

# WHEN RELIGION HURTS YOU

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Healing from Religious Trauma  
and the Impact of High-Control Religion

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**LAURA E. ANDERSON, PHD**

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For all who have been harmed by high-control religion,  
who have suffered adverse religious experiences,  
and who live with religious trauma.  
May this book provide hope and healing—  
abundant life does exist.

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# ABBREVIATIONS

ACE	adverse childhood experience
ACES	Adverse Childhood Experiences Study
ANS	autonomic nervous system
ARE	adverse religious experience
CPTSD	complex post-traumatic stress disorder
DID-NOS	dissociative identity disorder, not otherwise specified
EMDR	eye movement desensitization and reprocessing
HCR	high-control religion
OCD	obsessive-compulsive disorder
PFC	prefrontal cortex
PNS	parasympathetic nervous system
PTSD	post-traumatic stress disorder
RTI	Religious Trauma Institute
SES	social engagement system
SNS	sympathetic nervous system

# Introduction

**IN THE SOUTH**, when you meet someone new, the question after asking their name is “Where do you go to church?” Nashville, where I live, is home to many religious and conservative organizations, including large churches, colleges and universities, and the Southern Baptist Convention headquarters.

When I opened my therapy practice, I understood that spiritual abuse happened far more often than most people let on. People regularly sat on my couch and told me about deeply painful experiences they had endured from their pastors, ministry leaders, family, and friends, all in the name of God.

As the US presidential election of 2016 drew near, more and more of my clients expressed disillusionment at what they were seeing. Bewildered, they described the hurt and betrayal they felt as friends, family, and people they looked up to as their spiritual authorities enthusiastically supported a presidential candidate who for all intents and purposes seemed to be the antithesis of Christlike—at least according to what they had been taught their whole lives. Despite these supporters calling Donald Trump “God’s

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All the stories shared in this book are true, but many are composites that convey the magnitude and impact of what happened while protecting the identities of those involved. All names and identifying information have been changed.

man,” my disillusioned clients lamented that he was nothing like the Jesus they had given up everything to follow.

The day after Trump was elected president, the energy in my office was thick and heavy. Clients sat in tears, feeling confused and betrayed by the people they had trusted most. The questions they had been tentatively asking about life, faith, and God took on new vigor as they grieved the lives they once knew. They began realizing they needed to embark on a journey to understand and untangle what they had been told to be true and to find a new foundation to stand on. On top of this, many of my clients reported physiological and psychological symptoms consistent with trauma, extreme stress, and shame, all of which mere cognitive shifting couldn’t help.

I had extensive knowledge of trauma myself by this point—due both to my personal experiences and my professional work and education. Some of their triggers and responses were reflective of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD); others exhibited complex trauma from enduring decades of religious indoctrination and practices in their family of origin and churches. As clients relayed their experiences (many of them allowing themselves permission to be accurate and honest for the first time in their lives), we discovered dynamics of systemic power and control, religious and spiritual abuse, harm, and other adverse experiences that now, outside of the religious environment, were able to be seen for what they truly were and in many cases resulted in what felt like life falling apart.

**WHILE THE FIRST FOUR CHAPTERS** of this book will focus on what trauma is and how it functions in and must be healed through the body, for now it is essential to recognize this: *religious trauma is trauma*.

Once clients and colleagues alike caught wind that I was interested and versed in religious trauma and abuse, my practice quickly

filled up. As an entrepreneur, this was an excellent problem to have, but as a clinician who deeply desired to help others, I knew I needed to be innovative in finding ways to do this work.

In January 2019, I began my practicum for my PhD. I pitched to my professor that I could use this time to create a resource for other mental health professionals that would educate them on religious trauma, abuse, and adverse religious experiences (AREs). My project was accepted, and I went straight to Twitter to ask my meager following a simple question: *What do you wish your therapist knew about religious trauma?*

Being new to social media, I figured I would get a handful of responses. Hundreds came through in a couple days. I knew I was on the right track as so many people expressed both gratitude that this resource was being created and frustration that they so often had to educate their therapist—or worse, *convince* their therapist—that religious trauma was real. I was also able to connect with a handful of mental health professionals who found themselves in the same spot as me: desperately needing other qualified professionals to refer an overwhelming number of clients to.

Through these interactions, I cofounded the Religious Trauma Institute (RTI). I also cocreated the concept of AREs (which we will examine further in chap. 3). My RTI cofounder, Brian Peck, and I teamed up with the founders of the Reclamation Collective (a nonprofit organization offering support to religious trauma survivors) to create a trauma-informed foundation for understanding religious trauma. To our knowledge, we were some of the first therapists working with religious trauma who were *not* anti-religious and who approached religious trauma and healing from religious trauma using up-to-date trauma research. Our priorities included educating other mental health professionals and healers, supporting survivors through resolving trauma in the body, recovering from the unique harm religion can inflict individually and collectively, and reclaiming one's life as a healing individual.

## Limitations around Healing

Decades of participating in high-control religion combined with relational and sexualized violence left me with wounds and scars that, in spite of my attempts to heal, remained open and raw. I was dismayed that I was still experiencing physiological and psychological symptoms from earlier life experiences; I often felt helpless. I thought healing had a very specific look: physically, relationally, socially, emotionally, and spiritually. But despite my years of diligent therapy work, healing seemed further away than ever before.

Despite declaring that I would never go back to school, I decided to pursue a PhD in mind-body medicine. I vowed not only to be healed by the end of my program but also to somehow include my healing process in my doctoral research as I completed my dissertation.

But just a couple months into the program, while taking a somatic (relating to the body) therapy course, my hopes of being healed came crashing down. It was as if my body woke up from a deep slumber, and suddenly *everything* seemed to get worse. Due to this, the focus of my healing and research began to shift. While I could not deny that many of my symptoms had intensified, there were other areas where I was getting better. I struggled to understand how these two things could be happening at once.

In a meeting with my dissertation chair, she gently urged me to sit with the concept of healing as I understood it and notice if there were any limitations around it. I began to ponder my definition of what it meant to be “healed from trauma.” Since I knew I would be using my journals as a source of data for my research, I began to flip through the pages chronicling decades of my life. I noticed different patterns and themes. Where I had previously seen an unresolved issue, I now noticed that I had gained more insight each time I circled back to the issue. As I read my descriptions of what was happening in my life at a given moment, I could

remember what it felt like to be in my body at those times—and I could easily recognize that I no longer felt that way. Other times I could see that there were places I still felt stuck, but how I viewed them now was different.

I noticed that each time I wrote about not being healed in the way I wanted, I was missing the healing *that was happening right in front of me*. My definition of what healing looked like was making it nearly impossible to see the ways that I had grown, changed, and experienced healing.

Tentatively—as if I were trying something on for size—I began to wonder if my definition of healing was *limiting* the process. I wondered if being healed was not a fixed point that I would arrive at one day, where I could put a period at the end of a sentence and say, “There! I am done healing.” Instead, I wondered if healing could be an ongoing and dynamic process that was multidimensional and included small moments of change and awareness.

## Redefining Healing

Initially, I felt terrified to let go of the idea that I had created as the prize at the finish line. I lamented that I might have to live with some of the impacts of trauma for the remainder of my life. This felt unfair. (Truthfully, it *still* feels unfair!) But shifting my definition of healing opened space for other options and possibilities. Redefining healing as an ongoing process and not an end point allowed room for every tiny moment in the day when I tuned in to my body, felt something, responded differently, or engaged with self-awareness, to be seen as progress.

It struck me that my original conception of healing—that unless I arrived at a specific destination I was not healed—was flawed. It wasn’t lost on me that this was like the religious system in which I had grown up. I was taught to live my life with a specific end goal in mind: heaven. Anything else didn’t matter.

The idea of healing being ongoing, like sanctification, felt heavy. It seemed like the messages I was trying to discard—suffering happens for a reason; all things work together for good; God doesn't give us more than we can handle—were haunting me again. I struggled with the idea that my former religion was correct about suffering and pain. I later came to recognize that sanctification and healing have two distinctly different motivations. Sanctification *does* have an end goal: heaven. And with that, sanctification dismisses walking through pain and instead focuses on the point of growth or on finding a reason for the pain. Healing, however, is motivated by life on this earth—moving through the pain because healing ourselves allows us to live full and vibrant lives for ourselves, in relation to others and the world. Healing is not about circumventing pain or even being pain-free but about walking *through* the pain and trauma so that they don't define us, thereby allowing for depth, compassion, kindness, and empathy toward ourselves and others. For me, it didn't take long before healing sounded nothing like sanctification.

Redefining healing as an ongoing process became like a pair of glasses that helped me see more clearly. Many experiences that I had previously written off I could now see were clearly moments of healing, but I had downplayed their significance because it wasn't *the* end goal I had in mind. But by wearing the new glasses of healing as a lifelong process, I could see that I *was* healing. I was feeling emotions and developing self-awareness, I had begun a relationship with my body, I wasn't scared all the time, my anxiety and depression were significantly decreasing, people didn't feel as threatening, and so much more.

As I deconstructed my faith, and learned later in my research on healing, I realized that when the end goal is already set, we often miss everything else that's happening. When my focus was on eternity in heaven and the specific ways that I needed to live to get there, I missed life on earth. I was so concerned with living, eating, drinking, dressing, behaving, worshipping, relating, thinking,

and feeling exactly as had been prescribed, that days, weeks, and even years went by when I had no idea what had actually happened. Similarly, when I fixated on the end goal of being healed, I designed my life to achieve that ideal and subsequently missed everything else that was happening in my life—including the ways I was suffering and creating more pain for myself by trying to achieve a goal that felt out of reach.

I began scouring academic library databases for research on healing. I found ample research on trauma, symptoms of trauma, healing trauma, and even a concept called post-traumatic growth, but I found almost no research about ongoing healing after trauma. Most research defined healing as either symptom alleviation or symptom reduction, but this felt oversimplified and seemed to reduce the multidimensional way that trauma impacts individuals. No wonder my idea of healing was defined as a static end point; the data were *also* focused on this definition.

I began shifting in my own clinical practice—immediately. While many of my clients were seeing significant reduction and alleviation of their symptoms and even felt like they were creating a new life for themselves, they also were discouraged when they felt triggered, didn't stick to a boundary, felt angry, or struggled to make new friends. Clients often felt overwhelmed when their experience of a trigger and the subsequent physiological response seemed to signal that they weren't healed. They thought they needed to start over.

Though they were hesitant to accept a new definition of healing and often agonized over the thought of healing as a lifelong process, they also began to notice that shifting to this definition opened a new world to them. They experienced less shame. They realized that their experiences were momentary and didn't have eternal significance. They could celebrate each moment—small or large—when they did something different, even if they didn't get the results they thought they should.

Though the focus on healing as an ongoing and dynamic process didn't resolve the trauma they experienced, it did allow healing to

take on a more nuanced definition. This increased their feelings of hopefulness and empowerment, and it helped them recognize the inherent goodness they possessed within them—often for the first time.

## **What This Book Is About**

This book is a culmination of my doctoral research, clinical experience, and personal story. While I won't be laying out a step-by-step process of how to heal trauma or guaranteeing specific outcomes, I want to inspire hope that living in a healing body is possible after experiencing religious trauma.

In chapter 1, I tell my story of living within a high-control religion (HCR). My hope is that my experience may provide a sense of connection and togetherness for those reading this book. My interest in working with religious trauma survivors professionally stems from my own experiences and the journey of healing that I am living.

In chapters 2–4, I provide an overview of what trauma is and discuss religious abuse, AREs, and the nervous system. I am an eclectic practitioner and human, which means that I do not suggest one “right” way to do healing work. Each person is unique, and their experiences are subjective. What works for me in my own healing journey may or may not be helpful for you. This book does not take the place of therapy or any other healing practice that is meaningful to you. I am merely looking at the research to offer a better understanding of what religious trauma is so that you can make choices regarding your own trauma resolution and recovery.

Chapters 5–13 outline nine key areas that are impacted when one embarks on a healing journey, based on my doctoral research, clinical experiences, and personal story. It's important to note that this list is not exhaustive; healing can manifest in a life in many other ways. Some of the chapters may resonate more strongly with you than others. Each chapter will discuss how HCR influenced

the specific theme as well as how someone may experience living in a healing body after religious trauma.

**THE METHODOLOGY OF RESEARCH** I used for my doctoral dissertation was autopsychography, which means that my life and experiences were the motivation and foundation for this research. This may mean that my findings feel incomplete or reductive to you, since they don't consider your unique experiences and the complexities of who you are as a person. Though I tried to incorporate others' stories and experiences, I want to acknowledge that the intersections of who I am affect how I've experienced healing, my access to resources, and the ease or difficulty with which I've moved through the healing process. From an academic standpoint, this demonstrates why it is so important to do more research on the markers of living in a healing body after trauma—so that diverse voices and experiences are heard, considered, and valued.

I felt emotional when I presented my oral defense of my doctoral research to my committee—the people who would determine whether I had completed all the necessary requirements to become Dr. Laura Anderson. I felt nervous and anxious (this was, after all, the culmination of years of academic work). But there was another feeling I couldn't quite put my finger on—an awareness that I was about to do something big, that my research was important, and that my work was honoring the journey I had been on.

My presentation was flawless, thanks to many hours of practice, and when I turned to look at my committee after sharing my closing thoughts, I saw tears streaming down their faces. We sat in silence. The moment felt sacred. I realized that what I had been feeling leading up to the presentation was the feeling of holiness. Not the holiness of formal religion but a sense of awe, connectedness, and hope. It was an experience I will never forget.

I don't think things happen to us for a reason. I don't think there is some all-knowing force directing our lives so that we can

learn a lesson and pass on that knowledge to others. I don't think I had to go through what I did to get this book into your hands. In fact, there were many other ways I could have learned those lessons—and they could have been learned without excruciating pain. Yet I cannot deny that somehow my experiences also turned me into who I am and resulted in this book being in your hands today. Multiple things can be true at the same time.

Regardless of the hows and the whys, I feel honored to be able to share with you this research, anecdotes from others, and parts of my own story, so that perhaps you too can be inspired to keep going on this healing journey—while also celebrating how far you have already come.

# 1

## My Story

WHEN I WAS A SMALL CHILD, I lay in bed every night imagining Jesus dying on the cross. It was a story I had been told from the moment I was born: I was a sinner and Jesus died for me so that I could go to heaven and spend eternity with him. If I didn't accept what he had done, I would have to spend eternity in hell. At younger than five years old, there was no way I could cognitively understand what I was being taught. All I knew is that I needed to figure out a way to get to heaven. The phrase "accepting Jesus into your heart" was one I heard from the mouths of pastors, Sunday school teachers, and my parents, but no one was clear on how to do that. So every night for years I imagined Jesus, nailed to the cross, dying for my sins. It was my way of hoping that if Jesus came back while I was sleeping, he would have favor on me.

On the first day of kindergarten, I convinced my mom that I needed to ask Jesus into my heart. I'm not sure what it was that made the first day of kindergarten *the* day where I possessed more understanding than days in the past. Nevertheless, on that day she sat with me at the kitchen table and said the words, which I

repeated back, that meant that I had gained security into heaven. Later that evening we celebrated. My parents referred to that day as my spiritual birthday, and every year for decades I received gifts, cards, or calls from them, reminding me of the day I made the most important decision of my life.

Though I cannot say that this day marked any profound shift inside me, it officially marked my spiritual journey. Despite there never having been a time when I wasn't attending a church, participating in extra church activities, or hearing the Bible being read to me at home, asking Jesus into my heart to be the savior of my life was the day that, at five years old, I committed the rest of my life to following God.

Several years later, my parents informed my siblings and me that we would be moving to a rural area in Minnesota because God had called us to work at a church camp. Our family had gone there a few times and spent our weeks riding horses, swimming at the lake, and building campfires. What kid wouldn't love this? But I was apprehensive. Everything about our life would change: we would be a ministry family and unbeknownst to me and my siblings at the time, living at a camp wasn't all fun and games . . . literally. While the summer was filled with kids and weekends were filled with retreats, we lived quite a distance from our school, church, friends, and family. During the summers we lived in a world where crazy games, fast-paced activities, and chapel services were our normal. It was easy to forget there was a world outside. Every summer until my junior year of high school, I didn't see any of my friends from school for three months because of camp.

Camp life was unconcerned with school friends, relationship drama, the latest fads, or being popular. Instead we were focused on living for Christ, being on fire for God, and making commitments for abstinence and sexual purity so that we could be different from our peers. Not shockingly, my friends at school didn't understand my camp bubble and were uninterested in hearing about the things that were important in the camp bubble.

During my middle school years, a campaign swept the nation: True Love Waits. It was the first thing that bridged my God-world and my school-world. Since I went to school a significant distance from the church I attended, I often kept these two worlds apart. But when the campaign came to rural Minnesota, teenagers at both school and church were excited about it. I was a late bloomer when it came to puberty and adolescence. While I was interested in boys and had my share of crushes, I was terrified to act on them because I believed them to be a sin. Experiences from early childhood such as my crush on the neighbor boy and asking a boy, when I was in third grade, if he liked me were not received well by my parents. I took this to mean that, at the very least, liking a boy was not honoring my father and mother, and I *knew* that was a sin.

When the church youth pastor began talking to us about abstinence, virginity, and sex, I nodded along as if I understood. We were told about God's plans for sex and that anything outside that plan was not only a sin but evidence that perhaps we were not Christians at all. The decision to sign the True Love Waits pledge card was not a difficult one. I signed my name, was applauded by the congregation, and, a few years later, received a purity ring from my parents.

The True Love Waits campaign crossed the divide between religious and secular cultures through its marketing. Though some celebrities shared publicly about their own abstinence commitments and though abstinence-only sex education was nationally funded in schools, I still didn't understand the commitment I had made. Intuitively, however, I recognized the biological changes happening in my body to be a source of shame and disgust. Though I desperately wanted a boyfriend, I quickly became repulsed if someone liked me back because I feared it meant my body had caused them to lust. While I know now that I had hormones raging through my body, back then the sensations and shifts inside me felt scary and foreign. My junior year of high school, Dannah Gresh's

book *And the Bride Wore White* was published as a comprehensive guide on how to live a pure lifestyle—one that would lead toward my life purpose: to be married and have children. For years I used that book as a guide to and foundation for how I should live; I was floundering, and purity culture (though not called that then) felt like a stable foundation I could stand on.

By my senior year I was perplexed about what I should do next. I had academic, artistic, and musical credentials that would allow for my choice in schools, and I received an acceptance letter and an appealing financial aid package from each college I applied to. I was confused though because I had no idea what I wanted to do with my life. On the one hand, I knew the world was bigger than what I had been shown; on the other hand, the pinnacle of my life was to be a wife and mother, and I didn't need a degree or the student debt that came with it to fulfill that role. As I watched my closest friends excitedly go off to colleges, I resigned myself to trying to make the best out of community college.

As I walked out of my high school graduation ceremony, a weight descended on me. I realized that every decision from this point forward would impact the rest of my life. While this statement is true for adults in general, the weight of this decision felt even more intense because my Reformed theology taught me that finding God's plan for my life was a little bit like finding a needle in a haystack. Every choice I made had an eternal consequence. Perhaps when I chose my shirt in the morning before I went to my classes, I chose the wrong shirt, one that would be off-putting to a man who passed by me who was supposed to be my future husband. Instead of seeing my wise and godly character, he would be repulsed by my shirt choice, and my chances at marriage and children would be dashed. Though at the time I was unaware of mental health diagnoses, I know now that I developed severe anxiety and religious scrupulosity (a form of religious obsessive-compulsive disorder), and eventually depression, that no amount of Bible reading, prayer, repentance, or discipleship seemed to lift.

## **Experiences of Religious Abuse**

At church one Sunday after I graduated, the youth pastor, Tray, approached me. My stomach began to churn because I intuited that he was about to ask me to volunteer to work with the middle school youth group. Being a youth leader sounded like the worst possible way to spend my time. But when he told me that God had revealed to him that I would be an excellent small group leader, who was I to argue with him? Or God? Masking my frustration, I agreed to attend the youth leader retreat a few weeks later.

I did like the youth staff and was enamored with Tray. He had a magnetic presence—and more than that, he took an interest in me. He complimented what he called my raw talent and skills, bragged about me in front of other leaders, and would glance at me when he told jokes, as if he wanted to make sure I laughed. I found myself getting more involved in the youth group because I enjoyed that attention. Months into the first year of volunteering with the youth group, Tray asked me if I would help lead an upcoming mission trip. I couldn't understand why we should go to different locales to minister to people when we had enough people in our own community who needed the same gospel, but I understood that such questions would not be well received. However, when Tray asked me to be the main teacher, I accepted without hesitation. Months after that, when his ministry assistant decided to quit, he hired me to take her spot. At barely nineteen years old, I was in a prime position of serving God; I was visible to a godly man, and I was creating the life I had been told was for me.

Tray and I became a dynamic team; he showered me with compliments, gave me special attention, shared his innermost thoughts and secrets, and told me how lucky he was to have me working for him. I became friends with his wife and babysat his children, often spending many nights a week at their house, staying up late to talk and dream about ministry. Despite initially being hired for an assistant role, I accepted projects and tasks that went

far beyond my pay grade because Tray said he saw potential in me and promised that if I could prove my capability in these roles, then I could be considered for other, more prestigious positions. Eventually, I became the person that people had to go through to access him. He said he trusted me and valued my opinions and that he was willing to listen only to people in his inner circle—which I was.

Though my parents were members of the church, Tray confided in me that I needed someone who was further along spiritually, like he was, to guide me. I welcomed the invitation to look to him as a spiritual authority, and his words became a source of unquestionable truth. When he told me he knew me better than I knew myself, I believed him. When he told me I was special, I was over the moon. When he told me there was nothing really special about me, I was devastated and ashamed, but I believed him then too.

The first instance of overt spiritual abuse I experienced, though I was unable to categorize it as that at the time, came shortly after I began working at the church, when the senior high youth pastor, Phillip, ventured into the office I shared with his assistant, fuming. He ranted at me as his assistant looked on. He accused me of doing a task incorrectly and then lying about it. Baffled, I tried to defend myself, knowing that the task in question was his assistant's responsibility. Eventually he was yelling at me—to the point where an assistant from another department came into our office suite to close the door. Before leaving my office, Phillip warned me to not speak of what happened to anyone, noting that if I did, I would be sinning since he was my spiritual authority.

Despite this harsh warning, I simply could not hold in what had happened to me. I recognized that something was wrong but was dismayed when I later told Tray what happened only to have him affirm what Phillip had told me. Believing that the only choice I had was to apologize or risk losing my job, I chose the former and made my way to Phillip's office to ask for forgiveness.

By the early 2000s, many books had been written about various topics within purity culture: how to have a godly relationship, physical intimacy, boundaries, modesty, roles for men and women, purity of heart and mind, and everything in between. I devoured the books looking for any small or large characteristic or action I could change that would make me appealing to a man. I assumed that my singleness was both the result of some hidden sin I hadn't repented of as well as God trying to teach me a lesson. When I was brave enough to share my frustrations about being single, I was often told that I wanted marriage too much and that God wouldn't give me a husband until I was satisfied in him. Or that I needed to use this season of singleness to learn how to submit and to seek mentorship from older women in the church.

By this point I had learned that I needed to trust others' voices and direction for me. To keep me accountable, I also mentored girls in the youth group outside of my small group and created purity culture curriculum so that I could train the younger girls to become godly wives and mothers. I vowed to not kiss prior to my wedding day and learned to suppress all sexual desires—so much so that I wondered if I was asexual. Despite my absolute fascination with sex and relationships, I could explore this fascination only through the hatred of them in an effort to do things the godly way.

A few years into my position at the church, I was still single, and a mutual interest developed between one of the other leaders and me. Unfortunately, Lucas was four years my junior and finishing his senior year of high school. We decided that nothing could happen between us until he graduated a couple months later. Since we were both committed to living a life of purity in body, heart, and mind, I informed Tray of my interest in Lucas. He was enraged and threatened harsh consequences if I acted on my interest.

When Lucas graduated from high school, Tray informed other church leaders of my plans to allow Lucas to pursue a relationship with me, and they decided that I was not permitted to have

a relationship with him. Despite my compliance, Tray became furious with me for even entertaining a relationship that was not sanctioned by him and encouraged others to report back to him anytime I was seen in public. I was regularly accused of things I had not done and was unable to defend myself since Tray had already determined I was living in sin. Routinely, I was stripped of tasks in my paid and volunteer work and was told I wasn't allowed any youth group student contact and that I wasn't fit to shepherd other leaders. My work was eventually reduced to administrative tasks. After several months of this, I told Tray I would quit. He responded that he was relieved because if I hadn't, he would have fired me for failure to submit to spiritual authority.

The public reason for my departure from my position at the church was that I was going to move so I could go back to school, which was true. I began applying for master's programs and jobs a few hours away, and I fully intended to move. Initially the process of applying for schools and jobs was easy; I had many promising opportunities to choose from. One by one, however, I received calls and letters indicating that I would no longer be a fit for the program or job I had applied for. I later learned that people at the church had contacted the places I was interested in to warn them about me.

## **Beginning to Deconstruct**

Eventually I took a job at a local community college and began a process of repentance and restoration with church leadership. The community college was the first environment I worked in that was not tied to ministry or God. I was shocked by the respect I received for the work that I did and by the fact that my being a woman didn't hinder me. Though I did not particularly enjoy working at the college, it allowed me to see that I could pursue additional education and even move away. So without telling anyone, I began the application process again to attend

graduate school and a couple years later, I quietly made plans to move.

I attended Liberty University for my master's degree program. Though the school has received much negative press, I look back on my time in Liberty's hybrid master's degree program with relative fondness. Their education was good, and I felt prepared to enter the field of therapy. Simultaneously, the leadership at the church changed, which allowed me to work my way back into its protective covering. Despite knowing I wanted to move, I thought that being outside the protection of the church meant that the devil could get ahold of me, which was terrifying, so I used every opportunity to prove my usefulness.

Eventually I, along with three others, started a large young adult ministry in the community, and I was given all administrative and event-planning tasks, on top of teaching leadership courses, mentoring, and being expected to be available at any moment. Despite being a full-time student with an unpaid internship, I was asked to give more time and other resources to the ministry and to support the pastor and his wife leading the ministry. I eventually quit both of my meager paying jobs so that I could focus more of my time on ministry. Between my volunteer work and schoolwork, most of my hours were filled. Though student loans covered most of my expenses, I still needed to pick up as many side jobs as I could to make ends meet.

By the time I graduated from Liberty, I was so burned out that moving away from everything familiar felt like a relief. Knowing that I now had a career that would make it easier to support myself, I jumped at the first opportunity I was given to move. I never looked back. Starting over with a new life seemed less scary than spending one more day in the life I had been living.

I moved to Nashville and started attending a church that, while billing itself as progressive, still preached the same messages I grew up with. Though the process of my religious deconstruction and deconversion will be detailed, in part, later in this book, for

now what's important to know is that the church did offer me a place to ask questions. I experienced immense relief in simply being allowed to voice my uncertainties without my salvation being called into question. It was at this church that I would eventually meet a now-former partner with whom I would continue my deconstruction process, reevaluate my purity culture commitments, and ultimately leave the church. Despite the relationship being characterized by dynamics of power and control, domestic violence, and abuse—adding to the religious trauma that I already was suffering from—I can still maintain a sense of fondness toward a time in that relationship where I was able to try out life apart from the fundamentalist patterns of living that had been the entirety of my existence. Ultimately, processing this relationship in therapy opened my eyes to the spiritual abuse, harm, and AREs that I had undergone.

I went through a long journey to understand that the way my body responded to the HCR I was a part of resulted in trauma. My deconstruction journey began over a decade before I recognized that I had been traumatized. Trauma has traditionally been understood as the event that happened. It wasn't until I began having panic attacks, flashbacks, and visceral somatic symptoms on the one-year anniversary of leaving a physically and psychologically harmful job that a therapist gently introduced me to eye movement desensitization and reprocessing (EMDR) therapy—the most well-known trauma therapy modality at the time. Though neither of us discussed the possibility of trauma as it pertained to the panic and flashbacks around my previous job, EMDR was incredibly helpful in my therapy. At a certain point, however, while the intensity of the work experiences had decreased and were no longer scary, I was still experiencing symptoms in my body, having flashbacks to earlier events in my life, and feeling a constant sense of dread, panic, and anxiety.

Though my therapist genuinely wanted to help, my body seemed resistant, and I began to dissociate and was unable to

tolerate EMDR whenever we tried to discuss any overwhelming events outside of my job.<sup>1</sup> I eventually quit therapy because it felt like a waste of time and my symptoms were getting worse. By this point I was quite isolated and had significant social anxiety. I was experiencing extreme weight gain, increased depression and anxiety, insomnia, inability to concentrate, near-constant dissociation, digestive issues, exhaustion, and hypervigilance. Though I had cut out most of the people, places, and things in my life that were causing distress, the experience of living in my body every day was getting more difficult.

Eventually things were so bad that dissociation was the safest way to live; though I was physically present, I was mentally absent. Many times I ended up somewhere in or around my house with no recollection of getting there. I would often sit on the couch for what I thought was ten minutes only to discover that hours had gone by. Emotions escaped me, laughing was impossible, anywhere other than work or my house felt scary, and I only felt safe spending time with three individuals. I required rigid boundaries because life felt scary and intolerable.

Despite a growing list of symptoms, I couldn't get answers from medical or mental health professionals. Doctors were stumped when my external appearance indicated hypothyroidism, but my blood tests indicated near *hyper*thyroidism. Specialists couldn't understand how all their recommendations for sleep still resulted in extreme exhaustion and insomnia. Still, no one mentioned trauma. To be fair, I didn't recognize the symptoms as trauma either.

Several years later, my therapist casually dropped the term “complex post-traumatic stress disorder” (CPTSD) in conversation,

1. Trauma research suggests that when an individual undergoes extreme stress and overwhelming and/or prolonged traumatic experiences, as is often the case with religious trauma, individuals learn how to dissociate—that is, to mentally leave their bodies to protect themselves from a real or perceived threat. See Judith Herman, *Trauma and Recovery: The Aftermath of Violence—From Domestic Abuse to Political Terror* (New York: Basic Books, 1992).

assuming that I already knew this was my diagnosis. I stared back at her blankly, and she paused to educate me on CPTSD. Immediately I knew this diagnosis fit with what I was experiencing, which brought me significant relief because I knew that I was not making my symptoms and distress up in my head, that what I was experiencing was real, and that, yes, it really was *that bad*.

## Why Share My Story

I'm often asked why I have made a career out of working with individuals who have had AREs or experienced faith deconstruction, purity culture, religious trauma, and the like. Truly, my passion for working with them and my extensive research and training in trauma is motivated by my own experiences. What you've read above is just the tip of the iceberg regarding my own story. I contemplated giving more details and sharing more experiences, but I am more interested in the process of healing than in what I have experienced.

We live in a voyeuristic culture where salacious stories are regularly shared—almost expected—to prove that what we went through was that bad. We often use this as a way to compare trauma—that is, to see who had it worse. This almost always breeds shame. While our stories are important, my story does not need to provide a baseline or act as a measuring stick that determines if how you experienced and were impacted by an HCR is valid. It is valid. Because you experienced it.

As I will discuss in this book, trauma is not the event or the thing that happened to us; rather, it is the way our bodies and nervous systems respond to what happened to us. Operating from this premise allows us to consider that since religious trauma does not stem from specific practices, doctrines, or beliefs, this book could be for anyone—regardless of the sect, denomination, or group we belong or belonged to. My experience comes from a strict fundamentalist, evangelical, Reformed theological background, and my

stories reflect that lived experience. While I cannot speak to the lived experiences of someone who belonged to Mormon, Muslim, Jehovah's Witness, Catholic, or other churches and denominations, my research and training allow me to understand how trauma may live in that person's body the same way that it lived in mine. This means that even if you do not share my background, this book may still help you understand how religious trauma is trauma and how to reclaim your life.

Finally, it's important to me to recognize and own that I was once someone who participated in harming others through religious practices, rules, beliefs, and doctrine. I was someone who was in a position of spiritual authority, and I used my position and influence in ways that I now know caused people harm. In some cases, I have been able to talk to, apologize to, and repair relationships with some of the people I hurt, but I know there are many more people out there.

While it is true that I was doing what was done to and modeled for me, I also recognize that I must own the choices I made as an adult who was in relationship with others and in a position of influence. I taught harmful doctrine; I shamed people into behavioral change; I reported back to church leadership about specific people; I was judgmental, cold, unrelenting, and manipulative. I spread messages that promoted patriarchy, ableism, misogyny, capitalism, and racism. I know that there are people who were and are in pain because of how I acted and interacted in my ministry days. For this, I am deeply apologetic and regretful.

I recognize that there may be people who struggle to believe or accept my apology, and I can both understand and respect that. To them I would say this: your acceptance of my apology or forgiveness of my actions in no way determines your healing. Forgiveness is not a precursor for being truly healed; forgiveness doesn't need to be part of healing at all. Your story and experiences matter, and I truly do hope that you are able to live as a healing individual.