

It's Not Just Personal: The Collective Trauma of Religion

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Abstract:

Institutionalized religionism is even broader than institutionalized racism but it has not been understood or named. Yet it is taking an enormous toll. We are so far from being a “Christian nation” if compassion for people is any part of that ideal. Perhaps naming institutionalized religionism will be transformative in the same way that naming institutionalized racism has been galvanizing. We need to see and recognize the collective trauma we carry. Celebrating the nation’s religiosity in public ceremonies only reinforces our trauma. This article addresses the destructive effects of authoritarian religion, not the more progressive, liberal forms. There are churches and groups that are inclusive and life-affirming, and active in social causes, from a concern with this present life instead of being what is essentially a death cult focused on the hereafter. Marlene Winell, Ph.D. is a psychologist who specializes in religious recovery and has experienced in her own life the transition from being a devout religionist to being a “reclaimer,” a person who has left religion and reclaimed her life.

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On January 20, America’s religiosity was on full display. In fact, the religious parts of the U.S. Inauguration were excessive even by inauguration standards, which always includes an invocation and benediction. In addition to the lengthy prayers, Biden made multiple references to God and the Bible. Oaths were made on family Bibles, providing the clear message that these political families were people of faith. Everyone said the Pledge of Allegiance with “under God” in the wording. Then Garth Brooks sang “Amazing Grace” and unbelievably, led the crowd in singing the last verse together. This is more than a problem of separation of church and state; it perpetuates dangerous religious ideas that relate to deep issues of religion in our culture.

Usually, Americans assume people’s personal religious beliefs are just that – personal. It’s not polite to disagree or even inquire. We give wildly irrational ideas a pass because they are comforting. We’re tolerant; “Whatever helps you sleep at night.”

But religious beliefs are not personal because collectively, even well- intentioned religious people can do damage to society with their beliefs. They may vote for legislation that is misogynist or homophobic, for example. They may deny science and risk the planet. Or deny a pandemic and kill thousands. Recently, the alliance of Christian nationalism and Trumpism contributed to a deadly attack on the U.S. Capitol (Schaeffer, 2021) In numbers, religious people can do enormous harm, so yes it is our business what people believe. But I want to talk here about a different kind of harm from religion, one that is deeper and more complex—that has to do with how religions operate within the psyches of individuals and groups of people.

The people of the United States have suffered dogmatic, conservative Christianity as a collective trauma. What is collective trauma? The term refers to the impact of a specific event or broad social dynamic (war, natural disaster, epidemic, apartheid, etc.) on a whole group of people, causing related trauma to many at the same time. For example, writers are talking about the collective trauma on society from Covid 19 (Silver, 2020) and needing to heal from the collective trauma of the Trump era (Gessen, 2020).

Collective trauma can be a one-time event like a tsunami or take many years like slavery. It can be like Complex PTSD, involving many repeated injuries. It can be like chronic abuse. This is the case of religion as trauma – both individually and collectively. The injuries are multiple, and they come from both toxic teachings and toxic practices.

Toxic Teachings

Fundamentalist Christianity actively teaches that people are born bad and will always lean toward sin; they can never be trusted. These tenets were reinforced during the Inauguration ceremony as Garth Brooks sang, “Amazing grace, how sweet the sound, that saved a wretch like me.”

Individuals are taught from early childhood that they are empty of goodness, strength, or wisdom, and must always rely on God for anything of value. Feelings and intuitions and conversations that cast doubt on religious teachings or leaders cannot be trusted, and thinking for yourself is dangerous. People with different understandings of the world are seen as a threat to be destroyed or converted. (This leads to polarization in society, not unity.)

Children are also taught to be afraid – of burning in hell, of living in a sinful world, of spiritual warfare, of other people, of life itself. Believers are taught to live for the next world, not to take responsibility to make this world a better place or protect the environment. The abandonment of our planet was glorified by the inauguration crowd as they sang together. “When we’ve been there ten thousand years, bright shining as the sun, we’ve no less days to sing God’s praise, than when we first begun.”

Christian fundamentalists teach magical thinking and trust that a superior being will resolve everything at the end of time. Most seriously, they promote black and white thinking, with their group having the Truth, and all others being damned.

The psychological results of these beliefs can be devastating. Individuals may lack a sense of intrinsic self-worth or personal identity—identifying instead with their religious group. They may suffer anxiety because they can never be good enough and they can never have certainty about their ultimate salvation. Some former believers face ongoing struggles because discarding specific beliefs like these does not erase the associated toxic assumptions and feelings about self and life. In addition, leaving this kind of faith brings with it the trauma of having one’s entire worldview upended. Vital social support systems of church and family are disrupted, and the exbeliever feels lost in a big foreign world of secularism. Promises of cosmic meaning and perfectionism are shattered. A person who walks away must completely rebuild their life.

Toxic Practices

Fundamentalist religions have harmful practices that also cause damage. Parenting is often authoritarian and punitive, advocating corporal punishment, which can lead to abuse. Sexual repression results in dysfunctions and sexual abuse. Women must submit to patriarchy. The LGBTQ community is

condemned, as are many cultural and racial differences. Children experience isolation in the religious group as they are kept in closed environments in church, family, and school. They may suffer serious developmental delays as information and experience are kept from them, and they are unable to mature in the wider community. Upon leaving a religion with this in-group/out-group perspective, survivors often strive to catch up socially, cognitively, and emotionally. Many are not prepared to take part in the world community.

These individual effects have all been described in my work on Religious Trauma Syndrome (Winell, 2011) which is a pattern of symptoms common to the population of exbelievers who have been traumatized by living in and/or leaving a conservative, dogmatic religion. I have compared it to Complex PTSD and have dedicated much of my career to developing strategies for recovery (Winell, 2007). But I always concentrated on understanding and helping individuals. However I am now seeing clear symptoms of collective religious trauma.

Understanding Traumatized Believers

Think about the individual who is suffering the toxic effects of religion, and how many of those individuals there are. Add those who are less devout but who exhibit the cascading social and cultural effects of religion in the way of we/they mentality, patriarchy, homophobia, or misogyny. Racism, for example, has clear roots in religion (Camara, 2019). So do environmental exploitation and science denial. Think about the Christian nationalists who claim God-given rights on Earth, or climate change denialists and where they got their ideas.

Then try on a new thought: Think about all these people - this huge group of religionists - as victims of trauma. These are ordinary humans, born innocent babes. The guilt and shame, the fear, and the judgment they experience came from their religion. It happened over time, and over many generations. There is historical trauma (e.g. Salem witch trials, slave-holder religion) and intergenerational trauma (children and grandchildren of Jonathan Edwards, or the genealogy of the Mormons). There is huge, collective trauma; pervasive pain and dysfunction and yet all go unmentioned. Why? Because in our culture, religion is still considered a good thing. People get comfort from certain beliefs and they find community. No one wants to believe religion is behind so much psychological dysfunction, divisiveness in society, or vile attitudes and behaviors that are tearing us apart.

Religion of this kind stands opposed to human unity, no matter how good it sounds from President Biden right now. Christian end-times theology actually teaches that uniting people is a tenet of the “anti-Christ,” and will only lead to establishing his nefarious world-wide kingdom. Believers in this theology, which includes 70 million evangelicals in the U.S., learn to think in dichotomies: right and wrong, reward and punishment, separating sheep from goats. Correct knowledge in this worldview is revealed by God, not discovered by humans. In this view, science will never have authority because it is manmade.

God is said to be in control. According to fundamentalist religionists, humans are not responsible for the fate of the earth and it is considered hubris to think we can affect the environment. Nothing stands in the way of God’s will - not a pandemic and not climate change. Toxic teachings lead believers to be helpless but that’s considered okay because the earth is going to burn soon and justice will be served to the saved and damned. Meanwhile these religionists look for signs of the End—sometimes even to the point of encouraging war in the Middle East while looking the other way on global crises we could humanly solve if united in our goals.

Stated historically, some of the most harmful parts of Christianity are remains of an archaic system, still medieval in many ways. Doctors may have cures for epilepsy instead of considering it demon possession, but churches are still doing exorcisms, and exploiting people looking for faith healing. The Inquisition may be over but rampant prejudice and severe punishment is still meted out by religion.

It's time we name the culprit in the massive pain and suffering - authoritarian religion. We are dealing with crushing collective religious trauma. Millions of people are limping along, maimed and having no idea what the problem is. Most don't know they are impaired. They shout with ignorance and hate and don't know why. They've lost their moral core because their religion has usurped their natural instincts to make their own judgments about what is right. They are left vulnerable to church leaders with questionable motives who claim God wants them to support a person like Trump.

Institutionalized Religionism

This is the crime of religionism, and it is just as insidious as racism. But it's almost invisible because religion is embedded in our culture. We claim freedom of religion as a basic right, and forget about freedom from religion. But what if destructive religionist expression got the same disapproval as racist remarks? It's clear that we have institutionalized religionism. In the U.S. it's not possible (in practical terms) to run for public office without professing some kind of faith. Churches and religious organizations have enormous money and power while atheists are more suspect and hated in the U.S. than in other countries (Grewel, 2012). Amy Coney Barrett can be appointed to the Supreme Court while holding highly destructive religionist beliefs because it's considered private (Glueck, 2020). The same would not be true if she expressed racist attitudes. And how could her religious belief not affect her judgments? Sarah Palin was not worried about global warming because Jesus was coming back and no one cut short her run for high office. Courts and ceremonies use the Bible to swear in, as if it is the ultimate authority. The list could go on, and it is important to see that institutionalized religionism affects everyone in society, not just the religion-affiliated. It is unquestioned everywhere, safe from interrogation. Even billboards blare out threats about going to hell, and no one calls it what it is – abuse.

A history of religious influence shows in the structures of our society. Just like fundamentalist Christianity, our criminal justice system judges and punishes people as individuals, instead of holding systems accountable. We use the dichotomous guilty/not guilty. Incarceration is about control and revenge, not rehabilitation. We live a myth that capitalist America is a meritocracy, thereby looking down on the poor. Just like Christians get saved as individuals getting their tickets to heaven, we admire individuals who climb the status and money ladder.

Wait, you wonder, what would Jesus say? Exactly. The authoritarian Christianity of today has moved a long way from the original teachings of Jesus. The upper levels of church hierarchy are all about power and money. (The Mormon Church makes over \$7 billion a year, per Zuckerman, 2012) With this lens, it's possible to understand the Faustian bargain between Trump and the evangelical power base (Morris, 2019). The macho god of the fundamentalists/evangelicals is much more like the Old Testament Jehovah than Jesus. As I said in my article comparing Trump to Jehovah, this can help explain their support of Trump (Winell, 2016). The values and behavior are similar. For example "Might is right," and anything is permissible to achieve the ruler's ends.

In truth, fundamentalist, authoritarian Christianity is a violent religion. In the Old Testament, God sanctions multiple scenarios of death and destruction, and in the New Testament, the blood sacrifice of God's child is considered divine justice – the grace that saves us. The history of the church is a bloody

one; the Middle Ages brought hellish violence along with attempts at theocracy. And it's not over. Church groups in our time have no compunction about violently opposing moralities that diverge from dogma, such as the actions taken on matters of abortion or LGBTQ issues. This is not about wanting democracy by any means. This kind of religion has rigid ideas of right and wrong, and ultimately, only a theocracy will satisfy.

We have seen the violence of fundamentalist religion first hand recently. In the crowd of insurrectionists who seized the U.S. Capitol, Christian imagery was everywhere. Alongside Confederate flags and white supremacist symbols, protesters shouldered crosses, waved "Jesus Saves" signs, and hung oversized "Jesus 2020" or "Trump Jesus" banners, and carried Christian flags. On the National Mall, people chanted, "Christ is king" (Olmstead, 2021). These are the images of dominance, not democracy. As Bill Maher (2021) pointed out in his montage of Christian behavior at the Capitol protest, it was obvious that a large number of the protesters were evangelicals. He called the episode "America's Mass Delusion."

We may wonder about how religious beliefs and political views are related, but some of the linkages are clear. The worldview of the conservative can be seen as rooted in the Bible. Human nature is seen as fallen and not to be trusted. Goodness is related to power, and individual striving the primary virtue. Lakoff (2014) made clear the contrast between a progressive worldview and a conservative one by comparing their values as Nurturant Parent and Strict Father. He stopped short of connecting the conservative view with Biblical directives, but helped explain how evangelical beliefs would support Trump (Lakoff, 2016). It's clear that a muscular Jesus is the popular icon in modern evangelicalism (The Guardian, 2011) – the one who is coming back with an army to win the Battle of Armageddon.

Meanwhile, it makes sense that millions of Americans would feel disempowered by the religious doctrines of original sin and self-degradation. They are attracted to the strongman, despite being unaware of why they feel no self-efficacy. Authoritarian religion has undermined the sense of personal agency and ability for critical thinking necessary for a democracy. This happens to those listening to harmful sermons in church and many more who are affected by institutionalized ideas.

The religionism in our society is not only dangerous but can be life-threatening. In the midst of the Covid-19 pandemic, President Trump called houses of worship essential, (Woodward, 2020) despite clear evidence from the CDC that churches can be hotspots for spreading the disease (CDC, 2020). He wanted people back in church to celebrate Easter and many Christians have taken his cue, defying compassionate action by meeting together even as case numbers soar. This attitude about church attendance continues regardless of spiking Covid cases. In other words, our collective religious trauma is killing us.

Time for Healing

Our collective well being depends on us addressing and healing collective religious trauma. We need to think about how to recover. Perhaps we need more public truth-telling. After apartheid in South Africa, the truth-telling rituals done by the Truth and Reconciliation process were healing as people felt less alone with the truth of their lived experience. In my support groups for people in religious recovery, there is healing in the telling of stories as people resonate with shared experiences. They stop their denial and self-blame: they find compassion and hope. They join with new-found courage as they clarify self-chosen values. As people heal, they discover intrinsic dignity, learn mutual respect, let go of fear, and celebrate differences. They learn about new ways of finding meaning. They get excited about

finding love and connection with all humans, not just a chosen few. They rebuild their lives and write personal manifestos.

On broad levels, we need to question the values and assumptions underlying all of our institutions because they are affected by religious ideas. Students in school are not just empty vessels to be filled up with information (the “banking model” of education; see Freire, 1970), but young people to be encouraged in creativity and critical thinking. They do need information, but how about a class in comparative religion in grade school so kids don’t get the idea that their religion is the only one? Or what if we learn from the Norwegian program that gives convicts job training and housing help as they return to society, complete with the power to vote? (BBC News, 2019) What if we had an adequate safety net for all, so that our population does not have to live in fear of hard times? This fear clearly fuels our competitive system, but is that what we want? Must our primary messages be the same as rigid religion – “You are not okay, “and “You must be afraid”? This is institutionalized religion: when underlying religious messages prevail and have gained the power of becoming subconscious.

Institutionalized religionism is even broader than institutionalized racism but it has not been understood or named. Yet it is taking an enormous toll. We are so far from being a “Christian nation” if compassion for people is any part of that ideal. Perhaps naming institutionalized religionism will be transformative in the same way that naming institutionalized racism has been galvanizing. We need to see and recognize the collective trauma we carry. Celebrating the nation’s religiosity in public ceremonies only reinforces our trauma.

On the collective level, perhaps healing can come from truth-telling about religion and ending the silence. Perhaps healing involves putting effort into repairing damage caused by religiosity. And how about a collective manifesto to reclaim the life stolen by authoritarian religion?

We reclaim our intrinsic dignity and reject the notion of a fallen nature.

We reclaim our right to think for ourselves and reject authoritarianism.

We reclaim ownership of our feelings and our intuition.

We reclaim our respect for our bodies and our sexuality.

We reclaim our compassion for other beings and reject judgment of the Other.

We reclaim our love for the Earth and the desire to care for her.

We reclaim our right to live free from fear of punishment in the afterlife.

We reclaim the right to trust our own senses and our own experience.

We reclaim our freedom and responsibility for our own lives.

We reclaim our right to live free and naturally along with other animals.

Imagine a collective voice of healing as we reject the ancient burden of religionism. Imagine relief from so much silent pain and suffering. This is just as important as individual healing if we are to bring our society together. Telling the truth and declaring our freedoms could be a start. "Imagine no religion. . ." (Lennon, Ono, 1971) and imagine a culture of compassion.

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