

Drowning in Doctrine: A Counselor Redefining Family after Religious Trauma

Crystal W. Hamilton

Redefine Family

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A vulnerable, introspective memoir, Drowning in Doctrine is about growing past a damaging religious upbringing to help others dealing with similar trauma.

Crystal W. Hamilton's revealing memoir *Drowning in Doctrine* is about complicated experiences within the Mormon Church.

Her Texas household guided by the Mormonism's strict guidelines, Hamilton had a tumultuous upbringing. The family's faith protected her brother but seemed to marginalize Hamilton and her sisters, who felt treated as less worthy. Hamilton's rebellion against the religion was internal at first, later manifesting itself in dependence on alcohol, drugs, and toxic relationships. Still later, she became a licensed therapist, helping others through their own religious trauma.

Sobering but tender in tone, the book is pragmatic in addressing the impact of religious doctrines on individual lifestyles and mental and physical health. It is not a full-scale, critical exposure of Mormonism; it tempers its criticisms by concentrating on Hamilton's own experiences with the faith. Her story is further fleshed out with memories of her brother's deviant behavior; they had a close relationship when they were young, but her parents' defenses of him compromised this. Hamilton received less parental support while going through her own struggles: Though she denounced the Mormon Church in her twenties, her parents continued to impose their beliefs on her, including in the hospital after her emergency appendectomy.

The prose is straightforward, using familiar metaphors to bring into acute focus the weight of adhering to a faith whose dictates contrast with one's beliefs. Hamilton recalls how her family was "bound together by secrets whispered in hallways," with "omissions that spread like roots beneath the surface." And in covering Hamilton's infertility, the book says that the failed treatments were like a "dagger, twisting deeper into a wound that never healed." Feelings of shame, isolation, and depression are explored, and sympathy is extended to others facing faith and addiction issues. Indeed, the book expands on its personal story to suggest eight ways that others can create better futures for themselves after religious trauma, as by recognizing the trauma, finding support groups, and setting boundaries.

Organized according to Hamilton's life periods, including her youth and teenage years and her twenties and thirties, the text is impeded by occasional time jumps and instances of repetition, wherein additional context is given to events previously depicted. But its focus on personal growth is consistent, and its push toward Hamilton's recovery and healed family relationships is clear. In time, Hamilton became able to recognize how her mother sought to help her family—and how she needed to be older and wiser to appreciate her mother's choices.

A lucid memoir, *Drowning in Doctrine* is about religious trauma and a path toward healing.

KATY KEFFER (July 2, 2025)

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