

BOOK REVIEWS

Review of *When Religion Hurts You: Healing from Religious Trauma and the Impact of High-Control Religion*

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<https://doi.org/10.65589/001c.128118>

Military Chaplaincy Review

Vol. 1, Issue 1, 2024

When Religion Hurts You: Healing from Religious Trauma and the Impact of High-Control Religion. By Laura E. Anderson. Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos, 2023. 240 pages.

Twenty eight percent of Americans now claim no religious preference.¹ This is the largest such response and is only expected to keep growing. There are countless reasons for the decline in participation in organized religion in America, many of which have yet to be discovered or understood, but I imagine one reason may be people's experience of religious trauma.

In *When Religion Hurts You*, Laura Anderson provides personal anecdotes on the impact of adverse religious experiences (AREs) in high-controlling religions (HCRs) and she offers markers of healing from religious trauma. When Anderson began her research on religious trauma, she thought she was alone in experiencing a trauma response to her religious upbringing. But now, as a psychotherapist who specializes in religious trauma, she knows that is not the case. In her book, Anderson takes us on a journey on the road of healing from religious trauma.

This book brings together Anderson's doctoral research, clinical experience, and personal story. Anderson explains her methodology of research to be autopsychography, which means that her life and experiences were the motivation and foundation for this research.² She acknowledges the limitations this methodology of research may encounter, but she garners insights from scholars across a span of disciplines to reduce the negative impact of such limitations. Anderson began her research by using social media to ask the question: "What do you wish your therapist knew about religious trauma?" She was not sure what to expect, but she received

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¹ Jason De Rose, "Religious 'Nones' Are Now the Largest Single Group in the U.S.," *National Public Radio*, January 24, 2024, <https://www.npr.org/2024/01/24/1226371734/religious-nones-are-now-the-largest-single-group-in-the-u-s>.

² Laura Anderson, *When Religion Hurts You: Healing from Religious Trauma and the Impact of High-Control Religion* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2023), 9.

hundreds of responses which confirmed to her that she was on the right track. She partnered with a fellow therapist, Brian Peck, and together they became pioneers in working with religious trauma while simultaneously being not anti-religious.

Anderson begins by telling readers her own story of living in an HCR and the pain she experienced as she sought healing to her body's traumatic response. She then provides an overview of what trauma is and discusses religious abuse, AREs, and the nervous system. She uses the second half of the book to outline nine key areas that are impacted when we embark on the healing journey and markers of healing along that journey. Anderson gives language for and insights about this under-researched form of trauma, which invites readers to take part in the ongoing process of healing.

Anderson emphasizes the importance of understanding trauma to better understand religious trauma. She explains that “trauma is not the event or the thing that happened to us; rather, it is the way our bodies and nervous system respond to what happened to us.”³ Trauma is subjective, perceptive, and embodied.⁴ Because trauma is a response to an event, it can be best understood as the result of the physiological experience of overwhelm – when something is too much, too fast, or too soon and threatens our ability to cope and return to a felt sense of safety.⁵ When defining trauma, Anderson relies on scholars like Bessel van Der Kolk, the author of *The Body Keeps Score*, and others to help the reader understand how religious trauma may show up in their bodies the same way combat trauma, physical trauma, sexual trauma, or emotional trauma might. She quotes van Der Kolk who says that “trauma involves experiencing physical sensations, emotions, and feelings in the present moment that are associated with experiences from the past.”⁶ This is significant, because often trauma will not rear its head until after someone has been removed from the event, situation, or experience.

Anderson defines religious trauma as “trauma that results from a single or multiple experiences that happened in a religious system or relationship.”⁷ She is careful to explain that religion in and of itself is not traumatic. People who have experienced religious trauma can stem from a single incident but for many religious trauma results from experiences in which the very people who are supposed to be a source of safety and stability are a source of terror and confusion. It is unique because the trauma touches every area of their life. Thus, it is often a combination of several experiences that are perceived

3 Anderson, *When Religion Hurts*, 22.

4 Anderson, *When Religion Hurts*, 31.

5 Anderson, *When Religion Hurts*, 68.

6 van Der Kolk as quoted in Anderson, *When Religion Hurts*, 30.

7 Anderson, *When Religion Hurts*, 32.

as harmful that results in religious trauma. Anderson argues that religious trauma should be categorized as complex trauma. Complex trauma can best be understood as the result of experiencing consistent and pervasive threat or overwhelm without being able to escape.⁸

Anderson champions healthy religion and community for wholeness and healing, which is a break from the past. Sometimes healing from religious trauma requires detachment from religious communities.⁹ For many, however, leaving their religious tradition or rejecting their faith is distressing. Instead, she explores how people experiencing religious trauma can meaningfully engage with their faith along their healing journey. This healing often involves deconstructing one's faith, which can also mean finding a healthier religious community.

How religious trauma presents itself in survivors' bodies is not unique from other forms of trauma. Anderson spends several chapters unpacking the nervous system in conjunction with trauma. She, along with others like van Der Kolk, believe that people's bodies hold the stories of what has happened to them, but they also hold the map to healing.¹⁰ For that reason, she believes survivors must be willing to engage with their bodies to experience healing. Anderson draws from researchers like Brene Brown, Gabor Mate, and Peter Levine to help readers further understand the nervous system and the road to healing. Readers who are new to this topic will find the general overview very informative, but readers who are well versed in trauma may be frustrated by the extent to which she covers trauma and does not specifically mention religious trauma. Nevertheless, Anderson does a good job specifying how trauma shows up within HCRs by using stories from her own personal journey and from those she has counseled.

The path to healing from religious trauma, according to Anderson, is an ongoing journey with markers along the way. She believes markers of healing include survivors' ability to develop healthy boundaries built on self-trust and self-compassion, to develop a robust spectrum of emotions, to establish healthy relationships and connections with others, and to spend each day leaning more into their inherent goodness.¹¹

Anderson draws upon many books that have been published in the last ten years on topics such as trauma, abuse and power and control dynamics, building a healthy relationship with our bodies, the nervous system, and

⁸ Anderson, *When Religion Hurts*, 35.

⁹ Anderson, *When Religion Hurts*, 31.

¹⁰ Anderson, *When Religion Hurts*, 109.

¹¹ Anderson, *When Religion Hurts*, 212.

establishing healthy connection and relationships. Anderson's work stands out in the way it compassionately identifies how HCRs can be abusive and lead to religious trauma.

As society continues to place high esteem on mental and emotional health, there will be a shared sense of safety for people to more freely share their stories of trauma. An example of this is the #MeToo movement in which women began to come forward and share their stories of sexual abuse. This resulted in a heightened intolerance for sexual abuse within the workplace and forced companies to critically assess policies to create a more meaningful and safer workspace. As people continue to openly tell their stories of abuse and trauma within religious communities, religious leaders need to honestly assess the health of their communities within their theological framework.

Chaplains are well positioned to be beacons of compassion and care among Soldiers and within their units. Chaplains must also be mindful of the inherent power bestowed upon them as religious leaders and use it for good rather than harm. Chaplains hold significant trust as religious leaders. They are expected to provide a safe space for Soldiers to share their pain and find healing for their soul. When a chaplain self-righteously imposes their personal religious agenda onto someone seeking their counsel, damage can occur.

As religious leaders who advocate for the first amendment right for freedom of religion, it is important that chaplains foster an environment in which Soldiers are free to choose a spiritual path based on their personal value system. *When Religion Hurts You* highlights ways religious leaders can misuse their power and blur boundaries under the guise of religious necessity. This book should serve as a warning to all religious leaders to be humble, compassionate, and respectful.

Chaplains should also be able to recognize potential markers of religious trauma and foster healthy communities within their units for all Soldiers to engage in and deepen their spiritual well-being. Unfortunately, too many people have been hurt by religion or have heard negative stories about religion that have caused them to become disinterested. I believe this disinterest in religion has subsequently caused people to neglect their spiritual wellness which has negatively impacted the holistic health of our Soldiers. People remain the Army's greatest asset, so it is imperative that chaplains are value added to the lives of the Soldiers under their care.

When Religion Hurts You by Laura Anderson is an excellent book to introduce the topic of religious trauma. I believe it will help chaplains recognize patterns of trauma within Soldiers who seek their care. It acts as an informative guide to help chaplains provide compassion to Soldiers along a holistic path of healing beyond their trauma. It will benefit any chaplain as they care for the soul of the Army.

Published: February 07, 2025 EDT.



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