

Moving Toward Wholeness: A Religious Trauma Class
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Objectives:

1. Understand what religious trauma can look like
2. Unpack some of the ways you have personally experienced religious trauma
3. Begin to reconstruct your faith and beliefs in healthy and whole ways

Session One: reviewing the past

Welcome and Orientation	5 minutes
Opening Words	5 minutes
Introductions	15 minutes
Covenant	5 minutes
What is Religious Trauma?	15 min
Pair and Share Discussion	15 minutes
Whole Group Sharing	15 minutes
Closing and homework	10 minutes

Welcome and orientation 5 minutes

Show [slides 1-3](#), talk about objectives and structure of the class

Opening Words, 5 minutes

Light a chalice and share these words by Leslie Takahashi

[Prayer for When Words Fail | WorshipWeb | UUA.org](#)

Introductions, 15 minutes

Go first to model brevity, share names, pronouns, and what faith traditions you have been part of in your life (let people know there will be a lot more time for conversation, this is really just a listing of faith traditions).

Covenant, 5 minutes

Share the [covenant slide](#) and discuss those agreements

What is Religious trauma 15 minutes

Go through the slide show or show this video:

<https://youtu.be/WkMmv3c6xjE?si=NhKD8NI4Gpc3tZyp>

and discuss these characteristics of religious trauma:

- Overall, what thoughts, reactions, and questions do these characteristics of unhealthy religion bring up for you?
- Were there unhealthy characteristics of religion that surprised you or that you disagree are unhealthy?
- How does this change your concept of a healthy religious community?

Pair and Share 15 minutes

Put people in pairs to discuss:

1. When have you seen these characteristics of unhealthy faith communities and spiritual abuse in your life?

Whole Group Sharing, 15 minutes

1. How can knowing the characteristics of religious trauma help you understand your past religious experiences? What has a new meaning if you think about it in these ways?
2. Where you are now in life, what would be deal makers and deal breakers for you in your relationship to a faith community?

Closing and Homework, 10 minutes

Share the homework: to write a letter to your past self starting with the prompt:

“I’m sorry anyone ever told you/made you feel/led you to believe”

Close with this song, recorded by Libby Roderick:  [How Could Anyone - Libby Roderick \(live\)](#)

Session Two: beginning to heal inside

Welcome and check in	10 min
Covenant reminder	5 min
Homework sharing in pairs	10 min
Review of how trauma can affect you	20 min
Guided meditation	10 min
Whole group sharing	10 min
Creating a personal mantra	10 min
Pair and share	10 min
Closing and homework	5 min

Opening and Check Ins (10 min)

Prayer of Healing, abridged By Krista Westervelt

Full reading: [Prayer of Healing | WorshipWeb | UUA.org](#)

Spirit of life and peace,
Source of our strength and our surrender,

We lift up those who grieve,
Those whose griefs we know,
Those whose griefs may go unspoken for fear of being misunderstood or disregarded.
May they be held in a spirit of remembrance, of grace, and of comfort.

We lift up those carrying the pain of regret—
Regret for actions that cannot be undone and regret for the undone that has escaped possibility.
Give them a spirit of grace, of self-forgiveness and tender self-compassion,
That they may heal into embracing a future still unwritten.

We lift up those whose hearts and minds are heavy, whatever the source of that heaviness,
May they find comfort and clarity, understanding and peace.

We lift up those bearing the scars of religious trauma and spiritual harm.
May they find healing and renewal,
May they lay down that which no longer serves them and carry only that which brings them life and liberation.

We lift up those who fear that their hurts, their pains, are too insignificant for healing.
May they know that their hurt and their pain is valid, no matter the size,
And may they feel comforted in the knowledge that they are not alone and that they are loved.

In all things, may we acknowledge the ways that we, together, are an answer to our prayers by embodying and embracing peace in the midst of great sorrow. May we have the wisdom to know when to speak and when to accompany one another in the silence of sacred companionship. And may we strive to be a beloved community and a balm to those who are suffering and in pain.

In gratitude and hope we pray, Amen.

Check in question: If your current well-being or emotional climate were reported as a weather report, what would it be?

Covenant Reminder (5 min)

- 1. All are different - respect the unique nature of each person's experience and the dynamics of power and privilege that can be present**
- 2. Our stories belong to each of us - confidentiality**
- 3. Support the diversity of healthy and healing beliefs we may find**

Homework Sharing in Pairs (10 min)

What did you notice as you wrote your homework letter?

How Trauma Affects Us: 20 min

Show this video: <https://youtu.be/BJfmfkDQb14?si=pv28HOhfjjMsgd3w>

Take questions or pose these to the group:

1. How is this explanation and definition of trauma new to you?
2. Did you gain any new insights into patterns of trauma you've witnessed in yourself or others?

Guided Meditation (10 min)

Lead this or another guided meditation of your choosing:

Start with breathing and grounding

Then invite people to bring to mind a safe container space, a warm and cozy place

“Now picture the part of you that is wounded and needing comfort and healing, and invite this part of you into this warm, cozy, safe healing space you've created. Visualize what part of you is being held here, such as your child-self or another image that symbolizes this part of who you are.”

“Let yourself feel held and loved, you are both the one being loved and the one doing the loving. What kind of care and support did you need when you were hurt? Be that care and support for yourself now.”

“You might even picture another part of yourself entering this safe space too. This might be a parental and loving part of you, or even a fierce and protective part of you. Visualize what this part of you looks like, and invite them into this space to hold and comfort.”

“Continue to visualize this in silence, or you might start to mentally imagine a conversation between these parts of yourself. Either way, we will have some silence now before I bring you back to this present moment.”

Leave several minutes of silence before ringing a chime or simply saying “I now invite you to return to our present time and space, take a few deep breaths, and open your eyes when you are ready.”

Whole Group Sharing 10 minutes

Share what came up for you in the meditation OR what you find helpful or not helpful about guided meditation. What other healing modalities do you find helpful?

Creating a personal mantra 10 minutes

Another healing modality that can be helpful is a personal mantra that you can recite or chant for yourself.

A common format for mantra meditation is to select your word or phrase - your mantra - and then sit in your chosen meditative posture and slowly recite your mantra out loud 10 times, then silently while still mouthing the words for 10 times, and then just silently in your head for 10 times.

So now we will take 10 minutes to write down 7 phrases that you might find healing as a mantra. Examples:

The Divine Loves Without Judgment

I am strong and resilient

All are Loved, All Are Worthy

I cannot control, but I am not powerless

Pair and Share 10 minutes

Closing and Homework 5 min

Homework is to try some kind of healing practice this week - safe container meditation, mantra meditation, or find another you like such as somatic dancing, humming, or even

just the squeezing and releasing practice. Try it at least three times over the course of the week.

Session 3:

Opening and check ins	10 min
Whole group sharing about homework	10 min
Review of religious questions	20 min
Drawing 2 Divines	10 min
Whole group sharing	10 minutes
Finding your own answers	10 minutes
Pair and share	10 minutes
Closing and What's next	10 minutes

Opening

[It Matters What We Believe | WorshipWeb | UUA.org](#)

Sharing About homework 10 minutes

What did you notice about the homework (doing a practice of healing at least three times this week)?

Was there anything challenging about it? Anything unexpected?

Did the practice bring anything up for you? Did it seem like it might be helpful as a regular healing process?

The Big Religious Questions 20 min

Share the idea that religions around the world have developed as answers to specific questions and problems that people have faced. And some of the answers will be healthy and nourishing for you and some of them may not be.

It's a bit of an oversimplification, but:

Hinduism, or the Dharmic Traditions, focuses on the liberation of the spirit from the wheel of reincarnation through a variety of different practices

Buddhism focuses on the end of suffering through enlightenment and detachment

Judaism focuses on the relationship between a people and their God and how they can fulfill God's plan

Islam on surrender to God's laws

Christianity on salvation through following Christ

Most indigenous traditions focus on living in harmony with nature

And Unitarian Universalism focuses on questions of how to live our shared values in this life and honors individual needs to find their own answers to other big questions.

Show this video: [▶ God Is Not One by Stephen Prothero](#)

And now share these possible (and certainly not exhaustive) Big Questions:

What is the nature of humans? Do we have a soul? Is there a spark of divinity within us? Is the flesh also holy or is it corrupt?

What is the purpose of life? Why are we alive and how should we behave to live properly?

What happens after death? Why do we die? What happens to the essence of people after they die?

Why do bad things happen? Why do people do bad things?

Where is justice located? If people do bad things, what happens to them?

What is the nature of God? Is there a higher power in control of things? Does this higher power care about us? What is our relationship to this higher power?

What is the nature of the world around us? How was the world created and for what purpose? What is the human role within the world and relationship to it?

And there are many more What are your big questions?

Drawing Two Divines 10 minutes

Share something about how for many people there is a Divine that they were taught about that is not healthy for them. A judging, withholding, angry God or some other kind of unhealthy god image. But this isn't the only way to understand the Divine. So we'll spend 10 minutes to draw or write about these two divines. Perhaps put a line down the middle of a piece of paper and describe the harmful divine on one side and the healing divine on the other. Do this in whatever way works for you.

Whole Group Sharing 10 minutes

Did this exercise help you notice anything about the divine that you were taught about in the past?

In what ways has that image of the divine been unhealthy for you?

What different characteristics of the divine did you imagine for a healthy divine? Is this a divine you could believe in? How would it have been to have been taught this divine when you were young?

Do you want a divine in your life at all or do you find a different belief more healing and whole for you?

Finding Your Own Answers 10 minutes

Take one or more of the questions we've already listed, or a big religious question of your own choosing, and practice writing and journaling about some healthy or healing answers to those questions. You can also write about what would unhealthy answers if you like, as long as you don't stay just in the "what I don't believe" content and you also move to what you can/could/do believe.

Or you can do this as a whole group if you like, and choose a Big Question and work together to write down unhealthy and healthy answers to that question.

Whole Group Sharing 10 minutes

What did you notice about the invitation to find your own answers? Is that a process you find comfortable? Liberating? Strange? What were you taught in the past about who had the authority to answer these sorts of questions?

Are you happy with your answers so far? Are they very different from how you would have answered these questions in the past? Do you think your future self may answer differently as well?

Are there other questions you want to tackle next? Are there ways you would approach studying these questions (reading, observing people or nature, meditation, or?) What are your preferred methods for seeking truth and understanding?

Closing:

Invite sharing of what each have taken away from this class and what the next step might be for each on the journey of healing and spiritual growth.

Share this song as a closing: [▶ Peter Mayer "Holy Now" \(with lyrics in captions\)](#)