FROM HARM TO HEALING:
Understanding the Spectrum of Faith and Trauma

by Dr. Laura Anderson
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Learning *objectives*

Participants will be able to:

1. Recognize how religious or faith-based environments can both contribute to trauma and serve as sources of resilience, by exploring the spectrum of adverse religious experiences, dynamics of power and control, and protective elements of inclusive, empowering spirituality.

2. Identify common psychological, relational, physical, and spiritual impacts of religious trauma and understand how these may present in individuals across different settings, including educational, healthcare, and caregiving environments.

3. Describe core themes of trauma-informed healing—such as agency, belonging, meaning-making, and nervous system regulation—without requiring a rejection of faith, and with sensitivity to the diverse spiritual and cultural backgrounds of those they serve.

What This Talk Is *and Is Not*

- It's **not about bashing religion** or assuming all faith traditions are harmful.

- It's **not about suggesting atheism or leaving faith** is the "right" path for everyone.

- It's **not about drawing dividing lines** between "good" or "bad" faith communities.

What This Talk Is and Is Not

- Educating on **trauma—specifically religious trauma—**and how it may show up in the lives of the people you work with.

- Exploring **faith as a potential source of resilience and healing**, especially when practiced in ways that center safety, freedom, and inclusion.

- Giving you tools to **notice, name, and navigate** this complexity in ways that are sensitive, trauma-informed, and empowering for others.

Self Check-In

- ⊘ Notice what's happening in your body as you hear these words.

- ⊘ Are you feeling open and curious?

- ⊘ Are you feeling resistance? Tightness? Maybe even defensiveness or discomfort?

If you notice resistance, rather than pushing it away, try seeing it as an invitation: 'This is where I can get curious. What is this bringing up for me? Why does this feel tender or charged?'

"

Trauma is anything that is too much, too fast, too soon, or happens for too long and overwhelms your ability to cope and come back to a place of safety.

"

Religious trauma is anything that is too much, too fast, too soon, or happens for too long that overwhelms our ability to cope and come back to a place of safety *that results from religious teachings, practices, beliefs, doctrines, or relationships.*

The physical, emotional, or psychological *response* 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.
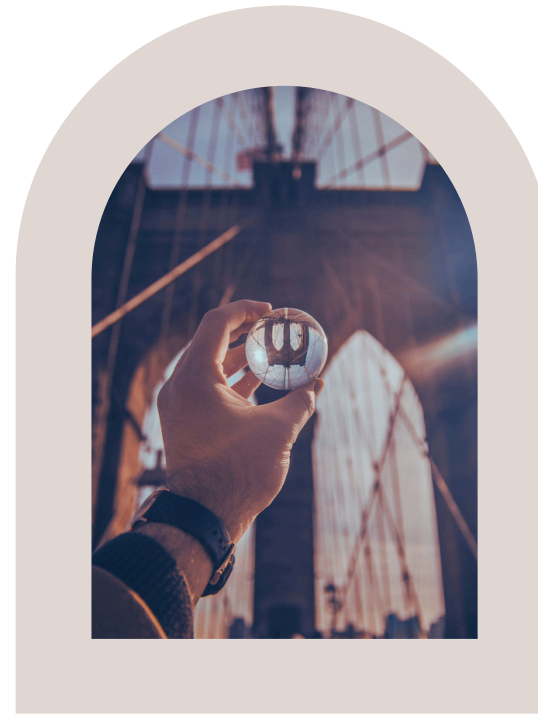
TRAUMA IS...

Subjective

What is traumatic for one person may or may not be for another person.
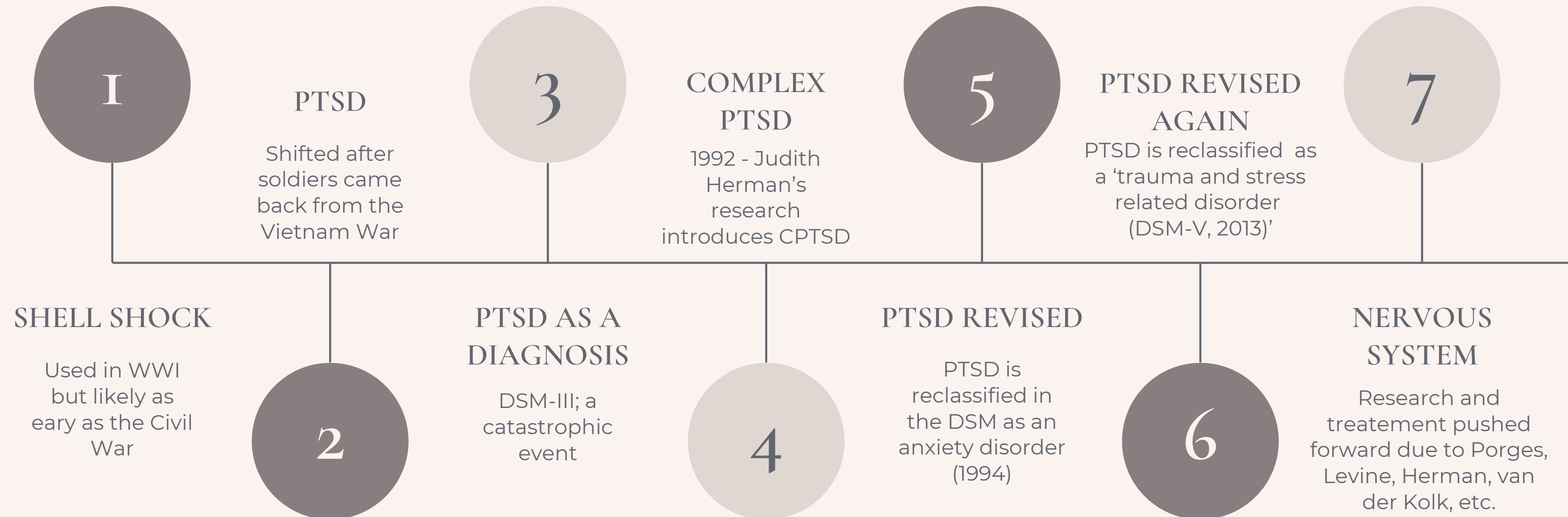
Perceptive

There does not have to be an actual threat in order for the body to categorize it as trauma

Embodied

Trauma does not live in the mind but is stored in the body; trauma cannot be thought away.

History of *PTSD and CPTSD*

1

SHELL SHOCK

Used in WWI but likely as eary as the Civil War

2

PTSD

Shifted after soldiers came back from the Vietnam War

PTSD AS A DIAGNOSIS

DSM-III; a catastrophic event

3

COMPLEX PTSD

1992 - Judith Herman's research introduces CPTSD

4

PTSD REVISED

PTSD is reclassified in the DSM as an anxiety disorder (1994)

5

PTSD REVISED AGAIN
PTSD is reclassified as a 'trauma and stress related disorder (DSM-V, 2013)'

6

NERVOUS SYSTEM

Research and treatement pushed forward due to Porges, Levine, Herman, van der Kolk, etc.

7

Single Incident Trauma

Overtime, if not treated, these traumas can result in PTSD

- ✔ Occurs as a result of a singular event/experience
- ✔ There is a clear "before" the incident/experience happens
- ✔ Symptoms and triggers arise as a result of the event
- ✔ Treatment includes resolving the incomplete trauma cycle arising from the specific event

Complex Trauma

Complex trauma is the result of 'death by a thousand papercuts'

- Occurs as a result of environments, patterns of relationship that are overwhelming or dangerous

- The threat is consistent, persistent, and inescapable; there is no "before" to go back to

- Most common in children with abuse and neglect, war torn countries, kidnapping, domestic violence, and religious cults

- Changes the core of who a person is, their personalities, and how they relate to others

Religious Trauma as Complex Trauma

CONSISTENT

The practices and beliefs of HCRs, cults and fundamentalism encompass every area of life with a growing influence, consequences, and requirements

PERSISTANT

The practices and beliefs of HCRs, cults, and fundamentalism are ongoing in nature and frequently carry over through multiple areas of life (e.g. home, work, church, relationships)

INESCAPABLE

If a person is born into this system, they don't have the skills and resources to leave; this also may occur for people who join later on. Leaving is accompanied by threats and consequences that may be too much to bear.

Religious trauma *as complex trauma*

HERE ARE SOME KEY WAYS RELIGIOUS TRAUMA MANIFESTS AS COMPLEX TRAUMA:

1 Affective Dysregulation

2 Disturbances in Self-Concept

3 Relational Impairments

4 Somatic Symptoms and Dissociation

5 Impaired Boundaries

6 Spiritual Intrusions or Confusion

Defining *Spiritual Abuse* and AREs *(Adverse Religious Experiences)*

Spiritual Abuse

refers to the *misuse of spiritual authority or religious power to control, harm, manipulate, or dominate others.*

Adverse Religious Experiences (AREs)

are a broader category that includes *any religious or spiritual experiences that undermine an individual's sense of safety, autonomy, dignity, or psychological well-being.*

Common categories we see people identify as Adverse Religious Experiences

1 Fear of Hell and Eternal Conscious Torment

2 Purity Culture

3 Alter Calls, Healings, and Scary Sermons

4 Spanking and Corporal Punishment

5 Patriarchy and Oppression

THE NEUROBIOLOGY
of Religious Trauma

The Triune Brain
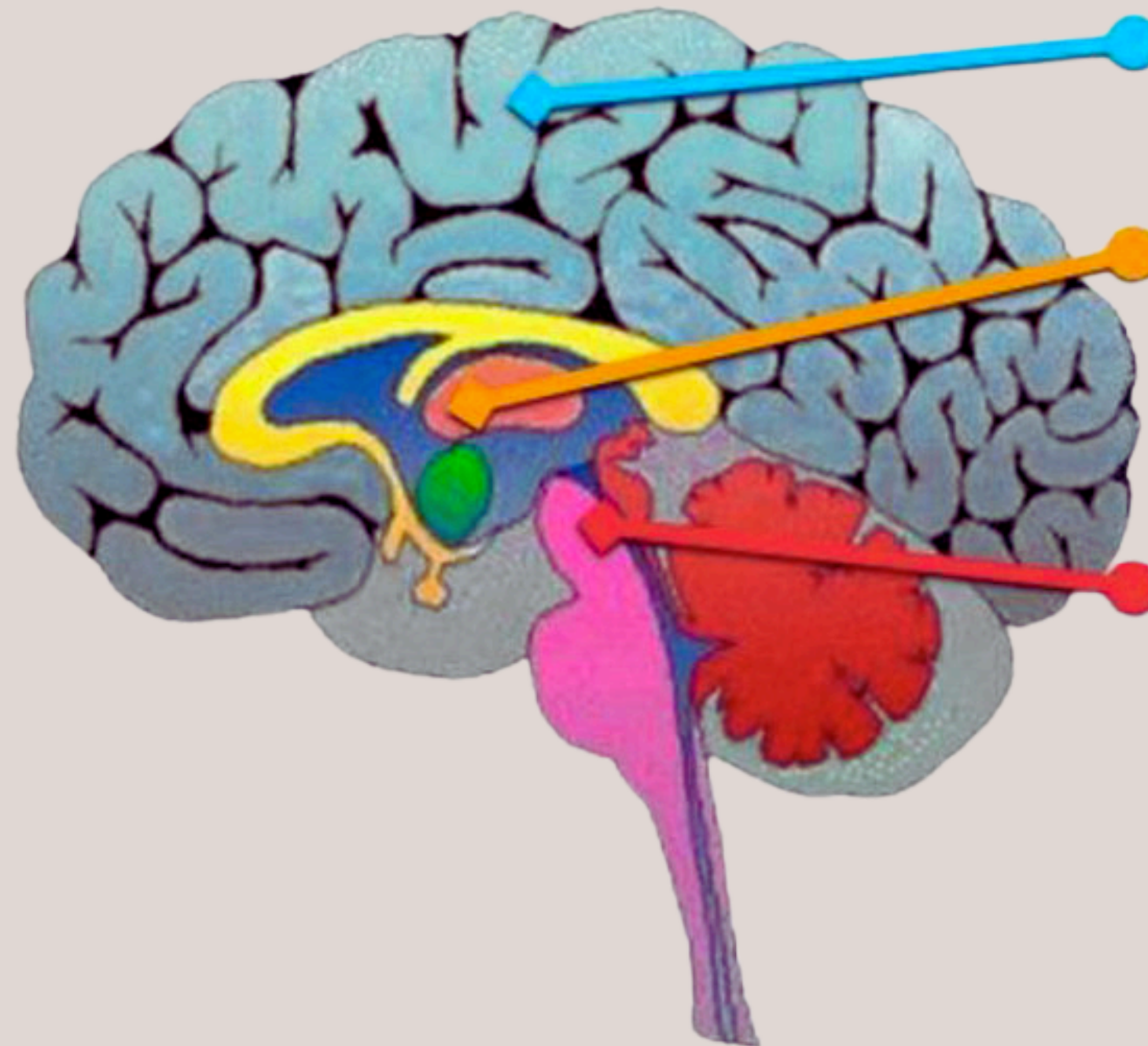
Neocortex:
Rational or Thinking Brain

Limbic Brain:
Emotional or Feeling Brain

Reptilian Brain: Instinctual
or Dinosaur Brain

Photo Credit: Research Gate

TRAUMA RESPONSE CYCLE

Real, perceived, or remembered threat

Nervous system mobilization

Fight, Flight, Freeze, and Fawn

Threat/danger passes

Opportunity for stress and Trauma Energy Discharge

If no discharge, trauma energy gets stuck in the body

If discharge occurs, the body recognizes that the threat has passed and they are presently safe.
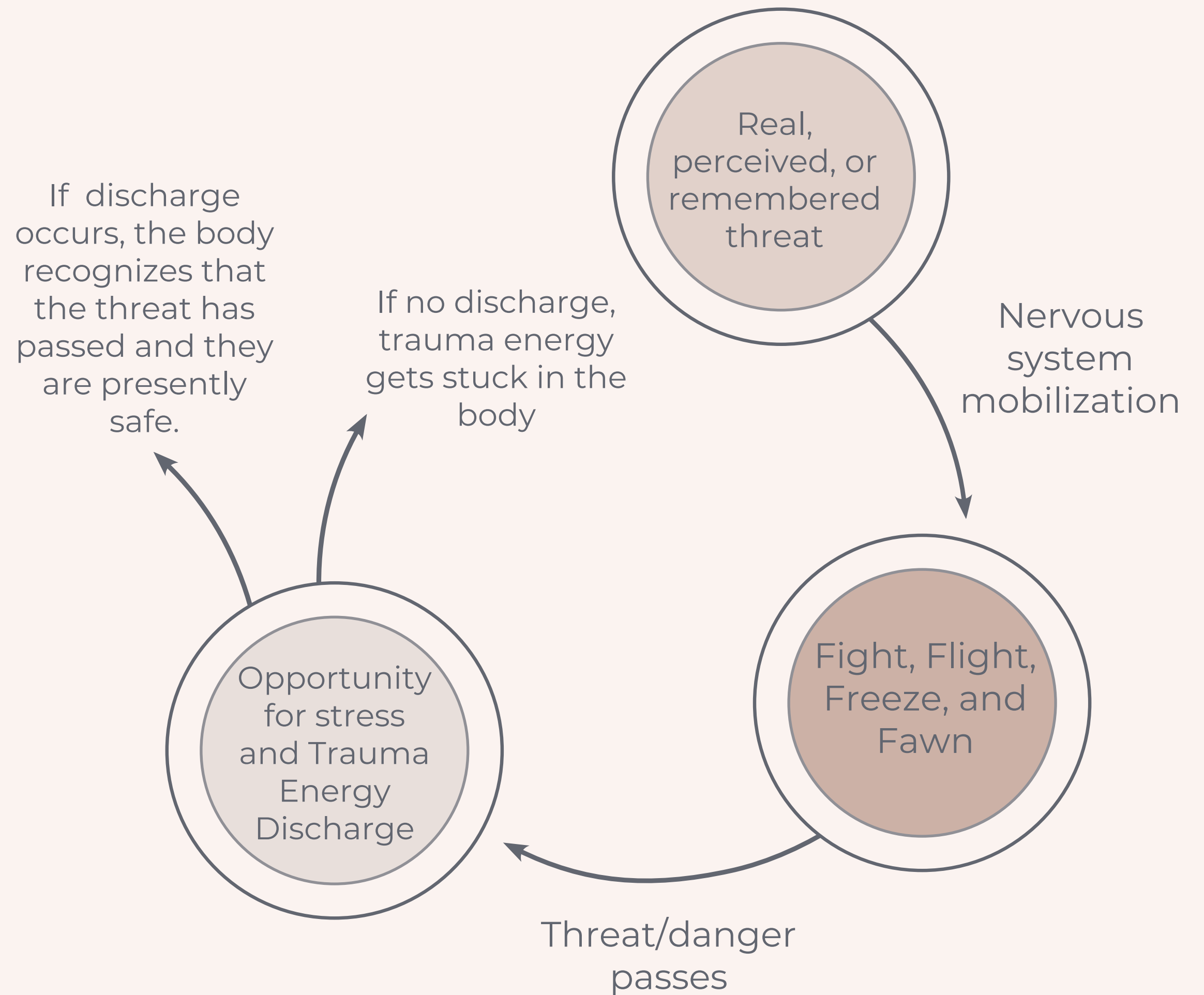
Religious Trauma and Chronic Dysregulation

1 Chronic Activation of the Stress Response System

2 Disrupted Attachment and Safety Neurocircuitry

3 Impaired Integration and Dissociation

4 Overlearned Fear Circuits and Cognitive Entrapment

5 Nervous System Entrapment and Inescapability

Hallmarks of High-Control Religious Systems

1   Authoritarian Leadership

2   Conditional Love and Belonging
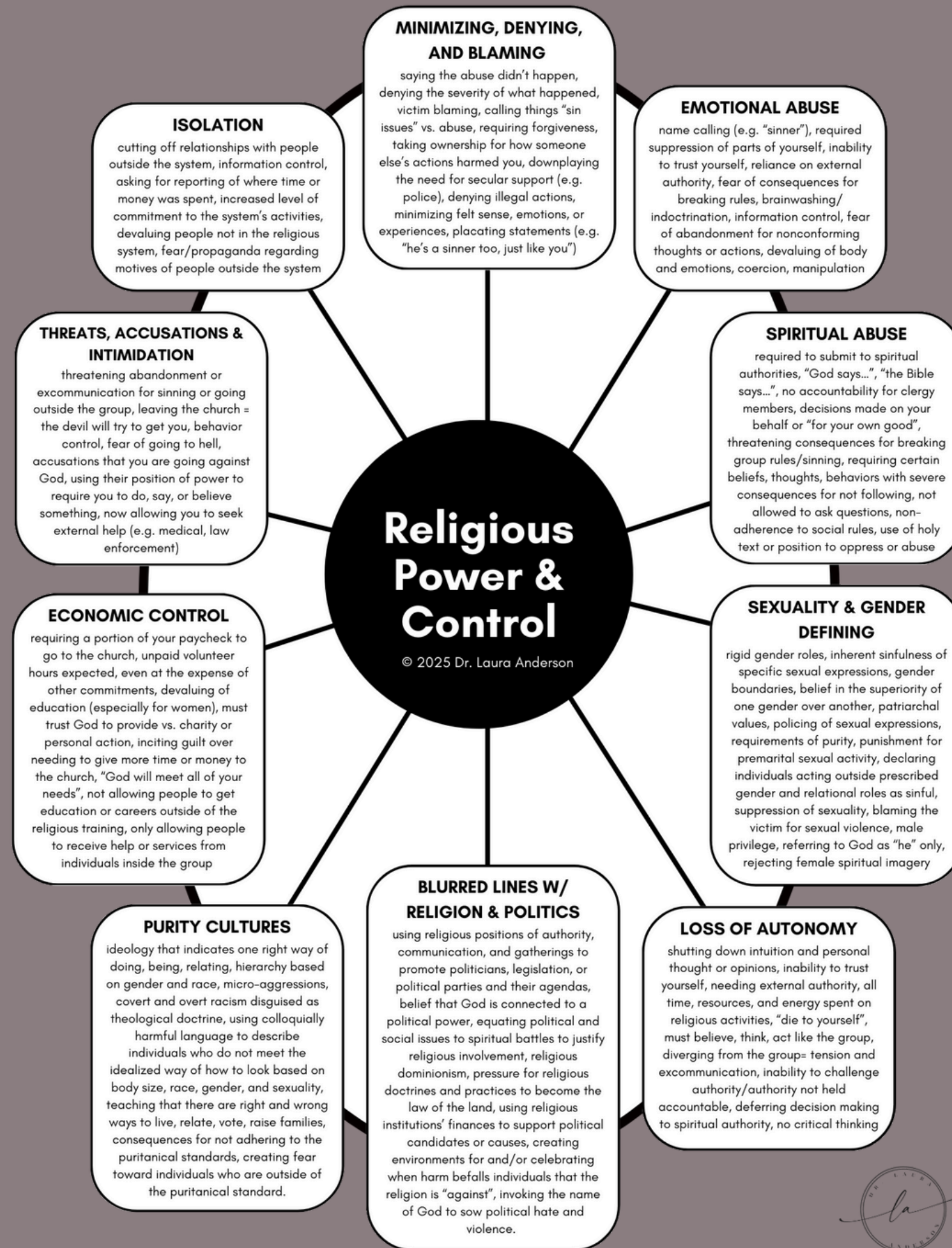
3   Fear-Based Teachings

4   Suppression of Autonomy
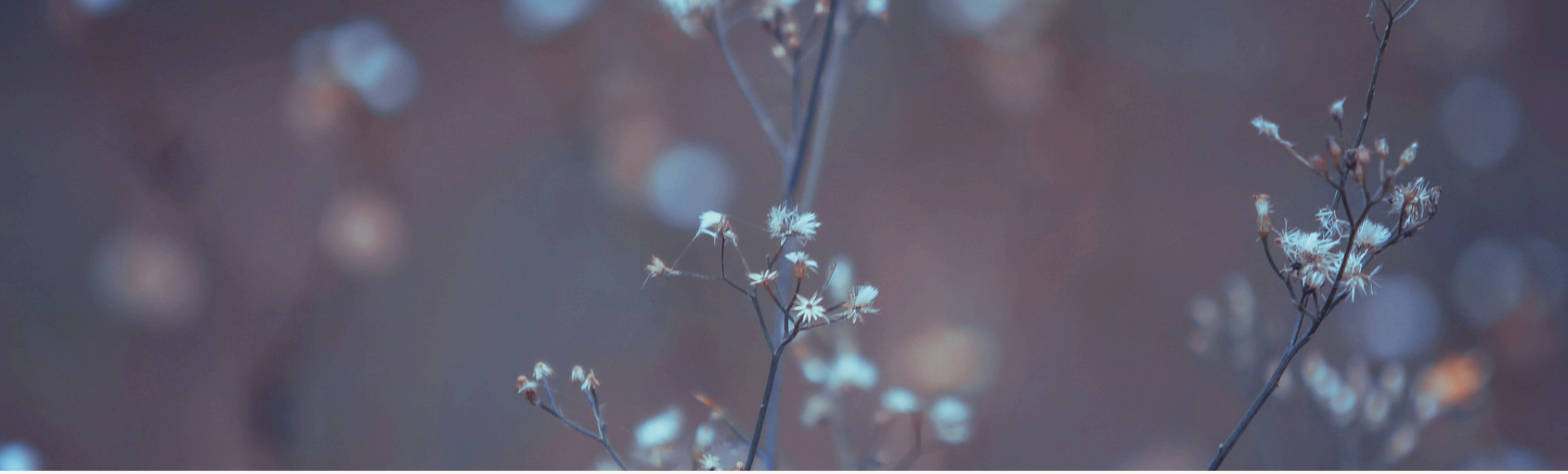
When High-Control Religion Becomes a Cult

Not every high-control religion meets the full criteria of a cult, but there is a continuum of control. The more a system:

- Restricts information
- Discourages external relationships
- Elevates charismatic or authoritarian leaders
- Demands absolute loyalty
- Punishes deviation or questions

the more it overlaps with the International Cultic Studies Association's (ICSA) recognized patterns of coercive control.

Religious Power & Control

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MINIMIZING, DENYING, AND BLAMING

saying the abuse didn't happen, denying the severity of what happened, victim blaming, calling things "sin issues" vs. abuse, requiring forgiveness, taking ownership for how someone else's actions harmed you, downplaying the need for secular support (e.g. police), denying illegal actions, minimizing felt sense, emotions, or experiences, placating statements (e.g. "he's a sinner too, just like you")

EMOTIONAL ABUSE

name calling (e.g. "sinner"), required suppression of parts of yourself, inability to trust yourself, reliance on external authority, fear of consequences for breaking rules, brainwashing/indoctrination, information control, fear of abandonment for nonconforming thoughts or actions, devaluing of body and emotions, coercion, manipulation

ISOLATION

cutting off relationships with people outside the system, information control, asking for reporting of where time or money was spent, increased level of commitment to the system's activities, devaluing people not in the religious system, fear/propaganda regarding motives of people outside the system

SPIRITUAL ABUSE

required to submit to spiritual authorities, "God says…", "the Bible says…", no accountability for clergy members, decisions made on your behalf or "for your own good", threatening consequences for breaking group rules/sinning, requiring certain beliefs, thoughts, behaviors with severe consequences for not following, not allowed to ask questions, non-adherence to social rules, use of holy text or position to oppress or abuse

THREATS, ACCUSATIONS & INTIMIDATION

threatening abandonment or excommunication for sinning or going outside the group, leaving the church = the devil will try to get you, behavior control, fear of going to hell, accusations that you are going against God, using their position of power to require you to do, say, or believe something, now allowing you to seek external help (e.g. medical, law enforcement)

SEXUALITY & GENDER DEFINING

rigid gender roles, inherent sinfulness of specific sexual expressions, gender boundaries, belief in the superiority of one gender over another, patriarchal values, policing of sexual expressions, requirements of purity, punishment for premarital sexual activity, declaring individuals acting outside prescribed gender and relational roles as sinful, suppression of sexuality, blaming the victim for sexual violence, male privilege, referring to God as "he" only, rejecting female spiritual imagery

ECONOMIC CONTROL

requiring a portion of your paycheck to go to the church, unpaid volunteer hours expected, even at the expense of other commitments, devaluing of education (especially for women), must trust God to provide vs. charity or personal action, inciting guilt over needing to give more time or money to the church, "God will meet all of your needs", not allowing people to get education or careers outside of the religious training, only allowing people to receive help or services from individuals inside the group

LOSS OF AUTONOMY

shutting down intuition and personal thought or opinions, inability to trust yourself, needing external authority, all time, resources, and energy spent on religious activities, "die to yourself", must believe, think, act like the group, diverging from the group= tension and excommunication, inability to challenge authority/authority not held accountable, deferring decision making to spiritual authority, no critical thinking

PURITY CULTURES

ideology that indicates one right way of doing, being, relating, hierarchy based on gender and race, micro-aggressions, covert and overt racism disguised as theological doctrine, using colloquially harmful language to describe individuals who do not meet the idealized way of how to look based on body size, race, gender, and sexuality, teaching that there are right and wrong ways to live, relate, vote, raise families, consequences for not adhering to the puritanical standards, creating fear toward individuals who are outside of the puritanical standard.

BLURRED LINES W/ RELIGION & POLITICS

using religious positions of authority, communication, and gatherings to promote politicians, legislation, or political parties and their agendas, belief that God is connected to a political power, equating political and social issues to spiritual battles to justify religious involvement, religious dominionism, pressure for religious doctrines and practices to become the law of the land, using religious institutions' finances to support political candidates or causes, creating environments for and/or celebrating when harm befalls individuals that the religion is "against", invoking the name of God to sow political hate and violence.

Power & Control

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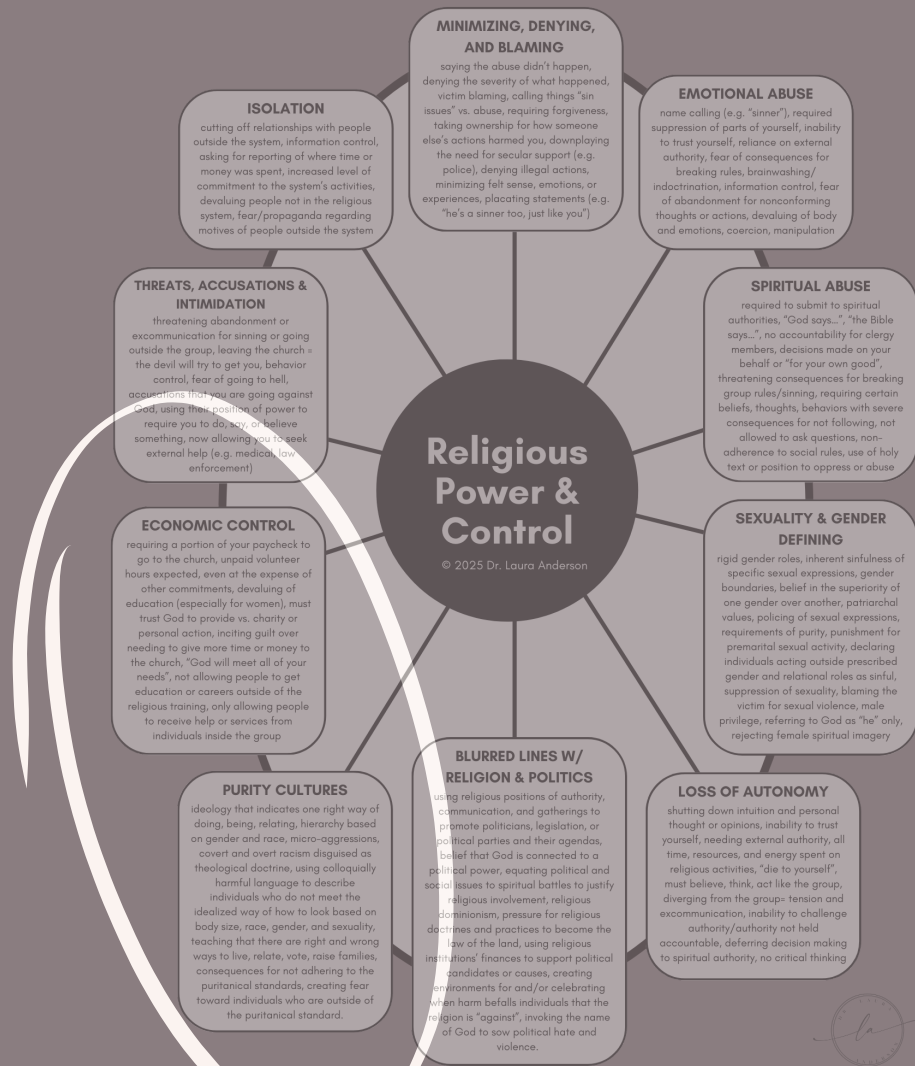
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ISOLATION

MINIMIZING, DENYING, AND BLAMING

EMOTIONAL ABUSE

THREATS, ACCUSATIONS & INTIMIDATION

SPIRITUAL ABUSE

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ECONOMIC CONTROL

Prosocial Religious Systems *vs.* *High-Control* Religious Systems

Domain	Prosocial Religious Systems	High-Control Religious Systems
Leadership	Collaborative or accountable leadership; leaders open to feedback and transparency	Authoritarian, centralized leadership; leaders claim exclusive authority and suppress dissent
Belonging & Acceptance	Unconditional belonging; diversity and questioning are allowed	Conditional belonging based on conformity and obedience; questioning may lead to exclusion or punishment
Teachings	Emphasize love, compassion, growth, and ethical living	Emphasize fear, punishment, sin, and the dangers of noncompliance
Autonomy & Agency	Encourages personal autonomy, critical thinking, and self-trust	Suppresses autonomy; individual thoughts and emotions are distrusted or labeled as sinful/rebellious
Boundaries	Respects personal boundaries and consent	Discourages or pathologizes personal boundaries; submission and self-denial are idealized

Prosocial Religious Systems *vs.* *High-Control* Religious Systems

Domain	Prosocial Religious Systems	High-Control Religious Systems
Emotional & Spiritual Safety	Prioritizes emotional and spiritual well-being; supports healing and integration	Uses shame, fear, and manipulation to maintain control; emotional suppression is often spiritualized
Community Dynamics	Supports healthy relationships, community service, and open dialogue	Employs surveillance, public shaming, or shunning to enforce control and discourage dissent
View of the Body	Honors the body as part of holistic spiritual life	Often promotes disembodiment, self-denial, or purity-based body shame
Response to Diversity	Embraces diversity of belief, identity, and life experiences	Seeks conformity and often marginalizes or excludes LGBTQ+ individuals, women, or dissenters
Conflict Resolution	Encourages repair, accountability, and mutual respect	Uses coercion, fear of divine punishment, or community exclusion to resolve (or suppress) conflict

Relational Impacts of *High-Control* Religious Environments

1   Sense of Self

2   Attachment & Trust Towards Others and Self

3   Relationships with Others

4   Embodiment (Relationship to the Body)

Psychological Impacts of *High-Control Religious Environments*

- ✓ Chronic Shame and Self-Loathing
- ✓ Depression and Learned Helplessness
- ✓ Cognitive Dissonance & Gaslighting
- ✓ Hypervigilance and Anxiety
- ✓ Identity Confusion/Role Enmeshment
- ✓ Religious OCD/ Scrupulosity
- ✓ Attachment Wounding

Physical & Somatic Impacts of *High-Control Religious Environments*

- ✓ Nervous System Dysregulation

- ✓ Autoimmune & Inflammatory Disorders

- ✓ Disconnection from the Body

- ✓ Sexual Dysfunction

- ✓ Digestive Issues

- ✓ Sleep Disturbances

- ✓ Somatic Flashbacks/ Triggers

Trauma Resolution:

Resolving the stored or stuck trauma energy in the body

Trauma Recovery:

Emphasizes *integration, ongoing capacity-building,* and *choice.* It's a winding process that allows space for grief, uncertainty, and agency.

Integration in trauma resolution and recovery refers to the process of assimilating traumatic experiences into one's broader life narrative, enabling individuals to function effectively in the present.

Key Components of Integration

1   Body-Based Techniques

2   Nervous System Regulation

3   Self-Compassion

4   Self-Trust

At its core, integration means bringing fragmented parts of experience—body, mind, emotions, memory, identity—back into a coherent and connected whole.

Integration is not about erasing or "fixing" the past

- Making space for painful memories, emotions, and experiences without being overwhelmed by them.
- Learning to respond to the present moment rather than automatically reacting from old survival patterns.
- Reconnecting the self with compassion, agency, and inner coherence.

Integration does not mean *"the trauma is gone."*
It means *"the trauma no longer runs the show."*

What Integration Looks Like in Practice

- Recognizing when you've been triggered—and choosing a different response
- Being able to sit with discomfort without spiraling into shame or self-punishment
- Naming and feeling your emotions without bypassing them with spiritual platitudes
- Making choices based on your own values, not fear of divine or social rejection
- Feeling a sense of wholeness, even while acknowledging parts of you are still healing
- Reclaiming agency and voice
- Rebuilding trust in self, others, and possibly the sacred
- Honoring grief and loss

Herman's 3 Stages of Recovery

01
Establishing Safety

- Physically, emotionally, and relationally
- Includes stabilizing symptoms and nervous system dysregulation

02
Remembrance & Mourning

- Processing trauma memories in a titrated, non-overwhelming way
- Grieving losses (e.g., childhood, identity, community, faith)

03
Reconnection & Integration

- Rebuilding relationships, purpose, and a meaningful sense of self
- Regaining autonomy, joy, and trust in oneself and others

When Faith Heals:

FAITH AS A SOURCE OF RESILIENCE

The cure to religious trauma is not atheism

- ✓ This can be just as fundamentalist as HCR - we cannot heal trauma with the same thing that traumatized us.

- ✓ This minimizes the way that trauma is embodied and its need for physiological resolve

- ✓ This can lead to an overarching belief that religion is inherently harmful, absolutely causes mental health impacts and leads to trauma and/or other negative side effects

SPIRITUALITY & FAITH BUFFER TRAUMA
& Boost Mental Health

- A classic U.S. study on childhood trauma found that positive religious coping—such as seeking spiritual support and reframing difficulties through sacred meaning—significantly buffered psychological distress in adulthood (Upenieks et al., 2024).

- A recent meta-analysis with earthquake survivors in Turkey showed that spiritual coping was strongly linked to lower anxiety, stress, and depression, and increased overall resilience (Okan et al., 2025).

- Another international study with 529 former-care-leavers found higher spirituality correlated with greater resilience, better mental and physical health, and increased life satisfaction—even after accounting for childhood adversity (Howard et al., 2023).

Protective Aspects of Faith

1   Belonging & Community

2   Ritual

3   Meaning-Making

4   Connection to Something Larger Than Self

5   Moral Compass & Life Purpose

Features of Systems That Foster Well-Being

1 Flexibility

2 Inclusivity

3 Non-coerciveness

4 Love-centered practices

Making Space for *Multiple Truths*

- Faith Can Be a Source of Both Harm and Healing

- Honor Complexity: People Don't Need to "Choose a Side"

- Your Role as helpers: Be a Safe Spaceed to "Choose a Side"

- Your role as helpers: Stay Curious

- Believe People When They Speak About Harm

- Don't Assume All Expressions of Faith Are Healing—or Harmful

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Who is *Dr. Laura?*

Dr. Laura Anderson (PhD, Saybrook University; LMFT) specializes in complex trauma with a focus on domestic violence, sexualized violence and religious trauma. Laura has a private practice in Nashville, TN and is the founder and director of the Center for Trauma Resolution and Recovery, an online coaching company where she and the other practitioners work with clients who have experienced high demand/high control religions, adverse religious experiences, cults, and religious trauma.

In 2019, Laura co-founded the Religious Trauma Institute with the goal of providing trauma-informed resources, consultation, and training to clinicians and other helping professionals who work with religious trauma survivors. Laura's first book, *When Religion Hurts You: Healing From Religious Trauma and the Impact of High Control Religion*, was released by Brazos press in October 2023. She lives with her dog, Phoebe, in Nashville, Tennessee.

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