

A photograph of a person standing at a crossroads in a rural landscape. The person is silhouetted against a bright, hazy sky. The roads are unpaved and lead into a field of dry, golden-brown grass. A bare tree stands on the left side of the frame, and a tall, thin pole is visible on the right. The overall mood is contemplative and solitary.

# Meeting People at the Crossroads of Faith

*Emerging Conversations in Leaving  
Faith Communities  
A Personal and Professional  
Exploration*

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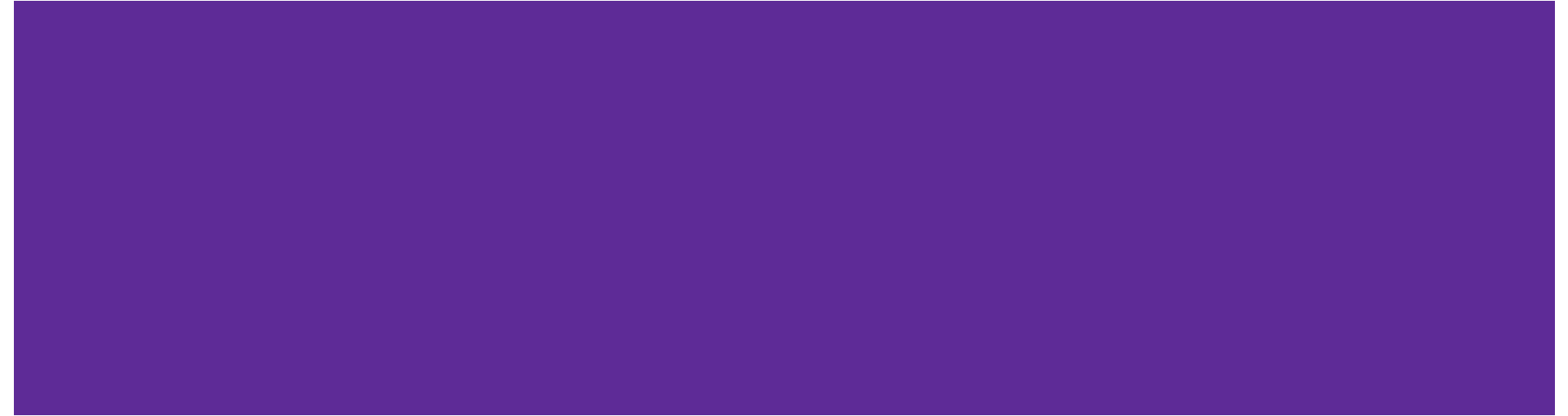
Please Refer to the Religious Trauma  
Inventory in your packet.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rtIJuVYevrs>

If It's Not God by Maddie Zahm

# “Meeting People”

An Overview of the Psychology of the Human Experience



# Erikson, Kohlberg, Fowler and Attachment

Erikson- established developmental language as conflict to be resolved.

Trust vs. Mistrust

Autonomy vs. Shame and Doubt

Identity vs. Role Confusion

Intimacy vs. Isolation

Generativity vs. Stagnation

Integrity vs. Despair

Kohlberg- established language around moral development

Pre-conventional (the human is acted upon by an outside force)

Conventional (human acts in accordance with rules/expectations- good boy/good girl)

Post-conventional– (human acts in integrity with agency and awareness) focus upon the social contract and universal principles

# Attachment and Interpersonal Neurobiology

Emerging research on interpersonal neurobiology, combined with studies on attachment.

Why is this relevant?

Understanding interpersonal neurobiology and attachment can help us understand the power of community and the power of faith.



“A child who understands herself to be a sinner who deserves punishment is formed within a hermeneutic in which those who have authority to punish do so because it is deserved. Abuse is not an interpretive option.” Alison

Downie

# Sociology

Group affiliation, natural drive to feel  
a sense of belonging

Abiological and psychological  
imperative

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# *At the Crossroads of Faith*

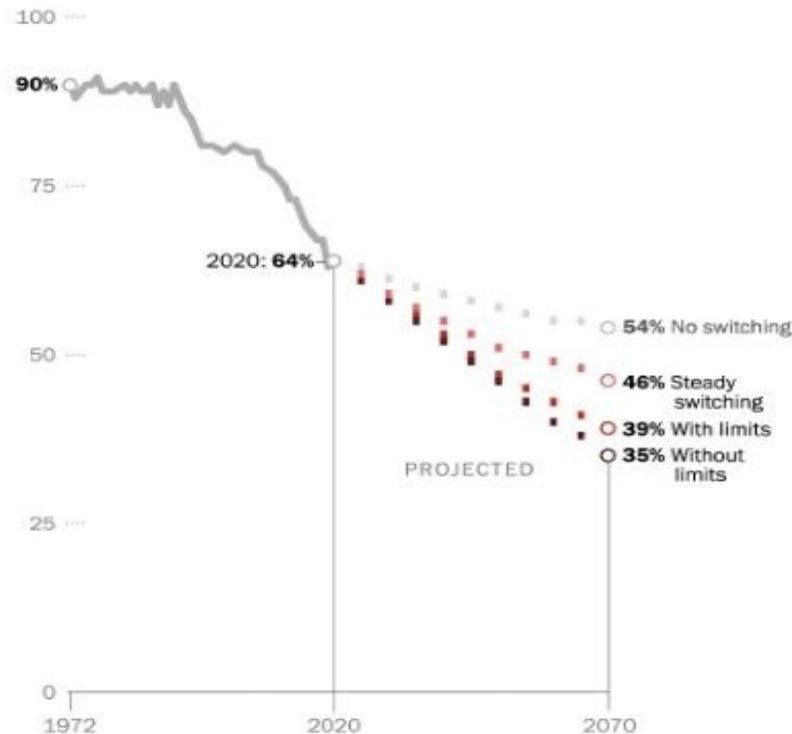
Religious Disaffiliation and Its Impacts

# Demographics-

- According to Pew Research:
- “Currently about 3 in 10 US adults are religious “nones.”
- “The religiously unaffiliated share of the public is 6 percentage points higher than 5 years ago and 10 points higher than a decade ago.”
- Christians continue to make up the majority, but their share of the adult population is 12 points lower in 2021 than it was in 2011.
- Looking at different numbers, the raw numbers of people leaving Christianity between 1990-2010 is around 25 million.

## U.S. Christians projected to fall below 50% of population if recent trends continue

% of Americans who are Christian



### Scenarios

#### No switching

This scenario imagines no person in America has changed or will change their religion after 2020.

#### Steady switching

Movement into and out of Christianity remains stable at recently observed rates. That is, in each new generation, 31% of Christians become religiously unaffiliated before they turn 30, and 21% of unaffiliated people become Christian.

#### Rising disaffiliation with limits

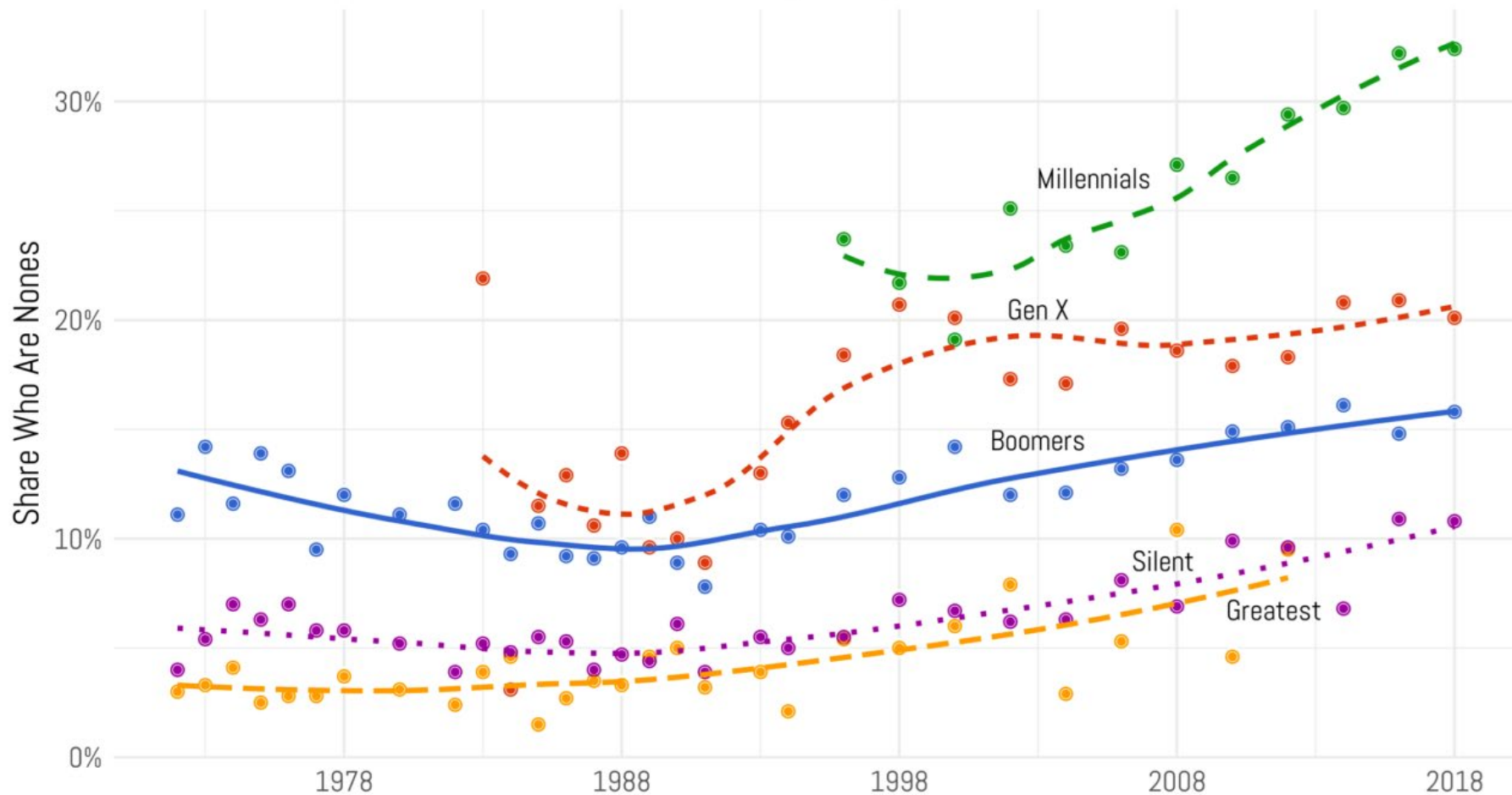
In each new generation, a growing share of Christians switch out before they turn 30, while a shrinking share of 'nones' switch in. But the switching rate is capped to prevent the share of Christians who leave the faith from rising above 50%.

#### Rising disaffiliation without limits

In each new generation, a growing share of Christians switch out before they turn 30, while a shrinking share of 'nones' switch in. No cap is imposed on switching rates.

Note: Historical data describes trends among U.S. adults based on surveys of adults. The 2020 estimate and subsequent projections show Americans of all ages. In 2020, we estimate that the religious composition of people of all ages roughly matches the adult composition. Sources: General Social Survey (1972-2006); Pew Research Center surveys (2007-2021); Pew Research Center projections (2020-2070). "Modeling the Future of Religion in America"

# The Share of Each Generation That Is Religiously Unaffiliated



# Demographics, cont...

“31 % of people raised Christian become unaffiliated between ages 15-29. An additional 7% of people raised Christian become unaffiliated later in life, after age 30.”

- Erikson- Identity vs. Role Confusion
- Rise of Internet- democratization of information and increased heterogeneity in informational access
- Changes in family structure
- Gen X and Gen Z report higher levels of loneliness than Baby Boomers.
- Local community is no longer the only source of knowledge
- Multi-generationally housed families are more likely to be religious. Consider changes in social organization.
- Families living apart. Increased incidence of estrangement.

# What forces are at play in the Contemporary Christian Landscape?

Terms:

Fundamentalism- Strict literal interpretation of scripture, clearly defined in/out group status.

Evangelicalism- emphasis on a “personal” relationship with Jesus

Charismatic- Characterized by high levels of expressivity and emotional engagement

Prosperity- Name it–Claim it gospel, equates material success with morality and goodness

Purity Culture- A movement in evangelicalism that limits sexual education and expression to one man/one woman, sex only within marriage, and strict sexual control.

Progressive/Mainline Christianity- Captures more progressive protestant Christian denominations and expressions. Episcopalian, Methodist, ELCA

# History, Purpose and Sociology of Religion

A feeling of belonging....  
A feeling of transcendence...  
A role to play, a purpose to serve....

Religions are  
metaphorical  
systems that give us  
bigger containers in  
which to hold our  
lives. Pipher



# What is the role of religion in social and ethical life? How has that role changed over time?

- Prior to the 1960s, most Americans reported high trust in civil and religious institutions.

- Americans increasingly report distrust of institutions across the board.

- Sense of belonging reduced.

Modernity-

Shared societal narratives

Post-modernity-

Focus on specific, individual narratives

Internet, globalization, access to knowledge and information

# High Control Groups

Often the most traumatic and  
difficult to leave

- Steven Hassan's BITE model of control
- Behavior
- Information
- Thought
- Emotion

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# Emerging Conversations

So what's changing? What's happening?



# Current Trends

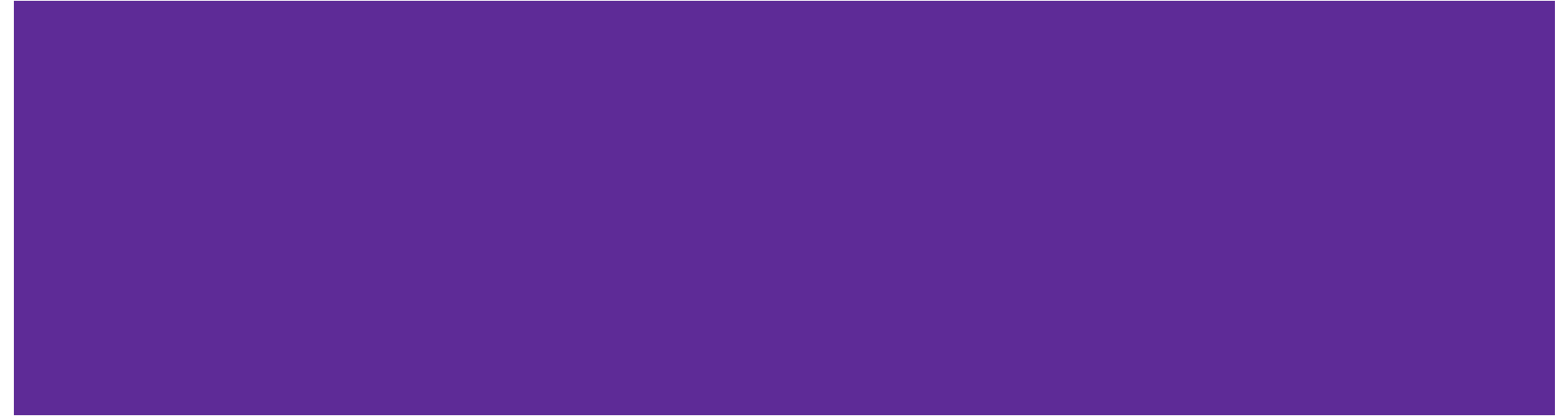
According to Pew Research, currently 29% of individuals in the United States identify as “none” religiously, up from 12% in 1996.

Among people in their 30s, only 66% of those raised Christian are still Christian... (NPR)

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# Leaving Faith Communities

Who? Where? Why?



## Who is Leaving?

- **Women** are leading the exodus from organized religion and deconstructing their faith systems. [As of 2022 49% of women considered themselves religious nones, vs. only 46% of men]
- Mid to elder **Millennials** and Gen Z
- **Victims of spiritual abuse** are finding support and strength online and leaving the institutions that hurt them

## Why do Evangelicals say they are they leaving?

- Sex abuse crisis in the Southern Baptist Convention.
- 2016 presidential election
- Racist attitudes in the face of the Black Lives Matter movement
- Sexism
- Treatment of the LGBTQ+ community

- “The feminist agenda is not about equal rights for women. It is about a socialist, anti-family political movement that encourages women to leave their husbands, kill their children, practice witchcraft, destroy capitalism and become lesbians.” —***Pat Robertson, Southern Baptist leader***

“A woman is a temple built over a **sewer**.”  
— Tertullian, the father of Latin Christianity

“The word and works of God are quite clear, that women were made to be **wives or prostitutes**.”  
— Martin Luther, Reformer

“Let’s get back to those days [before women had rights]... as if women should have any say [in the voting booth] in how our country is run. I don’t want to be ruled over by women.” -**Pastor Steven L. Anderson from the pulpit of Faithful Word Baptist Church 2019**

“If you vote Democrat, I don’t even want you around this church. You can get out. You can get out, you demon. **You cannot be a Christian and vote Democrat in this nation**. I don’t care how mad that makes you. You can get as pissed off as you want to. Somebody say, ‘Amen.’ The rest of you get out! Get out!” -  
**Pastor Greg Locke from the pulpit of Global Vision Bible Church on 03/06/22**



# Radical Authenticity

Millennials value radical authenticity. They want to be unapologetically themselves and are no longer willing to shrink to fit spaces where others refuse to embrace authenticity. When the church *preaches one thing* and *practices another*, Millennials have shown that they are not afraid to leave and look elsewhere for authentic community and shared beliefs. These beliefs usually center around **social justice** and compassionate community outreach, where individuals can be a part of a collective whole to feel like they are truly making a difference for a marginalized community group.

# What is Deconstruction?

... “Essentially a reverse-engineering; peeling back the layers of commitment and traditions to see what you actually believe and if you agree with those beliefs.”

It is an intentional dismantling of one's belief system, brick by brick.

Deconstruction has no established end goal.

Many in the deconstruction space are finding community and support online.

#Emptythepews

“My informants almost universally claim that in the communities in which they were raised, doubting in matters of faith was frowned upon and doubters were regularly regarded with scorn. In many cases, **doubt was an indication of immorality.**” Philip Salim Francis

## “They Called Me a Sinner When I was a Saint:” The Response from the Church: Discounted and Dismissed

...“Women should discuss theology with an older woman mentor within the church rather than seeking answers in an online community. Some of **Satan’s best work** is accomplished by women talking to women, in the floating world of disembodied souls on the internet.”

Doubt is not only discouraged, it is openly **demonized**.

Many in the Evangelical space discount deconstruction altogether as a “passing fad”

Whether they choose to acknowledge it or not, the numbers don’t lie and as previously mentioned, church attendance is trending downward at a steady rate of decline.

# 8 Stages of Leaving Organized Religion

1. Noticing Contradictions

2. Questioning

3. Denial

4. Letting Go

5. “Coming Out”

6. Self-Discovery and Exploration

7. Forgiveness and Reconciliation

8. Integration



Before Leaving



Leaving



After Leaving

# Impact of Leaving a Faith Community:

- Loss of identity and sense of self
- Loss of family and friends
- Loss of community and support
- Potential loss of income if employment intersects with faith
- Loss of protective factors [I won't act on SI because I believe I would go to hell]
- Loss of a framework to understand life experiences
- Loss of absolute certainty
- Loss of trust, in self and others
- **Loss of hope/coping skills especially related to grief**

“Who’s going to bring  
me a casserole now?”

-Rachel Held Evans

# Professional Implications

- Clients will need help with disentangling their self worth from their religion
- They will need help setting boundaries with friends, family, and members of their former religion who may use shaming or manipulation to try to get them to change their minds
- Clients will need help learning how to make a new support system for themselves and beginning to forge relationships with peers that are not based on a shared faith connection.
- How a client left their faith community will impact how destabilizing the event was.

The biggest thing to understand is that this singular decision will have implications that fracture outward into almost every aspect of your client's life. There are very few, if any areas that will not be completely turned upside down by this decision, and they are all crumbling at exactly the same time. This can be a cataclysmically destabilizing event in the lives of our clients.

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# Clinical Questions to Gain Insights

1. Could/Can you trust people outside of your religion?
2. Were you responsible for converting people to your belief system?
3. Who were the leaders within your religion?
4. What were the gender roles?
5. Were you allowed to have relationships with others outside your religion?
6. What were the consequences, both immediate and eternal, for “sin”?
7. How did your religion view nonreligious people?
8. How do they now view you or others who have left that faith practice?

## Questions to Uncover Beliefs About Self in Light of Religious Beliefs

1. Are you innately “good” or “evil”?
2. Do you have free will?
3. Is the world safe or unsafe?
4. Is there a higher power?
5. How involved is the higher power in your life and decisions?
6. When will we reach the “end times”?
7. Will there be a rapture?
8. Is there an afterlife?
9. Are people or souls reincarnated?
10. How old is the universe?

# Questions/ Thoughts Clients May Struggle With

- Is there a purpose to life at all?
- I don't know how to make friends or date in the "real world"
- What do I do with all the time I used to spend with my religious community?
- What do holidays look like for me now?
- I no longer know what comes after death and I am terrified.
- Did I make a mistake leaving my group? Was it worth all of this turmoil?
- Was my experience really as bad as I thought it was, or was I just nitpicking?
- How do I shoulder the guilt of being part of a group that harmed others?
- Can I continue on after estrangement?
- Can I trust my own instincts?

This transformation involves much more than an intellectual recalibration. [it involves] an overhaul of their previous identity as persons of certainty.”

- Philip S. Francis

# Disaffiliation vs. Religious Trauma

Disaffiliation may include-  
Grief; Loss of community  
(isolation), Altered family  
dynamics, sexual dysfunction

- “Religious Trauma Syndrome”- A term coined by Marlene Winell in 2012- “authoritarianism coupled with toxic theology.”
- Stone, defines it as “pervasive psychological damage resulting from religious messages, beliefs, and experiences.
- Winell and Stone both argue that religious trauma occurs within a climate of rigid binaries, absolute judgments, and an atmosphere of fear of condemnations.

# Sexual Dysfunction from Religion and Purity Culture

- Girls are taught that the only thing of value they have to offer a future husband is their virginity
- Abstinence only sex ed can leave clients unsure about how even basic sexual body mechanics work
- Girls are taught that their bodies are inherently evil. Atemptation. A stumbling block for good Christian men.
- There is a collective trauma experience for those coming out of PC



Teenage girls often hear messages in youth group where they are compared to inanimate objects if they lose their virginity before marriage:

- \*An old, beat up car that everyone has ridden around in and now nobody wants to drive
- \*A disgusting, chewed up piece of gum
- \*A piece of torn or crumpled paper that can never be whole, or clean, or pure again

# Clinical Implications

- PTSD like symptoms,
- Vaginismus
- Pelvic pain
- Primary sexual dysfunction
- Self-harm
- Suicidal thoughts
- Dissociation
- Panic attacks

These are believed to be physical signs and symptoms of purity trauma.

# Best Practices

and when to refer out



- Pelvic Floor Physical Therapist
- EMDR for PTSD symptoms
- AASECT Certified Therapist for individual or couples therapy



# Conclusion

- Questions?



# Organizations/ Links/ Podcasts:

<https://traumastery.com/religious-trauma-quiz>

<https://www.recoveringfromreligion.org/resources#non%20religious%20resources>

<https://www.patheos.com/>

<https://www.journeyfree.org/>

<https://www.daretodoubt.org/>

<https://www.religioustraumainstitute.com/>

[www.divorcing-religion.org](http://www.divorcing-religion.org)

The Clergy Project- <https://clergyproject.org/>

<https://www.exvangelicalpodcast.com/>

<https://www.holyghosting.com/#our-story>

<https://podcasts.apple.com/dk/podcast/what-makes-a-woman-who-she-is-and-what-to-do-when-it/id1658796859?i=1000593436665>

<https://empathyparadigm.com/religious-trauma?fbclid=IwAR3e1lVRyxyWHdHNDI0x2maxnZAJAvQL6do6bwyybE2fULzlonHHBdp5wY>

(Religious Trauma Inventory Printable PDF is available above along with a couple of other printable resources)

From Janice Selbie at Divorcing Religion:

## RELIGIOUS RECOVERY CONFERENCES

The **Conference on Religious Trauma** (CORT) takes place online annually. Early Bird ticket pricing is now in effect for CORT2023, being held October 20-22. Tickets available here: [www.religioustraumaconference.org](http://www.religioustraumaconference.org)

Session recordings from **CORT2021** are available to watch, free of charge, on the **Conference on Religious Trauma YouTube channel**: <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCGhyTXt1M9kdTJ1jW-Ckb5g>

Session recordings from the inaugural **Shameless Sexuality: Life After Purity Culture** conference are available for sale as a *Resource*. Ticket here: <https://pheedloop.com/SSLAPC2022/site/home/>

## ADDITIONAL HELPFUL/INTERESTING SITES for those recovering from religious trauma syndrome:

- [www.Recoveringfromreligion.org](http://www.Recoveringfromreligion.org) 24/7 hotline, online & in person support groups, RfRx podcast
- <https://www.ericasmithheac.com/> (PURITY CULTURE RECOVERY)
- <https://freedomofmind.com/cult-mind-control/bite-model/> & <https://culteducation.com/>
- <https://www.icsahome.com/support>
- Facebook also has many private groups for those recovering from fundamentalist religions
- <https://onlysky.media/latest-stories/>

## LINKS RELATED TO OVERCOMING FEAR OF HELL

<https://confidentman.net/spirituality/overcome-fear-going-hell>

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7I3xUu\\_auVk](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7I3xUu_auVk)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=A0PNvs0LkCw>

## PODCASTS

Some of my favorite podcasts about religious deconversion/deconstruction and high-demand groups include:

- Divorcing Religion (with Janice Selbie)
- The Influence Continuum (with Dr. Steve Hassan)
- MindShift (with Dr. Clint Heacock)
- IndoctrinATION (with Dr. Rachel Bernstein)
- The Thinking Atheist (with Seth Andrews)
- The Graceful Atheist
- Conspiracyality

## BOOKS:

**Pure** by Linda Kay Klein

Leaving the Fold, by Dr. Marlene Winell

Trusting Doubt, by Dr. Valerie Tarico

The God Virus, by Dr. Darrel Ray

Sex and God, by Dr. Darrel Ray

Take Back Your Life, by Dr. Janja Lalich

Bounded Choice, by Dr. Janja Lalich

Goodbye Jesus, by Tim Sledge

Wayward, by Alice Greczyn

**ARTICLES** for those recovering from religious trauma syndrome:

- <https://www.verywellmind.com/what-is-codependency-5072124>
- <https://www.modernintimacy.com/how-does-purity-culture-trauma-impact-sexuality/>
- <https://valerietarico.com/2010/11/05/getting-god%E2%80%99s-self-appointed-messengers-out-of-your-head/>
- Dr. Tarico also has a fantastic video series on YouTube: <https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PL18572A49A5A7EF0C>

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