Religious Addiction

Religious addiction is a dependency upon religious beliefs and religious practices as a way of avoiding having to deal with reality, with anxiety, with pain, or with sin. People use religious addiction as a substitute for genuine growth, for genuine faith, and for a genuine relationship with God. Religious addiction is often used as a means to avoid having to deal with one's real problems and issues.

"Rick is a prime example of someone who used religious addiction as a 'drug' to escape his real problems," recalls Stephen Arterburn. "He was in our sex addiction program at the clinic. He was an exhibitionist. He compulsively exposed himself on a frequent basis, at least once a week. In our clinic, he was making slow progress. His sexual compulsivity was very deep-rooted, and it was complicated by the fact that his pastor repeatedly undermined our efforts, telling Rick that he didn't need psychological treatment. One day, Rick announced he was leaving treatment because God had healed him. He had experienced 'deliverance' during prayer. We knew Rick wasn't ready, but we couldn't stop him.

"What Rick experienced—as do most religious addicts—was relief from feeling guilty and from feeling responsible for his sexually compulsive behavior. He had replaced his sex addiction with a religious addiction, which allowed him to avoid responsibility for working through his exhibitionistic behavior. He was substituting a religious 'fix' for a sexual 'fix'—replacing sexual exhibitionism with religious legalism and religious rituals."

You might think, "What's wrong with that? He's replacing a bad addiction (exposing himself) with a good addiction (being religious). Shouldn't he be encouraged to do so?"

"No," Arterburn replies. "First, religious addiction is not a 'good addiction.' It is as destructive in its own way as other addictions. Second, by retreating into religious addiction, Rick is avoiding the truth about himself (and only the truth can set us free). He is avoiding true healing and true wholeness. And he is avoiding an authentic relationship with God, which leads us to honesty, reality, and growth. The sources of Rick's exhibitionism were passive-aggressive anger toward women in general, and probably toward his mother in particular. His compulsive exhibitionism was an unconscious strategy to circumvent his anger and his feelings of low self-worth; now he was using compulsive religiosity to avoid the same issues.

"Rick placed all the responsibility for changing his life on God—'God delivered me'—and accepted no responsibility for changing himself. The next time Rick exposes himself (and there is always a next time until these issues are resolved), he will run back to his 'God,' pray to be 'delivered' again, then continue on with his life with his denial intact. He doesn't have to face reality or take responsibility, and so the process repeats itself again and again."

MIND-ALTERING, MOOD-ALTERING FAITH

"Oh, come now!" you might say. "I can accept the fact that substance abuse is addiction. I can even understand how people can become addicted to sex or gambling. And now people are even going to Twelve Step groups because they're powerless over a compulsion to overwork or overspend. But an addiction to *religion?* Now you've gone too far!"

This reaction is common—and understandable. At times it must seem that there is hardly any form of human behavior that *isn't* addictive. And it may seem that the recovery movement goes too far in identifying this or that issue as a reason to start another Twelve Step program. But the problem of religious addiction is a very real problem.

Let's start with a definition of addiction: when a person is excessively devoted to something, or when a person surrenders compulsively and habitually to something, that pathological devotion is an addiction. The presence of a psychological and physiological dependency on a substance, relationship, or behavior results in addiction. When a person

is willing to sacrifice family, job, economic security, and sanity for the sake of a substance, relationship, or behavior, then that condition constitutes addiction. When a destructive relationship to something becomes the central part of the person's life, when all else is sacrificed for the sake of that sick relationship, that person is said to be addicted.

Addictions develop when people seek relief from pain, a quick fix, or an immediate altered mood. When a person develops a pathological relationship to this mood-altering experience or substance that has life-damaging consequences, addiction exists. The addict becomes devoted to the source of mood alteration and, by giving up everything for that change in feelings, comes to worship the addictive act with body, mind, and spirit.

Religious addiction is not just an extreme form of the Christian faith; it is a false *faith, a* deceptive *faith.*

In our clinical experience at the Minirth Meier New Life Clinics, we have observed all of these conditions to exist in people who are addicted to religion. Just as people use drugs and alcohol as mind-altering, mood-altering substances, we have seen people use religion in the same way. People become intoxicated to escape reality, to escape from guilt, to escape anxiety, to escape responsibility, and to retreat from having to deal with their problems and sins. Religious addicts use their religiosity in the same way and for the same reasons. Just as drugs and alcohol distort reality and warp the substance abuser's ability to think clearly, the religious addict's perception of God and his ability to perceive spiritual truth also become distorted and warped. Religious addiction is *not* just an extreme form of the Christian faith; it is a *false* faith, a *deceptive* faith. Religious addiction is a mind-altering, mood-altering system of beliefs and behaviors. And it is destructive to those who are hooked on it, and to their loved ones.

Some religiously addicted individuals have spent their whole lives in a world of religious fanaticism and fantasy, hiding in their compulsive behaviors and delusions. They believe they are honoring God, but they are only circumventing reality, easing their pain, and attempting to work their way to heaven. Some are in dangerous cults, some are in denominational churches, some are attending a local church on the corner in your neighborhood, and others are seeking God in isolation. Some learned their harmful faith from their parents, others encountered legalistic or cultic faiths upon entering adulthood, and still others invented their own private systems of harmful faith. But because these individuals can look around them and see so many others like them, they do not believe there is a problem. They think that they and others like them have discovered "the truth." They are unaware that they have completely missed God in their search for Him.

Most religious addicts have four common characteristics that have contributed to their compulsivity:

1. *Rigid parents.* Having grown up in rigid homes, rigidity of behavior and thought are the only way of living these people have known. So they frequently seek out rigid, legalistic belief systems when they become adults.

2. *Experience of disappointment.* A deep wound from a major disappointment is in the background of most religious addicts—the loss of a parent, a divorce, an abandonment in later life. Religious addicts are attracted to religious groups that promise acceptance without risk of disappointment.

3. *Low self-esteem.* People with low self-worth feel alienated and isolated. They long to belong and be accepted. Religious manipulators, such as cult leaders and abusive, power-hungry pastors, know this and have an unerring "radar" for picking out wounded followers who want to feel important and accepted.

4. *Victims of abuse.* Childhood abuse often leads to further victimization in adulthood. Victims of childhood abuse often seek abusive religion, featuring an abusive religious leader or even an abusive God, to fill the void left by abusive parents.

When religious addicts are able to see their condition clearly and to understand that there are other people in the same condition—including many who have become liberated from their addiction—they begin to have hope that they can change and be healed. Once they view what they have done with their lives as an addictive process, they are often able to break through their denial and seek the help they need. With the power of God and the support of fellow strugglers, there is hope for recovery from addiction to harmful religion.

THE TRAP OF CHURCHAHOLISM

A person with harmful faith is worshiping a false god just as surely as an alcoholic worships a bottle of booze. That person is just as likely to be willing to die for his false god as a drug addict is willing to die for his needle or his next hit of crack. The misled faithful cling to their addictive, destructive religion to dodge the emotional turmoil of facing the reality of their circumstances. Their lives focus on the religion and not on God. The religion engulfs them, and they lose themselves to it.

Others become trapped in an unhealthy involvement with a church. Conviction turns to addiction, and the pain is eased with excess activity. Most are not able to see for themselves that the involvement is unhealthy. If someone is not able to point out what they are doing, they continue in their compulsive behavior, convinced they are honoring God. The warmth of fellow followers (most of whom are also addicted) melts away the addict's ability to analyze the situation objectively. The addict becomes lost in an organization that looks good from the outside but that is actually a wall of separation between the follower and God.

This behavior, compulsive churchaholism, is a form of activity much like workaholism. A compulsive churchaholic is obsessed with the need to do more and more through church work. Church is his drug. Like the workaholic who invests everything in work, eluding the responsibilities that come with relationships, the religious addict creates an atmosphere that revolves around church work. Any interpersonal relationships the churchaholic has are an incidental by-product of his obsessive-compulsive service to the organization. At any sign of conflict or anxiety, the compulsive churchaholic retreats into church work. All genuine intimacy and self-appraising honesty can be avoided by throwing himself, body and soul, into so-called "dedicated service." In times of great pain and disappointment, the religious addict tends to increase his desperate involvement in church work, just as a drug addict would retreat even more desperately into his substance abuse.

Religious addicts do not know who God really is.

Churchaholism is not a dependency on God nor is it honoring to God; it is a retreat from grace and from truth. Churchaholics have embraced a counterfeit religion. Work is the focus of everything. Rather than retreat to the loving arms of God, they drown their pain in compulsive religious activity. As they work harder and harder, they buy into the illusion that God applauds their efforts—even though they no longer have time for family, and they are leaving a trail of wounded lives in their wake. They are compulsively working their way to heaven and paying their own price for their guilt. Grace is just a religious concept to them; they do not internalize God's grace or forgiveness.

ADDICTIVE COMPONENTS OF RELIGION

Anyone can become addicted to just about anything. One can become addicted to feelings of righteousness, to being "in the know" and religiously superior to others, to an obsession with repetitive prayer. It's important to note that Jesus criticized these obsessive traits in the Pharisees of His own day. One can also become addicted to emotional highs resulting from worship and praise, to the feeling of being a part of something exciting, to the feeling of belonging to something important. Being a part of a tight-knit fellowship of other believers produces wonderful feelings, and these feelings of relationship should be enjoyed in a healthy Christian church fellowship. These feelings only become addictive when they become the purpose of the endeavor rather than a wonderful by-product of worshiping God.

Many people retreat into a religious group in times of stress or disappointment. They seek the safety of church when their powers are exhausted and they feel lonely, abandoned, and scared. Security is found with other believers focused on God. Often the persons feel so welcomed and safe that they desire to continue in the faith because of the people. God is not the primary factor. The addictive emotions are feelings of acceptance and warmth. These believers think they are growing in faith, but they closely resemble the businessmen who go to church just to make contacts.

Worship provides an example of how an unbalanced practice of faith can lead to addiction. An intense worship experience involving song and praise can push an individual to emotional highs. These emotions trigger

the release of brain chemicals called *endorphins*, natural secretions that are chemically similar to the narcotic called morphine. People can actually become "hooked" on the experience that produces this natural narcoticlike substance in the brain. This is not to say that emotions have no place in religious faith; they clearly do. But some people substitute the emotionalism of religion for authentic worship and faith. People who do so are practicing a form of religious addiction.

True addiction always results in separation from God. It starts as a substitution for God and eventually becomes a wedge between the person and God. The alcoholic feels unloved and rejected by God. The booze efficiently destroys the presence of God and blocks a person's knowledge of God. In a similar way, a religious addict replaces God with a caricature of God. The addict sees God with a score card writing down every wrong thing that has happened. To the addict, the only way to erase the sins from the score card is hard work. Eventually, religious work replaces God completely.

Adrian Van Kaam has called addiction in all its various forms "a perverted religious presence that has lost its true object." All addicts seek something spiritual when they begin to slide into addiction. They are looking for peace, and their addictive agent (drugs, alcohol, work, sex, or whatever) acts as an anesthetic for their emotional and spiritual pain, providing a false sense of peace. The interaction with the addictive agent actually becomes a religious experience with its own behavioral rituals and rules. After a while, the anesthetic begins to wear off, and the addict must "graduate to stronger stuff." This is true of religious addiction as well. The less relief the addiction provides, the more intricate the rituals become to heighten the experience. As the rituals and rules increase, God is pushed further and further to the side until God Himself—the true object of spiritual longing—is out of the picture completely. The addiction has taken over the religious functioning of the individual.

This explains why the Twelve Steps are so effective in treating addictions. Since addiction is a substitute for true spirituality in the first place, the only hope of healing addiction is to restore the addicted individual to spiritual sanity, to put spirituality back where it belongs in that person's life, to replace the addiction with the true spirituality that the individual was seeking all along. All addicts, religious addicts and otherwise, crave something that will grant them the experience of wholeness, of being significant, of having meaning and purpose in life. Religious addicts seek these experiences in religious activity. Because religious commitment is generally applauded and admired, this addiction is more deceptive than most.

The true presence of God in one's life doesn't provide escape from reality and responsibility. A true relationship with God gives us a firmer grip on reality and the sturdy courage to face our sins and problems with maturity and honesty. True comfort doesn't come from immersing ourselves in compulsive behavior as an anesthetic to pain but from authentic healing from the Great Physician, who surgically removes our emotional and spiritual cancers and restores our souls to health.

THE PROGRESSION OF RELIGIOUS ADDICTION

Religious addiction tends to follow a three-stage progression. Recovery is most likely at either end of the progression. In the early stage of the addiction, the addict may be able to see enough of the truth to pull out before it is too late and he is hopelessly hooked. In the late stage of the addiction, the addict is so hopelessly mired in the addiction that he "hits bottom," sinks into despair, and recognizes his need for change.

There are three stages of religious addiction.

The Sources of Religious Addiction

- Abusive parent, often the father. Abuse may be physical, emotional, or sexual.
- Child deprived of nurturing. Neither parent meets the basic emotional needs of the child.
- Feelings of alienation. Child feels detached from the family and what is perceived as a perfect world for others.
- Attitudes of perfectionism from imperfect parents. Demanding parents inflict the child with an irrational desire to be perfect and make no mistakes.
- High expectations. The parents are relentless in demanding the child be what they were not and attain what they did not.
- Low affirmation. Although the child exerts tremendous effort, the parents are never satisfied and rarely provide positive feedback to the child.
- Parents' addiction problems. Frequently, one or both parents will be alcoholics or sex addicts, or they will exhibit some other obvious compulsive behavior.
- Absent father. A child of divorce may have little male influence.
- Feelings of being dirty. Abuse and negative attention leave a child feeling guilty and dirty.
- Poor peer relationships. Afraid to share personal reality with others, the child feels cut off emotionally from friends and often seeks destructive relationships.
- Vivid fantasy world. Reality becomes so difficult that the child creates a fantasy world and retreats to it frequently.
- Feelings not shared. The home has provided little freedom to express emotions, and the child never learns how this is done or why it is helpful.

The Early Stage: First Experience

- Extreme stress. Increased stress impairs judgment and obscures warning signs of harmful faith.
- Repeated disappointments. Feelings that nothing works out right lead a potential addict to seek quick-fix solutions to lost expectations.
- Miserable existence. The addict has turned in many directions for hope and found none.
- Feelings of insignificance. The addict starts to believe life does not matter and there is no productive part to be played in it.
- Spiritual search initiated. Out of despair the addict seeks spiritual answers as a last resort.
- Loneliness. Any attention from any source would be welcomed.
- Hoping for someone to solve misery. Solving the problems seems too difficult; there is a need to be rescued.
- Increasing doubts about God. Wondering if God cares or if God is real, he or she is more vulnerable to variations of traditional faith.
- Increasing dependency on others. Association with others allows for delusional thoughts and existence in an unreal world.
- Feelings of guilt. Nothing can be done to overcome powerful guilt feelings.
- Feelings of insecurity. A terrible disaster seems to be lurking, and everything seems to be a potential sign of doom.
- Geographic cures. In an attempt to solve problems, the addict believes a fresh start will make life better but discovers it has further complicated the problems.
- Loss of other interests. Family, friends, and other activities are replaced with the compulsive activities surrounding the practice of hurtful faith.
- *Abandonment by friends and family. Associates become so irritated by obnoxious behavior that they no longer spend time with the religious addict.*
- Unwillingness to discuss problems. The individual becomes unapproachable about increasing out-of-control behaviors.
- One-sided sermons. Edicts, Scriptures, and judgments so fill the dialogue with the person that all conversations cease.
- Faith attached to a person. A comforting person (such as a strong leader) becomes the link to harmful faith.
- Intoxicating affiliation. The first experience with a new faith group produces immediate mood alteration.
- Growing attraction. Every new meeting, person, and experience increases the attraction to the harmful faith group.
- Heavy church attendance. Attendance becomes a means of avoidance and a way to be part of the group with little relationship with God.
- Conformity with other addicts. The person starts to look, dress, and talk like others in the group.
- Lack of intimate relationships. Intimacy with friends and family is sacrificed for the sake of religion.
- Growing denial and self-justification. The person becomes blind to problems and justifies behavior.
- Scripture used as a weapon. Verses are quoted to judge others and justify self.

The initial stage of religious addiction is a difficult one to spot. Many who do the same things as religious addicts are actually involved in a real faith. Outwardly they may be indistinguishable from religious addicts, but inwardly their motives and foundations are different.

The Middle Stage: Complete Attachment

- Immersed in the system. The person becomes an active member, identifying completely with the group.
- Knows propaganda of the group. Many pieces from the leader's writings are readily quoted.
- Outspoken. Little regard is shown for offensive comments made in the name of faith.
- Giving unusual amounts of money. Basic needs of the family are sacrificed to have gifts noticed by the organization and win favor.
- Relates to few people outside the group. Relationships are limited to other misled believers.
- Recruitment of others. Motivated to recruit others to the harmful faith, the addict does not attempt to bring others closer to God.
- Self-medication. The religious experience becomes an intoxicating high that medicates the addict's pain. Each new day is a search for a new religious high.
- Disappointed if ecstasy does not occur. Longing for the emotional catharsis that brings relief, the addict searches for other forms of relief when the harmful faith does not produce it.
- Dual addictions. Other addictions develop, such as eating, drinking, and having illicit sexual encounters, as the pleasure from religious ecstasy wears off.
- Difficult to handle rejection. Those refusing to join the group are discounted to overcome the feelings of rejection.
- All-encompassing practice of faith. Every area of the addict's life is affected by the destructive faith.
- Always searching for ways to further the faith. Every activity is used as a means to talk about the group and its beliefs.
- Discovery and use of special gifts. Self-manufactured and authentic spiritual gifts are used to exploit and manipulate.
- Claims of special anointing. The addict believes God has provided a more unique mission and more unique gifts than the less faithful have.
- Increased pressure. The drive to perform and please does not stop.
- Involvement for survival. The addict becomes trapped in the system with no choice but to conform or risk mental upheaval. The addict is totally dependent on the system for survival.
- Deepening denial. Unable to see the price being paid for the magical thinking, the addict refuses to question the reality of the faith.

The Late Stage: Descent to the Bottom

- Despair. The addict begins to sense hopelessness because the harmful faith is not producing the desired results.
- Erratic behavior. Knowing something is wrong and refusing to change beliefs, the addict attempts to fix the problem by changing behavior rather than the heart.
- Resentment and anger. As the addict's world falls apart, everyone else is to blame, and everyone else is a source of rage.
- Obsession with beliefs. Continually wondering what is wrong with the faith, the addict questions, ponders, and thinks through each belief until the addict is completely unable to concentrate.
- Deep depression. Collapse of beliefs leads to the inability to function.
- Physical deterioration. Depression and stress take their toll on the body, resulting in fatigue, lack of appetite, and medical complications.
- Stagnation. Once faith is lost, all else seems lost, and the addict is unable to do anything but obsessively ponder past mistakes.
- Searching for another fix. Other addictions such as food, drugs, and sex intensify as the addict seeks relief from other sources.
- Fear. Experiencing major insecurity, the addict becomes afraid of everyone, seeing each person as a threat. The addict is afraid to continue in the hurtful faith system and afraid to get out.
- Financial collapse. Work-related problems and financial irresponsibility often result in financial collapse.
- Family deterioration. Stress and distrust destroy family relationships, resulting in affairs and divorce.
- Hitting bottom. Running out of self-will and manipulation, the addict must give up the addiction and turn to God.

TREATMENT AND RECOVERY

Few people come to our clinics and say, "Please help me, I'm a religious addict!" They come because they are depressed, alcoholic, anorexic, suicidal, or in some other way sensing extreme pain in their lives. They don't know why they hurt. They just hurt. It is always an exciting and profound moment for them when they discover that the root of all their other problems is a dependent relationship with a harmful belief system. Finally they have discovered why they feel bound up and alienated. Now they have a glimpse of the real source of their pain, and they can begin working on their healing. The steps of treatment and recovery from religious addiction are:

Step 1: Penetrate Denial

It usually takes a major shock to shake a religious addict loose from his belief system. That shock may be a confrontation or intervention, or it may be an experience of "hitting bottom."

Our first objective in helping people recover from religious addiction is to break through their wall of denial. We try to help them identify their unhealthy relationship with religion as their primary issue. They must learn to see that religiosity is hurting their relationships with the people they care about. This process of breaking down denial usually begins with confrontation or intervention. People close to the addict must express how they feel so that he can finally see the hurt his addiction is causing others. With acceptance of this truth, there is a good chance for recovery.

Addicts are understandably reluctant to let go of their religious addiction. Alcohol is just a substance, workaholism is just an activity, but religion is a worldview, a way of perceiving reality. It is not easy to totally discard one's belief structure, even when convinced that it is causing harm to oneself and to others. Some addicts must see their belief system take everything away from them—their life savings, their emotional health, their physical health, their families—before they realize they have been pursuing an illusion.

Once denial is penetrated, however, recovery becomes possible.

Step 2: Surrender to God

The addict is confronted or hits bottom and is no longer able to deny his addiction. He has no choice but to surrender to God. At this point, many religious addicts will go into counseling or join a Twelve Step recovery group for religious addicts. The Twelve Steps require that an addicted individual admit that his life is unmanageable, and that he turn his life over to a Power greater than himself. His addictive religious system is gradually being peeled away, and he is left alone with his absolute need to build an honest relationship with the living, true God. This relationship must replace the old religion. The addict must surrender to God.

Step 3: Mental Recovery

In counseling, we confront the hurtful thinking of religious addicts. Addictive thinking tends to be extreme, drawn in stark black-and-white terms of good and evil, right and wrong. Certainly there are moral absolutes that we must recognize, but to the addict, *everything* is extreme, *everything* is black and white. One mistake, and the addict feels like a failure—so addicts are frequently incapable of admitting mistakes to themselves or others.

The religious addict needs to learn that life is a learning process and we are always growing and changing. Sin is a part of our humanity and can be overcome through the power of God. Failure is not final; we can recover. Religious addicts are hard on themselves and others; our task is to help them discover grace, so that they will become merciful to themselves and others and so they can experience the true peace of forgiveness.

We try to help addicts correct their faulty filtering of reality. Draw a dot in the middle of a piece of paper, hold it up to the addict, and ask him what he sees, and

The Twelve Steps to Overcoming Religious Addiction

1. We admitted that we were powerless over our compulsive religious behaviors and harmful faith—that our lives had become unmanageable.
2. We came to believe that a Power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity.
3. We made a decision to turn our will and our lives over to the care of God.
4. We made a searching and fearless moral inventory of ourselves.
5. We admitted to God, to ourselves, and to another human being the exact nature of our wrongs.
6. We were entirely ready to have God remove all these defects of character.
7. We humbly asked Him to remove our shortcomings.
8. We made a list of all persons we had harmed, and became willing to make amends to them all.
9. We made direct amends to such people whenever possible, except when to do so would injure them or others.
10. We continued to take personal inventory, and when we were wrong, promptly admitted it.
11. We sought through meditation and prayer to improve our conscious contact with God, praying only for knowledge of His will and the power to carry that out.
12. Having had a spiritual awakening as a result of these steps, we tried to carry this message to other religious addicts and to practice these principles in all our affairs.

(Adapted from the original Twelve Steps of Alcoholics Anonymous, and used without any implied endorsement by AA.)

he will say, "A black dot." In reality, he sees you, he sees a white piece of paper, and he sees a black dot which occupies a fraction of one percent of the surface area of that paper. He has filtered out everything but that tiny little dot. That is faulty filtering, and most addicts do this with their entire perception of reality. They focus on the negative, on the ugly, on the dirty, on the impure. They are hypercritical and negative about everything, including themselves. Our task is to help them learn not to filter out the good and the pure, not to focus only on the little black dots in life.

Step 4: Emotional Recovery

We seek to help addicts separate their emotions from reality. Most addicts tend to base their perceptions on their emotions. "I feel bad," they think, "therefore, I must *be* bad." If they feel disappointed, they assume God must be disappointed in them. These responses are rooted in low self-worth. When they hate themselves, this self-hatred colors everything they think about. Recovery from addiction requires that the individual learn to sift reality from emotion, so that his or her perception of truth becomes clearer.

Step 5: Spiritual Recovery

By labeling this and the preceding steps "Step 3" through "Step 5," we do not mean that they are sequential. In fact, mental recovery, emotional recovery, and spiritual recovery must take place *simultaneously*, for all of these dimensions of ourselves—mind, emotions, and spirit—are intricately interwoven.

Spiritual recovery requires that the religious addict shed the decades of religious propaganda that have shaped his hurtful belief system. He must start fresh, recognizing that he really doesn't know what to believe about God, about Jesus, about faith, or about the Bible. He must begin reading the Bible as if he has never read it before, asking God to help him see it with new eyes, and to peel away the scales of religious prejudice from his eyes. The addict's entire faith should not be thrown away, since there is a kernel of truth embedded there. But what should he keep and what should he discard? The answer lies in learning to question his old belief system, item by item, rather than disqualifying the entire structure.

The recovering addict needs to be in a group with other recovering people who will provide accountability and insight and who will be alongside him as he acquires and sifts new information from his study of the Bible. There are Christian support groups available, many of them specifically designed to meet the needs of religious addicts. A counselor or church should be able to help one locate such a group. A healthy support group is comprised of people who unconditionally love and accept people and welcome strugglers; who give people the freedom to express emotions without having to live up to the expectations of others; who are nonautocratic and noncontrolling (groups with authoritarian leaders are essentially cultlike and should be completely avoided).

Step 6: Relational Recovery

Religious addiction frequently brings great pain and alienation from family relationships. Recovery requires that relationships be mended that can be. Effective treatment must involve the family. If not, the family will disintegrate.

Families of addicts tend to be very angry, both with themselves and with the addicts. Treatment focuses on allowing family members to express their feelings and move beyond them. Once this occurs, the family can re-form and re-bond into a unified system of support and love.

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MINIRTH MEIER NEW LIFE FAMILY RESOURCE

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HOPE FOR THE RELIGIOUS ADDICT

There is great hope for the recovering religious addict. This hope comes through the development of a new faith, pure and free from the poison of addiction. For more insight into the causes and cure for religious addiction, read *Faith That Hurts, Faith That Heals* by Stephen Arterburn and Jack Felton (Thomas Nelson, 1992).

Are You a Religious Addict?

SELF-TEST

If you believe you (or someone you love) may be religiously addicted, answer the following questions.

YES	NO	
—	—	Has your family complained that you are always going to a church meeting rather than spending time with them?
—	—	Do you feel extreme guilt for being out of church just one Sunday?
—	—	Do you sense that God is looking at what you do and if you don't do enough He might turn on you or not bless you?
—	—	Do you often tell your children what to do without explaining your reasons, because you know you are right?
—	—	Do you find yourself with little time for the pleasures of earlier years because you are so busy serving on committees and attending other church groups?
—	—	Have people complained that you use so much Scripture in your conversation that it is hard to communicate with you?
—	—	Are you giving money to a ministry because you believe God will make you wealthy if you give?
—	—	Have you ever been sexually involved with a minister?
—	—	Is it hard for you to make a decision without consulting your minister? Even over the small issues?
—	—	Do you see your minister as more powerful than other humans?
—	—	Has your faith led you to lead an isolated life, making it hard for you to relate to your family and friends?
—	—	Have you found yourself looking to your minister for a quick fix to a lifelong problem?
—	—	Do you feel extreme guilt over the slightest mistakes or identified inadequacies?
—	—	Is your most significant relationship deteriorating over your strong beliefs compared to those of a "weaker partner"?
—	—	Do you ever have thoughts of God wanting you to destroy yourself or others in order to go and live with Him?
—	—	Do you regularly believe God is communicating with you in an audible voice?
—	—	Do you feel God is angry with you?
—	—	Do you believe you are still being punished for something you did as a child?
—	—	Do you feel if you work a little harder, God will finally forgive you?
—	—	Has anyone ever told you a minister was manipulating your thoughts and feelings?

If you answered yes to at least three of the above questions, we encourage you to seek Christian counseling for a possible religious addiction. If you cannot find a counselor in your area, contact the Minirth Meier New Life Clinics (1-800-NEW-LIFE).