

Percentage of U.S. Adults Suffering from Religious Trauma: A Sociological Study

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***Abstract:** This sociological study aimed to ascertain the percentage of adults living in the United States who have experienced religious trauma (RT) and what percentage presently suffer from RT symptoms now. After compiling data from 1,581 adults living in the United States, this study concludes it is likely that around one-third (27–33%) of U.S. adults (conservatively) have experienced religious trauma at some point in their life. That number increases to 37% if those suffering from any three of the six major RT symptoms are included. It is also likely that around 10–15% of U.S. adults currently suffer from religious trauma if only the most conservative numbers are highlighted. Nonetheless, since 37% of the respondents personally know people who potentially suffer from RT, and 90% of those respondents know between one and ten people who likely suffer from RT, then it could be argued that as many as one-in-five (20%) U.S. adults presently suffer from major religious trauma symptoms.*

Keywords: Religious Trauma, Adverse Religious Experiences, Spiritual Abuse, Religious Abuse, Religious Trauma Syndrome

Introduction

Leading into the twenty-first century, physician Martin Rossman noticed a disturbing trend among his patients: many were suffering from the lifelong consequences of being raised in a toxic religious environment. He wrote, “A great number of people I see in my medical practice have been traumatized rather than uplifted by their early religious training. I think that

harmful religious training may be one of the great unrecognized causes of mental and physical illness in our culture.”¹ Although at the time he did not have a psychological or medical term for what he was witnessing, Rossman’s experiential assessment (and prediction) about the pervasiveness of what is now understood to be religious trauma would turn out to be quite accurate. After compiling data from 1,581 adults living in the United States (U.S.), this study confirmed what Rossman and thousands of other practitioners have observed for decades: religious trauma is, in fact, a society-wide phenomenon and spiritual abuse is a chronic problem within religious communities.²

Study Rationale and Research Question

One problem is that the label “religious trauma” (RT) has remained ambiguously defined in much of the peer-reviewed literature, making it difficult for clinicians to identify and treat patients presenting with RT symptoms.³ To make things more complicated, the literature simply assumes that so-called “religious trauma” exists with little or no supporting empirical data. Indeed, most discussions on religious trauma have relied on qualitative research that focuses almost solely on individual experiences through case-studies and interviews. Thus, this article intends to correct the gap in quantitative knowledge by presenting findings from the most exhaustive sociological study on religious trauma to date, which was funded and carried out by the Global Center for Religious Research (GCRR). The purpose of this study was to discover if RT was a society-wide occurrence or simply an affliction that only a few disaffiliated religionists have mentioned in therapy.

The research question for the study is as follows: “What percentage of adults living in the United States have experienced religious trauma at some point in their life and what percentage currently suffer from religious trauma symptoms?” The hypothesis is that about 15–20% of the adult population have suffered from RT while about 5–10% currently suffer from RT symptoms. Before summarizing the study’s collection and analysis methodology, it is important first to define the terms used in the study.

¹ Rossman, *Guided Imagery for Self-Healing*, 200–1.

² Despite the reckless (and uninformed) claim by Brad Wilcox and Riley Peterson that “few people suffer trauma from religion in childhood” (Wilcox and Peterson, “Perspective: Don’t Believe the Headlines”).

³ This article will use the term “religious trauma” and the abbreviation “RT” interchangeably as a simple method to variegate both the language and grammar of the essay.

some type of sexual dysfunction, such as an inability to reach orgasm, physical pain during sex, a feeling of being abnormal, flawed, or immoral for engaging in sex acts, and an overall denial of sexual urges and desires. These types of symptoms can not only disturb a person's core identity, but they can also cause a lifelong disruption of meaningful interpersonal relationships.⁴⁶ Thus, it is important for future research to explore sexual dysfunction as a potential major symptom of religious trauma.

Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to discover if religious trauma was a society-wide phenomenon or simply an affliction of only a small few. As predicted by numerous clinicians, the survey found that religious trauma is a chronic problem within the U.S. adult population. In fact, NACRTR's original hypothesis under-estimated the total numbers by as much as 10–15%. After compiling data from 1,581 adults living in the United States, this sociological study found that it is likely around one-third (27–33%) of U.S. adults (conservatively) have experienced religious trauma at some point in their life (based on the definition above). That number increases to 37% if those suffering from any *three* of the six major RT symptoms are included. It is also likely that around 10–15% of U.S. adults currently suffer from religious trauma if only the most conservative numbers are highlighted. Nonetheless, since 37% of the respondents personally know people who potentially suffer from RT, and 90% of those respondents know between one and ten people who likely suffer from RT, then it could be argued that as many as one-in-five (20%) U.S. adults presently suffer from major religious trauma symptoms.

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⁴⁶ Cf. Crocker, "Persevering Faith," 26 and Fox, "Adverse Religious Experiences and LGBTQ+ Adults," 142–49.

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

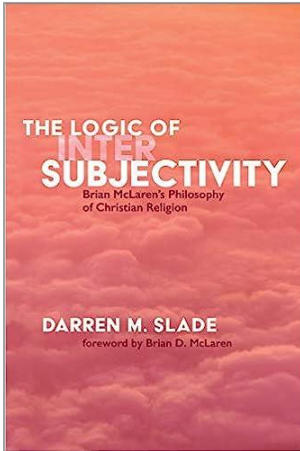
Darren M. Slade (PhD) earned his doctorate in theology and church history from the Rawlings School of Divinity (Virginia). He is an adjunct professor of ancient history and comparative religion at the Rocky Mountain College of Art and Design. In addition to his philosophical work, *The Logic of Intersubjectivity*, Dr. Slade specializes in the socio-political development of religious belief systems that include ancient Near-Eastern, Church, and Islamic history, as well as Second-Temple hermeneutical practices, the intersection of religion and science-fiction, and misotheism. He is also the Director of the North American Committee on Religious Trauma Research (NACRTR). Darren currently serves as President of the Global Center for Religious Research.

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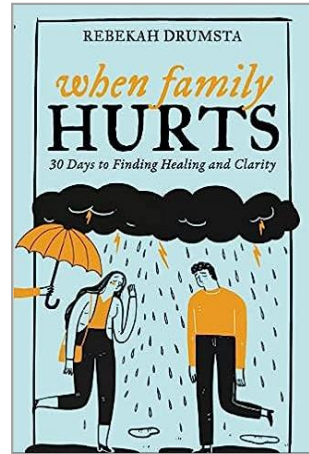
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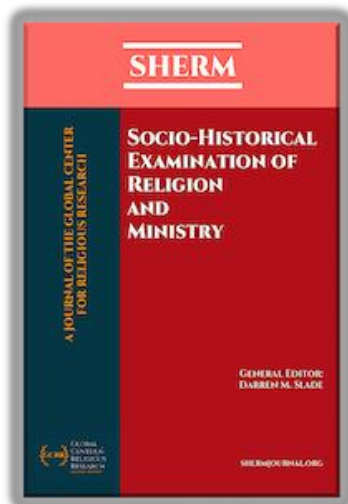
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The Logic of Intersubjectivity
Wipf & Stock, 2020



When Family Hurts
Clay Bridges Press, 2021





FOR THE FIRST TIME, SOMEONE WAS ABLE TO IDENTIFY WHAT WAS REALLY GOING ON

in the depths of my mind and nervous system
and how to actually help me.

I was raised from birth to believe I am a sinner
and that the only way to achieve fulfillment and
joy in this life and the next is to follow the
doctrines of my faith.

I was taught you're either all in or all out, so
when I found that my questioning led to an
inability to be all in, I could't see any other way
but to leave behind everything.

This led to a very long and lonely period of
rebuilding my entire worldview from scratch,
while trying to pretend to my family that
everything was fine because I didn't want them
to worry about my eternal salvation.



I WENT THROUGH FIVE MENTAL HEALTH PROFESSIONALS

before finally finding one who was educated on
the causes, manifestations and treatment
options for Religious Trauma. When I first heard
of Religious Trauma, I imagined extreme
situations like physical violation or radical cult
indoctrination.

But I soon came to realize that it very closely
describes my experience, and it explains the
numerous trauma responses I carry with me,
including chronic mental health issues and
physical health issues related to an overwhelmed
nervous system.

I always regarded my faith as very positive - I felt
loved, secure and safe. It was a source of
strength in my life. But what my therapist helped
me realize is that my crippling emotional and
mental health challenges actually stem from my
own seemingly innocent faith upbringing and the
religious teachings of my faith that had taken a
foothold deep in my psyche and created a toxic
environment of fear and shame.

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