁵ But this work has just begun.

When members of open, enquiring mainline denominations leave their faith, they rarely need a healing community. They seldom are rejected by family and friends, and few find the loss of Jesus as they imagined him to leave a vast, debilitating well of emptiness. As a consequence, many moderate believers far underestimate the power of religion to leave a life in tatters.

But for more conservative believers, the loss can be devastating. Most of the regular visitors to sites like ExChristian.net come from fundamentalist or “Bible believing” forms of Christianity. They include Evangelicals, Baptists, Pentecostals, Mormons and members of smaller less known sects. Literally thousands of personal stories posted by reclaimers attest to how harmful such teachings can be. That said, they also offer a glimpse into the many and varied roads to recovery. Reclaiming the self from the pseudo-self, rebuilding meaning, purpose, job skills and community—including a new family—these

⁴⁵Resources include:

Journey Free: Resources for recovery from harmful religion (journeyfree.org)

Awaypoint: Articles by Valerie Tarico (AwayPoint.wordpress.com)

ExChristian: Encouraging de-converting and former Christians (Exchristian.net)

This paper is published as a chapter in the edited volume, *Christianity Is Not Great: How Faith Fails*, edited by John Loftus, published by Prometheus Books, 2014.

can be the work of a lifetime, well worth the time, sorrow, and effort it takes to journey free.

References and Notes