

## When Religion Goes Bad: Part 2 -- Religious Addiction

by Dale S. Ryan and Jeff VanVonderen

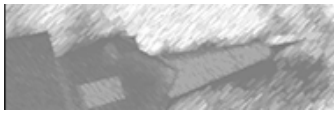
In the first part of this series we introduced the idea that religion can “go bad.” This might not be a difficult or threatening topic for some people. If our experiences with religion have been neutral or positive, we may even find it difficult to imagine that religion can ever go bad. Many of us, however, have been exposed to environments where “religion gone bad” is not an abstract possibility but a personal and deeply painful reality. Many of us carry in our minds and our spirits the painful effects of religion that has done damage. Starting with this issue of STEPS we look at a variety of ways in which religion can become a problem in our lives—starting with religious addiction.

### Addiction

To understand religious addiction, it's helpful to review a few facts about addiction in general. First of all, addictive substances alter our mood; they change how we think and feel. The precise nature of the mood alteration can vary widely. Sometimes addictive substances can alter our mood in ways we experience as pleasant or desirable—at least in the early stages of the addictive process. But they do not always make us feel better or “high.” They may, in fact, make it difficult for us to feel anything at all. We might use addictive substances so that we feel something; or we might use them so that we feel nothing at all. Second, we can become physically addicted to the substance itself; that is, our bodies can become accustomed to the presence of the substance. As a result, we may require larger and larger doses of the substance to get the same level of mood alteration. This is called tolerance. Third, if we are addicted to a substance, our bodies notice when the substance is not present. This is called withdrawal. Addictions to alcohol, heroin or barbiturates exhibit all these characteristics—mood alteration, tolerance and withdrawal. Even when a substance itself is not addictive in the same sense as alcohol, heroin or barbiturates, we can still become addicted to the mood alteration caused by use of the drug. Marijuana, for example, is not thought to be addictive in the same sense as alcohol, but the mood alteration caused by its use can be very addictive. The fact that mood alteration can itself be addictive explains why people become addicted to gambling, sex, work, exercise and many other things, even though no addictive substance is consumed. In most of these cases the body internally produces its own addictive chemicals in response to the person's addictive behavior. Finally, it's important to recognize that all addictions follow a cyclic process. The experience of addiction traps us in a cycle that looks something like this: 1. Preoccupation 2. Rituals/patterns of behavior 3. Using/acting out 4. Aftermath/consequences 5. Return to preoccupation

Let's briefly look at each element of this cycle.

- Preoccupation (mood alters up) If you've been working for several months without any time off and you have a vacation scheduled for next month in a beautiful setting, you may find yourself daydreaming about how it looks and what you'll be doing when you get there. In effect, you're borrowing pleasure from then to get you through now. This is

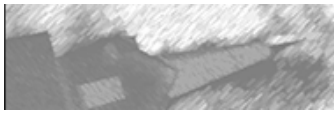


not a bad thing. The ability to anticipate good things happening in the future is important. But suppose you are sitting in a counselor's office baring your soul and your counselor is thinking about her or his upcoming vacation. That kind of preoccupation is getting in the way of something important. In the addictive process a preoccupation with future use can do enormous damage to our relationships. Even before we actually use an addictive substance or act out in an addictive way, we can experience a mood alteration by anticipating the coming use or by grieving the absence of our drug of choice. Preoccupation about using can get in the way of important things, even before using takes place.

- **Rituals/Patterns of Behavior (mood alters up)** Preoccupation leads eventually to what is often a ritualized set of pre-using or pre-acting-out behaviors. Ritualization simply means tending to do the same things in the same way. It refers to behaviors that we repeat over and over again before actually using or acting out. It can be as simple as having drinks with the same people at the same bar at the same time on the way home from work. Like preoccupation, ritualization allows the addictive process to fill more time. This is particularly true of addictions that do not involve consuming intoxicating substances. We can fill entire days, even weeks, with ritual preparations for acting out. The mood alteration that results from this ritualization can be as important to us as the acting out itself.
- **Using/Acting out (mood alters up)** Eventually our pre-use rituals lead to their logical end point, and we engage in our addictive behavior. In this part of the cycle, we use our drug of choice, we have another affair, we binge on ice cream, we do whatever we do to get the mood alteration we desire. The duration of the mood alteration resulting from using or acting out may be short; it can be the briefest part of the whole cycle. But whether short or long, it leads to the same predictable consequences.
- **Aftermath (mood alters down)** Eventually we always find that using leads to acting in ways we would not have acted had we not been using. While "under the influence" we act in ways that are inconsistent with our value system. Or we hurt people we care about. And the result is some combination of guilt, shame and humiliation. This phase of the cycle, the aftermath, is a low mood state. It is a terrible, sad and lonely place to be. Unfortunately, it sets up the "need" to return to the first step in the addictive cycle and start the whole mood-altering cycle all over again. We think, Maybe the shame and fear I feel in the aftermath of using will go away if I just use again. This is usually not a conscious process. In any case, around and around we go. In this way the low mood resulting from using leads us back to the mood elevation provided by the preoccupation stage. \* \* \* \* Notice that every stage in the addictive cycle is mood altering (either up or down), even when we aren't actually using. This is the reason that others experience no real comfort when we feel very bad about the consequences of our addiction and we promise not to use anymore. They know that our feeling bad may just be part of the mood alteration cycle. Notice also that during the pre-using and using stages of the process our mood alters up, while during the post-using part of the process our mood alters down and makes it "necessary"—even makes it a relief—to repeat the cycle.

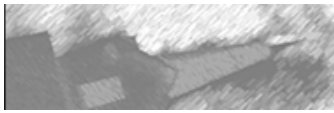
### Religious Addiction

Anything that can alter our mood can become addictive. Religious behaviors can certainly alter



our mood. Is that a good thing? Of course! Just like sex and food and work can alter our mood in positive ways, religious behaviors can also alter our moods in positive ways. But can religious behaviors also become a problem—become addictive? Absolutely. It may be easier to imagine what religious addiction looks like if you think about extreme examples such as religious suicide cults or religiously motivated extreme self-deprivations or self-injury. Our experience, however, suggests that religious addiction is much more common than you would conclude from looking only at the extreme cases. A wide variety of religious behaviors have the potential for mood alteration and therefore the possibility of becoming addictive. Evangelism, worship, personal spiritual disciplines, church attendance, service, and many other behaviors that are important and praiseworthy in a general sense can be subverted by the addictive process into very harmful and destructive parts of our lives. This is an important point. Just because prayer is good does not mean that addictive prayer is good. Just because worship is good does not mean that addictive worship is good. Just because evangelism is good does not mean that addictive evangelism is good. The addictive process can destroy the most precious of God's gifts to us. Except perhaps as loose rhetoric, even getting "addicted to Jesus" is not the solution to our problems with addiction. Addiction to Jesus is just another addiction. God's desire for us is not that we find the "right" addiction—Jesus. God's desire is that we find a way to live without being addicted at all. Sobriety is the solution, not being in an addictive relationship to God. The addictive cycle in religious addiction follows roughly the same stages found in other addictions. The process begins with preoccupation. We alter our mood up by thinking about, focusing on, obsessing about our next religious experience, the next evangelism opportunity, the next worship service, the next retreat or whatever. This preoccupation, while it may alter our mood up may also distract us from important parts of life. In most but not all cases, religious addiction also involves a major element of ritualization. Our pre-acting-out behaviors can become elaborate in religious addiction. We may repetitively recite memorized prayers or biblical texts, we may engage in what seems to others to be very Godly or pious behaviors. Eventually our preoccupation and rituals lead to some kind of religious acting out. As we have already emphasized, the specific behaviors that are part of the acting-out stage can vary. Evangelism addicts may experience an enormous rush when approaching a stranger with a presentation of some kind, and with even more of a rush if the stranger responds positively. Worship addicts may experience profound mood alteration when the "Spirit descends." But all addicts eventually find that their addictions lead to a stage in which their mood is altered down. In some cases, questions or doubts may trouble us or even plague us. We may become obsessed with whether or not we have done well enough. Shouldn't we try harder and do more to stay out of trouble with God? We may leave church on Sunday to face the next week determined to live the Christian life, only to return the next week and hear once again that it wasn't good enough. And for many, even if the reminder doesn't come this week at church, it comes readily from the echoes in our hearts and minds of past religious training. Addictive religion never leads to soul rest. It always leads to trying, trying harder and trying our hardest. It always leaves us tired, frustrated and depressed. Just like addiction to alcohol and drugs, the acting-out mood alters up, while the entire cycle mood alters down. The following less-than-comprehensive comparison illustrates the point.

Alcoholic	Religious Addict
Mood alters up by drinking; mood alters down by not drinking or simply by thinking about the	Mood alters up by behaving religiously; mood alters down when they don't or can't (attend



prospect of not drinking.

Chooses to be with people who have a relationship with alcohol similar to their own; relationships with others become a casualty.

Gravitates toward places that cater to, are sympathetic to, or even encourage using behavior (e.g., the local bar).

At its root, religious addiction begins when our faith stops being about a spiritual connection with God and becomes instead an attempt to control our lives—or to control God—by behaving in certain ways. These behaviors seem to help us to control our mood, but that sense of control is only an illusion. We find over time that we need to engage in the behaviors more and more frequently or with more and more intensity in order to achieve the same mood alteration; that is tolerance. And we experience depression, a sense of meaninglessness or grief when we are not able for whatever reason to continue the behaviors; that is withdrawal. The behaviors also interfere with our ability to maintain healthy relationships or to function in life. The result is an exhausting, graceless, performance-oriented spiritual life that knows nothing of the “rest for your soul” that Jesus described.

church, read the Bible daily, pray enough, etc.)

Chooses to be with people who have a religious belief system similar to their own, withdrawing from friends and even family members who don't.

Attends church and activities with people who believe the same or attends activities that are sponsored by like-minded groups and organizations.