

Addiction, Emptiness, and the Cult of Conversion: Why Recovery Often Becomes Religious Identity: by Zariyah Arredondo - Ortega

Addiction is not just a physical dependence, it is, at its core, a condition of emotional and spiritual hunger. Substance abuse often begins as an attempt to fill a void: to numb pain, to quiet trauma, or to escape the unbearable weight of being alive in a world that doesn't feel safe or meaningful. When someone in the grip of addiction finds recovery, they are not simply giving something up—they are being asked to change their entire way of coping, thinking, and existing. The substance was a crutch, yes, but more than that, it was often their identity.

In this vulnerable state, with the mind and spirit wide open and desperate for structure, many recovering addicts are drawn into religious frameworks, most often Evangelical Christianity in Western societies. These systems offer immediate answers to complex questions: "Why did this happen to me?" "Who am I now?" "How can I stay clean?" Jesus becomes not just a guide, but the entire infrastructure of identity. Recovery programs like Alcoholics Anonymous, while not explicitly Christian, are often steeped in God-language and spiritual surrender. The Twelve Steps themselves lean heavily on the notion of a "Higher Power" and for many, especially in rural or conservative areas, that Higher Power defaults to Jesus Christ.

This isn't necessarily a conscious choice. It is, in many ways, a cultural funnel: a path of least resistance that provides community, purpose, and the illusion of control. The rituals of church mimic the structure addicts crave: which is weekly meetings, shared mantras, moral rules, and a clearly defined enemy (in this case, sin and the devil, replacing the drug). It's not just a belief system; it's a lifestyle replacement. You give up one god (the drug) and take on another.

But what happens when the conversion is less about belief and more about desperation?

Many of these individuals don't truly believe in the doctrine they cling to. What they believe in is safety, control, and belonging. Religion, when adopted in this way, doesn't fill the void—it covers it. It places a layer of certainty over uncertainty, righteousness over shame, and identity over chaos. But it is not healing the root cause, it is redirecting the energy. The cult-like behavior stems from this: a need to replace obsession with obsession. Instead of a needle or bottle, it becomes a Bible or a testimony. Instead of getting high, they get "saved."

For many, this becomes their entire personality, not because they are blind, but because they are still afraid. Afraid of slipping, afraid of being powerless again, afraid of confronting the true reasons they used in the first place. They repeat the same phrases. They demonize non-believers. They see others' questions as dangerous because they can't afford to question. They fear relapse more than they seek truth.

Example: Tila Tequila – From Reality Star to Religious Extremist

Tila Tequila, once known for her provocative MTV show *A Shot at Love*, public chaos, and wild media presence, is a stark example of this transformation. After years of erratic behavior, substance use, and scandal, she “found Jesus.” But what began as a spiritual rebranding quickly escalated into radicalized beliefs and disturbing content.

Tila began posting videos declaring herself to be the reincarnation of Jesus, expressing extreme antisemitic views, and embracing fascist imagery. What’s tragic here is not just the descent into extremism, it’s that her recovery arc was never rooted in grounded healing. It was built on a need for control and identity after years of public humiliation, drug use, and mental health struggles.

Rather than confront the deeper trauma, she grasped at religion not as a path to peace, but as a new persona to protect herself from herself. And in doing so, she became consumed by a different kind of chaos, just one that wore a cross instead of a party dress.

And yet, this is a trauma response masquerading as faith.

Kat Von D – The Tattoo Icon’s Sudden Shift

Tattoo artist and entrepreneur Kat Von D, once famous for her gothic, witchy aesthetic and open discussions about mysticism, recently converted to Christianity, was baptized, and denounced her previous spiritual beliefs.

In her case, years of addiction, toxic relationships, and identity flux seem to have led her to a place where she sought a clean slate. But again, rather than a nuanced self-reinvention, she flipped the switch. Suddenly, the crystals and spell books were “evil,” and Jesus was the only light.

The dramatic pendulum swing is less about belief and more about control and about purging the past, even if it means denying parts of herself that once felt real. It’s a rebirth story, yes, but one rooted in rejection rather than integration.

The Role of Foundational and Shadow Work

Foundational work is the often unseen labor of rebuilding your inner world brick by brick. It’s the slow, painful, and unglamorous process of learning how to be with yourself in true peace without numbing, without distraction, without performance. And at the heart of that work is shadow work: the deep dive into the parts of ourselves we’ve been taught to reject, hide, or hate.

Shadow work asks the hardest questions:

What was I trying to escape?

Who did I become to survive?

What do I still carry that isn’t mine?

It isn't about fixing yourself, it's about facing yourself. It's about uncovering the root beneath the coping. Because addiction, whether to substances, validation, religion, or control, often begins as a strategy for surviving something unspeakable. Without confronting that origin, we risk simply swapping one strategy for another, never actually healing, just rebranding the wound.

This is why so many people "recover" into rigidity. Why they cling to structure, certainty, and moral absolutes. Because when you haven't made peace with your shadow, you'll always be at war with it. You'll try to exile your past instead of integrating it. You'll demonize your former self instead of honoring how she kept you alive. And you'll call that healing but it's just repression dressed in devotion.

Foundational healing doesn't offer easy answers. It offers honest ones. It asks you to feel it all: grief, rage, shame, longing and still come back to yourself with compassion. It teaches you that wholeness isn't about being good or pure. It's about being real.

And while that kind of work may never get a standing ovation, it's what builds the kind of recovery that can weather storms. Not performative, not hollow, not dependent on external approval but rooted, resilient, and real.

So What Does This Say About Recovery?

What these examples show is that recovery without inner integration is just substitution. The drug goes away, but the void remains. And that void will demand to be filled. Sometimes with religion. Sometimes with extremism. Sometimes with a messiah complex. But rarely with honest, raw healing. The cult-like pattern happens when faith becomes armor, not because someone is truly at peace, but because they are still afraid. Afraid to fall again. Afraid to feel lost. Afraid to sit in the discomfort that they once tried to silence with substances. This doesn't mean all religious recoveries are fake but it does mean we need to question the systems that offer absolution without depth, and that elevate public repentance over private healing.

This is not to say that spirituality has no place in recovery. In fact, genuine spiritual connection, whether to nature, humanity, ancestors, or even a God can be a profound anchor. But what's dangerous is the way dogma preys on the broken, offering a singular path to wholeness while discouraging complexity, critical thought, or self-led healing.

Some people genuinely find peace and purpose in their new religious identity. But many are simply replacing addiction with allegiance, swapping one dependency for another, only this time, it's socially praised and institutionally reinforced.

True recovery isn't just sobriety. It's integration. It's the willingness to sit with the pain, to wrestle with the questions, and to rebuild identity from the inside out and not by overlaying a prefab belief system, but by crafting a life rooted in authenticity, vulnerability, and choice. And that kind

of recovery is messy, nonlinear, self-aware doesn't always get you applause at church. But it might just get you home to yourself.

True healing is quiet. It's complex. It doesn't always post Bible quotes or testimonials. It doesn't need to convert others.