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Maggie Elizabeth Parker

*Agnes Scott College*, [mparker@agnesscott.edu](mailto:mparker@agnesscott.edu)

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# “God, Sometimes You Don’t Come Through:” The Presentation of Religious Trauma Syndrome Through Rock Music

Maggie Parker

*Agnes Scott College*

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## **Abstract**

Religious Trauma Syndrome (RTS) was a term coined by Marlene Winell in 2011. Winell is a popular educator and writer who has done psychological research on human development, and decided to research religious trauma after her own experiences. She became a licensed psychologist and began to explore the changes that adolescents go through as they age. Most of her work revolves around personal growth and healing, as she teaches about “thriving and not surviving.” In this paper, I will focus on the negative effects that religion can have on different individuals and the ways in which these individuals must use alternative coping mechanisms for their trauma. Then, I will move into the way that music is one alternative coping mechanism because of its cathartic value for individuals who cannot turn to religion for relief. Finally, I will draw a parallel between the two in order to show that there is a way that certain musicians are using their music and their lyrics in order to work through religious trauma from their past by presenting a case study of Brendon Urie.

*Keywords:* Religious Trauma Syndrome (RTS), PTSD, Music, Catharsis, Trauma, Therapy

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## Introduction

“In the case of fundamentalist beliefs, people expect that choosing to leave a childhood faith is like giving up Santa Claus—a little sad but basically a matter of growing up. But in reality, religious indoctrination can be hugely damaging, and making the break from an authoritarian kind of religion can definitely be traumatic” (BABCP). In the twenty-first century, a record number of people are having the experience of trauma related to their religious upbringing. According to a Lifeway Research Survey conducted in 2017, “66% of Americans between the ages of 23 and 30 years old said they stopped attending church on a regular basis for at least one year or more” (Jackson). Religious Trauma Syndrome (RTS) was a term coined by Marlene Winell in 2011. Winell is a popular educator and writer who has done psychological research on human development, and decided to research religious trauma after her own experiences. She became a licensed psychologist and began to explore the changes that adolescents go through as they age. Most of her work revolves around personal growth and healing, as she teaches about “thriving and not surviving” (“Journey Free”). According to Winell, RTS “is the process by which individuals are unable to cope with how religion and their religious community has treated them, or the trauma of leaving one’s religious identity behind them” (“Journey Free”). This disorder is a new concept that has arisen out of many psychologists work with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), and one that many psychologists are increasingly beginning to pay attention to. Though the concept is still being studied and developed, one common theme emerges: the idea that those who go through this trauma, turn to music as a way of coping due to the inherent cathartic power of music. This idea can be seen through the lens of the music of certain musicians today such as Brendan Urie, Tori Amos, Lucky Daye, and Sinéad O’Connor. These artists all experienced some form of religious trauma

growing up, and due to that, they are using their music and their lyrics as a way to work through their experiences with religious trauma.

In the past couple of decades, the number of people turning away from the church, especially youth, is significantly increasing. According to the latest American Religious Identification Survey, "Americans by the millions are making an exodus from their faith. The number of people who affiliate themselves with "No religion" has nearly doubled from 1990 to 2008. The 18.7 million people who fall in this gap have presumably come from mainline Protestant, Baptist, and Catholic churches, which have lost 12.7 million believers during the same timeframe" (BABCP). As previously discussed, it is my belief that one of the main reasons for this pattern is that Religious Trauma Syndrome (also called post-traumatic church syndrome). As the percent of those who identify as "none," is increasing, so too is the idea that religion is becoming more brainwashing and damaging. As I have already pointed out earlier, religious trauma syndrome is one of the most unrecognized psychological disorders in the United States today. I think that one of the places that RTS is most visible is in the current world of music as there are now many examples of rock musicians who have publicly renounced their religious upbringings because of traumatic experiences that they have gone through and who now identify as non-religious. Moving forward, I want to focus on the idea that the lyrics of certain musicians should be looked at through the lens of religious trauma. The way that these artists not only created their music and its lyrics, but also the way that they use certain depictions in their music videos, makes the listener think about religion in a different light. My intention is to shed light on the fact that religious trauma, as unknown as it may seem, is actually presented right in front of us in music that we listen to everyday. Music is a key coping mechanism for those experiencing RTS, and proves that RTS should be taken seriously by therapists and

psychologists around the world. The traumatic religious experiences of these musicians and the way that they are using their lyrics to work through said trauma should be taken as an indicator to point out the strong connection between the cathartic value of music and religious trauma.

### **Religious Trauma Syndrome**

If one was to attempt to look up RTS in any psychological disorder handbook, it would be absent. At the beginning of 2019, *The New York Times* published an article entitled, “When Religion Leads to Trauma,” in which Richard Schiffman discussed the traumatic effect of religion. This article was one of many which first began to discuss religious trauma, something that had before been an unrecognized condition.<sup>1</sup> In fact, in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, RTS is not mentioned and religion and spirituality are simply grouped under the category “problems related to other psychosocial, personal, and environmental circumstances” (American Psychiatric Association). Beginning with this article, awareness began to grow about religious trauma. The article addresses the fact that oftentimes it is overlooked that the church can actually be traumatic. As observed by Schiffman, “You won’t find this condition in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSMMD)*, which clinicians use to make their diagnoses. But the term has been gaining currency with psychotherapists, counselors, and others who work with people who are recovering from the harmful effects of religious indoctrination” (Schiffman, 1). The reality of the situation, however, is that those who come from a very restrictive religious environment are often left with PTSD-like symptoms, including anxiety, depression, and paranoia after they free themselves from such an environment. In this article, Schiffman uses examples of organizations that are helping RTS

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<sup>1</sup> More articles about religious trauma can be found at:

1. “The Sad, Twisted Truth about Conservative Christianity's Effect on the Mind,” Salon.com
2. “What is Religious Trauma Syndrome,” *World Religion News*
3. “The Health Effects of Leaving Religion,” *The Atlantic*

victims work through their trauma. One of the pastors of the churches, Michael Walrond Jr., states that ““We think of church as a place of healing and transformation, and it is, but in reality, religion has been more bruising and damaging than healing and transformative”” (Schiffman, 1). His church, First Corinthian Baptist Church in Harlem, is working towards creating environments in which those who have suffered religious trauma can begin to rebuild their lives. His church piloted a H.O.P.E. program, a free psychiatric clinic for those experiencing religious trauma, which I will talk about in more detail later. Overall, the H.O.P.E. center encourages the use of self-meditation and utilizes open dialogue within church services.

For the purposes of this paper, I want to focus on the definition of RTS as presented by Marlene Winell. Winell began to research and explore the idea of religious trauma after her own personal experiences with leaving her faith behind that left her with feelings of suffering, confusion, fear, guilt, and anger. Having grown up in a very conservative Christian household, Winell explains the idea that her parents were often abusive and would not let her create her own theological ideas while she lived under her parents’ roof. As a young child, Winell was raised in a household that emphasized the second coming of Jesus and the rapture, which led Winell to be particularly stuck on the idea of life after the Rapture. Her parents emphasized that in order to be saved from the Rapture, Christian girls were to act a certain way which included dressing conservatively, not dancing, only participating in “good, clean fun,” and praying during any free time during the day. As Winell grew older, she discovered that her beliefs did not add up with her parents’ beliefs, so she decided to begin exploring other faiths, which led to her being ostracized by her parents and her friends that she had grown up in the church with. This experience led her to publish her most well known book in 1994 entitled, *Leaving the Fold*, in which she outlines her personal experience living with fundamentalist Christian parents, and her

traumatic experience with the transition that she went through while a teenager and into college.

This book was also the first place that she officially coined the term Religious Trauma

Syndrome. Winell explains that often times, RTS goes unnoticed because many people overlook the fact that turning away from one's religion can be, in reality, a very traumatic experience.

Winell states:

We have in our society an assumption that religion is for the most part benign or good for you. Therapists, like others, expect that if you stop believing, you just quit going to church, putting it in the same category as not believing in Santa Claus. Some people also consider religious beliefs childish, so you just grow out of them, simple as that. Therapists often don't understand fundamentalism, and they even recommend spiritual practices as part of therapy. In general, people who have not survived an authoritarian fundamentalist indoctrination do not realize what a complete mind-rape it really is ("Journey Free").

Instead of being seen as something that does not leave a feeling of trauma in individuals who have gone through such a life change, religious trauma needs to be taken as seriously as PTSD.

She also gives advice on how to cope with one's trauma, and explains the steps to recovery.

Later in 2011, she officially coined the term "Religious Trauma Syndrome," after her continued research in psychological health. Winell defines it as "the condition experienced by people who

are struggling to leave an authoritarian, dogmatic religion, and coping with the damage of

indoctrination. . . . RTS is a function of both chronic abuses of harmful religion and the impact of

severing one's connection with one's faith" ("Journey Free"). In an interview done for Journey

Free, the organization started by Winell to help individuals cope with their religious trauma,

Winell describes that today, she likes to work with what she terms "reclaimers," who are

individuals who have moved out of a toxic religious environments, and are working to release

these beliefs and reclaim their lives, in addition to redefining what religion means to them. More

specifically, the group focuses on a variety of activities that they present to their patients which

encourage the patients to share their stories in order to gain confidence and rebuild their self worth.

It is important to note that religious trauma can come in a variety of different forms. For some, it can mean being abused by their parents for not attending church, while for others it can be equated to mental abuse about ideals and beliefs that were ingrained into these individuals in some fashion. According to Exline, "religious themes often surround trauma. Some victims suffered sexual abuse from church leaders, whereas others blamed God for allowing a loved one to die" (31). It is important to focus on the effects of religious trauma due to the fact that for many, as stated earlier, therapists will encourage the use of religion as a way of coping. However, if part of a victim's trauma is due to religion, then this may in fact worsen their symptoms or their trauma overall. For Exline, "Asking individuals to draw on religious beliefs, or to write in a manner that includes religious themes, may lead to increased emotional arousal for some--- also non-religious clients may feel pressured, misunderstood, or offended by directives to frame their experiences in a religious fashion" (31). If clients who are in therapy due to religious trauma are asked to use religion in their therapy writing, instead of therapy being a positive experience for them, it can actually turn out to be a further stressor.

Though it may sound like PTSD, RTS is strictly a condition caused by traumatic religious experiences. It is important to point out that RTS can take a variety of forms and can combine with other traumas. In victims who experience RTS, there may be trauma linked to other traumatic life experiences, however in the case of RTS, religion remains at the core of the victim's trauma. Many of the symptoms of RTS are similar to those of PTSD which is why RTS has remained largely undiagnosed. According to the British Association for Behavioral and Cognitive Psychotherapies, "the symptoms compare most easily with PTSD, which results from



experiencing or being confronted with death or serious injury and causing feelings of terror, helplessness, or horror.” They also state that, “like PTSD, the impact is long-lasting, with intrusive thoughts, negative emotional states, impaired social functioning, and other problems” (BABCP). RTS remains largely invisible due to the fact that there are usually pressures from friends or family to return to the repressive system that victims are attempting to escape. Instead of those who go through this receiving support and sympathy from those around them, instead RTS survivors are often ridiculed, nagged, and neglected to a point of guilt. This in turn causes them to re-think leaving the environment that they had worked so hard to get out of, and the end result becomes that they do in fact end up returning.

### **Music and Religious Trauma**

I want to touch on the fact that the reason that these artists use music as a medium for working through their trauma, is due to the fact that music is a form of catharsis, and has an effect on the emotions of trauma victims. Music presents an alternate approach for individuals who are struggling to get the help that they need through traditional cognitive-based therapy techniques. In an article published in the *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Family Therapy*, Simon Faulkner explores the idea of how the use of music in combination with cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) positively impacted those recovering from trauma. Faulkner explores the idea that music, not just listening to music but also making music, is a way for these victims to regain their self-confidence, and focus on something other than the trauma that they have gone through. He states, “When introduced appropriately, clients can have immediate success playing simple, yet powerful, rhythms on the drum, and this [music] is a critical element in its usefulness as a clinical tool,” and “introducing safe group music making can help clients to overcome the fear and hurt associated with their traumatic experience” (Faulkner, 628-629).

Faulkner also touches on the creation of a group called DRUMBEAT, which was designed as a way to meet the needs of trauma victims who were not having their needs met through CBT. The purpose of the group was to use experimental therapy through rhythmic music, movement, and voice, in order to meet the needs of a wider variety of trauma victims. Faulkner states, "What began as a simple need to engage clients who would not attend my 'talk oriented' counseling sessions, has developed into a medium that has allowed me, and many others working in the trauma field, to work to address a range of presenting issues in a fun and effective way" (634). In connection to this, the inherent cathartic experience of music helps artists today to cope with the religious trauma that they were affected by for years prior to their music making.

Due to its similarities to PTSD, music therapy should be evaluated as a solid approach to treating the trauma of victims experiencing RTS, because music has proved to be effective in the treatment of trauma among victims of PTSD. In a study conducted by The British Psychological Society, group music therapy sessions were conducted with patients presenting with PTSD symptoms for whom traditional CBT practices were continually proving to be unsuccessful. Patients were presented with the opportunity to listen to a variety of musical genres and create music using a variety of instruments. The therapy groups were held for ten weeks, and at the conclusion of the ten weeks data was collected based on the severity of the patients' PTSD symptoms being presented and the ways that the victims themselves felt about emotion, trust, and engagement. The study found that "on average, patients reported a greater reduction at 10 weeks in symptom severity in the treatment group," and "engagement, establishment of safety and trust, identification and expression of emotion, and capacity to tolerate particular sound qualities of instruments emerged after the treatment" (Carr, 187). This means that music was in fact a cathartic experience for these individuals who were struggling to work through their

trauma via traditional CBT practices. Therefore, it can be argued that music would prove to be an effective way of treating individuals working through RTS. It is important to point out that music therapy is not a cure for PTSD, and would not be a cure for RTS. It is simply a means of identifying that there is a problem taking place where individuals are being traumatized by their religion, and are turning to music as a way of “self medicating,” due to its cathartic value. Since RTS is still not looked at as an actual condition according to the DSMMD, music has become a way for individuals to try to deal with their trauma on their own instead of through professional CBT practices that are often unsuccessful due to therapist’s limited knowledge about religious trauma. Throughout this paper it is important to raise awareness about RTS because in the future, it could be the case that when RTS is seen in the same light as PTSD as an actual disorder, then CBT practices might become more helpful. For now, those suffering through RTS are left to turn to one of the only things to help them work through their trauma, music. It makes sense because in our everyday lives, music is often a way of coping with our everyday emotions.

### **Case Study**

Brendon Urie, lead singer of Panic! At the Disco, is an American song-writer, singer, and musician best known for his somewhat raunchy lyrics and controversial music videos.

Something that many do not know about Urie though is that at the root of his mental health problems stands long running trauma with his religious past. Urie was born and raised in Utah to very conservative Mormon parents who did not allow him to express himself as he wished. He was often confined to staying at home at all hours of the day so that his parents could keep watch of him, and more often than not, he was forced to attend church services even when he was battling with himself and those around him over his own beliefs. Urie’s experience with religious trauma, has significantly contributed to the message of his music, especially on his last album,

whose title *Pray for the Wicked*, even alludes to a religious message. The title of this album was purposeful as Urie wanted to use the songs on this record as a way to describe his personal battle with RTS. It was through writing this music, that Urie has been able to somewhat come to terms with the religious trauma that he experienced at a young age (IMDb).

In an interview done with Urie by Radio.com in June 2018, Urie explains the fact that he purposefully included many religious elements and alluded to a lot of religious imagery in his 2018 album due to continuing to come to terms with his religious past. He explains that he grappled with the idea of the Mormon church and its ideals being ingrained in him as the “end all in which the order of things was God, Family, and then self which for me just was not the way that I believed” (Timmerberg). After leaving the church, Urie was faced with a lot of judgment from his own family and was shunned due to turning away from the system that he had known his whole life. Urie explains that the purpose of using the religious imagery in his videos and lyrics is due to the fact that he himself is still working through the trauma of being shunned for having different beliefs than those around him, and that simply his music has become a new religion for him, and a new way of expressing his beliefs. He explains that the album has helped him to “romanticize memories about his traumatic childhood, instead of remembering the trauma of it all” (Timmerberg).

In a similar interview conducted by *GQ*, Urie explains that he had to take a ten-year hiatus from religion in order to cope with what he had been through as a child, and it was only through returning to music that he was able to begin to work through his childhood trauma. He explains that, “As a teenager, I knew two things: I wanted to be a professional musician and the Mormon faith wasn’t for me. It took a 10-year break from religion to allow me to return to it with his own set of rules. Now, I sees it as a catalyst for change” (Kaplan). It is through the use

of his music that he is able to redefine what it meant to experience religion the way that he did as a child, and it has allowed him to come to terms with the way that it affected his life. He explains that his music has led to his own ability to work through the hate/malice that he created not only for himself, but also for those around him. He consistently uses the theatrical elements of his songs in order to lighten the mood of the music's message. In this same interview, he describes the way in which his family reacted to him when he proclaimed his beliefs to them. He explains that his mom actually kicked him out of the house and told him to find his own way in the world. Due to the newness of RTS, it is only recently that Brendon was able to understand why he felt such hate for those around him, and why he felt unable to talk about or experience religion for years. Once he was able to realize that religion was at the root of his trauma, he was then able to use his music as a way of working through said trauma. With lyrics such as, "I pray for the wicked on the weekend/ mama can I get another Amen," and "this is Gospel for the fallen ones," Urie is using the power of his music in order to continue to grapple with his mixed feelings and own new opinions about religion. Urie states:

Now when I say "pray," I'm not thinking of some omniscient being who is controlling stuff wearing a white beard and killing things when he wants to like we're ants in a lab. For me, I think God is in all of us if there is a God. It's more like talking to yourself or meditating. "Pray" is such a specific word with a stigma behind it. It means something else to me: I'm not pleading for anybody else to save me, I'm pleading for myself. *Can I save myself and help others save themselves?* That's really what I want to accomplish (Kaplan).

### **Conclusion**

In an era where there is an increase in the amount of people leaving the church, it is time to recognize that there is an underlying cause of the problem. In order for there to be a change in our society, and the return of individuals back into the church, we need to begin to deal with underlying systemic issues present within the church. RTS is one of a multitude of underlying causes for individuals turning away from the church in the twenty-first century. As I began the

research for this project, it became an interesting point to me that for individuals suffering from PTSD, religion was often a place of refuge. It becomes ironic that in a nation filled with so many individuals for whom religion is a culprit, or a cause of trauma, at the same time there are equally the same amount of people turning to religion for comfort. Individuals who can not turn to religion for comfort because religion is the cause of their trauma must find alternative ways of positively coping with their trauma.

In order for psychologists to begin to properly diagnose and treat individuals going through RTS, there first needs to be a recognition that RTS is an actual disorder. In the early days of PTSD research, there was the prevalence of a stigma surrounding individuals who portrayed signs and symptoms of PTSD. The cultural aspects of understanding PTSD and those experiencing it often led to a misunderstanding about the causes and treatments for victims. It was not until 1980 that PTSD was formally recognized as a disorder “with specific symptoms that could be reliably diagnosed and was added to the American Psychiatric Association’s *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*” (APA). In order for victims of religious trauma to receive the help that they need, we need to get to a place in our culture where religious trauma can be accepted as a real condition, and not just a subset of PTSD. Within our culture, we need to recognize that even though there are many positive aspects of religion that can be helpful to certain individuals experiencing trauma, religion is also a root of the problem. For certain individuals religion can, in fact, be a way to treat symptoms of PTSD, but for others, alternate forms of coping need to be considered in order to decrease the prevalence of individuals dealing with and living with religious trauma. The question is what can lead us to a place that we can think of religious trauma in the same light of PTSD—how did we get here?— and how is it that

religious beliefs continue to be less prevalent without us recognizing that there is a problem with religious trauma that is causing individuals to turn away from their belief systems?.

It is important to recognize that music can be a starting point for individuals needing an alternate outlet for coping with their trauma other than religion. For those who are experiencing Religious Trauma Syndrome, it is obvious that they can not use religion for coping. Music then, becomes an important source of catharsis for victims of RTS. Music has helped victims of RTS to once again find meaning in their lives, and to begin to accept and cope with the trauma that was caused by religion. One of the suggested coping mechanisms suggested by Winell in her research with RTS is that of music. Music therapy has always been an important way for victims of PTSD to cope with their trauma. If RTS is in fact similar to PTSD, then it makes sense that music could be helpful for RTS victims as well. Looking at the bigger picture, concerts can be viewed as collective group music therapy in which individuals who are struggling in their everyday lives find purpose and connection with other fans who are as passionate as they are about the music. How do we respond to music as a type of group catharsis? For the musicians themselves listed above, who have experienced religious trauma, the music that they are creating and sharing becomes a cathartic experience. However, it is important to ask if these musicians using their music is in fact a solution, if it is exposing a problem, or if it is doing both. If the later is the case, and another solution needs to be discovered, then once religious trauma is recognized, other forms of counseling can be utilized in partnership with music therapy. Once religious trauma becomes listed in the DSMDD as a real disorder, then psychologists can be trained and can learn how to correctly treat religious trauma using traditional Cognitive Behavioral Therapy practices in partnership with music therapy. When this becomes the case,

we can begin to move forward towards a society where all individuals, even those for whom religion is the cause of their problem, can begin to be successfully treated for their trauma.



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