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**by Marta Thorsheim and team**

## **Religious Trauma from an IoPT Perspective**

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According to *World Population Review*, about 85% of the world's population identify as religious, the majority being Christian [1]. It is logical that those who are part of religious communities, unless they are there under force, likely feel that religion has a positive influence on their lives. This article explores how, from an IoPT perspective, religion can also have a negative impact on the formation of a healthy identity and, in that sense, be traumatizing. I have been specifically interested in exploring what happens when children are born into religious systems with a negative view of human nature, strict dogma, and a black and white understanding of *right* and *wrong* with harsh and unceasing consequences for “wrong” behavior. This is the kind of system in which I was raised.

I grew up in a conservative Christian tradition with primarily Mennonite roots that went back through many generations on my mother's side. Growing up immersed in this tradition, with

very little exposure to and many warnings against other spiritual paths, I did not question what I was told about the inerrancy of the Bible as the only word of God, the idea that our form of Christianity was the exclusive path to God, and the viewpoint that people are inherently evil and require salvation from the outside.

By the time I was a high school senior, I had gained more exposure to people who did not hold the beliefs with which I was indoctrinated, and I began to question, specifically, whether I was indeed inherently evil. I remember listening to a sermon in which the pastor was reminding us of our 'sinful nature'. During his talk, I paused to notice that I did not feel like my nature was sinful. This was quickly replaced by the terrible thought that my failure to recognize my transgressions was itself proof of my inherent depravity and that I should be ashamed for having considered otherwise. It was a couple more years before I seriously began questioning the religious teachings and practices that had been spoon-fed to me, and many more years before I would come to understand just how deeply traumatizing my religious upbringing was to my identity.

I was attending a small Mennonite college in Kansas when the opportunity came to go to Chicago and earn credit studying urban issues, art, culture, and ministries. In 1984, I left the sheltered environments of Northern Idaho and rural Kansas in the US to come face to face with the inner city. I lived in households in two of Chicago's poor south side neighborhoods. Our classroom was Chicago itself — its community organizations, social welfare offices, museums, churches, ethnic neighborhoods, political centers, housing projects, schools, and homeless shelters. Our curriculum included just about any social, political, or economic issue one could imagine. The purpose of the entire experience was to provide exposure and to stimulate critical

evaluation of our belief systems and of our identities.

One of my first urban experiences involved visiting churches, synagogues, and temples rooted in all the major faith traditions and in many ethnic backgrounds. From these visits, I gained a profound insight — that it doesn't take having an identity of “Christian” to *be* one – to embody the qualities for which Jesus is revered. I was struck by the reality that many non-Christian groups were more compassionately responsive to the incredible and often discomfiting needs within their communities than were some of the Christian congregations that unquestionably held Christ as their guide. I realized with a clarity I had not had before that identifying with Christianity and its associated dogma, rituals, and scripture was not helping me be the kind of person I wanted to be and that, in many ways, it was impeding me from learning who I truly was and from being authentic.

From a mainstream perspective, identity has a lot to do with what is external to us. It is common for people to define who they are in terms of things they identify with. “I’m a Christian” or “I’m a mother”, for example. As humans, we want to belong and we want to feel valuable so it’s understandable that we look for groups in which we can feel seen and accepted and for roles from which we gain a sense of purpose. However, what is often overlooked in the mainstream and what we know from an IoPT perspective is that a healthy *identity* is not gained by *identification* with things outside ourselves. Dr. Franz Ruppert, the founder of IoPT, defines *identity* as “the sum of all our life experiences, everything that has happened to a person from the very beginning of his or her existence and how, as a subject, he/she reacts to those experiences,” and *healthy identity* as “the unconditional ‘yes’ to our own existence.” [2] The focal point of a healthy identity then must be the person themselves. When we link who we are to

things external to us, this is *identification* which ultimately takes us away from ourselves, causing us to base our sense of self on the attributes, roles, values, codes, expectations, and evaluations of others and groups of others. Identification with churches, religious groups, and parents who are identified with these groups sets the stage for identity trauma because the values of the religious system are prioritized over the authentic needs and will of the individual.

Last year, I studied at the Institute for Trauma Work in Norway and embarked on an IoPT focused study of the traumatizing effects of religion. I met with six people from around the world for several weeks and facilitated six group- and 11 individual self-encounters. The individuals who participated were all raised in either a conservative Protestant or conservative Catholic Christian tradition which promoted the idea that humans are inherently sinful and that the solution to this is salvation from a god outside of ourselves. All participants felt they had been traumatized by their religious upbringings.

To begin my study, I conducted a questionnaire in which I asked how each participant felt that he or she had been traumatized by religion. This gave me a sense of the correlation that each person had already made between their religious upbringing and their life struggles.

Participants said that religion:

- Made me fear being judged by a God who had the potential to condemn me to eternal hell.
- Taught me not to love or think highly of myself because doing so could lead to hell.
- Made me fear the dark where demons and dark forces might be.
- Caused me to make extreme and odd decisions.

- Caused me to give up my identity in favor of ‘God’ and my parents’ needs and expectations.
- Disallowed me my own choices – my own will.
- Made me fear not being good enough and taught me that there would be formidable consequences if I wasn’t.
- Burdened me with the responsibility for ‘saving’ other people.
- Caused me to deny my sexuality and hate my body.
- Created confusion between how I was expected to behave and how I saw my mother behaving.
- Disallowed me from seeing myself as a good person and created in me a deeply rooted sense of shame.
- Taught me to hate myself because human nature was believed to be inherently evil.
- Resulted in sexual shame.
- Gave me no support for developing a healthy and positive self-perception.
- Taught me to obey parental authority and suppress my own truth.
- Made me fear looking at myself for fear of demons that might show up behind me.

As we proceeded to do self-encounters, participants brought forward intentions that, for them, seemed connected to their experiences of religion. Below are some of these intentions and my thoughts about how religious trauma may be relevant.

- ***I want to retaliate***

When a religious system forces its own beliefs and requirements on individuals, it is natural for individuals to feel that they have been wronged and want to retaliate. This is especially apparent in a parent-child relationship within a religious system requiring children to unquestionably obey their parents and preventing them from calling into question anything their parents do.

- ***I want to be loved/ I live to serve***

If parents are focused on satisfying the requirements of their religion and are carrying their own unaddressed religious trauma, they will be unavailable to truly see and meet their children's needs. The child experiences a *trauma of love* which leads them to work harder and harder to get the love from their parents that they need. Of course, later, this search for the parents' love is transferred to others, possibly in a focus on serving.

- ***I am a free woman***

In conservative Christianity, women must serve and even obey their husbands. Often, women are not allowed to have leadership roles in their congregations. They are then, just by virtue of being female, not free.

- ***I want to feel good enough / I want to explore why I feel that people don't like me***

When human nature is equated with *evil* and the definition of *good* is not far from the definition of *perfect*, it follows that one would feel as if their very nature were, at a minimum, chronically insufficient if not wholly bad, shameful, and unlikeable.

- ***I need to be saved***

At the foundation of conservative Christianity lies the fundamental belief that human

nature is inclined toward evil and that we need to be saved from our own inclinations.

This belief puts human beings in the impossible position of being a victim of themselves, rather than of having the wisdom to act in an empowered and life-affirming way.

- ***What fear prevents me from doing what I want***

When religious dogma determines what is acceptable and what isn't, the individual's own wants are, at a minimum, not encouraged and, more often, ignored or scorned.

- ***I accept sexuality***

Sexuality is little discussed and rarely visible in many conservative religious traditions.

Carnal urges come with warnings about the evil that can result if one succumbs to them.

Women, who are often required to serve their husband's sexual needs, are objectified and their own needs ignored or minimized. Additionally, homosexuality and bisexuality are typically regarded with contempt. There is an absence of support for healthy sexuality in this kind of system.

Over the course of the six weeks, I gained increasingly more clarity about how religion can be traumatizing, but what strikes me as the core of this trauma is that, if parents (mothers especially) are steeped in a belief system that sees human nature as inherently evil and believe that the remedy for this is to seek salvation from outside oneself, there is absolutely no possibility for a child to have a healthy identity. Trauma of identity is inevitable. Children are immediately dissuaded from recognizing their innocence, from having their own wants, and from trusting themselves.

When I was visiting my sister just after the birth of her first child, I witnessed her looking over at her beautiful little baby and saying, “And to think she’s already evil.” I was stunned and disheartened but reminded of the mindset my parents must have had when I entered the world. Imagine the difference between having a mother who looks upon her child with recognition of their innocence, and having one who looks upon them with the notion that they are already evil the moment they are born or even conceived. How does that initial assumption of her child impact the mother’s behavior toward that child throughout the course of the child’s life?

Below are some of the themes and hypotheses that have come up in the self-encounters centered around religious trauma that I have either facilitated or had for myself.

- Religious indoctrination based on the concept of original sin leads to a Trauma of Identity. The ‘I’ is not valued and reinforced as the subject of one’s life. Individual will is not affirmed or valued. The assumption is that the ‘I’ is not to be trusted, leading to identification with and submission to God, the church, the authorities of the church, and one’s parents.
- Religions that see human nature as evil directly or indirectly teach that the body is not to be trusted and should certainly not be a source of pleasure, except perhaps for men in relationship to women. This leads to dissociation from the body, dismissal of its signals and needs, and vulnerability to physical and sexual abuse. (Trauma of sexuality)
- Religion of the type noted in this article often threatens extreme punishment, both in



this life and in the believed afterlife, if one does not stay within a narrow range of acceptable behavior. Images of torture are often presented to very young children to stifle inclinations to enact behaviors outside of what is deemed okay. When behavior is restricted from without, a healthy identity is not possible.

- If a member of a family or religious community acts in a way that is discordant with the family's or community's spoken or unspoken codes, the individual faces the threat of abandonment and isolation. (Trauma of love)
- Religion often reinforces traditional gender roles and promotes female submission. This not only limits the capacity of individuals to express their unique characteristics and interests but sets the stage for mothers to avoid protecting their children and to become complicit in abuse at the hands of others. (Trauma of sexuality)
- In several self-encounters, it was revealed that religious mothers often defer the role of emotional support to Jesus. Rather than offering support to their children to notice and express their feelings, mothers directed their children to "pray to Jesus" about them. Resonators speaking on behalf of intention givers' young parts expressed wishing that their mothers were more like Jesus and confusion that they were being directed to someone (Jesus) who they couldn't see and who then, from a child's perspective, isn't there. (Trauma of love)
- Religion can be a means of avoiding truly dealing with problems and pain in a proactive and effective way if individuals are only given the option to pray about their problems and not encouraged to seek resources and support that foster self-reflection, exploration of one's trauma biography, new perspectives, etc.

- Religion often minimizes the value of this life in deference to the 'next life'. Pursuing one's passions and dreams, expressing one's uniqueness, and experiencing joy while alive on Earth seem not to be the priority for individuals who identify with religions focused on "getting to heaven". This is consistent with the lack of support that religions tend to offer in helping individuals to know who they truly are and to fully be themselves.

Many of the issues I have struggled with during my lifetime are issues I have seen surface time and time again in IoPT self-encounters of my own and of others, such as: low self-worth, feeling invisible, lack of clarity about personal wants, disconnection from the body and a confusing relationship to sexuality, and a never-ending attempt to feel good enough. These are all consequences of the *trauma of identity*, which is the trauma of not being wanted and which results in a separation of an individual's 'I' from their 'want'. These issues are of course not unique to religious trauma. However, when the mother's own 'I' has been subordinated to uphold the doctrines and expectations of her religion, she is not capable of standing unequivocally for her child's 'I'.

As I've seen from the many IoPT self-encounters I've done, my mother's wish that I did not exist is the fundamental source of my own trauma of identity. Her 'no' has had a profoundly painful impact on my life, as many other people who have explored their trauma biography can relate to. The relevance of religious indoctrination on the development of healthy identity is that it sets the stage for all the Identity Traumas to occur – the Trauma of Identity ("I am not wanted"), the Trauma of Love ("I am not loved"), and the Trauma of Sexuality ("I am not safe"). Even had my mother felt she wanted me, my parents would have still raised me to

dismiss my needs and wants, to perceive my nature as inherently evil, and to identify with the same religion that had already traumatized my mother and, to some degree, my father. There was little chance that they could have looked upon me and seen that, though small and vulnerable, I was innocent and whole and in no need of salvation from the outside. Due to their trauma and their religious views, they were wired to steer me away from myself from before my conception, and as Gabor Maté says, the essence of trauma is the disconnection from the self [4].

In conclusion, when a religion teaches that we need salvation from our own nature and that this salvation comes from outside ourselves, it becomes a source of perpetration. It leads people to distrust themselves, limiting their capacity to know themselves, to recognize their own wants, and to act autonomously according to what they need and want. If those who have been traumatized by religion in this way do not attend to their own healing, their internalized mistrust in the inherent wisdom of each individual can lead them to become part of a traumatizing culture that overrides others' realities with attempts to rescue or persuade based on a perceived superior view. This kind of traumatizing behavior is rampant in the world today and while religious systems are certainly not the only source, they are part of the problem.

If a religion can encourage and nurture individuals in recognizing 'God' as the energy of life within themselves, rather than as an external judging and penalizing entity who has the power to determine human fate, and if that religion can support members in self-exploration and clarification of what is best for them rather than prioritizing creeds and codes of the religious body, then perhaps it can be a healthy part of someone's identity formation. I presume there are religious bodies that do enhance people's lives, but I fear that the majority still have the

effect of preventing people from recognizing their inherent wholeness and from saying an unequivocal “Yes!” to themselves.

## References

[1] Religion By Country 2023. World Population Review.

<https://worldpopulationreview.com/country-rankings/religion-by-country>

[2] Ruppert (2020). Love, Lust, and Trauma

[3] Broughton (2011). Trauma and Identity

[4] Maté (2022). The Myth of Normal