

Church wounds

By [Jonathan Merritt](#)

August 31, 2015

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(RNS) Fifty-nine percent of millennials who grew up in a Christian church drop out of it permanently or for an extended period, according to research by Barna Group. Among the most common reasons for leaving are millennials' beliefs that churches are shallow, anti-science and overprotective and that they promote simplistic, judgmental views of sexuality. Some of these disaffected believers stay gone and others return later in life, but a large proportion of both end up bitter or jaded toward institutional religion.

Now, thanks to Reba Riley, these millennials have a shorthand term to describe what they are experiencing: PTCS.

In her hilarious and raw memoir, "Post-Traumatic Church Syndrome," Riley, who has called herself a "former Evangelical Poster Child," describes her struggle to heal from wounds inflicted by institutional Christianity. Her spiritual quest will no doubt make some Christian readers uneasy, but it will surely resonate with many. Riley, 33, talks with Religion News Service's Jonathan Merritt about what she learned about faith from her recent religious journey.

Q: What is "post-traumatic church syndrome," and what are its common symptoms?

A: Post-traumatic church syndrome is the term I made up to describe my spiritual injuries after I left my faith in my early 20s. I define PTCS as 1. A condition of spiritual injury that occurs as a result of religion, faith and/or the losing, leaving or breaking thereof; 2. The vile, noxious and otherwise foul aftermath of said injury; and 3. A serious term intended to aid serious spiritual healing, without taking itself too seriously in the process.

PTCS is not a medical or mental health term or a clinical diagnosis; it is a frame for a universal experience. Just like we'd say "empty nest syndrome" or "midlife crisis" to

describe other types of experiences, this term says, “Hey, spiritual injuries are real.” It reminds us that we aren’t alone and helps us start the conversation about spiritual healing. And yes, the term is intended to be a little tongue-in-cheek, because humor is one of the most healing forces of all.

Q: You sampled 30 religions before your 30th birthday. To some, this may feel more gimmicky than authentic. Were all of them — Scientology, for example — really viable options you were considering?

A: At the time I undertook my project, it was because my physical illness had forced me to look at my spirituality. I realized that even if I eventually recovered physically, I would never be truly healthy unless I dealt with the anger, bitterness and pain of PTCS. The daily task of surviving chronic illness doesn’t leave any room in your life for “gimmicky.” It narrows your focus to the most important, the most authentic.

Since I never set out to find a new religion, but rather to face my spiritual injuries and find healing, all the experiences — from Amish to [Native American] sweat lodge to Pentecostals — were not only viable, they were essential to rediscovering my faith. The journey would have been impossible without exploring many religious expressions — including, and maybe especially, Scientology. It was so foreign of an experience that it forced me to ponder questions I’d never thought to ask.

Q: If people ask if you’re a Christian, what do you say?

A: Yes. But often I’ve found that isn’t enough. For example, a few months ago a pastor was essentially cross-examining my answer to this question. After 45 minutes I gently said: “Sir, it seems like you’re trying to find out if I am Christian enough for you. If you’re asking if I love Jesus, the answer is ‘yes.’ If you’re asking if I follow Jesus, the answer is ‘yes.’ If you’re asking to give me a litmus theology test, I’ll probably fail, because my theology is really quite simple, kinda like Jesus’: Love God; love people. Love, period.” He decided I was Christian enough, but it would have been OK with me if he hadn’t.

Q: What about the claims that much of the Christian world makes about the “exclusivity of Jesus”? What about all that “I am the way, the truth and the life” stuff? If you’re following other ways and holding on to other truths at the same time, doesn’t that challenge the notion that you’re being fully Christian in practice?

A: It seems to me that Jesus honored faith wherever he found it, and it usually looked the way the people of his day would have expected. I'm reminded of a conversation I had with my friend and mentor, an Eastern Orthodox monk who lives and works among the inner-city poor. So one day the urban monk asked me, "Would you like to learn to meditate?" I knew that in addition to his whole Christian monk thing, he had also studied Buddhism under the Dalai Lama. So I got all twisted around with questions, like "Do you mean Buddhist meditation or Christian meditation?" And he just smiled beatifically, all monk-like, and answered: "There is no difference whatsoever."

Q: To some, your current religion may feel a little hodgepodge and arbitrary — a dash of Christianity, a pinch of Buddhism, etc. Doesn't this seem like a hyperindividualistic approach to faith, where you can custom-fit it to your own likes?

A: When I do workshops about PTCS, I hand out really official-looking fill-in-the-blank permission slips that give participants permission to give themselves permission to do whatever it is they need to do to find healing. I do this because no one ever told me it was OK to go exploring outside the lines of my upbringing. No one told me that my spiritual journey was just that — mine. No one told me that God was big enough to handle all of my wonderings and wanderings, or that God would meet me wherever I was — or wasn't.

What my story does is give people permission to take their own healing journey. And it doesn't have to look or act like yours or mine, because God is bigger than all the lines we try to draw around God.

Q: Your book claims to remind readers that "sometimes we have to get lost to get found." Explain what this means.

A. It reminds people that their religious past does not have to shackle them, and that it can become the bedrock of transformation. That's why there is a peacock on the cover: It is the physical equivalent of the mythical phoenix rising from the ashes, a symbol of healing, transformation and personal resurrection. "Post-Traumatic Church Syndrome" may be my story of physical and spiritual change, but it is also the story of everyone who has witnessed the way God can transform brokenness into beauty.