



Drowning in Doctrine: A Counselor Redefining Family After Religious Trauma

Crystal W. Hamilton

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A mental health counselor and erstwhile Mormon recounts her defection, addiction, and recovery in *Drowning in Doctrine*.

Crystal Hamilton's memoir begins in 2014, and Hamilton, a mental health counselor, is attending a conference where the subject is managing trauma. The speaker mentions "little traumas... [t]hings such as moving, having a mentally ill parent, leaving church,... financial insecurity." The phrase "leaving church" hits her hard. As a young woman, Hamilton had left the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, commonly known as the Mormon Church.

This prompts her to reflect on her chaotic upbringing. There were happy moments—fishing and camping trips, for example—as well as what she calls "miracles," such as when her father healed her of a dangerous fever by pouring "blessed" oil on her forehead.

As she got older, however, misery outnumbered miracles. Her sister Lindsey came out as gay and was sent to live with their grandmother. Her other sister, Sarah, was molested by their cousin. By age 15, her brother Sean "had been to jail, to his first rehab, and he had been expelled from school."

Eventually, Crystal followed suit, marrying and divorcing by age 18 and battling numerous addictions. Finally, she got sober, earned a master's degree, became a counselor, and married Scott, "her favorite person."

Hamilton is the best kind of memoirist: reflective but not performative, confessional but not melodramatic. What makes her memoir stand out from other redemption stories is the Mormon backdrop. We learn about LDS esoterica such as the Young Women's Motto, Baptisms for the Dead, and how Mormon communion differs from the Catholic version. While Hamilton debunks the messaging she grew up with—that her life's purpose was to marry and have children—her tone is stern with herself but straightforward, rather than angry, regarding the church. She never comes across as piteous or cloying.

Those interested in the Mormon church and memoirs in general will find this a compelling read.