

Research Article

A Traumatology Case Study of an Indonesian Theological Student

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Abstract.

Indonesian theological students often come to seminary with handful of problems from the onset of their life. The expectation from the traditional Christian family for their children to set the behavior right in the seminary is outdatedly common. This study explores a case of a 21-year-old theological male student who suffered verbal and physical abuse from his parents. During the initial four weeks of therapeutic alliance with the author, the student exhibited traumatic symptoms of severe hostility and somatic re-enactment of past adverse experiences. He had been known to possess talisman and some sacred relics for witchcraft in the past which contemporarily yield nightmare and terror at night. The qualitative case study explored the traumatic problem of the student through a 12-month observation and in-depth interview. Through experiential therapy of gestalt, CBT, and forgiveness therapy in the last seven months, the student showed reduced symptoms of hostility, somatic complaints, and impulse-behavior. The spiritual formation of prayer and meditation of the Scripture have been useful for the patient in dealing with his spiritual problems.

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1. INTRODUCTION

1.1. Troublesome Theological Students

The theological students are not immune from the problems. Just like the other secular university students, the financial, spiritual, and mental health problems also occurred in the life of the students in the seminary [1]–[3]. Some researches often found that seminary students or those who study in theological department in universities, have higher rates of depression and anxiety along with physical problems in comparison with general population [4], [5]. In the latest data of the Christian accredited theological schools there are 345 schools and seminaries in Indonesia [6]. Some of the students in the schools come from poor backgrounds which yields other different problems. She et al. (2023), from their latest study, remarked that financial issues of theological student contribute to the higher level of depression and anxiety clinical problems.

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These researchers also found that the financial issues also affect the relational issues in the life of these students in the seminary. In some cases, it manifested in relational isolation. The author has seen on some occasions that students with better financial situations tend to form a group with other students with similar economic backgrounds. Consequently, those students with lower economic backgrounds will withdraw into isolation. In theological seminary the students mostly live in dormitory and will take part in weekly internship in the churches or schools as they are honing their skills to be become excellent individual in spiritual leadership [7]. This means that living in dormitory under strict rules of the school will also shape their senses of independence and train their collaboration traits with other students. The problem, however, occurs that the students will live in isolation when they are not fit into any subgroups in dormitory.

The author's students often told stories about how their family sent their sons and daughters to theological seminary because of the children's failure in the academic achievement or, whether they involved in juvenile misdemeanors. Seemingly, their parents have subjective expectation for the seminary to set their children's behavior properly. When the troublesome students come to seminary with wrong expectations and then live in secluded areas, complication ensues. Some theological students were involved in premarital sexual relationships with unwanted pregnancy. This is ironic as these students are supposed to be trained in church situation where sexual abuse, teen pregnancies, and premarital counseling will definitely occur in the ministry, yet the training in this area is insufficient [8], [9]. The author has been teaching in four theological seminaries in Java in the last 15 years, and these students who committed premarital sex were often expelled from the schools and ended up have broken relationship with the seminaries.

1.2. Traumatic Experience & Spiritual Trance

Indonesian students who come from remote areas also often carry with them childhood adverse experiences. These traumatic events often were so overwhelming for an individual, thus impacting the current behavior as students. Trauma, based on DSM-V, is defined as exposure to the threatened death, serious injury or sexual violence [10], to which the definition is strongly contested by several traumatology expert to be insufficient because too limiting and unprecise [11]–[13]. The limitation in DSM-V was also challenged, that an event does not have to be life threatening to be traumatic, as some events of emotional abuse, major grievances or separation could not threaten

someone's life yet extremely upsetting thus traumatic. Therefore, the traumatologists concluded that an event is traumatic if "It is extremely upsetting, at least temporarily overwhelms the individual's internal resources and produce lasting psychological symptoms" (Briere & Scott, 2015, p.9). This definition is further supported by the fact that the foremost impetus is to recognize the client's experience as a distinguishing criterion rather than the severity of threat itself [15]. The lasting psychological symptoms could occur in the present time and affect the current behavior of an individual and impair his or her social functioning.

In the area of demon possessed and the involvement with witchcraft and religious syncretism, an individual is often referred as a patient who struggles in distress and traumatic spectrum disorder. Although the possession of a person by God or spirit is complicated to be observed scientifically, in general, it is categorized in dissociative disorder [16]. In the DSM-V, the trance or possession is also categorized as dissociative identity disorder, with the code of F.44.81 in the first diagnostic criteria [10]. However, in the first diagnostic criteria, DSM-V referred to the condition as culturally specific, which means different cultures may not see the characters disruption as trance or experience of possession. Across cultural backgrounds, the development of the dissociative identity disorder began at the earlier onset of traumatic experience, neglect, physical and emotional abuse by the parents. [10], [17]. In the researches to the mediums and spiritists across few nations, the majority of those people who experience disassociation or trance have had major traumatic experience at their upbringing and, to mention few traumatic bereavement in the teenage or adult years [16], [18]–[22]. Meanwhile, in the third world countries some force majeure like traumatic warfare, or natural disaster also contributed to trance or possession experience for some people [23], [24]. In the decent likelihood, it is safe, and yet limited to say that the majority of people who are familiar with spirit possession and trance, struggle with dissociative disorder which is rooted from traumatic experience at their very onset of life.

One of the author's students, a 21-year-old male student namely Ray, has had experience of physical abuse from both of his parents since he was five years old. He also described the overwhelming experience of witnessing his father had been beating up his wife throughout the years until Jay went to adolescence. Jay came to Java after finished high school and then studied in the theological school with different varieties of syndromes which will be further discussed in section three. It is important to state that this student was involved in shaman activities and had experienced trance often which

manifest in unregulated emotional attitude, uncontrolled breathing, and withdrawal-isolation behavior. The purpose of this qualitative case study is to trace and describe the counseling process of a traumatic theological student in Christian seminary which is successful in reducing the traumatic and dissociative symptoms disorder, which can help other mentor to be effective in treating the similar problem in the theological seminary setting.

The case of possessed is known to occur in monotheism religions, like Islam and Christian, which incorporated animism and dynamism in the devotion. This practice is known as syncretism which is defined, from Christian theological contexts, as an attempt to make the message of gospel relevant to the culture, however, its structures and categories are compromised [25], [26]. James (2019) explained, that such attempt will seek to find approval in the receiver's context and will do so with no concern to the integrity of the original message of Christianity. The worship practice then, inevitably, will involve the worship to the higher power other than the God in the Bible, which include the practice of medium. In the other side, in more contemporary view, syncretism is viewed as normal process, and such critical gesture toward the process is considered close-minded and racist [27], [28]. Ray who came from mainline Protestant Church in the east seemed to embrace the "other" spiritual discipline which include reciting some mantra and possessing few talismans to invoke the presence of certain spirit. Subsequently, he expressed disappointment to ever be involved in the rite at the first place because of contemporary nightmare and, as he described, unexplained intimidation from certain spirits every night.

2. RESEARCH METHODS

A qualitative study does not look for the inhering meaning of object waiting to be discovered, but a qualitative researcher would take interest in interpretation of the experiences, and how they construct the world they are living in, and the meaning they connect to the experience [29]. Case study, as part of qualitative study, seeks to build an in-depth description and analysis of a case or multiple cases [30], and in doing so maintain no interference to the reality and is conducted in ordinary context [31]. One of the examples of case study is when a researcher wanted to understand certain habits of an individual through single or multiple observation, to explain to the readers why such person does such habits [32]. In their explanation about the specific typical nature of case study, Creswell & Poth (2018) stated that the case under observation in case

study is usually an real life cases and is in on-going process. The study of Ray and his challenge as traumatic theological student can shed the light of how an ordinary young man perceived his traumatic experience in the unique structured setting and is still recuperating from the present disorder in daily basis, which is signified by the reduced symptoms.

2.1. Procedure

The data was collected through focus group discussion, counselling sessions, and in-depth interview from February 2022 right through January 2023. The initial encounter with Ray occurred when he came as a new student at the end of 2021 to the seminary and was part of author's class in leadership character development. Having given consent and set the goal and purpose together, Ray was willing to be in therapeutic relationship with the author. In Focus Group Discussion (FDG) with five students with similar experiences, Ray revealed emotional behavior when the group talked about forgiveness and parental relationships. He sobbed and was unable to respond inherently when he talked about his life upbringing, he came out from group twice because of the overwhelming feeling then returned when he felt better. Focus group is useful to gain the perspective of participants toward issues along with what they are thinking and why they are thinking that way, and how it was contrasted with the finding from other data collection [33], [34]. The researchers believe that FGD will enable participants to form their opinion by listening to other's opinion, and the attitude, belief and opinion, and decision will be formed when elicited by experienced facilitator. When the elicited in the right way, and the conversation is moderated in free, and yet unoffensive manners, discussion, or even debated in FGD would enable the participants to think critically and respond thoughtfully, while the researcher will gain enormous insight toward perceived issues under scrutiny [35]. Ray said that he felt relieved because he is not the only theological student who experienced problems in the family and in academic achievement, but he also said that "no-one has experienced terrors that I have from my own family."

After revealing about initial family problems in FDG, Ray was starting to feel comfortable to be interviewed. The interviews lasted about 30 minutes and happened four times in 12 months of research duration. The questions being asked in the interviews were open-ended question, with non-judgmental and non-leading questions, while respecting interviewee as an independence and absolute worthy person [33], [36].

Interview is useful in revealing personal experiences and perspectives, especially in regards to personal information and meaningful experiences [37]. The questions were formed to explore and elaborate Ray's attitude in the FGD before. An affirming statement like, "It seemed that the session in FGD impacted you significantly. Is that correct? ". The follow up question was, "Why did you feel so emotional in the FGD when the question about father and mother relationship occurred in the group?". The second interview, having recognized persistent behavior, focused on how Ray described the disorder and symptoms he experienced in his day-to-day situation.

2.2. Counseling Sessions

The counseling session utilized experiential therapy which focus on the needs of a counselee by incorporating the varieties of person-centered therapies, it is where emotional experience is facilitated, and he or she will be able to identify and face the past experience, and, subsequently, rewrite his or her future [38], [39]. The therapies were Gestalt, psychoanalysis, biblical forgiveness, and family therapies. The counseling sessions occurred seven times during the 12 months research period. The themes which emerged from the counselling were (1) traumatic experience in the early onset of life as early as five years old, (2) reenactment of traumatic incident of the past in the present, (3) emotional dissociative symptoms with very rare trance manifestation, (4) terrors and nightmare which caused continual sleep deprivation. It is difficult to isolate Ray's case into specific disorder, as the symptoms of dissociative also occur in ASD (Acute Stress Disorder) as part of the spectrum of PTSD. However, from the set of symptoms occurrence in continuum, it is safe to put Ray's disorder as part of PTSD/ASD, with trance and dissociative symptoms marked by code F.43.0 and F.43.10 [10], [14]. The diagnostic criteria of Ray's traumatic experience can be seen in Table 1.

As mentioned above, the idea of demon possession is limited to dissociative disorder symptoms and the lack thereof. However, as Christians it is an impetus to explore the possibilities for the dissociative symptoms as a part of the demonic attack [40]. Whether a person is a theologian, lecturer, or a pastoral counselor in the field, one must make choice based on philosophical commitment he or she subscribes [41]. It is inevitably therefore, from the epistemology notion, when one is facing limited scientific explanation of the incident of trance, he or she must base his perspective from another axiom with objective truth claim. Among the readily available sources out there, there is the biblical account of demon and spirits.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1. Background

Ray is a 21-year-old theological student who comes from the poor area in the eastern part of Indonesia. He came to the seminary in 2021 right in the middle of pandemic. He is now in the second year of his studies. His academic achievement was poor, with some complaints being reported from his peers about his emotional behavior. A couple of his classmates described Ray to be “high temper” and “careless” when working together. In the first intake interview Ray explained about his violent father who has been hitting him and his mother in the last 15 years. Ray is the third oldest of the siblings of five, and all of the children have witnessed the physical and verbal abuse their father has done to them and their mother. Ray expressed his angst toward his father and was attempted to kill him back in the high school but was discouraged by the mother. Ray was a frequent drinking in the weekend binge, smoke cigarette, and was sexually active in the high school. It is often common that a person with childhood adverse experience often developed promiscuity lifestyle in the adult year [42]–[45], and, conversely, the healthy religious parenthood have contributed to the prevention for children to develop risky sexual behavior [46].

When he entered seminary, it was mandatory for him to renounce his drinking and smoking habit. He shared the difficulty in managing his emotional behavior, social functioning and, importantly, the sleep difficulty, as often occurs as one alcohol withdrawal symptoms [10]. However, although experts put the category of hallucination and delirium as part of alcohol withdrawal with perceptual disturbances with F10.230. code, Ray did say that he was seeing evil being almost every night in the first four weeks after he stopped drinking. It was difficult to say whether this visual being he saw was truly demonic or was part of the substance withdrawal. He explained that his encounter with demon, *suanggi*, was part of his covenant he made in the past when he learnt magic mantra.

3.2. Result

3.2.1. Traumatic Disorder

In the first two weeks of counseling, Ray exhibited dissociative symptoms, where he was frozen, and unable to respond to any stimulus, for about 30 seconds. The incident

happened in the sessions and in the daily chores as students. The overwhelming traumatic events, in the contrary to most beliefs, are recorded in the memory without any subtraction or diversions, as opposed to Freudian's repression, this process is called disassociation where the negative memory is stored in the person's unconsciousness [11]. Through DSM-V the dissociative symptoms intertwine with the ASD (Acute Stress Disorder), and Ray stated many times that he experienced the reenactment of the traumatic events he experienced continually in his life. He explained the experience as recorded in the interview in the first week of interview post FGD:

Ray : I feel everything was so real sir. (He paused for at least 10 seconds) ... As if my father was there beating me up relentlessly. I tried to cover my head and body and asked him to stop but it kept on coming. My heart was beating, and I could not do anything (his hands were visibly shaken).

Ray exhibited some minor symptoms of somatic disorder and dissociation during the reenactment of the traumatic incident, but only limited to the event of "triggered" experiences. This process is part of disassociation of traumatic memory which come about in the form of stimulus from the environment whether in auditory, visual, tactile, or relational which represent one or more features of the encoded traumatic memory [11], however, the reenactment also serves as a direction for healing [47]. When being asked how the flashback came about, he added.

Ray : I was in the dish washing chores in the morning and I came quite late because I stayed up late to finish my presentation. The team leader came to me and spoke to me harshly, he called me lazy and troublemaker. It was when I felt burst was about to come out of my chest and I was about to hit him with big spoon, but my other friend restrained me.

The incident in the dish washing chore seemed to trigger the traumatic experience Ray had with his father. He added in subsequent weeks that his father and mother used to beat Ray because he broke some plates in the kitchen or did not wake up early to do his chores in the house. It is the process of reliving the traumatic experience unconsciously which has been coded by a person in attempt to gain control over the experience, and, consequently, made the trauma survivor to experience present relationship to be similar with past abusive relationship [48]. It was probable that the facial feature or the gesture of the guy who led the dish washing cores resembles Ray's father. Ray said that he felt uneasy every time he met this guy even before the chore's incident.

3.2.2. Family Therapy and New Attitude

The expert said that most traumatic patients could not reflect over the storm of the overwhelming emotion and feelings, thus they could not verbalize the mental states which pays major contribution in reflective functioning [49]. Verbalizing the traumatic experience, or emotional disturbance will help a person to revisit the experience and with the support and help of the carer will establish a new set of behavior even in brain system[50]. The expert said that the processing of traumatic experience is not permanent, brain has its neuroplasticity which can be directed to establish healthy, and valuable narrative memory through pharmacology, and psychotherapy. The journey then is not determined what really happened in the past, nor erased it, but to reintegrating to the client the trauma into daily life, so that they are able to face and live with all the emotional and sensational which occur and get on with it [51], [52]. The second and third months of the journey were to help Ray revisit the traumatic experience and the relationship he had with his family.

TABLE 1: Ray’s Traumatic Experience with DSM-V Diagnostic Criteria of PTSD/ASD.

Symptoms	Durations & Relevancy	Descriptions
Exposure to Actual or threatened death, serious injury, or sexual violence, in the following ways. Directly experiencing the traumatic events Witnessing, in person, the event (s), as it occurred to other. Learning hat traumatic event (s) to a closed family member or close friend in violent way The presence of one or more of the following intrusion symptoms. Recurrent, involuntary, and intrusive distressing memories of the traumatic event (s) Recurrent, distressing dreams in which content and/or the dream are related to traumatic events. Dissociative reaction	Toddler to Adult years Adolescence To close family. Adolescence to Adult years Toddler to Adult years Often freeze and unresponsive for avg. 10 seconds.	Ray had been receiving physical violence from his father since he was 5 years old. Ray witnessed a man almost beaten up to death in school brawl. Ray was witnessing his father beat up his mother and his siblings continually. Ray continually experiences re-enactment of traumatic experiences in certain present situations. Some dreams are terror from evil spirit. Often occurred in social and relational settings.

Having understood the traumatic family situation, the author and Ray were working together to verbalize the memory of traumatic events and find the common themes of the event. He described, with the help of the author, in his own words three things, (1) physical abuse he received from his father and later from his mother; (2) physical abuse he witnesses happened to his mother and siblings; (3) involvement in violence and spiritual ritual. Through psychodynamic and gestalt therapy, Ray was guided to revisit

some of the repressed memories he experienced since childhood. Gestalt Therapy is grounded in the self-awareness of contemporary experience which is connected with the environment which yields expanding rich perception, thus, in non-judgmental gesture toward one another, the ability to observe, describe and inquire about someone's behavior will be developed [53]. The process which happened in the fourth month was as follows.

Therapist : Ray, I want you to relax. Try to breathe regularly with your eyes closed and sit comfortably. (After 20 seconds he was able to relax with steady breathing). Now listen carefully, you are a baby in your mom's womb. Your mom loves you so much, you can feel the gentle hands in you as she touched her own belly. You hear one more voice, it is your father. He sits next to your mother, gently touches you and your mom. He says, "I cannot wait to see you".

Therapist : However, things change. You can hear distress in your mom's voice, she stayed in her room in the darkness, sobbing in sorrows. Your father comes and yells at your mother; he throws the chair into the walls. You are as confused and distraught as your mother is.

Ray was sobbing uncontrollably. When the therapist asked why he cried, he responded that he felt that he was the child inside the womb. The next question was "did you experience that in your real life?" He said that he was not sure, but he said that it was so real. It is possible that Ray's experience was fragmented in his unconsciousness so that some of dissociative traumatic experience was reenacted by the exercise. Ray was asked to describe the character of his father and his mother and himself. He said that his father is "cruel. ignorance and violence father", while she described her mother as "poor victim", and himself as "innocent and hopeless". Gestalt therapy seeks to fragment the memories from the perpetrators, so that the awareness of feelings of the past, and behavior of the present experience could be less maladaptive [39]. It is useful for the victim to take responsibility and shift focus to himself and his pathological behavior. Therefore, it is no longer parent's coercion but the present pain which needs healing. Ray was asked to do exercise in: (1) controlled breathing, then (2) training in verbalize in three sentences his feeling when triggered and why he is triggered, (3) naming his emotional negative feelings into three words [11], [14]. The set of a hundred list names of feelings was given to him in Bahasa, and he practiced that. Additionally, he must pray for healing for his heart for the pain he experienced every time he is triggered. Ray was struggling badly in his first attempt; however, he persisted and eventually could change the named emotional feeling from "cruel father's victim" into "pain, fear, and sensitive".

He listed triggering events into two themes: (1) tall man, as often meeting a man with similar features with his father and then asked a rational question/ or make a statement, “he is not my father my feeling come from the past not from present” (2) inferiority and unconfident, Ray often wanted have better achievement just like his classmates or better parents, but he asked rational questions “ I can’t change my parents can I? But I can achieve greatness just like everybody”.

3.3. The Dark Spirit

In the seventh month the bad dream’s frequency had been reduced by 40% from what usually was every night nightmare. Probably because some of dissociative symptoms also has reduced. However, the presence of evil spirit was still in his life. Ray explained that often at night he felt like a face with intimidating features was so close to his head and he hid himself under the pillows. Both social science and psychological therapy cannot explain the existence of supernatural powers yet they also do not readily dismiss it, meanwhile, in the other side, those who believe also are lack in the phenomenological literature to support its existence [10], [54]–[56]. Recent study also demonstrated that clergies embraced medical view on etiology of mental health issues, and only minority were operating in religious interpretation only [57]. However, the situation demands verdict and, subsequently, systematic plan, therefore, it is feasible to use biblical ways to deal with the supernatural issues.

Ray was part of exorcism service or is known as KKR, where he was prayed by several pastors of evangelical and charismatic churches. One of the pastors informed that, “the bondage from the evil one was too strong, so that Ray is remained in the bondage.” In the ninth month Ray expressed better emotional regulation, and almost no incident of trance and dissociative symptoms in the last eight weeks. The flashback of traumatic experience still occurred, but Ray said that the prayer to heal his heart especially the three particular traumatic themes, has helped him to be calmer, and eventually reducing the symptoms. He worked better in team in chores and study group, and his GPA improved dramatically.

Having addressed the somatic and psyche aspect of Ray, it was right to turn the attention to his spiritual problem through biblical perspective. In Paul’s epistle to the Thessalonians, he wrote that those who believed in Jesus Christ will be preserved holistically, at body, soul, and spirit, until the eschatological coming of Jesus Christ (*New International Version*, 2001, 1 Thess 5:23) (Most of Judaism literature limited

the understanding of human being as consist of dichotomy aspects, which is body and soul. In New Testament, Paul talked about trichotomy aspect of human being, seemed the impetus was to point out the role and the existence of Holy Spirit for the believers post the ascension of Jesus Christ in the day of Pentecost.). There has been ranging theological debate whether this process is entirely the work of God, or sparingly works of men, however, mostly agreed that this process is only happen after a person come to faith, and by the indwelling of Holy Spirit [58]. Most Pentecostals and evangelicals Christian counselor believe that Holy Spirit also take part in the life of those who struggle with mental health in the psychotherapy [59]–[61]. Ray once mentioned about discrepancy of life as a church goer and his life outside the church, such a valid question for a Christian who struggles with life in traumatic ways.

The author believes that God has given humanity mind, and science to understand phenomena inside and outside us. It is by critical faculty of human mind which shapes and enhances the perception and understanding toward phenomena and problems [62]. Thus, it is probable that the spiritual aspect of Ray's life was compromised by his early onset traumatic experience, which contributed to dissociative somatic symptoms. Therefore, when there is symptom decrease in *psyche* and *somatic* aspect, the *pneuma* aspect could improve as well. Ray was asked to pray the same prayer in those three areas he had been contemplating on, which are 1) physical abuse he received from his father and later from his mother; (2) physical abuse he witnesses happened to his mother and siblings; (3) involvement in violence and spiritual ritual. However, this time he added from the Scripture the verses of demonic exorcism which is James 4:7, which read, *submit yourself to the Lord and resist evil, and he will flee from you*, and Acts 16:18, which read, *in the name of Jesus Christ I command you to come out...*, Ray kept on doing this prayer ritual and reading the Scripture for the next two months. The demonic dreaming ceased by the end of ninth month, and at 11th month he stopped seeing demonic presence. However, the traumatic flashback remains with moderate to low emotional disturbance response, as Ray is able to response wisely and calmly with time. Ray is part of discipleship group mentored by senior pastor and have continual follow up sessions with the counselor. Nevertheless, it does not mean that the presence of the demon in Ray's life is completely understood or been done with completely which is a precursor to continual mentoring and counseling.

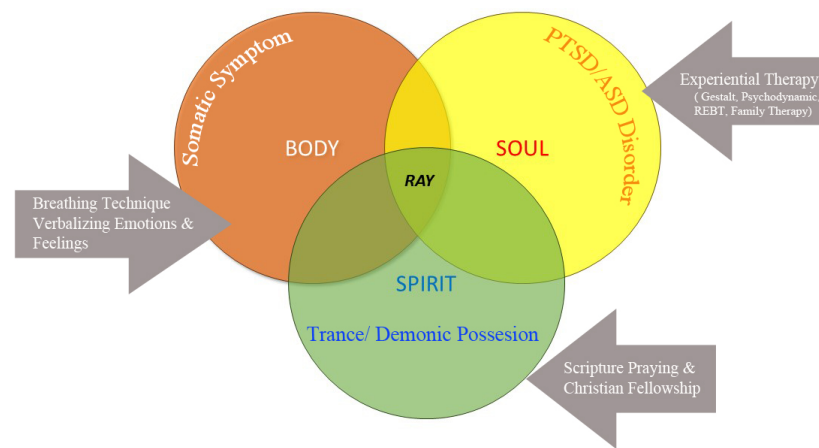


Figure 1: Ray's Traumatic 1 Thess 5:23-Trichotomy Based Therapy.

4. CONCLUSION

The counseling process for Ray was complex, and the case study is meant to see the whole journey as pure as it is with minimum intervention from a researcher. The author is completely aware that there might be a power imbalance which took place during the months of interaction and counseling with Ray. However, the research will hopefully bring additional information for the literature study toward traumatology.

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