

Healing from religious trauma and the impact of high-control religion

Prof Scot McKnight

The word trauma has risen in significance in institutions throughout the USA. An increasing number of institutions and churches want to become trauma-informed and trauma-sensitive so they can minister to and help in the healing of the traumatized. At times the traumatized can traumatize others in their zeal to assert their trauma.

One of the more recent developments, which is discussed in Laura Anderson's new book, *When Religion Hurts You: Healing from Religious Trauma and the Impact of High-Control Religion*, describes religious trauma. This book grows out of Anderson's PhD, and therefore shows all the marks of careful research, definition, and cautious conclusions. And of course tosses around not a few acronyms that some of us, like me, are not as familiar with. I believe it is a book that institutions and churches need on the shelf. It's very readable. And comprehensive.

Her method is a new one for my vocabulary it's called autopsychography, which is a combination of psychology and personal biography. She uses her story to illustrate religious trauma, while exploring religious trauma theoretically. She grew up in a High-Control Religion (HCR), was mentored (if you want to use that term for her experience) by a high control pastoral leader, had a bad interpersonal relationship with her significant other, and her research was both self-exploration and academic study.

A couple of highlights from the opening chapters.

First, she explores a false perception of what she thought healing meant. She perceived healing as a fixed point in time, at which she would arrive and no longer experience anxiety depression and the various ways she describes her trauma. Her discovery was that healing involves a lifelong process. Because she had put healing off to an idealized future, she was failing to see the small incremental progress that she was making in her own healing. Most understandings of healing are either "symptom alleviation or symptom reduction." But she discovered that healing is better understood as an ongoing process that is multidimensional.

Second, I want to mention a few facets of her own experience, but the only way to be fair to her experience is to read her own story. She was enculturated in the purity movement when it came to sexuality. The emphasis upon eternal consequences for everything that happened in life led to religious scrupulosity and severe anxiety, which can at times be a reflection of a religious obsessive-compulsive disorder. [SMcK: The God of wrath behind the threat of hell, especially when youth are targeted with that message, has led to more religious trauma than any theological idea.] These elements of her life led to being groomed into an authoritarian relationship with a youth pastor who wanted to control too much of her life. She discovered that outside the church that she was respected far more for her work and character than in the church. She entered into a deconstruction process where she learned to live apart from the fundamentalism of her past, even leaving church for a while. She recognized that she had been traumatized. She was helped by eye movement desensitization and reprocessing therapy (EMDR). Her condition got bad enough that she lived for times in dissociation. And she came to understand the multidimensionality of the trauma that she had experienced.

Third, at the heart of Laura Anderson's study is the conclusion that “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.” She breaks this down into more ideas, and I quote from her:

Trauma is not what happened to you but your body and nervous systems response to what happened to you. Trauma is anything that is too much, too soon, or too fast and that undermines our normal ability to cope and return to a sense of safety. To reiterate, this means that trauma is subjective: what is traumatic for you may or may not be traumatic for me, and vice versa. It also means that trauma is perceptible: there does not have to be an actual threat or danger in front of you. The mere perception of threat and danger can feel threatening enough to overwhelm your nervous system. Finally, it means that trauma is embodied: trauma is stored in the body and not in the mind, which means that we cannot merely think trauma away.

And fourth. A mantra-like idea in Laura Anderson's book is that “religious trauma is trauma.” So much so that she italicizes the sentence. Religious trauma like other traumas, can be a single incident trauma or a complex trauma, which means being traumatized by a series of events, episodes, interactions, or relationships. People in religious trauma live in a survival mode of existence, or they're “in a constant state of fight, flight, freeze, or fawn.” A little more from her on this:

If our nervous system determines that we can't fight or flee, it moves to fawning or phrasing responses. A person with a fawning response lives in a state of needing to please, appease, or submit to avoid danger or punishment; a person with a freezing response often dissociates, becoming small, silent, and a non participant in their life. It only takes a couple attempts at fighting or fleeing to realize that it's safer to fawn or freeze.