# PERCENTAGE OF U.S. ADULTS SUFFERING FROM RELIGIOUS TRAUMA: A SOCIOLOGICAL STUDY

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A recent sociological study by the Global Center for Religious Research (GCRR), an organization that conducts academic research on the impact of religion, examines the prevalence of religious trauma in the United States. While most existing research on this topic has been qualitative—relying on case studies and interviews with small groups—qualitative methods offer valuable depth but do not provide a clear sense of how widespread a phenomenon is. This study uses quantitative methods—focusing on numerical data—to provide a better understanding of the extent of religious trauma.

For this study, researchers surveyed 1,581 U.S. adults aged 18 to 100. Of these, 51% identified as White, 25% as Black, and 10% as Hispanic/Latino. The sample included 46% women, 45% men, and 9% nonbinary individuals, while 81% identified as heterosexual and 16% as non-heterosexual, with the top three categories being bisexual, homosexual, and asexual.

The study used GCRR's definition of religious trauma to guide its investigation: "*Religious trauma results from an event, series of events, relationships, or circumstances within or connected to religious beliefs, practices, or structures that is experienced by an individual as overwhelming or disruptive and has lasting adverse effects on a person's physical, mental, social, emotional, or spiritual well-being.*"

To assess religious trauma, researchers examined six key manifestations: anxiety, stress, fear, depression, shame, and nightmares—many of which align with symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). The study found that 27.7% of respondents self-identified as having experienced religious trauma in their lifetime, while 15% reported currently experiencing it. Stress and anxiety were the most common symptoms, affecting 16–17% of participants, while nearly 15% cited religion-related depression and fear, and 12–13% reported experiencing nightmares and shame. These symptoms were often linked to adverse religious experiences, such as feeling rejected by religious leaders or family members or feeling pressured to conceal one's true identity in religious settings, with 66% of those who reported such experiences also experiencing religious trauma.

Based on these findings, researchers estimate that approximately one-third (27–33%) of the U.S. population has experienced religious trauma in their lifetime, and that one in five Americans, or 20%, may currently be experiencing it. The study also suggests that many individuals may not recognize their anxiety, depression, or other symptoms as stemming from religious trauma. Additionally, stigma around religious trauma may prevent some from acknowledging their experiences. This is evidenced by the fact that 11% of respondents denied having religious trauma when explicitly asked, despite simultaneously endorsing multiple symptoms of it.

This research provides compelling evidence that religious trauma is both widespread and under-acknowledged. However, one major limitation is that the study was published in a journal that is produced by the same organization, the GCRR, that funded the research. which may have limited the extent of the peer review process. Despite this, it serves as a seminal starting point for further research to refine our understanding of religious trauma and validate (or challenge) these findings.

**Reflection Question:** Are you surprised by the possible prevalence of religious trauma revealed in this study? Why or why not? Feel free to reply all and share your thoughts with the group!

**We weren't able to connect with the study authors for a Q&A, but we still wanted to explore this important topic. So instead, here's a brief overview of the term "religious trauma"— its origins, evolution, and dissemination.**

## Who Initially Coined the Term?

While psychologists have long recognized that cult indoctrination and certain religious beliefs and experiences can negatively impact well-being, the concept of religious trauma was not officially identified until Dr. Marlene Winell, a psychologist specializing in religious and spiritual harm, introduced the term Religious Trauma Syndrome (RTS).

Winell first outlined the phenomenon of RTS in her seminal book, Leaving the Fold: A Guide for Former Fundamentalists and Others Leaving Their Religion, originally published in 1993 and later revised in 2011. In the book and subsequent articles, she described RTS as a set of symptoms—including anxiety, depression, guilt, identity confusion, difficulty with decision-making, and more—that often overlap with Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) symptoms but extend beyond its scope.

Although RTS is not formally recognized in the current DSM (Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders), which guides mental health diagnoses, it has gained growing recognition by therapists and laypeople.

## How has the term evolved?

While many continue to use Religious Trauma Syndrome (RTS) to describe the phenomenon as a distinct syndrome, others have adopted the broader term Religious Trauma (RT), without the syndrome label, viewing it as part of the existing framework of PTSD and trauma research. Those who support the RTS model argue that it captures the unique psychological distress associated with negative religious experiences, which can encompass every area of one's life. Others who favor the RT framework, such as the Global Center for Religious Research (GCRR) and the Religious Trauma Institute (RTI) suggest that religious trauma can be understood within the current definitions of PTSD, without requiring a separate diagnostic category. Both perspectives advocate for a trauma-informed approach that recognizes the diverse ways individuals experience and recover from religious harm. The debate continues among clinicians, reflecting broader discussions in the mental health field about how best to define and address trauma-related experiences.

## How has the term entered the mainstream?

Although academic research on religious trauma has been expanding over the past decade, mainstream awareness of the term has grown largely due to:

- News Outlets: Articles in The New York Times, The New Republic, and other news outlets have explored religious trauma, exposing the topic to their readers.
- Social Media: Influencers and content creators on platforms like TikTok, YouTube, and Instagram have shared personal experiences of religious trauma, many of whom grew up in fundamentalist environments and later underwent a process of "deconstruction"—critically examining and often leaving behind elements or all of their faith. One example is Olivia Plath, whose deconstruction journey was captured via her participation in the reality TV series: *Welcome to Plathville.*