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Religious Trauma Syndrome: Being raised in fundamentalist religious homes leads to frequently misdiagnosed complex PTSD symptoms

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Statement of the Problem: Adults raised in fundamentalist religious homes frequently struggle with mental health. Although religion is often viewed as benign, those raised in rigid fundamentalist environments can suffer significant psychological harm. Symptoms of childhood fundamentalist religious indoctrination include poor self-esteem; overwhelming guilt, shame, and fear; and other issues that mirror complex PTSD. Clinicians can easily misdiagnose this religious trauma. Religious Trauma Syndrome (RTS) refers to symptoms suffered from long-term exposure to harmful religious ideologies such as Hell, and harmful lived experience including physical violence disguised as discipline. Members of the 2SLGBTQIA+ community are frequently subjected to “conversion therapy” and shunning during adolescence, compounding their religious trauma. Upon divorcing fundamentalist religious beliefs, formerly religious adults additionally suffer losses of community support, worldview, and identity. Methodology & Theoretical Orientation: Scientific research lags behind the recent proliferation of memoirs, conferences, podcasts, and blogs on religious trauma. I am a Registered Professional Counsellor with a special interest in RTS who partnered with religious trauma pioneers Dr. Marlene Winell and Dr. Darrel Ray to found and host Conferences on Religious Trauma (CORT) and the Shameless Sexuality: Life After Purity Culture conference. Each event featured sessions by psychologists, researchers, and authors specializing in religious trauma and purity culture recovery. I work with clients from around the world struggling to build post-religious lives. Findings: Many of my clients have unsuccessfully sought help from clinicians unfamiliar with religious trauma. Unfortunately, providers’ personal religious beliefs can impede treatment of these clients. Treatment modalities for religious trauma have not been clarified in rigorous scientific studies. Practitioners are eager for scientific guidance in this work. Conclusion & Significance: Misdiagnosis of individuals suffering from religious trauma may delay their return to health and obscure the contribution of problematic religious ideas to societal mental health.

Biography

Janice Selbie is a Registered Professional Counsellor and religious recovery consultant in British Columbia, Canada. She has been in private practice since 2015, specializing in the area of religious trauma recovery since 2019. After conferring with religious trauma pioneers Marlene Winell and Darrel Ray, she saw the need for conferences addressing Religious Trauma Syndrome. She founded and hosted the first CORT (Conference on Religious Trauma) in 2021, and the second in 2022. This year she also founded and hosted the Shameless Sexuality: Life After Purity Culture online conference. Her events are attended by mental health professionals and interested lay persons, with sessions headed by psychologists, social workers, researchers, counsellors, and survivors of religious trauma. In addition to conferences and one-on-one work, she facilitates the Divorcing Religion Workshop several times per year.

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