

These paintings reflect on the more morbid side of religion and how too close a relationship with spirituality can spiral into a host of crippling mental illnesses. Growing up in a relatively non religious household and community, I was curious why people convert, practice, and fall out of faith. Delving further into why individuals stop practicing religion, I uncovered the damaging psychological effects religious practices and beliefs can have one's psyche.

In my three paintings, I drew inspiration from specific religious imagery. Two of the paintings are meant to be a parody of sorts, drawing inspiration from Marian Apparition paintings and the Sacred Heart images. With the gold leaf, I wanted to draw attention to the outwardly appealing and gilded parts of religion to juxtapose a contrast with the dark and gory imagery depicted in my work.

My paintings are just a manifestation of my inner thoughts and musings that surfaced during my research process. I am not only trying to question the idea of religious faith but one's own belief in any "higher being" and how that can shape an individual's morals and lifestyle. I wanted to try and capture the pain that can overwhelm and deteriorate one's mental health and how this side of religion isn't widely known or discussed.

Caroline T.
New York

The Psychology Of Religion And Religious Trauma Syndrome

Caroline T.



With pristine white bricks and brown accents along the windows and the roof, the First Presbyterian Church of Napa sits on the corner of Third Street. Its regal spire reaches towards the sky, topped with a delicate silver cross. Inside, the white walls are just as immaculate, and wooden support beams suspend intricate chandeliers to cast a soft glow through the space. An excess of light pours in through the lattice-work stained glass windows that line the sides of the church. Rows of simple wooden pews line the floors, leading to the back of the church where the altar stands, behind it a modest cross. Upon entering the church, I am immediately aware of the deafening silence and stillness of the room. The overwhelming quiet creates a sense of unease and in the back of my head a small voice pipes up to tell me that my faith isn't strong enough for me to belong in such a sacred space.

Having grown up in a non-religious family with very minimal religious knowledge, I have always questioned the idea of religion, and wondered what pushes people to live their lives devoted to a larger, intangible being. However, when asked "Is religion an important part of your daily life?" over 99% of Egyptians say "yes," 66% of Americans said "yes" and a mere 16% of Swedes said "yes."¹ The reasoning behind why people are drawn to practicing religion is scattered— it varies in each case and is dependent on one's personal beliefs and choices. It is widely believed that the primary appeal of religion is the fact that it satisfies sixteen basic human desires that many people spend their entire lives finding ways to satiate. The 16 desires are: Acceptance, Curiosity, Nourishment, Family, Honor, Idealism, Independence, Order, Physical Activity, Power, Romance, Saving, Social Contact, Status, Tranquility, Vengeance.² We all share the same 16 goals, but what makes each person different is how much they value each one. For example, How much an individual values each of those 16 ideals corresponds closely to what he or she likes and dislikes about religion.³ Each of the 16 desires interest specific personalities at different levels which requires that each person finds a place in a religion that successfully embraces their needs. For example, one of the desires is the "need for social contact." Religion has to appeal to both introverts and extroverts. For extroverts, religion offers festivals and teaches that God blesses fellowship and community. For introverts, religion encourages meditation and privacy and teaches that God blesses inner peace and solitude. Religious rituals fulfill the desire for order, while religious teachings about salvation and forgiveness tap into the basic human need for acceptance. Promises of afterlife are designed to help people achieve tranquility and relinquish the fear of death which, in turn, makes it easier to say goodbye to loved ones as part of the grieving process. For my suitemate Kayla, who follows the Muslim religion, she finds that in trying moments where she finds herself struggling to contain her emotions, reminding herself of the core values held in her religion helps her maintain her composure. Though one's religion may not influence their every action, as shown with Kayla, it can help people reign in their emotions and help with forgiveness.

For some, they are searching for a peaceful God who can shepherd them into a safe and loving community, where others who may feel isolated or angry, are searching for a place to direct their anger. These individuals seek a vengeful God, someone that they feel is on their side, or someone who will fight for them and deliver righteous justice to those they feel deserve it. In many

¹ "The Psychology of Religion." Psychology Today, Sussex Publishers, www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/the-pursuit-peace/201712/the-psychology-religion.

² These 16 needs are from a study by a psychologist named Steven Reiss and his theory of what attracts people to religion based on his research in the 1990s on motivation. He and his colleagues surveyed thousands of people and asked them to rate the degree to which they embraced hundreds of different possible goals.

³ Grabmeier, Jeff. "The Psychology behind Religious Belief." Phys.org, Phys.org, 5 Oct. 2015, phys.org/news/2015-10-psychology-religious-belief.html.

cases, people who feel like they have lost their community or experienced severe trauma or loss, often turn to religion, and more specifically, their God, when they are searching for answers or solace. Religion provides a sense of control, where those who feel like they have no control of their destiny, are able to pass off the burden of carving a path through life and place it in the hands of an ethereal being, which administers a sense of comfort in knowing that it was ‘meant to be’ and that each bump in the road is part of a bigger celestial plan.

Sometimes, the need to fulfill these 16 desires reaches epic proportions, especially when someone is experiencing extreme despair or distress. Individuals under duress can fall into an extreme religious following where the original teachings and morals of that practice can be warped to justify acts of violence and bloodshed. One example of such a group is the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant, or more commonly known as ISIS. There are many reasons why people join, but Mahdi Abdile, Finn Church Aid’s Regional Representative for East and Southern Africa, has managed to boil it down to 9 of the most prevalent reasons.⁴ The largest group of joiners is status seekers, which are the followers who joined with the intent or hope of improving their social standing. These individuals are “driven primarily by money and a need to gain a certain sense of recognition from those around them.”

Identity seekers, who are prone to feeling isolated or alienated, and often feel like outsiders in their community/environment. They seek to identify with others, and despite the nature of the groups they join, the most important factor to them is that they feel they’ve found their place. After that comes revenge seekers. Revenge seekers consider themselves part of a group that is being repressed by the (most commonly) the West or someone else.

Redemption seekers, who join ISIS because they believe it absolves them of previous sins or sinful actions.

Responsibility seekers, who have joined or support ISIS because it provides some material or financial support for their family. Ideology seekers, who want to impose their view of Islam on others.

Thrill seekers, who joined ISIS for adventure.

Justice seekers, who respond to what they perceive as injustice. Once the injustice they feel they are experiencing ceases to exist, these people once again lose their sense of direction.

Then there are Death seekers, who have “have most probably suffered from a significant trauma/loss in their lives and consider death as the only way out with a reputation of martyr instead of someone who has committed suicide.”

A more pressing question that many people have is why individuals stay in these groups despite some of the awful acts that are committed in the name of their religion? It was found that the “feeling of 'belonging' (21%) is really important. Some 11% felt a sense of responsibility. However, fear and economic dependence are also factors to reckon with.”⁵ Despite this, the reasons for joining extreme religious groups can be just as varied as reasons for joining the organization in the first place.

Just like any drug, religion is a tool used by many people to escape reality and in some cases, it can be a source of fun. In her book *Sober Spirituality*, Elizabeth Esther describes how

⁴ Tucker, Patrick. “Why Do People Join ISIS? Here's What They Say When You Ask Them.” Defense One, 8 Dec. 2015, www.defenseone.com/threats/2015/12/why-do-people-join-isis-heres-what-they-say-when-you-ask-them/124295/.

⁵ Tucker, Patrick. “Why Do People Join ISIS? Here's What They Say When You Ask Them.” Defense One, 8 Dec. 2015, www.defenseone.com/threats/2015/12/why-do-people-join-isis-heres-what-they-say-when-you-ask-them/124295/.

church experiences can produce a “high.”⁶ The result, Esther says, can be a destructive quest for spiritual euphoria. Even after the most intense pleasures—those that tend to create the highest rates of compulsion—most people are able to retain their capacity for balance. Actions like sex and gambling can be enjoyed in moderation, and most people can ingest a pleasurable neurotoxin like alcohol or even cocaine in moderation, while some others find themselves naturally drawn towards addiction and self-destruction. The same is true of religiously induced pleasures—including intense feelings of euphoria, transcendence, joy, absolution, security, immortality, purity, purpose, or belonging. Because many people turn to religion during a very vulnerable point in their lives, using it as a coping mechanism to help support them in a way that their community couldn’t, religion can become a crucial part to their everyday life and in some parts, influence every thought they may have. Former Christian Nate Zimmer describes the feelings of euphoria he experienced when he was a part of the Charismatic Christian sect. “You live for the high of having a metaphysical encounter with God, but more than anything you hope to have that experience in the presence of other believers.”⁷ Chris was a part of the Charismatic Christian sect (also known as Spirit-filled Christianity). This branch of Christianity emphasizes the work of the Holy Spirit, spiritual gifts, and modern-day miracles as an everyday part of a believer's life. This need to be as close to God as possible, and trying to reach a spiritual climax can be severely damaging to a person’s mental state the result of such an aggressive and deep rooted belief can result in a mental condition that is known as Religious Trauma Syndrome.

Religious Trauma Syndrome (RTS), involves a set of symptoms that are tied into harmful experiences with religion. “They are the result of two things: immersion in a controlling religion and the secondary impact of leaving a religious group.”⁸ In Bible-based religious groups that emphasize a patriarchal authority in family structures and use harsh parenting methods, it is sadly very common for those who fall out of faith also come away with varying levels of RTS. One of the most crippling effects of Religious Trauma Syndrome is that despite being consciously aware of your decision to stop believing, subconscious behaviors that have been ingrained as a result of closely following a religion can persist and influence everyday thoughts and emotions. In the book *Christianity Is Not Great: How Faith Fails*, by John W. Loftus, a former Christian suffering from RTS states, “Despite the fact that I’ve intellectually broken from Christianity, however, I cannot seem to let go of my beliefs. Every single day is a nightmare, plagued with mild panic attacks, de-realization, doubt, OCD, etc.” (Loftus, John). Conscious of their decision to stop practicing, the real terror lies in the struggle between conscious logical thoughts and the subconscious irrational fears that permeate everyday streams of thought despite best efforts. Another details, “Reason is unreliable and you just have to keep believing. I know this is illogical, but every time I try to convince myself that, my brain just stubbornly insists that I just believe, believe, believe. My life is a living hell.” (Loftus, John). If you spend most of your life living with the belief that every action made and every outcome is because of a path predetermined by a heavenly blueprint, the utter chaos of having that reality shatter can be catastrophic. The sense of loss, misdirection, grief and guilt - any feelings that may have been sorted or remedied by religion resurface. That tidal wave of emotions can be crushing and the result can be a huge emotional whirlwind. On top of

⁶ Staff, Pacific Standard. “The God Drug: When Religion Becomes an Addiction.” Pacific Standard, 2 Sept. 2016, psmag.com/news/the-god-drug-when-religion-becomes-an-addiction.

⁷ Staff, Pacific Standard. “The God Drug: When Religion Becomes an Addiction.” Pacific Standard, 2 Sept. 2016, psmag.com/news/the-god-drug-when-religion-becomes-an-addiction.

⁸ “Religious Trauma Syndrome: How Some Organized Religion Leads to Mental Health Problems.” *AwayPoint*, 16 Nov. 2014, valerietarico.com/2013/03/26/religious-trauma-syndrome-is-it-real/.

that, if you were raised in an environment of religious fear, especially for impressionable young minds, the religion bound neglect or abuse that might have been experienced can cause trauma that can last despite a conscious non-religious mindset. Marlene Winell, a human development consultant who works with people who identify as being in recovery from addictions to religion, says that her clients are not people who would otherwise struggle with mental-health issues. “Instead, they are people who got sucked into toxic versions of religion because they care deeply about doing good and living well, and once free, many transition to other world-views that promote both meaning and happiness.”⁹ While traumatic interactions with religion don’t commonly result in RTS, the amount of people who are seeking help for their problems is small enough that there is still a struggle to get RTS widely recognized as a mental health issue. Religious Trauma Syndrome is also often misdiagnosed since there are many skeptics who refuse to believe that something as intangible as religion has enough weight to cause lifelong trauma.

Religious Trauma Syndrome can also be easily instilled in small children, with ideas like eternal damnation, original sin, sexual guilt and black and white thinking creating a faith soaked in fear. The main characteristics of RTS is fear and anxiety. People participating in fundamentalist Christianity as small children sometimes have memories of being terrified by images of hell and apocalypse before their brains could begin to make sense of such ideas. Some survivors, or “reclaimers,” have flashbacks, panic attacks, or nightmares in adulthood even when they intellectually no longer believe the theology.¹⁰ On top of anxiety, people struggling with RTS can also experience depression, cognitive difficulties, and problems with social functioning. Born-again Christianity and devout Catholicism tell people they are weak and dependent, calling on phrases like “lean not unto your own understanding” or “trust and obey.” Because of these phrases and teachings, people who deeply internalize these messages can suffer from learned helplessness.¹¹ Authoritarian religious groups create a sense of community where conformity is required in order to belong and fully thrive in the environment. As a result of this, if you dare to leave the religion, you risk losing your entire support system.

Standing at the back of the church, I feel like an outsider peering into a whole new world. I feel wildly out of place in this sacred space. Despite the emptiness of the room, and my conscious effort to keep quiet, I feel like my very presence is disrupting the abstract whispered prayers from imagined hunched shoulders and bowed heads in the pews. I fill each seat with figures— some holding rosary beads, others palming bibles, a scattered few with their hands folded in their laps. Trying to picture myself in one of the seats, and I find that this image is surprisingly familiar. In moments of extreme emotional turbulence I’ve found myself picturing myself in this exact scene and imagining what it would be like to pray and have full faith that there was something with the answer to my questions hearing my words.

⁹ Staff, Pacific Standard. “The God Drug: When Religion Becomes an Addiction.” Pacific Standard, 2 Sept. 2016, psmag.com/news/the-god-drug-when-religion-becomes-an-addiction.

¹⁰ “Religious Trauma Syndrome: How Some Organized Religion Leads to Mental Health Problems.” *AwayPoint*, 16 Nov. 2014, valerietarico.com/2013/03/26/religious-trauma-syndrome-is-it-real/.

¹¹ “Religious Trauma Syndrome: How Some Organized Religion Leads to Mental Health Problems.” *AwayPoint*, 16 Nov. 2014, valerietarico.com/2013/03/26/religious-trauma-syndrome-is-it-real/.

Bibliography

“Religious Trauma Syndrome: How Some Organized Religion Leads to Mental Health Problems.” *AwayPoint*, 16 Nov. 2014, valerietarico.com/2013/03/26/religious-trauma-syndrome-is-it-real/.

Cannon, Dale S. *Six Ways of Being Religious: a Framework for Comparative Studies of Religion*. Wadsworth Publishing Company, 1996.

“Why Do People Join Terrorist Organisations?” *European Institute of Peace*, eip.org/en/news-events/why-do-people-join-terrorist-organisations.

Grabmeier, Jeff. “The Psychology behind Religious Belief.” *Phys.org*, Phys.org, 5 Oct. 2015, phys.org/news/2015-10-psychology-religious-belief.html.

Loftus, John. “Christianity Is Not Great: How Faith Fails by John W. Loftus.” *Goodreads*, Goodreads, 21 Oct. 2014, www.goodreads.com/book/show/20697567-christianity-is-not-great.

Staff, *Pacific Standard*. “The God Drug: When Religion Becomes an Addiction.” *Pacific Standard*, 2 Sept. 2016, psmag.com/news/the-god-drug-when-religion-becomes-an-addiction.

“The Psychology of Religion.” *Psychology Today*, Sussex Publishers, www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/the-pursuit-peace/201712/the-psychology-religion.

Swan, Thomas. “Why Do People Convert to Religion?” *Owlcation*, Owlcation, 26 Mar. 2018, owlcation.com/humanities/Why-Do-People-Convert-to-Religion.

Tucker, Patrick. “Why Do People Join ISIS? Here's What They Say When You Ask Them.” *Defense One*, 8 Dec. 2015, www.defenseone.com/threats/2015/12/why-do-people-join-isis-heres-what-they-say-when-you-ask-them/124295/.