

**Book Review:**  
***When Religion Hurts You***  
**By Laura E. Anderson**

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**Abstract:** *Licensed psychotherapist, podcast host, and religious trauma survivor, Dr. Laura Anderson, has contributed a volume drawing from both her own experiences and trauma studies scholarship. Anderson avoids harsh and direct condemnation of high-control religions (HCRs) but, rather, describes the human experiences and biological explanations of lives immersed in fear, shame, and mistrust. Her book, When Religion Hurts You, will likely connect most with religious trauma survivors who have already left an HCR (or are on the way out) and with professionals unfamiliar with the specific biological and relational theories of trauma. Anderson provides cautious optimism, noting the time and effort needed to “live in healing bodies.”*

**Keywords:** High Control Religion, Religious Trauma, Trauma, Purity Culture

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**Trauma Theories, Embodied**

The collection of deconstruction literature is growing rapidly, including both first-person narratives from those who have been deeply hurt by religious institutions and theological or social-scientific explanations about why either (1) institutionalized religion has failed, or (2) former believers have deconstructed or deidentified from religion. A third type, written primarily by mental health professionals, focuses on understanding the unique experience of religious trauma and bridges the divide between individual experiences and theoretical explanations. Dr. Laura Anderson’s book, *When Religion Hurts You*, falls into this third group.

Anderson, a licensed psychotherapist and podcast host, interweaves her own story of growing up in and leaving a high-control religious group (HCR) while sharing current biological and relational models of trauma. To her credit, she includes the pioneers and current “heavy hitters” in the fields of trauma studies and trauma-informed therapy, including Judith Herman, Bessel van der Kolk, Deb Dana, Bruce Perry, and Peter Levine. By centering on the effects of adverse religious experiences, rather than a pointed argument to leave religion,

may need to revisit some chapters multiple times. Readers who do not resonate with the specifics of Anderson's stories may benefit from also reading or listening to stories from survivors who are more similar to them. Professionals new to trauma studies, and religious trauma in particular, will also benefit from reading this book and recommending it as they see fit.

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### **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

Dr. Marsha Vaughn, LMFT, is Professor and Core Faculty at Adler University (Chicago, IL). She is an AAMFT-Approved Supervisor and teaches in both master's and PhD programs in Couple and Family Therapy. She has presented both empirical and theoretical work on spiritual abuse and religious trauma at regional and national conferences. She also is part of a group private practice in the Chicago suburbs.

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