

## Article

# Religious/Spiritual Abuse, Meaning-Making, and Posttraumatic Growth

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**Abstract:** While religion and spirituality (R/S) have been broadly studied for their positive mental health impacts, instances of abuse within religious or spiritual contexts remain under-researched. This scoping review aims to elucidate how individuals experiencing such abuse navigate their trauma, find meaning, and foster posttraumatic growth (PTG). The research was conducted using a scoping review methodology as a guide, and 10 articles were selected based on predefined inclusion and exclusion criteria. Synthesizing these articles revealed the following three central themes: recognizing abuse, relaying one's story, and redefining spirituality. Survivors often face disbelief and stigma, hindering their ability to process their experiences. However, narrative sharing enables many to reclaim agency and healing through validation and the integration of the narrative into one's life story. Additionally, survivors often transform spirituality, shifting from rigid frameworks to more nuanced and flexible understandings of the Divine and self. These findings underscore the importance of trauma-informed, spiritually sensitive clinical approaches that validate survivors' experiences, facilitate narrative sharing, and support spiritual redefining. Future research must address knowledge gaps, including the development of improved assessment tools, exploration of effective treatment strategies, and the unifying of terms to better support survivors' healing journeys and promote meaning-making and PTG in the aftermath of R/S abuse.

**Keywords:** trauma; religious/spiritual abuse; meaning-making; spirituality; posttraumatic growth



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## 1. Introduction

Religion and spirituality (R/S) have recently garnered significant attention in research, being recognized for their potential to facilitate healing, posttraumatic growth (PTG), decreased mental health symptomology, and the construction of meaning (Bryant-Davis and Wong 2013; Sen et al. 2022; Czyżowska et al. 2021; De Vynck et al. 2023). Within the mental health field, there is a growing acknowledgment of the pivotal role spiritual dimensions play in providing holistic care to individuals (NASW 2021; Parada 2022; Gilligan and Furness 2006; Gilligan 2012; Jerome et al. 2023). The Association for Spiritual, Ethical and Religious Values in Counseling (2024) underscores the importance of therapists recognizing the centrality of their clients' R/S beliefs, or absence of R/S beliefs, to their worldview, which can profoundly influence psychosocial functioning.

While the previous literature has predominantly explored the beneficial aspects of religion and spirituality (Jerome et al. 2023; Sen et al. 2022; Czyżowska et al. 2021; Rowe and Allen 2004; Bryant-Davis and Wong 2013; Gur and Reich 2023; Whitehead and Bergeman 2020), recent scholarship, non-academic sources, and grey literature have begun to shed some light on the various forms and expressions of abuse in the R/S sphere (Zaeske et al. 2024; Parada 2022; Religious Trauma Institute 2022; Truong and Ghafournia 2024; Wilson and Lopez 2021; Johnson and VanVonderen 2005; Oakley and Humphreys 2019; Anderson 2023; Baker 2019). However, there remains a significant gap in the understanding of how individuals navigate these experiences, derive meaning, and experience PTG from them. This review aims to bridge this gap by synthesizing current research on R/S abuse and delving into its impact on individuals' meaning-making processes and PTG experiences.

In their recent scoping review, [Zaeske et al. \(2024\)](#) pointed out a lack of consensus regarding terms and definitions, which has created a universal challenge within the literature. These terms include spiritual abuse, religious abuse, spiritual wounding, spiritual harm, adverse religious experiences, and religious trauma. They are often used interchangeably and rarely with clear delineation. Additionally, R/S abuse is sometimes conflated with other forms of abuse, further complicating its conceptualization and understanding ([Zaeske et al. 2024](#)). Recognizing such complexity, this review adopts a broad understanding of R/S abuse, which encompasses any instances where religious or spiritual authority is misused or exploited, resulting in significant psychological and/or spiritual harm to individuals ([Ellis et al. 2022](#)). This includes forms of abuse such as manipulation, coercion, exploitation, or betrayal of trust within religious or spiritual contexts, as well as specific instances like clergy perpetrated sexual abuse.

The aftermath of R/S abuse can have profound and far-reaching effects, permeating various aspects of an individual's well-being, including psychological, emotional, and spiritual dimensions ([Ellis et al. 2022](#); [Ellis et al. 2023](#); [Marotta-Walters 2015](#); [Pargament et al. 2008](#); [Doyle 2009](#); [Flynn 2008](#); [De Vynck et al. 2023](#)). Individuals often grapple with symptoms akin to post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), navigating experiences of depression, anxiety, self-harm tendencies and more ([Flynn 2008](#); [De Vynck et al. 2023](#); [Ellis et al. 2023](#)). Moreover, the trauma inflicted can engender profound spiritual insecurity, leading to a deep sense of grief, shame, and existential disorientation ([De Vynck et al. 2023](#); [Doyle 2009](#); [Marotta-Walters 2015](#)). In some cases, individuals may resort to maladaptive coping mechanisms, such as eating disorders or engaging in dysfunctional relationships ([Flynn 2008](#)). Further, R/S abuse can rupture the sacred bond between an individual and their faith, sparking feelings of anger towards a higher power and fostering a gradual erosion of faith ([Marotta-Walters 2015](#); [Doyle 2009](#)). This myriad of impacts underscore the intricate and extensive consequences of R/S abuse.

[Vis and Boynton \(2008\)](#) introduced the concept of “transcendent meaning-making” as a central spiritual task in the trauma process, which moves beyond the cognitive to incorporate “a deeper intuitive understanding of one’s relationship with themselves and their existence in the world” (p. 74). This involves an intentional meaning-making process of restructuring one’s worldview into one capable of embracing the entirety of one’s experiences ([Vis and Boynton 2008](#)). Understanding how individuals navigate and derive meaning from these adverse experiences is crucial. Therefore, this review will explore the factors that enable individuals who have experienced R/S abuse to engage in transcendent meaning-making, shedding light on their journey toward healing and growth. Beginning with an overview of the methodology, this review will then delve into the three prominent themes identified within the literature. It will then discuss some of the clinical implications derived from the findings. Finally, this review will conclude with an outline of the limitations inherent in the studies, followed by various recommended avenues for future research.

## 2. Methodology

This study employed a scoping review methodology to map the existing literature on the under-researched topic of R/S abuse and its relationship with PTG. Scoping reviews are particularly well-suited for exploring an emerging research area like R/S abuse where the limited number and diverse nature of available studies make a comprehensive synthesis premature ([O’Brien et al. 2016](#)). Given the nascent nature of research on R/S abuse and the varied ways in which individuals find meaning and heal from the trauma, a scoping review approach was deemed optimal to identify key concepts, themes, and gaps in the literature ([O’Brien et al. 2016](#)). This methodology allowed for a broad exploration of the research landscape to provide an overview of how survivors navigate trauma, find meaning, and foster PTG in the aftermath of R/S abuse.

A comprehensive search was conducted on the ProQuest database on 28 March 2024 using combinations of the following search terms: religion, spirituality, Christianity, the-

ology, Catholic churches, religious beliefs, Christians, religious organizations, pastoral counselling, religious orthodoxy, spiritual resilience, resilience, meaning-making, coping behaviour, coping, adaptation psychological, emotional adjustment, stress reactions, avoidance, emotional responses, functioning, trauma, abuse, priest, minister, clergy, rabbis, nun, and pastor.

The inclusion criteria involved selecting only scholarly journals, and the articles were required to directly explore the intersection of religious or spiritual abuse with positive psychological outcomes such as resilience, posttraumatic growth, coping, or meaning-making. Additionally, articles had to be available in English. The exclusion criteria encompassed articles solely focused on non-religious related abuse or trauma. Articles primarily centered on Indigenous, 2SLGBTQ+, or domestic/family violence subjects were also excluded as these subjects, while significant, are beyond the scope of this paper.

The initial ProQuest search yielded a pool of 37 articles. A subsequent review of the titles and abstracts identified five articles meeting the predefined inclusion criteria. An additional search of the references cited in these chosen articles, known as an ancestral search, yielded five more relevant articles. Thus, this review comprises 10 articles published between 2008 and 2024, selected to provide insights into the intersection of R/S abuse with meaning-making and PTG.

A theoretical framework of storytelling/narrative sharing was utilized to identify and understand the abuse experiences documented in the reviewed articles. This approach was chosen due to the inherent challenges in quantifying the subjective, personal, and diverse nature of religious experiences. Among the 10 selected articles, the majority utilized some form of storytelling and narrative recall, which were captured in qualitative descriptive paragraphs. According to [Lee et al. \(2016\)](#), “storytelling expands our understanding of social determinants of health by illustrating culturally grounded messages and experiences of the target audience in their local settings” (p. 59). Thus, a narrative framework was deemed most suitable for effectively illustrating and expanding the understanding of the complex experiences of individuals who have faced R/S abuse.

An examination of the literature unveiled three central themes as follows: individuals who have experienced R/S abuse can create meaning and facilitate PTG when their experiences are recognized as abuse; when they have the opportunity to articulate their narratives; and when they engage in the process of redefining their spirituality to resonate with their evolving worldview.

### 3. Literature Review

Storytelling and narrative sharing are powerful tools for helping people understand and make sense of their experiences ([Lee et al. 2016](#)). Qualitative methods, particularly those centered on storytelling/narrative sharing, are well-suited to capture the nuances and emotional impact of R/S abuse experiences, which often defy quantification through traditional research approaches. Given this, this review utilized a narrative framework to identify, understand, and explore the diverse ways survivors navigate trauma, find meaning, and foster PTG.

#### 3.1. Recognition: Naming the Abuse

Research has demonstrated how trauma impacts individuals across spiritual, psychological, social, and physical dimensions ([Pargament et al. 2008](#)). However, when the trauma originates from religious or spiritual sources, survivors often encounter secondary challenges, including disbelief, stigmatization, isolation, shaming, and even overt hostility from their spiritual community as well as the broader public ([Pargament et al. 2008](#); [Heyder 2022](#); [Flynn 2008](#); [Doyle 2009](#); [Ellis et al. 2023](#)). As often happens in both personal and professional environments, a lack of awareness and validation of R/S abuse compounds the difficulties faced by survivors, which can lead to self-blame, mental health struggles, confusion, and more ([Ellis et al. 2023](#); [Flynn 2008](#); [Heyder 2022](#); [Pargament et al. 2008](#)).

Without recognition that abuse was experienced, integrating any traumatic experiences into one's life narrative becomes challenging.

Flynn's (2008) study, focusing on twenty-five participants predominantly comprising white women who were victims of clergy sexual abuse, delineated several factors unique to this form of abuse. One notable factor was the misidentification of the experiences by many of the perpetrators, church leaders, and, at times, the whole congregation, framing the abuse as a mutual relationship between consenting adults and thus leading to immense feelings of guilt, shame, and personal responsibility (Flynn 2008). Further, attempts to disclose the abuse were frequently met with victim-blaming, denial, disbelief, and even open hostility, leading to revictimization and abandonment by the religious community (Flynn 2008). Heyder (2022) echoed similar findings in her analysis, which was based on the narratives of twenty-three German Catholic women who had been spiritually and sexually abused. She stated that "the 'unbelievable' remains misunderstood and unbelievable because a social and intellectual resonance space is missing" (Heyder 2022, p. 3). Similarly, Flynn (2008) conveyed, "The creation of a context for their experiences is pivotal" (p. 235). These quotes underscore the importance of validation for survivors and the need for others to recognize that abuse, harm, and trauma have occurred. The lack of validation that abuse has occurred can exacerbate difficulties and impede healing, potentially becoming a source of trauma itself (Doyle 2009).

Recognition of R/S abuse as abuse is imperative for survivors' healing and recovery (Flynn 2008; De Vynck et al. 2023; Ellis et al. 2023; Marotta-Walters 2015). This acknowledgment offers psychological confirmation and aids in symptom reduction, facilitating psychological healing and meaning-making (Marotta-Walters 2015). In researching four predominantly white and white-passing women's experiences of spiritual distress, De Vynck et al. (2023) noted that "The language of trauma and describing it appeared to allow the participants to make meaning of these disorienting, overwhelming, and distressing emotional and embodied experiences. . ." (p. 7). In other words, using the language of abuse and trauma provides a context for what affected individuals have experienced, allowing them to assign meaning to their experiences and begin to understand them. In addition to recognizing one's own experience as abuse, realizing that others share similar experiences and symptoms can be important to the meaning-making process, as well as aid in helping survivors contextualize their experiences and recognize that they are not uniquely damaged (Marotta-Walters 2015). Recognizing and validating experiences of R/S abuse as abusive and traumatizing is pivotal for survivors' healing and recovery. This naming of what occurred not only provides a context for their experiences but also aids in reducing trauma symptoms and facilitating psychological healing and meaning-making. In the words of a survivor, "It has so much healing power. . . just to be able to say, 'Yes, this is what it was.' That was so helpful" (Flynn 2003, p. 232). Common threads of feeling silenced and disbelieved permeate R/S abuse experiences, contrasting starkly with the healing, meaning-making, and integration often associated with being able to articulate one's story and receiving belief and validation from others (Pargament et al. 2008; Heyder 2022; Marotta-Walters 2015; Walker et al. 2010).

### 3.2. Relaying: Exploring the Trauma Narrative

Building upon the preceding theme of recognizing the abuse and trauma, the subsequent theme delves into the significance of survivors of R/S abuse being able to share their narratives. Walker et al. (2010) contended that the primary purpose of creating a trauma narrative is to aid the survivor in integrating the traumatic experience into their life. Narration is a versatile medium encompassing storytelling, writing, song, art, and other expressive forms (Walker et al. 2010). Walker et al. (2010) suggested exploring parallels between the individual's story and religious narratives dealing with suffering and meaning-making and subsequently fostering spiritual and emotional connections that allow for the creation of personal meanings from experiences.

Heyder (2022) highlighted the agency-restoring potential of storytelling, emphasizing how narrating painful events enables individuals to weave them into their life story, reclaiming control over their narrative. Survivors attest to the transformative power of storytelling, expressing how sharing their experiences aids in resolving confusion, rebuilding trust in their feelings, and stripping traumatic events of their hold over them (Heyder 2022). Similarly, Marotta-Walters (2015) noted the role of extroversion as a protective factor, as this personality trait may make it more likely for an individual to process trauma by discussing and sharing their stories, thereby integrating them into their worldview. Pargament et al. (2008) conceptualized storytelling as testimony, affording individuals catharsis and an opportunity to derive meaning from their experiences and assert dignity in their life narratives.

As survivors tell their stories, intense emotions may arise, such as anger, grief, bitterness, and fear (Heyder 2022; Flynn 2008; Doyle 2009). These emotions may be directed at God, at one's faith community, or at one's faith itself, and these emotions must be validated and normalized as appropriate responses to the experience of abuse (Heyder 2022; Flynn 2008; Doyle 2009). This validation helps facilitate the integration of their emotions into their life narratives (Heyder 2022). Additionally, exploring trauma narratives often aids in recognizing accountability, relieving survivors of self-blame and fostering self-empathy (Marotta-Walters 2015). Heyder (2022) notes an essential qualification by highlighting survivors' autonomy in choosing if/when, how, and with whom to share their stories, underscoring the emotional intensity and complexities inherent in the process.

In sum, the act of narrating one's story serves as a cornerstone in the journey of healing and meaning-making for many survivors of R/S abuse, offering a pathway to reclaiming agency by deriving meaning and integrating traumatic experiences into their evolving life narratives. In the words of a survivor, "To tell what I have experienced helps me to solve my confusion... I begin to trust my own feelings again... By telling my story, my experiences become a real and living part of my life" (Heyder 2022, p. 3).

The journey of acknowledging and recognizing one's experience of R/S abuse and sharing one's story often coincides with a profound reevaluation and redefinition of one's spirituality, which the following theme will discuss.

### 3.3. Redefining: Transformation of Spirituality

The literature revealed a final theme centered on the redefining and reimagining of individuals' concepts of and relationships with the Divine, self, clergy, and others (Doyle 2009; Pargament et al. 2008; De Vynck et al. 2023). Women who had experienced sexual abuse by clergy members described a transformation in their faith, shifting from structured religious practice and a rigid understanding and connection to God to a spirituality centered on interpersonal connections and relationships (Flynn 2008). Previously perceiving God as distant and powerful, many of the participants came to view God as personal, caring, and primarily relational post-abuse (Flynn 2008). Flynn (2008) revealed that some participants found that their spirituality became primarily relational and human-oriented. They articulated that "The central meaning and importance of achieving relational connection became an avenue of spiritual awareness" (p. 234). Doyle (2009) emphasized how spiritual abuse perpetrated by religious authorities significantly impacts one's relationship with God and faith and advocated for survivors to embrace a view of God that is non-judgmental, loving, and personal. However, while survivors may shift their view of God intellectually, integrating this new understanding emotionally can pose challenges for survivors (Doyle 2009).

De Vynck et al. (2023) introduced the concept of "cultivating spaciousness" to describe individuals' expansion of spirituality in response to spiritual distress. This process involved adopting curiosity, humility, and a commitment to inner growth and values alignment. Using the metaphor of being pulled away from the safety of the shoreline, De Vynck et al. (2023) described how this pull "appeared to be in service of a worthwhile existential task of claiming one's identity, values, and authenticity on one's own terms" (p. 7). This quote



illustrates the process of how the experience of spiritual distress and trauma brought about the opportunity for growth as the participants had to interrogate and reevaluate their beliefs and values. Participants in this study described a new, less confining relationship with God, letting go of rigid frameworks and intentionally building a spirituality that allowed for complexity, nuance, and questioning (De Vynck et al. 2023). This could be described as a process of deconstructing what one has previously believed and then continuing to reconstruct and redefine one's beliefs, relationships, and values to those ethically aligned with one's new worldview. This is consistent with the concept of transcendent meaning-making discussed earlier, wherein individuals deepen their understanding of themselves and their presence in the world (Vis and Boynton 2008).

Pargament et al. (2008) emphasized the importance of spiritual transformation in response to struggles, noting that "whether struggles lead to growth or to decline may depend, in part, on the individual's ability to transform his or her understanding of and approach to the sacred" (pp. 404–5). They go on to state that religious traditions, such as rites of passage, conversion to a different conception of the Divine, or changes in the pathway to the sacred, can provide individuals with diverse approaches to foster transformation in their connection with the Divine (Pargament et al. 2008). Once spirituality has been transformed, the individual will often continue to evolve and enhance their spirituality according to their new understanding over the course of their lifetime (Pargament et al. 2008). As individuals engage in this process of reevaluating their beliefs and relationships, many experience a deeper connection to themselves, their spirituality, and to others. While some may deidentify from their faith, reject ideas of God and religion, disengage from spirituality, and find R/S terms or rituals triggering, others may find comfort in R/S rituals or beliefs as they renegotiate their meanings (Pargament et al. 2008; De Vynck et al. 2023). Marotta-Walters (2015) discussed how some survivors expressed spiritual healing and found meaning in engaging in altruistic actions, such as advocating for victims' rights or lobbying for legislative reforms. To summarize this theme in the words of a survivor:

I think I have a high degree of spirituality. But as far as embracing my former beliefs—I don't. I have a tremendous respect for the interpersonal God and a great belief in the interpersonal God. As far as the external God, the one that sits up there and is all powerful and controls the world—don't think He ever existed—He! But the personal God, the interpersonal God that I understand—and I only understand pieces of it—I think She's wonderful! And so I spend my time connecting with an interpersonal God. (Flynn 2003, p. 180)

To conclude, recognizing that abuse has occurred, relaying one's story, and redefining one's spirituality enables the individual to validate their experiences, reclaim agency, integrate the experience into their life narrative, and revise their beliefs to resonate with their current self. This journey often prompts profound reflection, leading to spiritual transformations, PTG, and transcendent meaning-making.

#### 4. Discussion: Clinical Implications

The preceding three themes offer valuable insights for helping professionals who seek to facilitate meaning-making and PTG in individuals who have experienced R/S abuse. Embracing a trauma-informed approach alongside spiritual sensitivity and creating a safe space for spiritual dialogue is foundational (De Vynck et al. 2023; Pargament et al. 2008). Studies indicate that many clients are eager to discuss spiritual matters if the helping professionals are receptive (Lindgren and Coursey 1995). Helping professionals can foster spiritual dialogue by attentively noting any spiritual themes in the clients' narratives and responding with relevant questions (Pargament et al. 2008). Demonstrating genuine empathy and curiosity is crucial (De Vynck et al. 2023) and asking open-ended questions as simple as 'Tell me more' can be particularly helpful (Pargament et al. 2008). Additionally, to maintain a spiritually safe space, it is essential for helping professionals to remain reflexive and aware of their biases to prevent inadvertently imposing personal beliefs onto their clients (Zaeske et al. 2024).

As the clients share their stories, helping professionals can support positive spiritual transformation by validating and normalizing the full spectrum of spiritual emotions that arise (Pargament et al. 2008). Psychoeducation, especially in the early stages of treatment, can help clients comprehend and contextualize their trauma symptoms (Marotta-Walters 2015; Walker et al. 2010). For instance, completing symptom checklists that assess R/S abuse and/or trauma may offer relief by validating the clients' experiences and reassuring them that they are not alone (Marotta-Walters 2015). Additionally, educating clients about power dynamics, authority, and oppression may empower them to navigate their experiences more effectively (Zaeske et al. 2024).

Facilitating and integrating reflection practices throughout therapy has the potential to enhance the clients' overall awareness and meaning-making, encompassing self-understanding of their values, self-expression, and R/S beliefs and identities (Zaeske et al. 2024). Zaeske et al. (2024) stated that helping professionals "need to be comfortable with ambiguity and empower and validate clients as they negotiate their R/S beliefs and identities" (p. 12), underscoring the importance of the helping professionals' support in this process. Approaches should be tailored to each client's unique spiritual journey, considering questions such as the client's current spiritual state, understanding, and the role of spirituality in their struggles or solutions (Zaeske et al. 2024). Given the profound isolation often experienced by survivors of R/S abuse, fostering meaningful relationships—both within therapy and beyond—is essential (De Vynck et al. 2023). De Vynck et al. (2023) encouraged helping professionals to reflect back "glimmers of resilience and PTG within the therapeutic relationship" (p. 10). Pointing out these areas of strength can provide hope and encouragement for clients who may not be able to see them on their own. Finally, helping professionals can help clients reflect on what concepts of spirituality and the Divine would be nurturing and healing for them and allow the client to lead as they journey through redefining what these concepts mean to them.

#### 4.1. Limitations

When evaluating the existing body of research on R/S abuse, meaning-making, and posttraumatic growth, it is crucial to recognize several limitations that may impact the applicability and reliability of findings. Notably, the discussed studies suffer from small sample sizes. This limits the extent to which conclusions can be confidently drawn about the broader population affected by R/S abuse. Moreover, the lack of diversity within these samples raises concerns about the generalizability of findings to diverse populations, potentially overlooking crucial cultural intersections. This issue is also reflected in the Ellis et al. (2022) systematic review, which recognized that most study participants were white women and included studies conducted in Western contexts. Similarly, the Zaeske et al. (2024) scoping review noted that most of the included studies were conducted in North America, and most participants were white. Thus, a significant bias exists in the research, limiting the transferability of results to non-Western and non-white populations. This oversight neglects culturally specific factors influencing the experience of R/S abuse and the mechanisms underlying meaning-making and posttraumatic growth, hindering efforts to deliver culturally and spiritually competent and holistic care.

Furthermore, some measures utilized in the research were adapted from non-religious trauma and abuse measures to fit a Christian context without empirical testing, raising questions about their validity and reliability (Ellis et al. 2022). While many studies offer rich qualitative data through semi-structured interviews and the utilization of interpretive phenomenological analysis, the cross-sectional nature of these designs limits the ability of the studies to establish causal relationships (Ellis et al. 2022, 2023). Additionally, the reliance on self-report measures across much of the literature introduces the risk of response bias and data inaccuracies, complicating the interpretation of findings (Zaeske et al. 2024; Ellis et al. 2023).

These limitations underscore that it is imperative for future research to adopt more rigorous methodologies and designs. This includes employing larger and more diverse sam-

ples, conducting longitudinal, qualitative and quantitative studies to build the theoretical base, utilizing empirically tested measures, and incorporating cross-cultural perspectives. By addressing these limitations, future research can enhance the relevance and effectiveness of clinical interventions, as well as provide more data on the factors that encourage and facilitate meaning-making and PTG for all the individuals affected by R/S abuse.

#### *4.2. Knowledge Gaps: Recommendations for Future Research*

While some progress has been made in understanding R/S abuse, several notable knowledge gaps warrant further investigation. One area requiring attention is the development of improved measures for assessing R/S abuse. Existing measures lack empirical testing and may lack specificity or fail to capture the nuanced experiences of individuals affected by such experiences. This includes separating R/S abuse from other forms of abuse and trauma. Therefore, there is a need to refine and validate assessment tools that accurately capture the diverse manifestations of R/S abuse across different contexts.

Furthermore, there is a pressing need for more research focused on treatment strategies for R/S abuse. While some interventions exist, many of them have been adapted from research on other forms of abuse and trauma. Thus, their efficacy and applicability to this specific area remain understudied. Future research should explore and evaluate the effectiveness of therapeutic interventions for those who have experienced such trauma. Additionally, integrating concepts on how to have a spiritually sensitive practice, how to assess for R/S abuse and trauma, and appropriate interventions into existing social work education programs would be beneficial.

Moreover, future studies should adopt more complex research designs and incorporate positive psychological constructs such as resilience, hope, strengths, well-being and PTG into their investigations. By utilizing longitudinal and mixed-methods designs, researchers can better elucidate the complex interplays between R/S abuse and these positive psychological outcomes. Integrating these constructs into research frameworks can provide a more holistic understanding of individuals' experiences and facilitate the development of more comprehensive interventions.

Lastly, it is essential to stress the importance of synthesizing language in future research endeavors. Given the diverse terminology used to describe R/S abuse across disciplines and cultural contexts, there is a need for greater clarity and consistency. Synthesizing language can enhance communication among researchers, practitioners, academics, and policymakers, facilitating collaboration and advancing knowledge in the field. More concrete and universally agreed-upon definitions and language would also increase public awareness of these concepts and their theoretical foundation.

### **5. Conclusions**

In conclusion, this review has illuminated the complex interplays among R/S abuse, meaning-making processes, and PTG for survivors. By synthesizing the current research, three central themes have emerged as follows: recognizing the abuse, relaying one's story, and renegotiating spirituality. Survivors of R/S abuse often face disbelief, stigmatization, and isolation, hindering their ability to recognize and name their experiences as abusive. However, through storytelling and narrative sharing, many find validation, healing, and agency in reclaiming their narratives. Furthermore, survivors often undergo a redefining of their spirituality, shifting from rigid R/S understandings to more relational, nuanced understandings of the Divine, self, and the world.

These findings hold significant implications for clinical practice, highlighting the importance of trauma-informed, spiritually sensitive approaches that create safe spaces for spiritual dialogue. Helping professionals must validate survivors' experiences, facilitate narrative sharing, and support redefining spirituality to align with survivors' evolving beliefs and needs. Moreover, future research must address existing knowledge gaps, including developing improved assessment tools, exploring effective treatment strategies, and integrating positive psychological constructs into research frameworks. By addressing



these limitations and advancing our understanding of R/S abuse, we can better support survivors' healing journeys and promote meaning-making and PTG in the face of such experiences.

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