FOUNDATIONS FOR TREATING RELIGIOUS TRAUMA

with Kathryn Keller, Ph.D. and Anna Clark-Miller, MA, LPC

EMPATHY PARADIGM

Presented by Religious Trauma Institute, Empathy Paradigm, and ContinueLearn.

REFLECTION

- What has your personal experience (if any) with spirituality or religion been like?
- How have others' spiritual or religious beliefs impacted you?

COMPETENCIES FOR CLINICIANS

- Multicultural Competency
- General Trauma Competency
- Spiritual & Religious Competency: Identify spiritual/religious practices and beliefs that might negatively impact psychological health; Identify and address spiritual/religious problems in clinical practice; Make referrals when necessary.[1]

PART 1: CONCEPTUALIZATION

TERMINOLOGY

SPIRITUALITY: A subjective experience of the sacred[2]
RELIGION: A system of beliefs and practices[3].

SPIRITUAL ABUSE: Misuse of power in a spiritual context whereby spiritual authority is distorted to the detriment of those under its leadership. It is a multifaceted and multilayered experience that includes acts of commission and omission, aimed at producing conformity. It is both process and event, influencing one's inner and outer worlds and has the potential to affect the biological, psychological, social, and spiritual domains of the individual.[4]

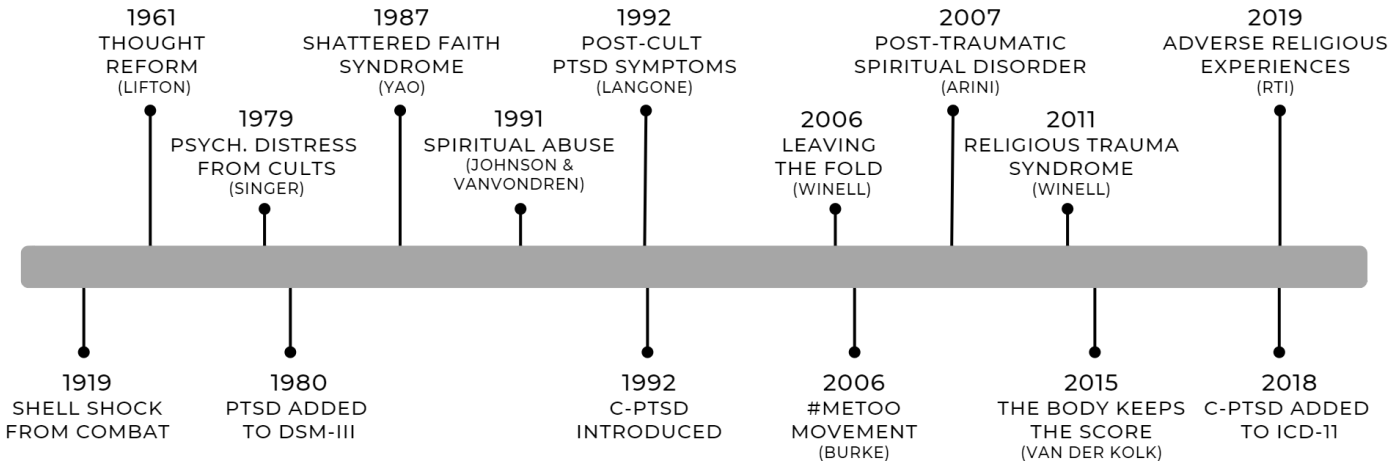
RELIGIOUS TRAUMA: The physical, emotional, or psychological response to religious beliefs, practices, or structures that is experienced by an individual as overwhelming or disruptive and has lasting adverse effects on a person's physical, mental, social, emotional, or spiritual well-being.[5].

[1] Vieten, C; Lukoff, D. (2022) Spiritual and religious competencies in psychology. The American psychologist, 77(1), 26–38.
[2] Vaughan, F. (1991) Spiritual issues in psychotherapy. Journal of Transpersonal Psychology, 23(2), 105-119.
[3] Argyle, M., & Beit-Hallahmi, B. (2013) The Social Psychology of Religion (Psychology Revivals) (1st ed.). Routledge.
[4] Ward, D.J. (2011) The lived experience of spiritual abuse, Mental Health, Religion & Culture, 14:9, 899-915.
[5] The Religious Trauma Institute

RELIGIOUS ABUSE: The mistreatment of someone in need of spiritual empowerment resulting in the weakening and undermining of their empowerment[6].

ADVERSE RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCES: Any experience of a religious belief, practice, or structure that undermines an individual's sense of safety or autonomy and/or negatively impacts their physical, social, emotional, relational, psychological, or spiritual well-being[7].

TIMELINE: RELIGIOUS TRAUMA AWARENESS[8]



RELIGIOUS TRAUMA: A UNIQUE SPECIALTY

- Survivors often have intense fear regarding actions that are perceived as eternal.
- God/deity is often seen as a secondary attachment figure.
- Grief/Pain is difficult to process without a framework or healthy coping skills.
- The focus can easily shift to religion as the problem instead of trauma or abuse.
- Many perpetuate the abuse as a survival skill, resulting in complex grief.

CONSIDERATIONS

Comorbid issues, Somatic symptoms, Vulnerable populations, Developmental Impacts (patriarchy, sexism, racial minorities, LGBTQ+, purity culture, developmental trauma, etc.)
Diagnostic options: PTSD, CPTSD, GAD, OCD, MDD, etc.

RELIGIOUS TRAUMA SYNDROME is a framework, but not a formal diagnosis.[9]

[6] Johnson D. & VanVonderen J. (2005). *The subtle power of spiritual abuse*. Bethany House.
[7] The Religious Trauma Institute
[8] Brian Peck, 2022, Room to Thrive; Adapted
[9] Winell, M. (2011) Religious Trauma Syndrome (Series of 3 articles), Cognitive Behavioural Therapy Today; British Association of Behavioural and Cognitive Therapies, London.

SYMPTOMOLOGY

COGNITIVE

- **Impaired Decision-Making:** Confusion or indecision; Lack of confidence in one's own judgment or perceptions.
- **Impaired Critical Thinking:** Cognitive inflexibility due to rigid or binary thinking patterns; Inability to tolerate diverse or contradictory ideas; Avoidance or oversimplification of intellectually complex ideas.
- **Moralization/Binary Thinking:** Habitually inferring moral or spiritual significance to ideas or behaviors; Obsession with seeking correctness and avoiding badness or evil
- **Identity Confusion:** Lack of awareness or understanding of one's personality, sexuality, gender expression, etc; Difficulty distinguishing one's individual identity from the identity of the group; Difficulty identifying one's likes and dislikes
- **External Locus of Control:** Perceived helplessness, powerlessness, or lack of agency; Excessive reliance on external sources for motivation.
- **Dissociation:** Cognitive or emotional detachment or numbness; Disconnection from reality or functioning on "auto-pilot"; Impaired memory.
- **Spiritual Cynicism:** Skepticism and distrust of spiritual experiences, teachings, or leadership

AFFECTIVE/EMOTIONAL

- **Impaired Emotional Expression + Regulation:** Suppression & invalidation of feelings; Avoidance of strong emotions; Difficulty communicating emotion; Impaired empathy or difficulty tolerating the emotions of others.
- **Fear / Anxiety / Panic:** Excessive fear or worry regarding spiritual matters (ex. sin, death, salvation); Scrupulosity, obsessive fears, or superstitions; Hypervigilance
- **Depression:** Grief, sadness, hopelessness, purposelessness, Suicidal ideation or self-harm; Anhedonia.
- **Excessive Shame + Guilt:** Self-hatred due to perceived inadequacy, badness, or inability to meet spiritual expectations; False guilt and/or inflated sense of personal responsibility; Obsession with avoiding pride or pridefulness.

FUNCTIONAL/BEHAVIORAL

- **Somatization:** Physical manifestations such as chronic pain, chronic fatigue, hypertension, insomnia, etc.; Intermittent or unexplained health problems
- **Sexual Dysfunction:** Difficulty engaging in and enjoying sex or masturbation; Inhibited or repressed sexuality and/or difficulty identifying sexual desires; Trauma responses during sex.
- **Addictive Behaviors:** Use substances and/or numbing behaviors; Control-oriented obsessions regarding food, appearance, work, etc.
- **Scrupulosity**: Obsessive/compulsive behaviors linked to religious or moral rules.
- **Self Deprivation + Neglect:** Inadequate self-care related to health, sleep, nutrition, work boundaries, etc; Self-harming behaviors; Fear or avoidance of potential sources of happiness or comfort.

SOCIAL

- **Enmeshment / Codependency:** Difficulty separating one's own thoughts and emotions from those of the group; poor personal boundaries

- **Trauma Bonding / Stockholm Syndrome:** Trauma-induced relationship dysfunction; Identification with the abuser.
- **Authority Issues:** Excessive need for instruction or approval from authority figures; Excessive fear of being falsely accused or punished; Contempt or distrust of those in positions of power.
- **Social Anxiety:** Excessive fear of being scrutinized, judged, or excluded socially; high sensitivity to perceived rejection or blame; avoidance of attention.

DEVELOPMENTAL

- **Insecure Attachment Styles:** Anxious or avoidant behaviors; Fear of abandonment or betrayal; Excessive reliance on others OR excessive self-reliance; difficulty establishing trust at a healthy pace.
- **Developmental Trauma:** Delayed or impaired development of cognitive, emotional, and social skills.
- **Impaired Identity Formation & Sexual Development**

ASSESSMENT TOOLS

Spiritual Abuse Questionaire - Kathryn Keller, 2016
Religious Trauma Inventory - Anna Clark-Miller, 2021
***Both tools are included at the end of this packet.

PART 2: HIGH-CONTROL DYNAMICS

RELIGIOUS POWER & CONTROL WHEEL[10]

COERCION & THREATS

- Fear of punishment, God's wrath, eternal torment
- Abandonment and exclusion by the group
- Temptation, spiritual warfare, possession, etc.

SPIRITUAL INTIMIDATION

- Leaders claim divine appointment & authority
- Elitist treatment and lack of leadership accountability
- Forbiddance of questioning the group's ultimate truth

EMOTIONAL ABUSE

- Shaming for not meeting unrealistic expectaitons
- Emotional suppression and invalidation
- Villainization of self-love
- Terminology like "sinful", "prideful", "selfish"

ISOLATION

- Limited access to outside supports

[10] Adapted The Duluth Model (1993) Power and Control Wheel; Domestic Abuse Intervention Project; AND Adapted from Laura Anderson, LMFT with the Religious Trauma Institute.

- Control of information and media access
- Propaganda dehumanizing, mocking, & inciting fear of outsiders

MINIMIZING, DENYING & BLAMING

- Spiritual bypassing and gaslightining
- Denial of mistreatment or any unintended inpacts
- Justification of abuse based on divine order
- Blaming members for their own suffering (victim-blaming)
- Required forgiveness & reconciliation

LOSS OF AUTONOMY

- Suppression of intuition & critical thinking
- Required reliance on the group for all needs
- Denial of privacy & individual agency
- Required submission to authority

DEFINITION OF GENDER & SEXUALITY

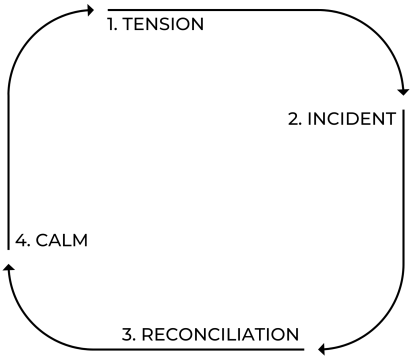
- Rigid and/or binary gender roles & expectations
- Shame & exclusion for non-conformance
- Patriarchy, subjugation of women
- Pathologizing of queer identities, fear mongering

ECONOMIC CONTROL

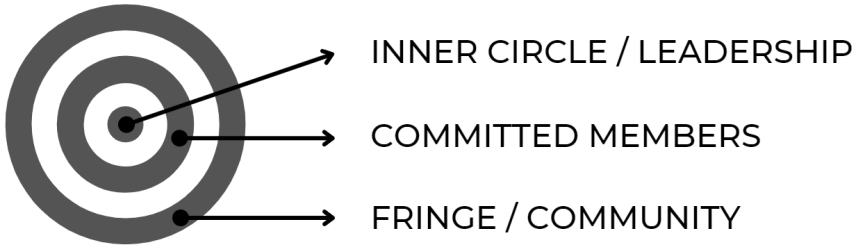
- Required financial investment from members
- Demands of total trust in divine provision
- Restrictions on education & employment of women
- Shaming for “worldliness” or enjoyment of material things

THE CYCLE OF RELIGIOUS ABUSE[11]

TENSION: Member is indoctrinated and trained to conform as fear of displeasing God or spiritual leaders builds.
INCIDENT: The member is shamed, punished, or publicly humiliated.
RECONCILIATION: The member is blamed or invalidated and encouraged to forgive and reconcile.
CALM: The member is showered with love, belonging, and promises of unconditional acceptance, reinforcing the continued cycle.



THE CONTINUUM OF CONTROL



[11] Adapted from The Cycle of Abuse by Walker, L.E. (1979) The Battered Woman. New York: Harper and Row.

LIFTON'S 8 CRITERIA FOR THOUGHT REFORM (MIND CONTROL)[12]

1) **MILIEU OF CONTROL**
    a) Communication is strictly controlled within the group
    b) Access to outside information or media is limited, isolating the group from society
    c) Members are taught to self-monitor and police one another
2) **MYSTICAL MANIPULATION**
    a) Events are orchestrated to appear mystical or portrayed as signs/prophecies
    b) The leader makes authoritative displays of power
    c) History is rewritten to demonstrate the group's exceptionalism
3) **DEMAND FOR PURITY**
    a) Members are required to conform to group standards
    b) Black-and-white thinking is taught and encouraged
    c) Behavior is controlled through the use of guilt and shame
4) **CONFESSION**
    a) Members are required to routinely confess their sins/failures
    b) Demonstrations of self-surrender or public shaming are celebrated
    c) Personal privacy and confidentiality are devalued
5) **SACRED SCIENCE**
    a) Group doctrine is elevated above all other sources of truth
    b) Criticism of group doctrine is forbidden and reverence is required
    c) Nuance and subtlety are disregarded in favor of dogma
6) **LOADING THE LANGUAGE**
    a) Habitual use of group-specific words, phrases, or thought-stopping clichés
    b) Words and ideas are redefined or reinterpreted to fit the group's ideology
7) **DOCTRINE OVER PERSON**
    a) Ideology is valued above personal experiences
    b) Members are encouraged to distrust and ignore contradictory feelings
    c) Nonconforming interpretations are pathologized
8) **DISPENSING OF EXISTENCE**
    a) Outsiders are depicted as evil, unworthy, and unenlightened
    b) Outsiders are denied the right to exist as equals
    c) Members who leave or reject the doctrine are completely rejected and excluded

PART 3: TREATMENT CONSIDERATIONS

HERMAN'S STAGES OF TRAUMA RECOVERY[13]

1. Establishing Safety
2. Remembrance + Mourning
3. Reconnection

[12] Lifton, R. (1961) Thought Reform and the Psychology of Totalism: A Study of "Brainwashing" in China.
[13] Herman, J.L. (1993) Trauma and recovery: From domestic abuse to political terror.

STAGES OF RELIGIOUS TRAUMA RECOVERY[14]

SAFETY & AUTONOMY

- Ask for consent at every juncture to reinforce their autonomy.
- Educate on nervous system responses to threats: Fight, Flight, Freeze, and Appease.
- Identify what physical and psychological safety feels like and encourage the client to listen to their body for signs of activation.
- Affirm their right to be sad, angry, or afraid, prioritize their safety and comfort, make autonomous decisions, and set protective boundaries.

REMEMBRANCE & NAMING

- Encourage the client to tell their story: The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly.
- Use appropriate terms like grief, abuse, manipulation, etc.
- Identify abusive cycles, power dynamics, triggering words or phrases
- Investigate internal narrative and self-talk.
- Identify any adaptive and maladaptive coping mechanisms they developed in order to survive and offer grace.

(RE)CONNECTION WITH SELF

- Explore the client's identity, values, and roles apart from the group.
- Normalize having likes and dislikes and being self-affirming.
- Identify emotions and needs and integrate their feelings and sensations.
- If they want to, help them reimagine healthy spirituality.

(RE)CONNECTION WITH OTHERS

- Redefine what healthy relationships look like.
- Experiment with new ways of relating to others.
- Build skills of assertiveness, communication, and boundary-setting.

DECONSTRUCTION

- Religious Deconstruction is a process of analyzing the truth and impact of a belief system's individual elements. The goal is not to reject the beliefs, but to assess them.
- Connect cognitive processing with the client's emotional experience
- Differentiate the client's values from the group's values
- Investigate incongruence between beliefs and values
- Identify patterns of spiritual bypassing

INVESTIGATE BELIEFS THAT PROVOKE DYSFUNCTION

- False dichotomies that cause shame and judgment
- Ultimate truths that cause thought blocking
- Deterministic beliefs that cause disempowerment
- Authoritarian beliefs that cause submission and victimization
- Eternal consequences that cause excessive fear, anxiety, panic
- Evangelistic responsibility that causes guilt and coercion

[14] Adapted from Judith Herman's Trauma & Recovery Model

THERAPEUTIC CONSIDERATIONS

RETRAUMATIZATION
- Watch for re-creation of leader/teacher dynamics
- Acknowledge when you don't understand something
- Avoid potentially triggering homework
- Set goals that are not performance-based
- Be cautious about discussing taboo subjects

SAFETY RISKS
- Potential ongoing threats or continuum of abuse
- Possible consequences of leaving the group
- Client resilience, coping skills, and support system
- Readiness to change factors
- Suicide or self-harm risk
- Conversion therapy practices

OTHER TRICKY ISSUES
- Religious based counseling or conversion therapy
- Impacts of self-disclosure and boundaries
- Family of origin issues
- Preexiisting or co-occurring traumas

COUNTER-TRANSFERRENCE
- Assess personal assumptions about religious groups
- Avoid making judgments about "healthy" spirituality
- Process your own adverse religious experiences separately
- Prioritize your self-care

POSITIVE ASPECTS OF SPIRITUALITY
- Happiness / Life satisfaction
- Meaning and Purpose
- Self-actualization / Personal growth
- Social support
- NOTE: This doesn’t mean non-religious people miss out on these benefits!

REFLECTION
- What will you do differently next time someone with RT seeks help from you?
- What takeaways do you have from this discussion that can help you going forward?
- How has this discussion impacted your own biases regarding spirituality/religion and their potential impact on people?

SOURCES

- Abrams, Z. (2021) Improved treatment for developmental trauma. Monitor on Psychology, 52(5).
- Argyle, M., & Beit-Hallahmi, B. (2013) The Social Psychology of Religion (Psychology Revivals) Routledge.
- American Psychiatric Association. (2013) Diagnostic and statistical manual of mental disorders (5th ed.).
- American Psychological Association. (n.d.) Abuse. In APA dictionary of psychology.
- Blosnich, J. R., Henderson, E. R., Coulter, R., Goldbach, J. T., & Meyer, I. H. (2020). Sexual Orientation Change Efforts, Adverse Childhood Experiences, and Suicide Ideation and Attempt Among Sexual Minority Adults. American journal of public health, 110(7), e1–e7.
- Bronfenbrenner, U. (1976). The experimental ecology of education. Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association, San Francisco, CA.
- Herman, J.L. (1993) Trauma and recovery: From domestic abuse to political terror.
- Johnson D. & VanVonderen J. (2005). The subtle power of spiritual abuse. Bethany House.
- Keller, K; Stabb, S; Harri, J; Marshall, D; Mollen, D. (2016) Development of a Spiritual Abuse Questionnaire.
- Lifton, R. (1961) Thought Reform and the Psychology of Totalism: A Study of "Brainwashing" in China.
- Religious Trauma Institute: https://www.religioustraumainstitute.com/
- Reclamation Collective: https://www.reclamationcollective.com/
- Rotter, J.B. (1954) General principles for a social learning framework of personality study. Social Learning and Clinical Psychology. Prentice-Hall, Inc.
- The Duluth Model (1993) Power and Control Wheel; Domestic Abuse Intervention Project.
- Van Deusen, S. & Courtois, C. A. (2015) Spirituality, religion, and complex developmental trauma. In Spiritually oriented psychotherapy for trauma (pp. 29–54). American Psychological Association.
- Vaughan, F. (1991) Spiritual issues in psychotherapy. Journal of Transpersonal Psychology, 23(2), 105-119.
- Vieten, C; Lukoff, D. (2022) Spiritual and religious competencies in psychology. The American psychologist, 77(1), 26–38.
- Walker, L.E. (1979) The Battered Woman. New York: Harper and Row.
- Ward, D.J. (2011) The lived experience of spiritual abuse, Mental Health, Religion & Culture, 14:9, 899-915.
- Winell, M; Allen, S. (2016) Leaving the Fold: A Guide for Former Fundamentalists and Others Leaving Their Religion. Los Gatos California: Smashwords Edition.
- Winell, M. (2011) Religious Trauma Syndrome (Series of 3 articles), Cognitive Behavioural Therapy Today; British Association of Behavioural and Cognitive Therapies, London.

SPIRITUAL ABUSE QUESTIONNAIRE

Created by Kathryn Keller, Ph.D. as a part of her 2016 doctoral dissertation: “Development of a Spiritual Abuse Questionnaire”

> **Instructions**: Please consider your current or previous involvement in a Christian or Bible-based church or group (ex: a church, student organization, missions organization, etc.). Respond by checking the box that most closely matches your experiences in that group. If you have been involved in more than one church or group, please answer according to the church/group that stands out to you the most.
>
> If the church/group that stands out to you the most is one in which you are currently involved, please answer the items as if they are written in the present (felt-->feel, etc).

On a continuum of Strongly Disagree.....Disagree.....Agree.....Strongly Agree

1. It was acceptable to express my true emotions in my church/group ®
2. Leaders in my group acknowledged harm they caused to others ®
3. I know some religious leaders shared information about other people (through prayer requests or otherwise) that should have been kept private
4. I believed that God's love and acceptance of me was dependent upon my performance in the church/group
5. I currently have no trouble trusting religious leaders/churches/groups ®
6. I no longer trust myself to find a good spiritual community
7. I was harshly criticized by religious leaders or church/group members
8. I felt like a spiritual failure and I depended on my leader/church group to "get it right”
9. I believed God would punish me if I didn't do what my church/group encouraged me to do
10. I now feel cynical about church/religious groups
11. I felt freedom to ask questions or express concerns in my church/group ®
12. I felt dependent on the church/group
13. My religious leaders used fear to control people
14. I know that I or others were asked to serve as the "eyes and ears" for our leader to get information about our members
15. At times, I was scolded by my leader and made to feel ashamed and helpless
16. I believed I could be totally surrendered to God if I did everything perfectly according to the church/group's instructions
17. I now feel lonely and misunderstood because of my church/group experiences

® Means reverse score

RELIGIOUS TRAUMA INVENTORY

Empathy Paradigm: Anna Clark-Miller, 2021

EMPATHY PARADIGM

This is a self-administered inventory, designed to help survivors identify if and how they have been impacted by religious trauma. It is not a test and there is no scoring system; rather this is a tool for gaining insight into thoughts and behaviors that might indicate religious trauma.

SHAME + BLAME

- ☐ I often feel undeserving of love and acceptance.
- ☐ I often feel incapable of making good decisions on my own.
- ☐ I feel ashamed of my natural personality, identity, or sexuality.
- ☐ I often feel guilty even when I haven't done anything wrong.
- ☐ I often blame myself when bad things happen to me.
- ☐ I often suspect that I am bad or incapable of doing good.
- ☐ I often feel guilty about not donating time or money to my religious group.
- ☐ I often feel guilty about not recruiting enough people to my religious group.
- ☐ I often feel guilty about not attending enough of my religious group's meetings.
- ☐ I often feel compelled to confess and seek forgiveness for my spiritual failures.

SUPPRESSION

- ☐ I often feel that I can't trust my own instincts and emotions.
- ☐ I often feel disconnected from my body's needs or sensations.
- ☐ I have trouble describing my identity apart from my religious beliefs.
- ☐ I often feel ashamed for getting angry, even when I haven't lashed out.
- ☐ I often feel ashamed when I experience pleasure.
- ☐ I feel the need to change to fit my religious group's expectations of my gender.
- ☐ I often feel selfish or prideful when celebrating my own successes.
- ☐ I often feel selfish or prideful when advocating for my needs.
- ☐ I feel that it is prideful to question those in authority over me.
- ☐ I often hide my feelings or opinions from those in my religious group.

ANXIETY

- ☐ I often feel responsible for the salvation of people around me.
- ☐ I worry that I or someone I love will go to hell or be excluded in eternity.
- ☐ I worry about getting advice or treatment from non-believers.
- ☐ I worry about being influenced by media made by non-believers.
- ☐ I worry that my religious doubts indicate I'm not a true believer.
- ☐ I worry that unseen evil forces will control or harm me.
- ☐ I feel panic at the thought of being excluded or left behind by my religious group.

CYNICISM

- ☐ I often assume that religious people are judging me unfairly.
- ☐ I often feel resentment and distrust of religious leaders.
- ☐ I suspect that God and/or religious leaders don't want me to be happy.
- ☐ I suspect that God and/or religious leaders don't want me to enjoy sex.
- ☐ I suspect that God and/or religious leaders are cruel or sadistic.
- ☐ I suspect that God and/or religious leaders don't care about my suffering.

NOTES: