Religious Trauma:

Making Sense of, and Seeking Healing for Spiritual Wounds

by

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Abstract

Religious trauma is an understudied phenomenon that can lead to numerous mental health maladies for those subjected to it. In this literature review, white North American Evangelicalism is studied as its various theologies, practices and cultural norms are hypothesized to contribute to environments that allow for adverse religious experiences occurring and religious trauma to be more likely to occur. Therapeutic modalities such as embodiment, accelerated experiential-dynamic psychotherapy (AEDP) and narrative therapy are suggested in addition to general considerations being provided for therapists. Further, recommendations for church members and leaders regarding fostering trauma-informed and safe faith communities are offered. The intention behind researching this topic is to illuminate possibilities for healing from religious trauma and to communicate a personal vision of what nurturing faith communities can look like.

Keywords: religious trauma, North American Evangelicalism, adverse religious experiences, spiritual abuse

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Chapter One

The biopsychosocial model of influence on people's behaviours and/or conditions has been the standard when analyzing a person's mental wellbeing for a while. This model examines what kind of biological, psychological and sociological factors are at play in a person's life that contribute to their current state. What is not as frequently discussed is the spiritual aspect of a person's make up. A biopsychosocial-spiritual model can potentially provide a more rounded view of one's personhood, by considering the spiritual elements in their lives. That said, spirituality carries a different meaning for each individual. It can be a source of comfort for many, while for others it can be a distressing domain in their lives.

Overview of Topic

As of 2019, 68% of Canadians report having a religious affiliation (Cornelissen, 2021). Additionally, 54% of Canadians report their religious beliefs to range from somewhat to very important to them (2021). As of 2020, about 70% of Americans identify as Christian, while about 23% identify as non-religious with about 7% identifying with another religion (Public Religion Research Institute, 2021). Religion and spirituality are still major facets of North American culture. For the purposes of this paper, religion will largely refer to the spiritual institutions and structures that people can be a part of. This would include macro institutions such as Christianity and its churches where structures relates to theologies and cultural norms church members subscribe to, whereas spirituality refers to both the individual and communal experience of faith. This relates to one's personal relationships with the divine, beliefs and others as it pertains to their shared faith.

Most people in North America report having a spiritual aspect of their self that holds significant meaning to them. It is well documented how instrumental religion and spirituality can

be for helping people cope and manage through life's various trials (Crocker, 2022; Downie, 2022; Jerome et al., 2023; Lloyd et al., 2023; Martínez de Pisón, 2022). However, this paper seeks to investigate the instances where religion and spirituality exist as sources behind a person's pain. Religious/Spiritual Abuse and Trauma (RSAT) is an understudied phenomenon that deserves more research (Perry, 2024).

For the purposes of this paper, RSAT discussion and analysis will centre around North American Evangelical Christian contexts. This is for two reasons. First, it is one of the two dominant religious sects within Canada and the United States (the other being Catholicism) at 14% of the American population and about 20% of the Canadian population (Cornelissen, 2021; Public Religion Research Institute, 2021). The large population make up is enough to warrant a need to research this community. While there is significant overlap between Catholic and Evangelical sub-cultures, the highlighted focus will remain upon Evangelical Christianity, however much of what will be discussed may apply to the Catholic context as well.

Second, the other reason why exclusive attention will be paid to Evangelical Christianity is because I grew up in and spent most of my life in that environment (which will be expanded upon more in the positionality section). It is a subculture I know and understand well. Religion relates to culture with reciprocal influence. As a white cis-het male who grew up in a predominantly white area of Canada, I feel it inappropriate for me to critique any religion in which I have limited to no experience in or cultural ties towards. I cannot adequately speak towards the experiences of other religions.

Complicatedly, Evangelicalism holds many different meanings (Newport, 2023). If one were to ask ten Christians what it meant, there is a good possibility they may receive ten different answers. In short, this term can define a culture and a theological belief. Due to the

diversity of churches that fit within this label, it can be hard to pin exactly what community is being referred to. Theology is certainly more nuanced than this paper could ever hope to communicate. A disclaimer needs to be made that much of what this paper discusses theologically, will be generalized and more impact focused than theologically focused.

When the focus is narrowed to "White Evangelicalism," there is a general script that many churches within that label follow. Many tend to follow patriarchal modes of church conduct. Theologies such as complementarianism work in tandem with patriarchy to keep women in subservient positions under men (Du Mez, 2020). Biblical manhood and womanhood are often preached from a patriarchal understanding of the Bible (Du Mez, 2020). These ideas can cast hierarchies, holding men in positions of authority over women as the spiritual protectors of their family unit. Heteronormativity is strongly reinforced in these spaces, while toxic ideals of masculinity can be prominent as well (Perry & Whitehead, 2021). Original sin as a doctrine that believes everyone is born sinful and broken creates a personal disposition that is vulnerable to negative self-esteem and general negative view of the self (Downie, 2022).

It is some of these prescriptions that lead to the marginalization of those who do not fit within the narrow ideal of how men and women ought to be in the church. These marginalized people are vulnerable to certain abuses within the church. Ultimately, Evangelicalism is predominantly concerned with the soul and its eternal destination (McBride, 2023). This concentration can carry one toward a disembodied outlook where physical sensations typically are attributed to spiritual origins. This act of ignoring bodily messages or avoiding unresolved issues is called spiritual bypassing (Anderson, 2023). Ultimately, this paper theorizes that doctrines like original sin and patriarchal customs ultimately do church members a disservice by requiring rejecting certain aspects of their humanity. They do not get to embrace the fullness of

their humanity. Whether it is a man rejecting the feminine aspects of human experience because he needs to strictly adhere to traditional masculine values, or a woman who rejects her bodily warning signs as "spiritual attacks," this denial and violation of one's humanity is a major contributor to RSAT.

Evangelical sub-culture is enormous and holds an equally enormous influence over the socio-political culture within North America. For example, Donald Trump rode the support of 81% of Evangelicals towards his presidential victory in 2016, while garnering 75% of their support in 2020 (Sherwood, 2020). Moreover, coupled with this massive influence and power, the Evangelical church has been exposed for a myriad of scandals involving high profile "celebrity" pastors abusing their positions of authority over others. Examples include Mark Driscoll's fostering of an abusive church culture at Seattle's Mars Hill, Brian Houston covering up his father's sexual abuse at Hillsong Church, and Karl Lentz's alleged sexual abuse of Hillsong congregants are a few of the most notable abuse scandals to emerge in the past decade (Cosper, 2021; Johnstone et al., 2022). Despite how well documented patterns of abuse within the Evangelical Church are, there is a dearth of resources and literature speaking towards religious trauma and caring after the event(s) (Björkmark et al., 2021).

Purpose Statement

This paper will aim to define RSAT, identify how systems of patriarchy and colonization cause RSAT and present therapeutic modalities, alternative theologies, and tangible actions churches can take as helpful responses. Overall, the goal here is twofold. First, to offer hope and comfort to any RSAT survivors who may be reading this. You are not alone, and you are not forgotten. May you feel validated and seen as you read this. Second, is for church members and leaders to understand what practices and policies contribute to the harmful alienation and

marginalization to certain church members. Hopefully, some best practices can be extracted from this paper to create a more trauma informed church culture that safeguards against the risks for RSAT in their communities.

Contribution to the Field

I believe this paper provides a comprehensive understanding of what is still largely an understudied phenomenon (Perry, 2024). Further, my hope is that this paper can offer various paths of healing for both individuals and communities. This paper aims to speak towards this issue from both therapeutic and theological perspectives. These perspectives are not mutually exclusive, and this paper intends to convey why. A reclamation of one's faith can contribute to a healing path that allows them to love themselves and others more fully. Likewise, leaving a toxic faith altogether can be just as beneficial to a person. This paper seeks to offer a holistic approach towards healing from RSAT without questioning the validity or wholeness behind one's healing methods, especially in terms of including or excluding spirituality.

Chapter two's sub themes were chosen because of the connections between themselves along with the links they have to the potential remedies introduced in chapter three. I believe the connections help explain RSAT, it's origins and what possible treatments can be effective for survivors' healing. Evangelical Christianity will be explored as a culture and a system where RSAT occurs. Understanding this subculture is foundational to progressing my research. Examining contributors towards RSAT experiences such as various theologies that inform church cultures along with Evangelicalism's patriarchal and colonial roots will help contextualize how RSAT is manufactured and why certain new sub-cultural practices will be advised. Subsequently, RSAT as an experience will be discussed to demonstrate why treatments such as narrative, embodiment and AEDP will be suggested. Overall, this paper works as a

synthesis of personal exploration in the literature wherein RSAT is thoroughly studied and analyzed through a feminist, justice and constructivist approach. Constructivism plays a large role in my interaction with chapter three due to personal experiences in the church and in personal interests behind embodiment, AEDP and narrative therapeutical approaches.

Personal Positioning

I am a twenty-nine year old white, cis-het man who was born and raised in Chilliwack, British Columbia. As part of the Eastern Fraser Valley, the region has been colloquially known as the "bible-belt of B.C." (Kennedy, 2021). I grew up in a Mennonite Brethren church where I attended until age twenty-five. I also did my undergraduate studies at a bible college in my early twenties. While I fondly regard my church upbringing and college experience, I also encountered adverse experiences in other Christian settings that I years later understood as religious trauma.

My understanding of Christian theology transformed radically throughout my twenties. I suppose I would identify myself as a progressive Christian, however I still feel trepidation identifying completely with "Christian" as a label. As my social, political and historical consciousness developed, I had greater difficulty reconciling my transformed faith with rhetoric taught in many North American churches today. Much of which I was taught in my upbringing.

My white cis-het male privilege protected me from much of the hurtful historical actions relayed by the church via colonialism and harmful messaging informed by patriarchal values. It also made me ignorant of, dismissive and generally complicit with much of what this paper will criticize. Re-evaluating my faith enabled me to reconcile many inner tensions that existed when I held more dogmatic views. I have been able to love others in a more holistic way, accept the multiplicity of truths and explore the connections between my multiple passions as a way of fully embracing my humanity.

I hope this paper does not read like a brutal critique of white Evangelical Christianity, though it may come across like it at times. Rather, the intention is to dissect how fundamentalist theology rejects the connection between spirituality (mind) and the human condition (body) while simultaneously seeking how to restore that in church cultures and in people's internalized experiences. Once more, I do not want to limit this goal to just a religious context, as again I believe faith is a pluralistic experience, that contains space for infinite modes of expression.

Key Terms

Accelerated Experiential-Dynamic Psychotherapy (AEDP)

An experiential therapy that involves processing emotional and relational wounds via the support of a therapist. The aim is to access the core state of a person to achieve more harmonious functioning (Foscha, 2000).

Biblical Manhood

Christian masculine ideals that are based on biblical interpretation. For this paper, I will examine the biblical interpretation that aligns manhood with traditional western views of masculinity (Perry & Whitehead, 2021).

Biblical Womanhood

Christian feminine ideals that are based on a biblical interpretation. For this paper, I will examine the biblical interpretation that understands womanhood through traditional western gender analysis (Perry & Whitehead, 2021).

Complementarianism

Christian theological belief that men and women were created equally before God but were made for distinctly separate roles. A main distinction is that positions of leadership and family headship are set aside for men only (Rogers, 2020).

Conversion Therapy

Christian faith based therapeutic interventions aimed at reducing same sex desires in clients. This therapy has been debunked by many health organizations and has been banned in several jurisdictions (Babits, 2024).

Egalitarianism

Christian theological belief that men and women were created equally before God and have equal access to all opportunities and roles (Rogers, 2020).

Embodiment

Therapeutic practice where consciousness is raised towards sensations that the body is feeling. This works towards building up mind and body connection through actions such as grounding, mindfulness, self-kindness and self-acceptance (Anderson, 2023).

Evangelicalism

A sect of Christianity that makes up a theological and cultural identity. Encompassing several different protestant denominations, the bulk of white, North American Christianity can fit under this label (Smidt, 2019).

Feminist Theology

Christian theology that critically reflects on the subjugation of women within historical and contemporary Christian theology. It challenges patriarchal norms within the church and aims to broaden the visions of what it means live out “biblical manhood and womanhood.” (Haddad & Esposito, 2020).

High Control Religion

A faith community that requires strict obedience and adherence to its customs and theology. It discourages members from questioning its principles and practices and discourages

close relationships outside of the group. Typically, one faces ostracization if they leave the faith at all (Anderson, 2023; McBride, 2023).

Liberation Theology

Christian theology that critically reflects on the private and corporate suffering of the marginalized from their oppressors. It highlights Jesus' social justice and advocacy work on earth and promotes a biblical interpretation in which God seeks justice for humanity and liberation for the oppressed. This theology was particularly popular amongst Black Christians in apartheid South Africa and Christians in Latin America (Singer, n.d.).

Narrative Therapy

A form of therapy that externalizes one's problems. This empowers clients to make changes to thought patterns and behaviours in efforts to rewrite their life story in a way reflects their true selves (Manda, 2015).

Original Sin Doctrine

A contemporary Christian doctrine that believes due to Adam and Eve's sin in the beginning of the Bible, all of humanity is inherently sinful. People are born into sinfulness due to humanity's loss of innocence (Downie, 2022).

Original Blessing

A Christian doctrine centred around the understanding that God first blessed all of creation before Adam and Eve's first sin. Therefore, all people and living beings possess a divine blessing from God. Consequently, this means each person and living being ought to be revered for the sacred beings that they are. People are not seen as automatically fallen, but are cherished for their inherent worth and value (Fox, 2000).

Patriarchy

A system of beliefs and values embedded in political, social and economic systems that reinforce gender inequality, where men are upheld in privileged positions (Nash, 2020).

Purity Culture

Values taught by Evangelical Christianity that promote strict sexual ethics such as abstinence and heterosexual marriage (Natarajan et al., 2022).

Queer Theology

A Christian theology centred around normalizing the historical existence of 2SLGBTQIA+ peoples, including in the Bible. Branching from that, heteronormative structures within Christian theology are dismantled such as God's gender (Dicknson & Toomey, 2017).

Religious/Spiritual Abuse and Trauma (RSAT)

Physical, spiritual, psychological, and emotional damages that come from adverse religious experiences (McBride, 2023).

Spiritual Bypassing

A psychological defense mechanism where spiritual ideas or practices are utilized to avoid addressing emotional and psychological stressors or wounds. (McBride, 2023).

Trauma

A physiological, psychological, emotional and spiritual response to a hurtful or disturbing event(s) (Anderson, 2023).

White Evangelicals

The majority group within North American Evangelicalism that tend to be socially and politically conservative. As a voting group, white Evangelicals hold major influence over conservative political parties in Canada and the United States (Du Mez, 2020).

Chapter Outlines

This study contains three chapters. Chapter two will be a literature review that overviews four themes. First is further defining what Evangelicalism is in North America. This will contain exploring what theologies are commonly taught from the pulpit, cultural norms that exist within this sect, and its colonial roots. This includes describing patriarchy's place in Evangelicalism through outlining practices that subjugate women, uphold heteronormativity, and white supremacy. Once these sub-cultural elements are defined, the paper will transition to the second theme of outlining what adverse religious experiences (ARE's) are and differentiating spiritual abuse from religious abuse. The third theme defines high control religions (HCR's) and details common cultural structures among them as well as common HCR leader traits. In addition, this section attempts to illustrate how some North American churches embody HCR traits. The final theme discusses the impacts on survivors of RSAT experience. This comprises physiological, psychological, developmental, social, emotional and spiritual outcomes for RSAT survivors.

Chapter three will propose potentially helpful therapeutic techniques for addressing harms caused by RSAT. Therapeutic modalities such as embodiment practice, accelerated experiential-dynamic psychotherapy (AEDP), and narrative therapy will be introduced along with general suggestions for therapists. Beyond this, alternative theologies will be explored as possible ways to decolonize the church on both an individual and collective level. Finally, best practices for church leaders and members for fostering a safe, trauma-informed church environment will be highlighted.

Chapter Two

Before proposing any sort of a solution to a problem, the problem must first be comprehensively understood. The intention of this chapter is to analyze religious/spiritual abuse and trauma (RSAT) to the point where the reader is informed on what structures and beliefs facilitate an environment where RSAT can occur along with learning about the experience for those subjected to RSAT. This chapter will present an overview on North American Evangelicalism and certain theologies it promotes within that can lead to RSAT. Subsequently, this chapter will provide a literature review on findings behind how RSAT can really be described, the differentiation between religious trauma and adverse religious experiences (ARE's), and finally the impacts felt by RSAT survivors.

North American Evangelicalism: A Primer

Defining an Evangelical difficult. The term Evangelical is notoriously fluid (Newport, 2023). Yet oddly enough within Christian circles, Evangelicalism is simultaneously indefinable yet also universally understood. Christianity today has roughly over 45, 000 denominations (Coffey, 2022). It is generally divided between Catholics and Protestants, with Evangelicalism falling within Protestantism. Moreover, North American Protestantism can further be divided between Evangelical and mainline denominations (Chan & Ecklund, 2016). However, Evangelical and mainline traditions are not only separated by denominational lines. They are also distinguished by church operations in tradition, belief and values (Chan & Ecklund, 2016). Theoretically Evangelical and mainline churches could operate within the same denomination. With that, Chan and Ecklund (2016) help delineate some differences that distinguish the two traditions. Mainline protestants tend to be more accepting of science, the separation between church and state, and flexible with social interpretations of the Bible. Conversely, Evangelicals

are more likely to be beholden to a literal biblical interpretation and harbour a greater concern for injecting Christian influence into secular society (Chan & Ecklund, 2016).

Smidt's (2019) article breaks down the three main frameworks from which people define Evangelicalism. His first framework understands Evangelicalism as an adherence to religious beliefs. His second framework categorizes Evangelicalism as membership in a religious tradition while the third framework describes it as a religious movement where self identification identifies one as an Evangelical. While there are elements of all three at play here, Smidt (2019) expresses a preference for the religious tradition model. His reasoning is that tradition's definition is sociologically based. Evangelicals are a sub-culture in North America that carry a major social influence (Adams, 2021; Delehanty et al., 2019; Du Mez, 2020; Sherwood, 2020; Smidt, 2019; Tisby, 2019). Therefore, a sociologically informed definition seems most fitting to Smidt (2019). The belief framework rests on a cognitive foundation while the movement framework was more psychologically driven Smidt argues (2019). Further, Smidt (2019) suggests that a definition based on beliefs can be inconclusive given the debatable nature of what constitutes Evangelical beliefs. Moreover, a definition based on a religious movement where self identification is all that is required makes for a less conclusive identification of Evangelicalism.

Branching from the religious tradition model, David W. Bebbington's (2021) quadrilateral further expounds the main characteristics and concerns of Evangelicalism as a social entity. It considers four main tenants of Evangelicalism. First is conversion, in which Christianity ought to expand by winning over converts. Evangelizing to the world and creating new believers is an ultimate mission of the church. His second point is activism where Evangelicals ought to engage in action that honours God and their traditions. This can be seen in American history with rise of groups like the Moral Majority in the 1970's and 80's that led to

Evangelicalism's binding to the Republican party (Du Mez, 2020; Tisby, 2019). It is evident in how the group's voting power alone is recognized by right wing parties in Canada and the United States and influences their shaping of policies in hopes of attracting votes (Delehanty et al., 2019). Activism can also take the shape of missionary trips, where numerous organizations have sprouted up globally for the purpose of mixing humanitarian work with evangelism. Third is biblicism, which pertains to a commitment to a literal interpretation of the Bible (Bebbington, 2021). Finally, the fourth pillar is crucicentrism which describes a strong belief in Jesus' death on the cross and the salvation they believe it brings. Belief in this is the most important aspect of the tradition (Bebbington, 2021). This is an especially consequential belief as it stands to separate Evangelicals from the rest of the world by categorizing everyone either as "believers" or "non-believers." This serves as a distinct way of othering themselves from the rest of the world which carries many consequences. Primarily that "non-believers" are subject to eternal damnation in Hell and need conversion. Secondly, those that are not interested in converting are then to be feared or even avoided so that "believers" may be kept safe from stumbling. Overall, this is a closed epistemology that contributes to the formation of a superiority complex when regarding other faith traditions.

Patriarchy and Heteronormativity

A prominent feature in many churches within Evangelical Christianity is patriarchy's influence. Copley (2022) defines patriarchy in literal terms as, "rule of the father." The author supposes that patriarchy operates on two levels, structure and ideology. Structure consists of a dominant group (men) and a subservient group (women). However, Copley (2022) is quick to note that complimenting that binary is corresponding hierarchies informed by other elements such as heteronormativity, race, class etc. Coinciding with this is ideologies that work to

internalize a justification for the structure within the subservient group. This aids in fostering acceptance and mitigates the risk of rebellion. Copley's (2022) description of patriarchy summarizes it in a secular context; however, it is apparent how patriarchy's structure fits within Evangelicalism once one becomes more familiar with its common doctrines.

An example of an ideology within Evangelical Christianity that serves this function is the theology of complementarianism. This ideal promotes that men and women were created equally. However, it also states that while their value is equal, each gender is destined to fulfill distinctly separate roles (Rogers, 2020). With this, the main distinction is that roles of leadership and authority are set out for men only while roles related to caregiving for children and others are reserved for women. 1 Timothy 2:12 is often used as a main biblical basis for this belief (*New International Version Bible,* 2011). The belief that men and women are equal in these spaces is paradoxical considering that roles of leadership and authority carry tangible privileges in comparison to the roles reserved for women. This belief in rigid gender roles and male authority is consequential to much of how church cultures and systems become established. Conversely, it should be noted that many churches within Evangelicalism hold an egalitarian view in which women have just as much a claim to leadership roles as men (Rogers, 2020). In a 2022 poll of 1000 various protestant pastors, it was found that 55% come from a church that accepts women to be lead pastors (Foley, 2022). However, it should be noted that there are some denominations such as the Southern Baptist Convention that strictly forbid women from holding such positions (Foley, 2022). Further, only 3% of Evangelical congregations within the United States employ a woman as lead pastor (Rowell, 2022).

Copley (2022) elaborates upon another dominant power structure that exists to divide women into separate categories of "respectable" and "not-respectable." This division aims to

limit the power women could have as a unified collective. Copley (2022) described the Madonna/Whore dichotomy as a contemporary societal example. An example in Evangelicalism can be the dichotomous purity culture labels of the morally degenerate Jezebel versus the honour of purity and virginity (Du Mez, 2020).

Biblical manhood and womanhood are also values that are taught frequently in these spaces, be it from the weekly sermon or through reinforcement in men's and women's fellowship groups in churches. These are preached from the bible through a patriarchal lens that seeks to inculcate rigid gender role values within the church. According to Perry and Whitehead (2021), biblical manhood is taught more to reflect modern western hegemonic masculine ideals such as strength, stoicism, success and dominance (Levant et al., 2013). This obfuscates the Ancient Near Eastern masculinity portrayed in the Bible's historical period. Perry and Whitehead (2021) share that these messages seemed to intensify within the American Evangelical church back in the 1990's and 2000's in response to gains the secular feminist movement made in society. This can be seen with the rise of prominent celebrity pastor figures such as Mark Driscoll who made a career out of scolding men for their "pussification" (Cosper, 2021; Du Mez, 2020; Perry & Whitehead, 2021). Spiritual strength is conflated with physical strength as men are called to both reclaim their masculinity by embracing patriarchal standards, and teach their sons these values as soon as possible (Perry & Whitehead, 2021). Ultimately, this rhetoric seeks to uphold patriarchal values within the church and reinforce men as ultimate authority bearers. Ironically, Perry and Whitehead (2021) inform how this intense pressure from the pulpit culminated in Evangelical men reporting more insecurity in their masculinity compared to men outside of the subculture.

On the other hand, biblical womanhood often teaches women to uphold the posture of a submissive wife, who is dedicated to being a homemaker and a nurturing mother (Held Evans,

2012). Passages such as Titus 2:3-5 and 1 Peter 3:4 are used to promote submission, gentleness and quietness (*New International Version Bible,* 2011). While the ultimate beacon of biblical womanhood is described in Proverbs 31 from which many women in the church are highly encouraged to emulate (2011). These gender role values are carried beyond just church leadership. A recent viral moment arose this year when Kansas City Chiefs kicker Harrison Butker spoke at Benedictine College's graduation ceremony addressing women graduates urging them to give up their potential careers for the sake of living out their calling of being homemakers (Mendoza, 2024). Overall, these teachings on prescribed gender roles instill a hierarchy within the church that marginalizes women and disproportionately empowers men.

Purity Culture. Purity culture is a massive ideology where the patriarchal and heteronormative hierarchy is exploited. Purity culture arose in the 1970's in response to the sexual liberation movement of the 1960's (Natarajan et al., 2022). It is a movement within Evangelicalism that champions heterosexual marriage as the only context wherein sex is condoned (Natarajan et al., 2022). Purity culture's influence peaked in the 1990's and early 2000's, though its remnants still very much remain to this day. Organizations such as True Love Waits gained much influence not just inside church youth groups, but also in American school systems too (Gish, 2018). Millions of youths signed the pledges and billions of dollars in federal funding went towards abstinence based sex education as purity culture was able to successfully cultivate a secular public health image in its branding (Gish, 2018). Of course, overwhelming evidence now demonstrates how ineffective abstinence based sex education is (Gish, 2018).

Criticisms of purity culture stem from the double standards that were frequently taught to youth. Men's sexual impulses were often characterized as natural and animalistic while, women's sexual feelings were viewed as more calculated and controllable (Estrada, 2022). This belief

firmly placed an onus on women to be the gatekeepers of sex for Christian youth. Women were tasked with dressing modestly, being sure not to "lead a man astray" with their words or actions, and to understand their own sexual urges as unnatural and sinful (2022). Virginity was upheld as the ultimate form of purity, with messaging communicated specifically to women on the consequences of pre-marital sex. Messages rooted in fear described the loss of value a woman would face should she have sex before marriage. Virginity is seen as the ultimate gift a woman can give her husband. Losing it before marriage would liken them to a peeled off sticker, crushed styrofoam cup, or an incomplete flower (Gish, 2018). Ultimately these metaphors commodified women and their sexuality as something that their worth is stored in. An unmarried woman without virginity is without worth under this system. This can be seen in how a woman is regarded as needing her father and then husband to protect her from sexual missteps (Klement & Sagarin, 2017).

Another consequence of purity culture is its contributions to rape culture. Klement and Sagarin (2017) outline four factors that contribute to rape culture. First is rape myth acceptance which amounts to calling into question a victim's credibility when reporting a rape. Second is victim blaming which is tightly connected to purity culture's prescriptions for how women ought to dress and act. Third is normalizing sexual violence which could connect to the normalizing of men's sexual urges as animalistic and uncontrollable. Fourth is hostile sexism which is revealed in the second class citizenship women typically carry within conservative Evangelical circles. Many of these messages taught women to accept responsibility for instances of sexual harassment, as it usually meant that they were not upholding to their duty of modesty (2017). Consequently, shame would be a natural internal disposition for women to take. Further, purity culture and biblical womanhood's messages of submission to men was communicated as "God's

Plan." Ultimately, this could create internally conflicting situations of needing to preserve one's virginity but also needing to submit to a man's sexual desires to obey male authority. Further internal conflict also existed for women who faced encouragement to live up to conventional beauty standards as part of traditional femininity while also maintaining modesty (2017).

Additionally, Franz (2002) lists six common beliefs in Evangelical church culture that support perpetrators of sexual abuse. First is the belief of male headship with God intending for men to lead over women. Thus, this compromises women's agency. Second Franz (2002) mentions the belief that women are morally inferior to men, citing Eve's leading of Adam into sin in Genesis 3 (*New International Version Bible,* 2011). This again justifies a man's direction over a woman. Third Franz (2002) argues the belief that children are evil and need to have their wills broken to submit to their parent's authority. In fairness, how mainstream that belief is questionable. Reflecting on personal experience, this belief may be more akin to older generations within Evangelical culture and currently would be more in line within a high control religious environment. Considering Franz's article is from 2002, that belief may have been more mainstream in the time the article was written. Fourth is that marriage is the ultimate good and that it must be preserved at all costs. This encourages episodes of abuse within marriage to be overlooked or ignored as the sacredness of matrimony must be protected. Fifth is that suffering is seen as a Christian virtue (Franz, 2002). Romans 5:3-5, which speaks to rejoicing in one's sufferings, can often be misused as a way for people to shame victims from speaking up or taking any action against their abusers. (*New International Version Bible,* 2011). Finally, forgiveness as the ultimate command for God's followers can often be exploited by abusers and abusive church structures. Forgiveness and reconciliation are often conflated within the church

and a patriarchal church culture will likely coerce a female victim into forgiving and reconciling with their perpetrator not on their terms (Franz, 2002).

Internal conflict is a major consequence from purity culture teachings. Laura Anderson (2023) discusses disembodiment in high control religions and how much more pronounced it is under purity culture. Essentially Anderson (2023) describes how members are taught to distrust their body's natural feelings as "tokens of the flesh" that mislead a person into sin. This distrust in one's bodily messages can have major consequences, especially on the sexual maturation of a person. Estrada (2022) highlights how the sexual consequences manifest for adults.

Estrada (2022) writes that women who subscribe to traditional gender roles are at higher risk of both mental and sexual health issues. Estrada (2022) illuminates the double standard youth were taught in how sex is something to be avoided at all costs, however once it is their wedding night, the gates of repression can be flung open, and sex can be enjoyed to its fullest. Laura Anderson (2023)reveals how often this instant cognitive change in sexual attitude is paired with the body's delayed somatic acceptance of sex as permissible. The body has been subject to a message of sex being wrong for so long, that it cannot make that evaluation change so quick. It needs sexual experiences coupled with positive affirmations to transform the view of sex (2023). That is why there are numerous testaments of people reporting massive feelings of shame and regret after consummating a marriage, despite following purity culture's teachings closely.

Additionally, Estrada (2022) writes that another common teaching in purity culture is that women need to satisfy their husband's sexual drives to keep him from sinning sexually (via affairs, abuse, porn usage etc.). She reports that women under this teaching are 79% more likely to have sex out of obligation. Further she also states that women who have sex out of obligation are 37% more likely to experience pain during intercourse. Again, internal conflict/confusion can

also arise where in some cases the body may experience pleasurable sensations paired with shame filled emotions, or even pain paired with thoughts such as, “this is okay to do now, I should be enjoying this.” Like most other things regarding purity culture, men also can experience sexual health issues, however it is typically to a lesser severity compared to women on average (Estrada, 2022). To reiterate, purity culture’s main function serves patriarchal and heteronormative systems. The next section will discuss more on how heteronormativity dominates Evangelical spaces.

Heteronormative Dominance. North American Evangelicalism’s patriarchal and colonial roots inform a heteronormative dominance within the subculture. However, as the 2SLGBTQIA+ community continues its work for equality and justice, parts of the overall Christian church are making movements towards affirmation of the queer community. Mark Yarhouse (2015) outlines three typical postures Christian churches hold regarding the queer community. First is an integrity stance where a queer identity is understood as a choice that deviates from God’s will. Thereby judging one’s queer identity to be sinful. Second is a disability stance where queer identities are regarded as mental illnesses due to the fallen world that people live in. Third is a diversity viewpoint where queer identities are seen as a natural part of human experience and deserve acceptance.

Conservative Evangelical churches will likely subscribe either to the first or second posture, or even a combination of them both. Hollier et al. (2022) speak to the experience of queer people in Australian Evangelical churches. They outline experiences ranging from social ostracization in the church, being told they were a threat to the community, encouraged to be celibate or have their sexuality erased, and in some cases subjected to conversion therapy (2022). This article reveals the antagonism faced by the queer community from conservative

Evangelicals and how minority stress theory suggests the gravity of the impact the antagonism has on their mental well being. Further, Hollier et al. (2022), discuss minority stress theory's effect on queer people in the church. Minority stress theory argues that members of minorities face stresses unique to their identities daily which can result in negative mental health outcomes (2022). These stresses are then reinforced by the compounding micro and macro aggressions that were dealt to queer church members. Finally, Hollier et al. (2022) make an important observation in that what makes queer church members' minority stress experiences unique compared to secular queer folks is that the discrimination perpetrated against them was always committed by an identified family member, church leader, close friend or an acquaintance within the church community. This closer relational proximity carried a larger emotional impact than it otherwise might had the perpetrator just been a stranger (2022). There were larger identified impacts in a relational, emotional and internal sense. Suggesting that a stronger sense of internalized homophobia may be adopted more quicky (2022).

Thomas (2023) also lists three domains in which queer people experience RSAT. First is structural via institutional rules such as exclusive support for heterosexual marriage or forbidding queer people from taking on any leadership roles within the church. Second is interpersonal which refers to rejection, stigma and violence one may face for their sexual orientation in addition to a heavy feeling of needing to conceal one's sexuality in order to conform to the group. Third is an intrapersonal level wherein one may carry internalized negative feelings of homophobia or transphobia and experience sexual and/or gender identity conflict. This conflict arises especially considering the contrast their natural feelings have to the staunchly heteronormative sexual and gender ethics they have been inculcated with (Thomas, 2023). Overall, heteronormativity dominates the sexual principles inside conservative Evangelicalism.

White Supremacy and Colonial Roots

North American Evangelicalism has Eurocentric roots, and is a product of colonialism. Delehanty et al. (2019) suggest that white Evangelicalism's proposed national identity is a narrow one where their values often exclude non-whites, "undeserving poor," atheists, Muslims, and 2SLGBTQIA+ folks. However, in fairness, this identity exists on a spectrum where fervent subscribers to it relate more closely to white, Christian Nationalist extremism (which contains many white Evangelicals) rather than typical, average white Evangelicalism. However, an interesting point that the authors note is that the white Evangelical identity is just as much a racial one as it is a religious one though the racial piece of that likely may be more of an implicit belief as opposed to an explicit one (Delehanty et al., 2019).

This section will examine how these origins impact racialized persons within the church and the broader culture. Further, Evangelicalism's political ties and activism will be discussed in how it relates to the church's colonial origins. Before delving further, it bears mentioning that much of this analysis will not solely apply to Evangelicalism, but rather to a broader North American Christianity that includes Catholicism and mainline Protestantism.

Christianity and the Indigenous Peoples of Turtle Island. Hillary McBride (2023) in her podcast, *Holy Hurt* describes the concept of historical trauma as a traumatic event that occurs to a people group and carries lasting intergenerational repercussions. Historical trauma can be viewed as a communal manifestation of complex posttraumatic stress disorder (CPTSD) (McBride, 2023). Examples could include Jewish people who lived through the Holocaust and its impacts on their descendants, Black Americans descending from slaves and from people that lived and endured the Jim Crow era South, and descendants of Palestinians today who are enduring genocidal horrors in Gaza and the West Bank. Another case where historical,

intergenerational trauma is present is for indigenous people who have faced numerous historical traumas ranging from genocidal starvation and disease infection policies/practices pre-20th century to church run residential schools (Daschuk, 2013). These practices followed a colonial mindset that has strong ties to the church.

The *Doctrine of Discovery* was a set of legal principles issued by the Catholic church in the 15th and 16th centuries that determined Turtle Island to be open for claims to any Christian (European) nations as indigenous populations were not considered civilized, therefore declaring the land to be uninhabited (Hele, 2023). Many Indigenous peoples refer to North America as Turtle Island, originating from numerous oral histories from various nations (Robinson, 2018). With that, nations over the course of the next several hundreds of years colonized the land in conjunction with missionaries, aimed at Christianizing and extracting value from the lands. Residential schools instilled in the 19th century in Canada along with the institution of the Indian Act in 1876 set in motion apartheid like policies that followed principles of white supremacy (Daschuk, 2013). The atrocities that occurred in Canadian residential schools (run by Christian churches) are becoming more widely known as of recent years (McBride, 2023). Moreover, the historical, intergenerational traumatic consequences also are gaining space in the public consciousness. All of this to say there are direct religious and spiritual components linked to the settler colonial violence inflicted upon Turtle Island's indigenous peoples.

Christianity and Slavery. Christianity also had a role in the enslavement of African people during this time frame. A common justification used back then was an interpretation around the "Curse of Ham" in Genesis 9:20-27 (*New International Version Bible*, 2011). In short, Ham is a son of Noah who commits a shameful act against Noah, causing Noah to curse Ham and his descendants. Stating that his descendants will always be subject to Ham's brother's

descendants (2011). The “Curse of Ham” interpretation presupposes that those living on Africa’s west coast are Ham’s descendants, and consequentially ought to be enslaved to pay for Ham’s sin (Tisby, 2019). Enslavers recognized themselves as the descendants of Ham’s brothers due to how “advanced” and “civilized” their societies were comparatively (Tisby, 2019). Not only did this justify slavery, but this theology also promoted views of moral and physical superiority over BIPOC peoples (Howard & Sommers, 2019). Slavery was a major element of American Evangelicalism so much so that the Southern Baptist Convention (which is the largest Evangelical denomination in America today) started in 1845 as a schism from the Northern Baptists (Katz, 2022). This schism was over slavery as the Northern Baptists moved to denounce slavery while the Southern Baptists wanted to uphold it (Katz, 2022).

It is worth noting that it was Evangelical, William Wilberforce’s advocacy for ending slavery in the British Empire in 1833 (Tisby, 2019). By extension, other Evangelicals have been lionized for their work in support of abolition and the Civil Rights movement, however Tisby’s (2019) historical account of the American church illuminates how these Evangelicals were the exception rather than the norm for their times. For example, despite the North’s reputation of being more accepting of racialized persons, Northern churches were complicit in twentieth century racist policies. In large cities such as Chicago or Detroit, churches participated in “white flight” by leaving their communities for growing white ones in the suburbs which contributed to the growing racial segregation in these cities’ geodemographics at the time (Tisby, 2019).

The “Curse of Ham” theology has since lost a lot of influence over the years though it still has its proponents. Harrison Mooney (2022) wrote in his memoir about first encountering that theology as a Black, preteen boy attending a church in 1990’s rural Abbotsford, British Columbia. An American preacher spoke in his church about how Black people’s “sinful nature”

is because of the "Curse of Ham." He expresses feelings of deep shame as he endured stares from the whole congregation. He received assurances from congregants that they would not let him fall into his nature along with other condescending remarks (2022). This exemplifies how attitudes of paternalism mix with moral superiority complexes to fuel white supremacist theologies (Howard & Sommer, 2019). Religious imagery also contributes to these mindsets.

Whitewashed Religious Imagery. A consequence of colonial roots in North American Christianity is whitewashed imagery of its various figures. Aside from it likely being an inaccuracy due to the Ancient Near Eastern origins of Christianity, there are other ripple effects from such imagery (Howard et al., 2022). One is these create God images for people that can then be linked to bias prejudices of morality versus immorality. For example, white depictions of Jesus (God's son) imply to people that God is also white, which can carry a sense of moral superiority attached to whiteness (Howard & Sommers, 2019). Howard et al. (2022) describe how often religions are practiced within races. Despite Christianity being a global and ethnically diverse religion, denominations and separate churches are largely divided by race. Howard et al. (2022) share how this intra-racial component within religion can cause members to see other races as part of a religious out group. Essentially working this paired white religious imagery (especially of Jesus Christ) can cause subtle attitudes of white supremacy to seep into one's mind (Howard & Sommers, 2019).

This can also apply to God images that portray God as a man and every biblical figure as heterosexual. Such ontological understandings of these figures carry underlying implications on how one views the world. Howard et al. (2022) report that those who understand God as strictly male are more likely to subscribe to traditional gender roles, heteronormative principles and conservative politics. Additionally, white male God concepts were found to lead one to be more

supportive of the overall status quo in their church culture and broader society (2022). Another implicit message behind whitewashed religious figures is tied to purity culture.

Whiteness and Purity Culture. While modern day critiques of purity culture are prevalent, most come from white female voices that tend to overlook the racialized woman's experience in purity culture (Natarajan et al., 2022). Natarajan et al. (2022) utilize critical race feminism (CRF) to examine how race and gender collaborate to create social inequality. Modesty prescriptions for women typically modeled white ideals around femininity. Cooper (2016) argues in her column that as slavery removed bodily agency from Black people, purity culture aims to do this again to Black women so that they may conform to white ideals around womanhood.

CRF discusses how Black bodies are historically and presently fetishized within white supremacy (Natarajan et al., 2022). Be it in popular media or within purity culture. Anderson et al. (2018) touch on the Jezebel stereotype that persists within purity culture. Jezebel is a biblical figure known for her moral shortcomings and seductive nature (Anderson et al., 2018). The Jezebel is depicted as an evil seductress who derails men from the path of sexual purity and righteousness (Anderson et al., 2018). This stereotype has largely been attributed to Black women which results in objectification and shaming for Black women. Beyond the objectification and shaming, violence is also a possible response to those who are subjected to this stereotype. An extreme case can be the Atlanta shootings that occurred in 2021 where Robert Aaron Long murdered eight people, six of them being Asian women (Tang, 2021). Long targeted Asian massage parlors, admitting to a need to eliminate the sexual temptation the women there presented to him (Tang, 2021). The intersecting identities of the victims as Asian women made them targets for Long as he was influenced by hypersexualized stereotypes related to their Asian identity and a theology that blames women for any unwanted sexual attention drawn toward

them. This atrocity is an extreme example of how the intersection of patriarchy and white supremacy uniquely harms those marginalized by these structures.

Subsequently, white images of Jesus' mother Mary convey an image of ideal womanhood that all women ought to abide by. White is then associated with purity and righteousness which then influences how racialized persons see themselves within this version of Christianity (Natarajan et al., 2022). It promotes an assimilation to traditional white beauty standards, self expression and mannerisms, ultimately serving a colonial purpose. Natarajan et al.'s (2022) article highlights accounts of people denying aspects of themselves in order to fit these ideals. Cooper (2016) shares similar personal accounts in her article along with Mooney (2022) in his memoir. Natarajan et al. (2022) finally remind us that while purity culture impacted all people, the consequences were disparate between white and racialized men and women.

Politics of North American Evangelicalism. Sparkle (2020) suggests that an Evangelical can almost be better defined by what they oppose versus what they support. On a socio-political level this can be helpful considering the influence the Evangelical voting block has over modern North American politics. Generally, Evangelical political support involves movements or politicians that are opposed to certain issues such as marriage equality or women's reproductive rights (Du Mez, 2020). Evangelical political support has traditionally been strongly linked to right wing conservative parties over the past fifty years. 81% of Evangelicals voted for Donald Trump in the 2016 election, followed by 75% in 2020 (Adams, 2021; Sherwood, 2020). A further break down shows in 2016 that 1/3 of Trumps sixty million votes were cast by Evangelicals (Adams, 2021).

Jerry Falwell's birthing of the moral majority in the 1970's set a path of unconditional Evangelical support for Republican candidates in American politics (Du Mez, 2020). Adams

(2021) outlines how fear is a major component behind Evangelical support for Republican politicians. The secular world is often demonized whether by pastors or right wing politicians and commentators to mobilize Evangelical voters. Left wing politics becomes conflated with spiritual evils further driving fear into Evangelical minds (Adams, 2021). Moreover, messages of ongoing spiritual warfare being an ever present force in the world provide a sense that the stakes are higher than ever within every political facet of North American society. When every aspect of society is attached with either demonic or angelic qualities, then political participation will be strong due to the felt involvement of eternal implications. It ought to be said however, that Evangelicals subscribe to spiritual warfare to varying levels in their daily lives. Many would be considered moderate who do not let it occupy their minds while others scrupulously base their daily decisions on a fearful obedience in every domain of their lives (Adams, 2021).

Aside from a fear based moral standpoint, power and influence over secular politics is a major motivation behind Evangelical support for right wing policies. As previously mentioned, Bebbington's (2021) quadrilateral places activism as a major value of Evangelicalism. This can explain things such as high voter turnout and fervent participation in demonstrations such as pro-life rallies and anti-SOGI protests (Wadhwani-Smith, 2018).

All in all, why does this matter? Unpacking these informative factors behind Evangelical Christianity helps one understand how implicit in and out groups are created within the church. In groups tend to be restricted to white, conservative, cishet, adult men. Everyone on the outside of these groups tends to lay at the margins to varying degrees within the church hierarchy. White adult women would be the next rung in the ladder with racialized and queer persons being further down the ladder. Despite discussing how colonialism and white supremacy inform and dominate these spaces, it is important to note that these are not homogenous spaces. People on the margins

do inhabit these spaces too. However, as part of the out group they do tend to be more vulnerable to RSAT than those from the in-group as minority stress theory suggests (Hollier et al., 2022).

Common Theologies Exploited by High Control Religious Environments

If there is anything to take away from this paper, it is that all the discussed dynamics exist on a continuum. Some churches do not embody these traits at all, others in subtle, implicit ways while others embrace all these traits in overt fashion. Laura Anderson (2023) explains the term, "High Control Religion" (HCR) to mean an environment where everything is demanded from church members. Questioning is discouraged, along with relationships outside of the faith community. Further, an HCR promises certainty to a member that their beliefs are right, thereby demanding total loyalty. A couple of theological tenants within Evangelical Christianity encourage loyalty and allow environments where abuse can thrive.

First is the doctrine of original sin which rationalizes that because of Adam and Eve's sin in Genesis 3, all of humanity is tainted with sin (*New International Version,* 2011). That is to say humans are ontologically understood as impure sinners and are destined for Hell, if not for the grace of God via Jesus' sacrifice (Downie, 2022). This viewpoint fosters an internal shame narrative around oneself. Downie (2022) criticizes that the church insufficiently distinguishes guilt from shame which allows people to feel chronic shame for sins they may have committed. Externally, original sin influences one to have a negatively skewed outlook upon others too. Original sin doctrine places great doubt in one's own human nature and ability to discern morality in their actions and thoughts. Downie (2022) argues this can lead to chronic shame where one begins to feel shame for their mere existence. This negative self regard can open one up to suggestibility from authority figures within the HCR which will be discussed further.

Connected to original sin is the doctrine of eternal damnation in Hell which Downie (2022) also highlights as a main theological component that entices people to accept authoritative control. Hell's depictions have been found to be traumatic for people (Downie, 2022). This doctrine can cause much fear and is ripe for exploitation by authorities within HCR's. Original sin's doctrines communicate that all humans are destined for Hell unless they repent and accept Christ's sacrifice. Some HCR's may require more steps to ensure salvation which can result in what Adams (2021) describes as salvation anxiety. A fear that one is unsure of their salvation and therefore submits to more fearful obedience to their authorities (Adams, 2021). Another potential condition is religious scrupulosity where the person embodies obsessive compulsive like traits and rituals to ensure their salvation (Bucholz et al., 2019). Scrupulosity and salvation anxiety can work symbiotically to both bind an individual in paranoid anxiety and also make them highly suggestive to religious authorities (Adams, 2021; Bucholz et al., 2019).

Ultimately, there is much nuance to be had behind these theologies and some conservative churches do grapple with these doctrines in a way that is constructive for them. However, taken to their extremes (which many churches do), people open themselves to being controlled by authoritative leaders, thereby exposing them to potential RSAT. The next section will discuss and provide definitions behind RSAT and adverse religious experiences (ARE's).

RSAT and Adverse Religious Experiences

Religious and Spiritual Abuse

First, it may be beneficial to breakdown RSAT and define the differences between religious and spiritual abuse versus trauma. Johnson and Van Vonderen (1991) offered one of the first definitions of religious/spiritual abuse when they described it as, "the mistreatment of a person who is in need of help, support, or greater spiritual empowerment, with the result of

weakening, undermining, or decreasing that person's spiritual empowerment" (p. 23). Further, McBride (2023) differentiates between spiritual and religious abuse by categorizing religious abuse as more overt and institutional. An example could be sexual abuse from a clergy member or ostracization from a religious community for a perceived sin. Alternatively, McBride (2023) describes spiritual abuse to be more inward where one is abused by doctrines or communal values that cause internal distress. Panchuk (2020) portrays this spiritual violence in how it can be conducted via prayer, doctrine or other customs that are weaponized against certain peoples.

While this weaponization occurs maliciously, it is also unfortunate that it can at times be done because one member genuinely believes it is the loving thing to do. Downie (2022) highlights how many Christians conflate the shaming of others as loving interjection. The Christian practice of "speaking the truth in love" is a phrase inspired by the passage Ephesians 4:15 (*New International Version Bible,* 2011). This generally refers to the practice of "correcting" someone and calling out their "sin" (Heck, 2020). While the intention behind this practice may be good in some cases, it is also a practice that is ripe for abuse where people are often shamed in the name of love.

> Alternatively, Ward (2011) takes spiritual abuse deeper by defining it as a:
>
> "misuse of power in a spiritual context whereby a spiritual authority is distorted to the detriment of those under its leadership. It is a multifaceted and multilayered experience that includes acts of commission and omission, aimed at producing conformity. It is both process and event, influencing one's inner and outer worlds and has the potential to affect the biological, psychological, social and spiritual domains of the individual." (p. 913)

This definition does well to describe just how all encompassing spiritual abuse is in a person's life. It affects every intricate realm of one's personhood.

Additionally, Koch and Edstrom (2022) extend religious/spiritual abuse's definition to include systemic elements. Actions of control and coercion are used in religious contexts to ensure that the survivor continues to adhere to the system they are being harmed by. The authors (2022) provide altering biblical scriptures for manipulation as a common example. This addition to the definition can highlight how systemic religious abuse can be. It can be bidirectional in that it is done to protect the religious ecosystem, while the ecosystem itself can work to protect the abuser. Anderson (2023) adds how sometimes abusive actions may come from good intent (like the scripture quotations for instance) but with ignorance to the interpersonal harm they cause. These behaviours can come from people who have been subject to the same system and doctrines and their allegiance to these systems can evoke pain unto others unwittingly (Anderson, 2023). It is important to highlight that religious/spiritual abuse can be perpetrated by both individual actors and by entire religious ecosystems.

Religious and Spiritual Trauma

Conversely, trauma in a general sense refers to the emotional and physical responses to intensely harmful events or periods of life (van der Kolk, 2014). Religion acts as a categorizing term that helps make sense of the trauma's nature. Panchuk (2020) outlines three characteristics found within RSAT. First, the trauma is caused by something affiliated with religion. Second, the religion played a part in the causation of the experience. Examples could be motivating the perpetrator, justifying their behaviour, or failing to protect the survivor from the experience. Third, posttraumatic effects may have religious triggers. Beyond that, Panchuk (2020) also mentions how RSAT can be spiritually disabling going forward. Meaning the survivor may have difficulty reintegrating into a religious community, engaging in spiritual activities or even maintaining a desire to do any of those activities.

Anderson (2023) further proposes that religious trauma can manifest as a form of complex posttraumatic stress disorder (CPTSD). She supports this thought through multiple rationales. First, it is complex in that religious trauma contained multiple events and messaging that occurred over an extended time period. Second is that the abuse occurred in multiple dimensions of a person's life. Not only in the religious building, but sometimes at home with caregivers. This messaging dictated every facet of a person's life, including their internal spiritual and psychological domains. Third, is that messages or abusive acts were conducted by people close to the survivor whom they trusted and loved. An example could be corporal punishment inflicted by a parent upon a child in line with church sponsored discipline. Finally, it is complex because the period of time conditioned people to generally adopt fawn and freeze trauma responses due to severe punishment for any fight or flight actions. Also, fawn/freeze responses can sometimes develop into natural dispositions for a person (Anderson, 2023).

Adverse Religious Experiences

The CDC-Kaiser Permanente study on adverse childhood experiences (ACE's) in the 1990's was groundbreaking for revealing the deep impact potentially traumatic experiences had for children later in life (Felitti et al., 1998). Much research has grown from this study and now ACE's are widely known as major determinants for future life maladies like mental health challenges, substance use, poverty, further abuse victimization etc. (van der Kolk, 2014).

Adverse religious experiences (ARE's) are a similar concept in religious trauma literature that has been inspired by the informative pieces that ACE's provide trauma researchers. ARE's are a way of categorizing and tracking religious and spiritual abuses that one encountered in their life. Slade (2022) describes, "AREs are any experience of a religious belief, practice, or structure that undermines an individual's sense of safety or autonomy and/or negatively impacts their

physical, social, emotional, relational, sexual, or psychological well-being." (para. 2). Slade expands by providing three categories that ARE's fit into (2022). First is abuse on an interpersonal level, which consists of emotional verbal, physical and sexual domains. The second category is neglect and includes the same domains as the emotional category. The final category is communal practices which describes domains such as community violence, bullying, public outing/shaming and financial exploitation amongst other things (Slade, 2022).

While these ARE types help for categorization, they do seem to oversimplify ARE's to simply being event based. Ellis et al. (2022) illuminate more core elements of ARE's. First is describing a common misuse of power that occurs. Whether it is church leaders, parents or the community itself, typically a power imbalance will be exploited in an ARE (2022). Second, psychological harm often results from ARE's. To expand on Slade's (2022) description, Ellis et al. highlight negative impacts on one's sense of self, worldview and affective capacities (2022). Third, Ellis et al. (2022) mention the spiritual harm conducted by ARE's affecting things like sense of meaning, belonging, faith, and moral/ethical guidelines which the authors associate with one's spirit (Ellis et al., 2022). Ellis et al. (2022) also identify those with intersecting identities such as racialized persons, members of the 2SLGBTQIA+ community, women, and children as typically vulnerable to RSAT. Both Ellis et al. (2022) and Slade's (2022) definitions of ARE's offer a picture of the various realms in one's personhood that can be violated in religious ecosystems. There is one more element within ARE's that is worth discussing before proceeding.

Hermeneutical Injustice

Fricker (2007) describes hermeneutical injustice through a feminist lens that largely referred to women's experiences within the Christian church. While this term can certainly apply to all people, it traditionally has been women that have been subjugated by this type of injustice.

Hermeneutical injustice branches from epistemic injustice wherein one has knowledge withheld from them so that they may remain on the margins of the community (Fricker, 2007). Fricker (2007) further explains how some people are not even able to describe the violations they experience because they have not been equipped to recognize when a violation is happening to them. An example can be women denied leadership in the church due to being taught a literal biblical interpretation of 1 Timothy 2:12 (*New International Version Bible,* 2011). Justice may be allowing women to learn that there are multiple ways to interpret the passage that result in equal opportunity for women and men to hold leadership positions in the church.

Subsequently, Fricker (2007) also touches on how hermeneutical ignorance can be weaponized. As mentioned in the prior section on conservative Evangelical impacts on women, queer and racialized persons, hermeneutical ignorance is weaponized upon these persons via literal biblical interpretations. Various passages throughout the Bible have been used to provide hermeneutical justification for the subjugation of marginalized peoples (Fricker, 2007). Examples include the aforementioned "Curse of Ham" and 1 Timothy 2:12 passages used to justify slavery and disqualify women from leadership (*New International Version Bible,* 2011, Genesis 9:20-27; McBride, 2023). Finally, Fricker (2007) alludes to hermeneutical access which describes an overemphasis of certain parts of the Bible that overly normalize and reinforce the experiences of the dominant group. It could look like whitewashing imagery of biblical figures or overly highlighting biblical figures like David who conquered much land in various wars to support the ideals of hegemonic western masculinity (Du Mez, 2020)

ARE Prevalence

Finite research is available for who demographically is more vulnerable to ARE's. However, Landers et al. (2021) did find that 49.5% of Native American youth did report an ARE

during their time in foster care. Meanwhile Simmons (2017) reports that 95% of people from 2SLGBTQIA+ community reported at least one instance of an ARE during their time in the Church of Latter Day Saints (LDS). Although it should be mentioned the LDS does not fall under the Evangelical umbrella that is being defined and discussed in this paper. With religious trauma and ARE's thoroughly established, it is important to now examine high control religions (HCR's) to understand how abuse can often cycle within their environments.

High Control Religions and Abuse Cycle/Dynamics

High control religions (HCR's) are described as highly demanding faith communities that require devout obedience, unquestioning loyalty, and exclude or highly discourage interactions with those outside of the group (Anderson, 2023). This section aims to elaborate more on HCR structures and patterns within the context of white Evangelical Christianity.

HCR Structures and Spiritual Abuse Cycles

HCR Structures. Koch and Edstrom (2022) developed a spiritual harm and abuse scale that introduces main areas that HCR's can negatively impact a person. Koch and Edstrom (2022) identified areas are maintaining the system, internal distress, embracing violence, controlling leadership, harmful god-image and gender discrimination. This scaling system proposes a helpful way of identifying more specific ways a person may experienced an ARE. This scale's usefulness will be discussed further in chapter three. These domains however reflect other authors' descriptions of HCR's in how they systematically control members.

Maintaining the system is often done through various means. Anderson (2023) provides a helpful graphic with her "Religious Power & Control Wheel" in her book *When Religion Hurts You*. The wheel contains various methods that HCR's use to preserve their system which are: isolation, minimizing, denying and blaming, emotional abuse, spiritual abuse, threats and

intimidation, economic control, sexuality and gender defining, and revoking one's autonomy (2023). Ostracizing members from the outside world can in some extreme cases this could mean physical isolation via compounds, however in mainstream white Evangelical Christianity, this is more so done via rhetoric spoken by the pastor. Often "the world" can be depicted as a scary, evil place which discourages people from interacting with it. By "world" it is often referring to anything that is secular. Panchuk (2020) describes how binary language comparing Christianity to the "the world" is often used to reinforce a member's fears of secularism and encourage them to further isolate themselves from anything that is outside their religion. Sinner versus saint, Christian versus pagan, saved versus unsaved are all examples of this binary thinking. Laura Anderson (2023) expands on this by proposing that binary thinking increases rigid viewpoints for church members, thereby allowing them to be more easily controlled. Further, Evangelicalism often builds and supports a superiority complex on an individual and systemic level wherein Christianity is seen as the only true religion and path to salvation. Martínez de Pisón (2023) calls this narcissistic spirituality, where the faith tradition members are a part of is the only trusted source of truth. Shaping rules for members and fixing moral attributes behind them (such as, "following these steps will assure your salvation") can make system maintenance more doable (Anderson, 2023).

Emotional abuse is another major element mentioned in the control wheel (Anderson, 2023). This often looks like the suppression of "negative" emotions such as sadness, anger and grief (McBride, 2023; Stone, 2013). This can lead to constant repression and conformity as one works to hide their true feelings from the group. Stone (2013) notes how relationships that exclusively accept "positive" feelings will lack intimacy and resiliency. Further, unpleasant

emotions are encouraged to be internalized and bottled up which can often lead to unhealthy psychological and physiological consequences (2013).

Spiritual bypassing is a term introduced by John Welwood in 1984. He describes it as one using spiritual methods to avoid facing emotional issues, psychological wounds or incomplete developmental tasks (1984). Spiritual bypassing is common amongst many in HCR's as it is a learned response to distressing or uncomfortable occurrences in their lives. Stone (2013) illuminates how spiritual bypassing can lead to habitual emotional repression, numbing and detachment, anger-phobia, overly emphasizing the positive, developmental delays and interpersonal challenges. In a cultural sense, spiritual bypassing can also lead to institutional dismissals of serious concerns. A common example is attributing spiritual elements to things such as mental illness instead of ensuring that one can access the help they need (Lloyd, 2024). Historically, the phrase "pray the gay away" was known as a mantra behind conversion therapy which 2SLGBTQIA+ church members were subjected to by their church communities (Barton, 2012). Another recent public example of spiritual bypass is when televangelist, Kenneth Copeland publicly prayed away COVID-19 during a broadcast in April of 2020 as he promptly declared the virus no longer a threat to America (Woodward, 2020).

Finally, Laura Anderson (2023) introduces emotional cut off as another aspect of emotional abuse within HCR's. Emotional cut off is often exalted in HCR's as a form of stoicism one ought to attain. Anderson (2023) describes emotions as the "language of the body" where the body is trying to communicate something important to the mind. Severing the mind body connection like that reduces the impact of intuition and internal messages for a person which therefore, makes them more susceptible to external influences. As Downie (2022) highlights, removing one's reliance on their own emotions and intuition promotes truth and salvation as only

being externally accessible through submission and conformity to outward authority and the group. Passages like Philippians 3:1-3 and Jeremiah 17:9 are commonly referred to within Evangelical HCR's for their messages that question the trustworthiness of one's bodily intuition (*New International Version Bible,* 2011). "Don't trust the flesh" or "the heart is deceitful" are often told to people so that they avoid being emotionally led. Guilt and shame tend to be emotions projected onto people to reinforce conformity.

Chronic shame was alluded to earlier in this paper when discussing the doctrine of Original Sin. Fear and shame based environments cause members to conform lest they be subject to public shaming or other tactics that further isolate them from their community. Martínez de Pisón (2023) explains how chronic guilt and shame impair the mental health of an individual by leading them to outcomes such as depersonalization and dissociation. In depersonalization, one sheds their personal autonomy and identity for the sake of remaining in the group (2023). Martínez de Pisón (2023) emphasizes how this can distort one's God image. Hillary McBride (2023) provides helpful understanding on this through an attachment lens.

McBride (2023) discusses how it is human nature to strive for connection, based on our evolutionary survival instincts. Therefore, when one is in an environment that produces an autonomy versus connection conflict, more often than not a person will choose connection despite whatever cost is associated. Frequently, "family" is used to describe the HCR. It can manipulate people to remain in exploitative relationships within the HCR (McBride, 2023). It is worth mentioning that leaders alone do not use that kind of rhetoric. Fellow community members will use this language, though not usually out of malice intent. They are just as hooked into the rhetoric as everyone else. Finally, God is characterized as a parental attachment figure of sorts within Christianity as the "Heavenly Father." McBride (2023) lists attunement, responsiveness,

engagement, affect regulation, willingness to repair and acceptance/handling of our emotions as basic attachment needs from caregivers. An HCR will often communicate the characteristics of this attachment figure to its members as well as dictate what criteria needs to be met to obtain those basic attachment needs. Consequently, some of these attachment needs are not communicated as God characteristics which impacts one's God image immensely. For example, God's character may reflect more of an authoritarian being that ought to be feared rather than a nurturing being. Further it is worth noting that personal attachment relationships with parents (or other figures) may impact one's God's image as an attachment figure (McBride, 2023). For example, one's father was absent from their life may therefore view God, the "Heavenly Father" as an absentee more than an involved figure in their life.

Overall, these elements spawn a sense of dependency for the individual as they relate to the HCR. The individual is dependent of the HCR's provision in a spiritual, social, and sometimes financial sense as they relate to needs for connection. This imbalanced relationship exposes six types of power HCR's have over a person according to Doll (2024). The first type is the coercive power of guilt and shaming which has just been previously discussed. The second is reward power where promises are made to individuals to entice them to obey the HCR's demands. This can look like offering certainty of one's salvation to them or even offering praise or conditional validation to the person. The third one is legitimate power in which the HCR leadership has an authority claim over the person citing a divine right of sorts. Fourth is expertise power where HCR leadership cites knowing more about spiritual/religious subject matter than the person (Doll, 2024). In an Evangelical context, this could be a person claiming special revelation from God. This can also relate to hermeneutical injustice where the person is gaslit into believing HCR leadership due to their credentials regardless of how legitimate they are or

how inaccessible those credentials may be to general lay people (Fricker, 2007). Fifth is information power where the HCR leaders have access to exclusive information, which again relates to hermeneutical injustice (Doll, 2024). Finally, the sixth power domain was characterized as religion power and social control which encapsulates the total control the HCR can have over a person's life in the spiritual, emotional, physical, and financial realms. Overall, these are the HCR structures that create an optimal environment for RSAT to occur.

Experiential Spiritual Abuse Cycles. Both Ward (2011) and Anderson (2023) propose cyclical models within HCR's that illustrate the experience of one being subjected to religious/spiritual abuse. Anderson's (2023) cycle presents the external experience while Ward's (2011) is more descriptive of the internal experience for the HCR member.

Anderson (2023) begins the cycle through detailing what she calls the "Love Bombing" phase. This phase involves new members being extolled by the HCR with intense affection. Gifts, compliments, positive attention and connection are all in large supply in this stage. The new member feels valued almost beyond comprehension. In an Evangelical context this could look like many different things. Perhaps it could be a lifelong member being presented with a volunteer opportunity to become "an insider" in their church's leadership structure. For a new convert, it might be a place of intense connection and belonging, perhaps maybe the first place that they have ever felt such unconditional acceptance. I recall in my personal RSAT experience, a feeling of reinvigoration for my faith in the HCR that I encountered. I grew feelings of apathy from my church of origin likely due to having been there my whole life and not experiencing much novelty with faith. This group offered that in addition to heart warming affirmation.

The second phase is the tension building phase which is comprised by a greater pressure to conform to the HCR's standards and practices (Anderson, 2023). Isolation rhetoric

commences as warnings about the secular world increase. Feelings of shame may increase for the person in accordance with the building pressure to live up to the HCR's standard. It may begin to become apparent in this stage that the standards are impossible to meet which can contribute to feelings of confusion, isolation and further shame. I remember facing much pressure from this group to have more "revelations" from God and to speak in tongues. This practice is common within Pentecostal/Charismatic church circles, but rather rarely done in the denomination that I grew up in (Fairchild, 2019). The pressure to conform to this practice was heavy and led me to a point of faking it in front of group members to relieve the pressure. I do recall feelings of insecurity for not being able to do this act that everyone else seemed so easily able to do. Coupling with this pressure was a more intensely keen interest in my personal life, but in what felt like more of an invasive sense. This also did work to minimize my autonomy. These are a couple examples that come to mind when reflecting on the tension building phase.

The third phase is the explosion phase. Anderson (2023) describes this as when the HCR determines one is not following them sufficiently and that they must be subject to correction. This is where conflict comes to the surface and where many ARE's occur. This phase can be comprised of threats, harassment, attacks of various kinds and abuse. I recall in my experience being faced with harassment from that church's leadership and threats/shame statements such as "you are defying God's will," that accused me of being an antagonistic agent towards God.

The final phase of this cycle is the honeymoon phase (Anderson, 2023). This phase is where repair attempts are made by the HCR or perpetrator to ensure the person remains in the system. According to Anderson (2023), this phase may involve victim blaming or reinstatement plans with the victim so that they regain the favour of the HCR. Empty promises may be made, or platitudes offered to gloss over the hurt incurred in the previous two phases. In many cases,

the Christian value of forgiveness is weaponized. Franz (2002) discusses how forgiveness is a duty often foisted upon a victim. Part of that is how HCRs typically conflate forgiveness with reconciliation (Franz, 2002). The victim is burdened with both forgiving and reconciling with their perpetrator. Often, victim blaming, shaming and distorting scriptures on forgiveness are utilized to coerce the victim into forgiveness (Franz, 2002). Forgiveness is a powerful step towards healing for any person that has been hurt. However, when coerced upon a person and coupled with forced reconciliation, all it does it cheapen the forgiveness, compound onto any prior trauma possibly experienced by the victim and potentially act as a secondary trauma. My personal experience entailed my perpetrator lecturing me on how I had to forgive him. He then prayed in front of me and considered the whole issue resolved. That was one of the last times I saw this person as I severed ties with that community shortly thereafter. Which leads to Anderson's (2023) next point where the cycle can either restart, or the relationship can end. Ward (2011) describes more the internal experience cycles for RSAT victims.

Ward (2011) offers a map of spiritual abuse that details a survivor's internal experience. It commences with the recognition of the perpetrator or HCR leadership as being representative of God (Ward, 2011). A cultural consequence of this is that there is little space for accountability for the individual/system. Questioning is discouraged and commitment is mandated. Ward (2011) then highlights three common actions that exasperate internal and external tension for the individual which are spiritual bullying, conditional acceptance through performance, and spiritual neglect. Spiritual bullying can look like excessive fault finding in the individual according to Ward (2011). This can be where a person's contributions to the group are never appreciated or where affirmation is withheld for the sake of "keeping one humble." Acceptance via performance requires adherence to the group's demands for the sake of maintaining favour or

avoiding admonishment. Ward (2011) adds that one's value is based on their productivity which is common within Evangelical mega churches like Hillsong or the former Mars Hill church in Seattle (Cosper, 2021; Johnstone et al., 2022). Finally spiritual neglect refers to unmet spiritual needs (Ward, 2011). This could result in medical, financial, interpersonal, and emotional suffering for church members that are either outright ignored, or insufficiently addressed through spiritual bypassing (2011). Individuals may even face shaming feedback or criticism for lack of faith if they exhibit any emotions of lament or fear. Ward (2011) mentions that neglectful HCR responses to spiritual suffering were reported to be just as painful as acts of HCR violence. This aligns with Gabor Maté's (2022) description of ACE's where both negatives that happen to a child that should not have occurred and things that needed to happen for the child that did not occur. Likewise, with ARE's this concept rings just as true.

Ward (2011) continues detailing how these actions will occur in a cyclical nature. In this cycle spiritual, psychological, and physical symptoms may arise, which will be discussed in more depth later in this paper. However, as this cycle continues, a greater cognitive dissonance will build for the person which may lead to a breaking point. Ward (2011) paints this dissonance as a growing discrepancy between internal beliefs and values versus the reality of what is happening in the HCR. It could look like a growing consciousness to the harm the HCR is perpetuating upon the community and feeling the clash that has to personal prosocial values. Some may be able to block this dissonance and never leave the HCR, but for others this moves to a point of being unbearable, which prompts leaving the HCR (Ward, 2011). At this point, individuals are faced with a choice between reforming and maintaining their faith, or leaving it altogether (2011). Neither option is better than the other, however how one embraces this choice will be consequential to their healing.

Toxic Leadership Traits

Ward (2011) finally offers a helpful comparison between six healthy and toxic religious leadership qualities. First is an awareness of power imbalances and dynamics. HCR leaders tend to either be ignorant to or deny present power imbalances. Often spiritual justifications are utilized to cement one's seat in power. Second is unconditional acceptance of people into the community. HCR leaders tend to make their acceptance conditional. Again, this is very prevalent within mega churches where members or volunteers are valued only for their usefulness, rather than for their personhood (Brennecke et al., 2022). Third is incorporating a balance of the biopsychosocial-spiritual lens when interacting as a community in teaching, making sense of the world around them, or engaging with the broader, secular community (Ward. 2011). HCR's tend to place a spiritual emphasis on all phenomena when some things can be simply explained through other methods (Ward, 2011). An example can be attributing demonic influence or possession to mental illness. Lloyd et al., (2023) explain how this mindset can sometimes lead to deliverance therapies being conducted which involves casting out demons from a person. These experiences can be considered ARE's and do contain traumatic elements to them.

Fourth, Ward (2011) lists cooperation in addressing spiritual needs as a healthy trait that contrasts with HCR's exploiting one's spiritual needs to satisfy the ego of the leader. This could include performative prayers being done over members in need that only seek to impress the community as opposed to dealing with the member's need. Disrespecting a member's privacy would also fall within this category. Fifth, encouraging members to take ownership of their spirituality is compared to an HCR prescribing a narrowly specific way for one to spiritually engage. Usually, this path is one that is thoroughly gatekept by leadership. Lastly, Ward (2011) compares leader humility to the narcissistic tendencies of HCR leadership. Mark Driscoll is a

notorious church leader from this century that fits the mold for most of these qualities (Cosper, 2021). He regularly bullied and exploited church leaders' labour, emotions and allegiance to build his own personal brand. Numerous ex-members of Seattle's Mars Hill church have been on record to describe him as a narcissist in the *Rise and Fall of Mars Hill* podcast (Cosper, 2021).

The Aftermath and Personal Impacts of RSAT

Personal Impacts of Religious Trauma and Spiritual Abuse

There are myriad impacts HCR's and ARE's have on a person. These manifest physiologically, psychologically, emotionally, spiritually, socially, and developmentally. The physiological affects of HCR's and ARE's relate strongly to the nervous system. Anderson (2023) communicates how HCR's condition members to have overly active nervous systems. Within Evangelicalism, "spiritual warfare" is a practice of being hypervigilant of the spiritual realm's relationship to the physical world. Demons are actively trying to attack believers, hinder their goals or outright harm them, while angels work to protect them. Constant prayer and moralizing behind even the most mundane occurrences or objects becomes a daily discipline. Harrison Mooney (2022) describes this in his memoir *Invisible Boy* as living a constantly fearful life, scared that demons might be possessing any object in his home like his furniture for example. Of course, this type of theology exists on a spectrum where some denominations believe it to more extreme depths than others. However, the impact on the nervous system still exists, where fight/flight mode is stuck in the "on" position (Anderson, 2023).

Nervous systems are only meant to be activated for short durations as part of a survival mechanism (van der Kolk, 2014). Prescriptions around distrusting the body along with spiritual warfare teaching makes it easier to confuse messages from the body such as fight or flight with messages from the Holy Spirit. Personally, I recall a couple of encounters with my perpetrator

after the incident where my body was sending me messages around getting away from this person. My personal understanding of trauma and the nervous system was limited at the time, and I spiritualized these messages as the Holy Spirit directing me to go reconcile with this person. Thankfully, my freeze response won out the competition for my obedience and no interaction was had.

When the nervous system is activated, people are driven into fight, flight, freeze or fawn responses (van der Kolk, 2014). Fight and flight are linked to hyperarousal of the system while freeze and fawn result in hypo-arousal. Hyperarousal can manifest as anxiety, high blood pressure, irritability, guilt, shame, and persistent paranoia (Anderson, 2023). The persistent paranoia is usually associated with moralizing or spiritualizing every situation, especially considering spiritual warfare. Meanwhile, others within HCR's may be driven to hypo-arousal (freeze and fawn) responses due to the theologies they're taught or abuses they've experienced. Typically hypo-arousal will also be learned as the best option as a survival response. Within an HCR, this usually is those who's agency and power is limited such as women, children, racialized persons, 2SLGBTQIA+ members etc. These people groups often either had to consistently take postures of submission (ex. women submitting to male headship and authority) or denial/repression of an identity to satisfy cultural norms like white supremacy or heteronormativity. Dissociation and numbing are the most common states for those whose nervous systems are perpetually shut off (Anderson, 2023).

Psychological and Emotional Impacts. Stone (2013) posits that religiously traumatized folks share many symptoms with those with PTSD. Anderson (2023) even argues that some people's religious trauma could qualify for a CPSTD diagnosis. Symptoms of hypervigilance, dysregulated eating, excess in fear, anxiety and exhaustion were described (Crocker, 2022).

Further, Crocker (2022) shares how depression was an over-corrective state the body sometimes enters to compensate for the long instances of hyperarousal. Other prevalent symptoms for CPTSD are developing autoimmune disorders, social phobias, digestive issues, relational issues, and sexual difficulties (Anderson, 2023).

Gibbs and Goldbach (2020), illuminate the psychological experience for sexual minorities that grow up in non-affirming religious spaces. They found there was an association between internalized homophobia and a non-affirming religiosity. Identity conflict is at the forefront of the experience especially as the sexual identity grows and clashes more with the heteronormative narratives they have been given (2020). This identity conflict can extend to racialized persons who grew up in white dominated religious environments. Considering whitewashed religious imagery and descriptions of whiteness as the ideal sense of purity within purity culture, identity dissonance and conflict would be a plausible state for racialized persons to enter (Cooper, 2016; Howard & Sommers, 2019). Gibbs and Goldbach (2020) conclude depression, anxiety, self-harm, and isolating behaviours as potential mental health outcomes for religious identity dissonance.

Additionally, another phenomenon worth analyzing is perpetrator regret. In ARE cases that involve repeated harmful messages or teachings, perpetrators can be dozens of different people, each committing their own small acts of spiritual violence. Many of these individual acts are often committed with good intentions by people following harmful theologies that they were taught as good. Ellis et al. (2022) debrief how perpetrators are often simultaneously victims within HCR's. Joshua Harris is a well known public example of someone who was both a victim and perpetrator of purity culture. Joshua Harris (1997) was known in Evangelical Christianity for writing the dating advice book, *I Kissed Dating Goodbye* as a twenty-one year old. His book

largely contributed to the purity culture movement that harmed many youths relationally and psychologically as discussed earlier in this chapter. He has since renounced that book, ended distribution of it and left Christianity as whole (Harris, 2023). Harris (2023) did live by his own advice in the book and recognized how damaging those sexual and relational principles were for him and others. His story exemplifies of how perpetrators of RSAT can also be victims.

Rachel MacNair (2005) introduced the concept of perpetrator induced traumatic stress (PITS). It relates to people who grapple with guilt, grief and moral injury after committing acts they deeply regret. While it does compare closely to PTSD, PITS does differ in terms of guilt, shame and meaning behind these feelings. McBride (2023) connects this concept to those who have left HCR's who feel a sense of guilt in contributing to others' religious trauma. Fixation on their complicity can negatively impact their ability to trust or hold a positive view of themselves. McBride also suggests that PITS can be intergenerational, similarly to how PTSD is (2023). A result of this is denial. It can explain the major resistance conservative Evangelical culture has to discussing topics such as Indian residential schools, slavery, and systemic clergy abuse in the church. Grappling with these issues and seeking justice and restoration as a church require feelings of healthy guilt and lament to occur which Mark Charles argues in an episode of *Holy Hurt*, are emotions that the Evangelical church does not make space for (McBride, 2023). This makes sense when positive feelings are often the only ones that are promoted or accepted within the church (Stone, 2013). As a result, avoiding acknowledgement of complicity in past and current atrocities is a frequent response in a group that may suffer from intergenerational PITS. A major avoidance strategy is spiritual bypassing.

Spiritual Bypassing, Avoidance and Developmental Losses. Spiritual bypassing was discussed earlier in this chapter regarding individual and institutional consequences. It has

largely been depicted as an avoidance tactic that is masked as an attempt to address the issue by communicating with God. A main component of spiritual bypassing is that it is passive in nature. A common example could be praying for God's intervention over something that is easily doable or attainable by the individual. On an institutional level an example of spiritual bypassing was the phrase uttered in sermons by many Evangelical pastors in 2020 after George Floyd's murder, "racism is a sin issue, not a skin issue." (Relevant, 2020). This phrase spiritualizes racism to as an individual choice people make because of their sinful natures and ignores the systemic racism that exists in Western society's institutions. On an individual level, an example of spiritual bypassing could be praying for God to provide employment, only to follow through by not applying to any jobs at all. It avoids the task of obtaining employment by leaving it up to spiritual intervention. This example demonstrates how HCR's leave developmental impacts on a person.

Thomas (2023) discusses how spiritual bypassing can lead one to arrested development in societal and relational domains. McBride (2023) outlines how the following developmental tasks are stunted and punished within HCR's. First is the ability to express feelings and ask questions. As illustrated earlier, expressing emotions such as sadness and anger is typically discouraged within Evangelicalism. Second is sexuality and sexual exploration as purity cultures demonizes anything relating to that domain with the sole exception of sex within heterosexual marriage. Third is relationships and romantic dating. This is another casualty of purity culture. Fourth is lying and boundary pushing to learn logical consequences for actions. Some HCR's may have highly punitive cultures where corporal punishment is promoted. Extreme punishments do not help one make sense of where logical parameters exist for what is acceptable behaviour, rather it creates a disposition of fear for the child to grow into (McBride, 2023).

Culturally speaking, HCR members feel a sense of estrangement from the secular world as members (especially children) are isolated from contemporary pop culture or fed whitewashed historical educations via Christian homeschooling. Harrison Mooney (2022) corroborates this in his memoir of growing up homeschooled and being forbidden to consume secular television or music. Cognitive symptoms can include chronic indecisiveness since HCR's do not grant much space for one to practice their own discernment skills (Thomas, 2023). Additionally, diminished ability to think critically is common due to HCR's discouragement of questions.

Spiritual and Social Losses from RSAT. Religion and spirituality are common and powerful mechanisms for coping and healing from hardship, grief and pain (Martínez de Pisón, 2023). However, Koch and Edstrom (2022) contest that RSAT impedes one from being able to utilize religion as a coping resource. This is because of the obvious link between the religion and the traumatic/abusive context. Ellis et al. (2022), elucidate spiritual and social effects that RSAT have on a person such as the distortion of one's God image. This typically carries psychological affects too due to God often acting as an attachment figure of sorts within Evangelical Christianity through epithets like "Heavenly Father." (Johnston, 2021). This disrupts and turns the attachment into an insecure one that causes much distress when RSAT occurs (Johnston, 2021). Another impact is the distortion of one's spiritual identity (Ellis et al., 2022). This may result in being unsure if they identify as a Christian anymore after enduring an ARE. They may still hold on to some beliefs or doctrines related to Christianity, but may no longer want to associate with the religion anymore because of the hurt. Thus, creating a spiritual identity conflict. Ellis et al. (2022) also specify barriers at play for one's ability to accept grace, establish healthy boundaries and trusting relationships. Relationships in their religious communities may have been conditionally based solely on a shared belief system as opposed to a foundation of

trust or authenticity. Coming out of an RSAT experience, social isolation may intensify if relationships do not allow for open questioning or vulnerability (Stone, 2013). As for challenges in accepting grace and setting boundaries, Ellis et al. (2022) mention how scripture is weaponized in HCR's to set up people for revictimization. Examples can be distorting humility as a concept or coercing forgiveness of abuse.

By extension, Doll (2024) lists various losses one encounters when they do leave their religious environment. They consist of a loss of the divine, social ties, identity, and certainty. While relationship with God, spiritual identity and social isolation have already been discussed, loss of certainty is an understated loss from RSAT. Evangelical Christianity relies heavily on certainty in its teachings and culture. It offers people a comfort in their eternal destiny, their life purpose and a belief of what truly matters in this life. This loss drives anxiety, confusion and cognitive dissonance as the veil of certainty is torn in one's life (Doll, 2024).

According to Slade et al. (2023), roughly 27-33% of American adults are religiously traumatized based on their metrics. They base this on six main symptoms that manifest from religiously traumatic events, structures, beliefs and/or practices that one has been exposed to. The six symptoms are anxiety, stress, fear, depression, shame and nightmares related to religious content (Slade et al., 2023). The authors also state that the traumatized percentage jumps to 37% of the population if the threshold is reduced to only three of the six symptoms.

Despite this large percentage of religious trauma being found in people, still the majority of persons in North America remain religiously affiliated, with 70% of Americans identifying as Christian and 68% of Canadians identifying as religious (Cornelissen, 2021; Public Religion Research Institute, 2021). Despite the "nones" (non-religiously affiliated people) being the fastest growing "religious" group in America, only 38% percent of those who consider leaving

their faith actually do (May, 2018). This begs the question, why do the other 62% stay? More specifically, why do religiously traumatized people stay?

Why Religiously Traumatized People Stay

There are numerous reasons why people stay in toxic religious environments. Anderson (2023) lists arrested development, inability to provide for self, denial, personal aspirations within the HCR and maintaining close relationships as internal reasons for staying. Further, Anderson and Peck (2019) discuss emotional barriers to leaving such as fear, isolation, and believing they are deserving of the abuse. Fear is a major driver, particularly fear in how it relates to one's relationship with God. HCR's may conflate themselves to God with loyalty to the HCR being sometimes regarded as more important that loyalty to God (Ellis et al., 2022). The fear that inhibits one from leaving the church can lead to an additional fear of leaving God. This fear ties to a simultaneous rejection from God, ultimately resulting in eternal consequences such as damnation (Doll, 2024; Thomas, 2023). The connection of eternal future and present moment fears heavily discourages people from leaving their religious environments. Meanwhile, Johnston (2021) characterizes the pressure of conformity within an HCR and how it is an external factor in why one would stay. Nica (2020) offers the term "high cost leaving" to describe the losses one may incur from leaving their religion such as status (in some cases), supportive relationships, eternal certainty and comfort, stigma from the former community, identity confusion and possible psychological/spiritual wounds. The cost of leaving is simply too high for many to leave their religion or challenge any violations they experience within their HCR.

A major external reason is the family system. Knight et al. (2019), illustrate the deep connection between the family system and the religion that often exists. The authors (2019) detail various familial consequences that occur when one leaves their faith. One such

consequence is the major difficulties that occur for family functioning and connecting. Many family rituals or connection activities can be centred around religion amongst Evangelical families. Annual gatherings to mark Christmas and Easter in conjunction with weekly meetings at church foster natural gatherings for connection. Leaving the religion not only ostracizes the individual from the family system by community removal, but can also cause tension during family gatherings in the home as the system grapples with the confusion of the member leaving the religion (Knight et al., 2019).

Within the system, Knight et al. (2019), highlight parent/child relationships are challenged due to value incongruence. With values now emanating from different sources, various conflicts can arise over issues such as lifestyle and political/social views. Adult children reported that their relationships with their parents experienced difficulty due to the religious differences (2019). Further, the authors (2019) highlight a decrease in marital satisfaction and co-parenting challenges when one member of the partnership leaves the religion. Considering these issues and pressures surrounding the family system, it is understandable that one would feel the need to conform to both the family and religious system to avoid this distress.

However, this avoidance carries negative consequences according to May (2018). May (2018) suggests that those who consider leaving their religion but stay experience more depressive symptoms compared to those who do leave their religion, people who stay and never consider leaving, or those who were never religious at all. This is largely tied to an identity crisis where one feels identity stress, but chooses to avoid (mainly via spiritual bypassing) confronting the internal incongruency. Nica (2020) supports this by how one's identity formation relates to the HCR that they belong to. This identity is usually informed by the meaning or purpose that their religion gave them (Nica, 2020). In the case of Evangelical Christianity, one's purpose and

meaning are strongly connected to conversion and activism for the church's cause (Bebbington, 2021). Johnston (2021) shares more on the meaning that religions can offer a person. Religions promise existential meaning, a framework where one can make sense of experiences, a prescribed set of values to follow and finally a community to be a part of (Johnston, 2021). Of course, these are positive things to have in life, however HCR's tend to weaponize these components by making them conditional upon obedience to the leadership or group. Once one leaves the church, what is their mission in life? Where is the assurance behind their eternal salvation? Does leaving the faith doom them to hell? Removal from such an environment can certainly result in identity stress as the purpose becomes null and void, causing a disorienting sense of nihilism for the individual.

Finally, religiously traumatized people tend to stay in HCR's because those environments are familiar to them. McGraw et al. (2019), propose how abused members learn shame, depression and helplessness as basic states. It is common to draw towards that familiarity even if it is toxic. Marks (2021) expands on how the freeze and fawn responses to danger work as a survival strategy for many individuals. This contributes to a homeostatic dynamic where the person feels more comfortable with "the devil you know" compared to the fear of the unknown outside of the HCR. Overall, there are numerous justifications members make to stay in an HCR regardless of how abusive it may be. Similar to how many in abusive relationships, work environments, social groups etc. will find reasons to stay in those environments. We crave connection. It is a need we have that we are willing to make numerous sacrifices to attain. The fear of ostracization is prime amongst the many more consequences that come with leaving an abusive religious environment.

Despite this, people do manage to leave as per May's 2018 article. Doll (2024) outlines four reasons that people do leave HCR's or give up religion in general. First are intellectual reasons. These range from evolving views on politics, philosophy and science. As these evolve, one can realize incompatibility with their faith. Second is religious trauma and abuse. The triggers become unbearable to be around and cause one to leave the environment. Third is personal adversity which refers to personal crises of faith or adverse personal experiences that challenge a person's faith and sow doubt for them that is beyond reconciliation. Last is social reasons such as belonging to a traditionally marginalized group within the church and again, surpassing the threshold of tolerance for one's discrimination (Doll, 2024). These reasons may not be enough initially to prompt one to leave an HCR. Ward's (2011) map of spiritual abuse demonstrates that each person may have a certain threshold of cognitive dissonance that they can tolerate before leaving an abusive religious environment or situation. It is from this place and decision where healing can begin.

Conclusion

RSAT effects a person in many realms within their life. An HCR dictates the entirety of a person's being which makes it very difficult to not only heal from, but also recognize the need for healing in the first place. The *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (5th ed.; DSM-V; American Psychiatric Association [APA], 2013)* does use code V62.89 (Z65.8) to discuss religious problems that impact one's psychiatric health. This code is attributed to people with "distressing experiences that involve loss or questioning of faith, problems associated with conversion to a new faith, or questioning of spiritual values that may not necessarily be related to an organized church or religious institution" (APA, 2013, p. 725). This can be a helpful description for those who are either beginning an awareness of their cognitive dissonance within

their faith or for those who have already left their faith altogether. It is in this intersection where people are most likely going to seek help for processing and healing from their religious trauma. These people have already taken that first step of breaking a cycle of avoidance by deciding to face their trauma and acknowledge its existence. This is where the work begins.

Chapter Three

Chapter two focused on defining Evangelicals, religious trauma, ARE's, HCR's and the overall impacts religious trauma has on a person. This chapter aims to address the maladies affecting religious/spiritual abuse and trauma (RSAT) survivors through both the therapy room, and some recommendations for practices and theologies that churches can embrace to become more inclusive and trauma-informed. Church communities, faith and spirituality have been known to be powerful aids in healing from and coping with painful hardships of all kinds (Downie, 2022; Jerome et al., 2023; Martínez de Pisón, 2023). 72% of Americans view religion as important in their daily life (Brenan, 2018, as cited in Jerome et al., 2023 p. 178). It is undeniable how important faith is to people still in this age. Jerome et al. (2023) identify how religious coping can fit into therapy through fostering positive therapeutic relationships between client and counsellor, integrating faith with psychology, acknowledging the divine's role in experiences, and utilizing faith for constructive meaning making.

All of this is to suggest that there is space in therapy to include the spiritual side of one's personhood. Although it is important to be sensitive to how much (if at all) the spiritual is to be integrated into counselling for those who are desiring to heal from RSAT. The first half of this chapter will look to discuss various postures and practices in the therapy room that can be inviting to one's spiritual side while also being trauma informed. Following the general best practices section will be a description of a few suggested modalities that the literature proposes as potentially helpful for RSAT recovery.

Therapeutic Recommendations

First, this section will define the clients needs. To begin, it is worth asking, what might a RSAT surviving client be looking for? Are they looking for healing from trauma? Are they in

denial and need to be made aware of the trauma? Of course, with any therapeutic scenario, it will depend on the client's situation and personal readiness. It is important to note that chapter two discussed in great detail the various identities that RSAT survivors typically hold. Many of these relate to marginalized identities within our broader society and with that, the therapist has a responsibility to learning about these identities and communities to optimally conceptualize their client's experiences.

Doll (2024) identifies three main needs for clients, comprising connection to others, psychological safety and support for losses. As mentioned in chapter two, those who experience RSAT may also have tremendous losses that require grieving and healing. This is especially true for those who leave or are excommunicated from their religion (Nica, 2020). Many of these losses are social in nature, which speaks to the need for connection to others, while the other losses can pertain to feelings of compromised psychological and spiritual safety (Doll, 2024). This overall need for safety is a common theme the literature emphasized when it came to best practices for treating religious trauma.

Felt safety for the client is a foundation from which all therapy begins. Especially in therapy that needs to be trauma informed, establishing safety is the crucial first step towards their healing. McBride (2023) describes safety as the following things. First, it removes one from the person or environment that is a threat to their sense of safety. Second is creating a space where the client can heal from their trauma free from external pressures of re-opening any wounds prematurely. Third and perhaps most importantly, is creating a trusting rapport with the client (2023). Stone (2013) describes this process as following a person centred model where the client is allowed to lead therapy. Often people coming from HCR's experienced a low amount of personal control and agency. Allowing the client to lead their services can help them learn to

take control of their own lives in a way that may be completely novel to them (Zaeske et al., 2024). Another helpful way to allow the client to grow in their autonomy is making space for the client to disagree with the therapist (Bilsky, 2013). Again, one coming from an HCR may not have ever experienced the freedom to agree or disagree with others in their community. Especially those they had relationships with that involved imbalanced power dynamics. Facilitating space for collaboration and disagreement can create a corrective experience for clients whose agencies have historically been compromised (Thomas, 2023). One more component to keep in mind is pacing. Expectations for the client's healing pace ought to be held loosely given how individualized the healing process is. Dictating the pace of one's own therapy can serve as a corrective experience for clients coming from HCR's that may have pressured them into actions or situations they were uncomfortable with (Doll, 2024). As for rapport and trust building, it may be a slower process, especially if the counsellor does not identify as part of the client's religious group. Since, those from HCR's were often taught to be wary of "the world" or those that were outside of their tradition, it may take some time to build trust and shed the paranoia of "the other." (Anderson, 2023).

Another important component in working with RSAT survivors is being familiar with the customs and practices of the religion or faith group the client is coming from (Thomas, 2023). In the case of Evangelical Christianity, there is a lot of jargon used within that sub-culture that may not be entirely understandable to outsiders. Admittedly, being familiar with the client's environmental and experiential contexts is generally prescribed for counsellors with clients of all backgrounds. Beyond this, having a good knowledge of how RSAT impacts a person is also encouraged (Bilsky, 2013). RSAT touches on all aspects of a person's life including the spiritual, emotional, psychological, physiological and social domains (Bilsky, 2013). Familiarizing oneself

with those affects (the ones mentioned in the previous chapter) can aid in understanding and empathizing with the client in the rapport building process.

Group work has also been suggested as a helpful step in healing from RSAT (Stone, 2013; Thomas, 2023). Although the recommendation in the literature was to begin with individual therapy to build a base of safety (Stone, 2013). The idea behind group work is that it can potentially provide a healing experience in multiple ways. One being that the client can experience being in a space where diverse thought is supported, and conformity is not a perquisite for membership (Stone, 2013). Thomas (2023) adds that group can allow space for one to be able to express negative emotions with others without judgment, which contrasts to typical experiences within HCR's. Thomas (2023) further suggests that this validation can add to one's redevelopment of their self-concept. Simultaneously, groups can be therapeutic by providing the client with a space of belonging. Losing one's community is one of the most common losses to be grieved for RSAT survivors (Nica, 2020). Conversely, Stone (2013) cautions that groups can be triggering for RSAT survivors due to transference as a group discussing faith and spirituality could remind them of their HCR. It is a reminder that a strong base of safety and security needs to be built for the client before engaging in such groups.

Zaeske et al. (2024), suggest three core categories within the therapeutic process for RSAT survivors. First is positioning the self. This would factor into rapport building by being transparent with the client about personal biases, beliefs and experiences. Transparency is typically in short supply within HCR's (Anderson, 2023). This can again offer the client a corrective experience as the power imbalance is addressed. Second is holding tensions and boundaries (Zaeske et al., 2024). This portion of therapy involves deconstructing the rigid thinking environments that RSAT survivors may be coming from while also constructing healthy

boundaries for the client (Winell, 2007). Embodiment and narrative therapy will be discussed later in this chapter as helpful methods for achieving this. Finally, orienting towards hope and healing are crucial steps (Zaeske et al., 2024). This also will be elaborated upon later in the chapter as potentially effective methods to build hope and healing are introduced. Overall, Zaeske et al. (2024) encourage the therapist to hold a hopeful disposition for their client throughout the therapeutic method. An unconditional positive regard for the client again will act as an opposite experience for them as they leave an HCR environment where their worth may well have been conditional (Thomas, 2023; Ward, 2011).

By extension Cashwell and Swindle (2020) do well to outline four specific tasks in therapy. First is owning experiences as traumatizing and abusive. Clients may be in denial of the nature of their experiences which can be a block towards healing (Cashwell & Swindell, 2020). There is a possibility that clients may be incapable of recognizing their experiences as traumatic based on the messages they grew up and identified with in the HCR (2020). Guilt or fear may also be an emotional block in this step. The fear frequently pertains to potential spiritual consequences that may occur should they speak ill of their church or its leadership in addition to feelings of powerlessness especially in cases where the client feels their perpetrator is God themselves; an omnipresent, omnipotent and omniscient being. (2020). Embodiment practice, accelerated experiential dynamic psychotherapy (AEDP), and the spiritual harm and abuse scale were identified as helpful resources to address this step and will be elaborated upon in the next section (Anderson, 2023; Koch & Edstrom, 2022; McBride, 2023). Second is coming to terms with how their religious beliefs from the HCR influence their belief systems regarding the world, human nature, relationships, values etc. Processing this step will be helpful for the client to deconstruct their beliefs and create a sense of meaning in reflection of their experiences

(Cashwell & Swindell, 2020). Meanwhile the third step is grieving losses (Cashwell & Swindell, 2020). This is a large and crucial step towards healing from RSAT. Narrative therapy will largely be discussed as a helpful resource. Finally, the last step Cashwell and Swindell (2020) recommend is building a new community. The literature had much to say on this step from various perspectives with attachment theory taking a prominent place.

Owning Traumatizing and Abusive Experiences

Assessment. One helpful way of addressing denial is by introducing Dan Koch and Leihua Edstrom's (2022) Spiritual Harm and Abuse Scale – Clinical Screener to the client. The scale follows a 1-5 rating system corresponding to 16 situational statements. Participants rate based on how often the statements occurred in their environment experiences. Another section of similar complexion follows with 11 statements describing internal emotional states following ARE's. The rating corresponds to how often the participant felt these emotional states. Following this is a checklist where participants check "yes" or "no" on eleven different statements reporting how applicable they are to their religious experiences.

This self report scale aims to identify how a client has been exposed to potentially spiritually abusive practices and how the client's internalized experience of these events manifested (Koch, 2022). Six sub scale factors are identified in this scale, being maintaining the system, embracing violence, controlling leadership, gender discrimination, internal distress and harmful God-image (Koch & Edstrom, 2022). Harmful God-image pertains to how one views God. Koch and Edstrom (2022) detail how healthy church communities depict God as a benevolent, loving figure. Conversely, one with a harmful God-image understands God as an adversary. The authors (2022) also include age inappropriate descriptions of violence as a means of encouraging obedience from children or youth as part of embracing violence. Overly graphic

descriptions of Hell to children and youth is a common example within high control Evangelical churches of embracing violence for the purposes of encouraging obedience (McBride, 2023). Overall, this assessment can prove helpful in allowing one to externalize their trauma and begin to view it as something that happened to them rather than as a condition that reflects their personhood.

Embodiment. As discussed in chapter two, HCR's tend to foster a severing between the mind and body connection (Downie, 2022). There is a severe distrust in one's body which then becomes a substantial block towards healing. Anderson and Peck (2019) discuss supporting the nervous system in a new order so that rewiring and healing can begin. They discuss incorporating movement into the client's life such as exercise in addition to physiological state movement. Estrada (2022) provides breath work, mindfulness, and progressive muscle relaxation exercises as examples of ways client can get more in touch with their bodies and sensation in general. Movement comprises moving from states of activation towards states of safety. van der Kolk (2014) describes this process as pendulation, where the client moves back and forth between activating themselves to feel the sensations and emotions attached to traumatic memories and then returning to safety.

Anderson (2023) suggests developing a safe space image to anchor the client as they venture into their traumatic memories. Anderson (2023) also encourages discussion of mundane topics as helpful distractions when the client needs to retreat. Finally, titration is heavily encouraged as an act of pacing the client appropriately (Anderson, 2023). There is a delicacy required in embodiment work with clients so that they avoid being flooded and pushed out of their window of tolerance (van der Kolk, 2014). The window of tolerance is where one's nervous system is adequately activated to function optimally (Siegel, 1999). Traumatized persons often

have a smaller window of tolerance and can find themselves in states of hyper or hypo arousal (1999). With that said, embodiment work's purpose is to expand one's window of tolerance as they heal from their trauma.

Anderson (2023) does well to describe embodiment in relational terms as well. Fundamentalism within HCR's can be embodied just as much as it can be stored cognitively. Fundamentalism is often tied to feelings of certainty, and Anderson (2023) argues that many who leave religion may lean into different types of fundamentalism to seek comfort from their dysregulated nervous system. Like much healing work that has been discussed so far, encountering opposite experiences can help with gravitating away from fundamentalism. Curiosity as a posture helps one embrace uncertainty, nuance, openness and the possibility for multiple realities or truths to co-exist (Anderson, 2023). Beyond this, embodiment can be characterized relationally between one and their body.

Anderson (2023) describes emotions as the language of the body. Often emotions are the body's way of trying to communicate something to us. Curiosity helps one lean into what their body is saying and sensing. This continual interaction is a daily discipline that helps one become more aware of their present surroundings and attuned to their body's needs. Tuning to the language of emotions can help one build self trust and compassion for themselves. Estrada (2022) explains how helpful psycho-education will be around emotions and sensation in this stage. Particularly in working with client's whose trauma revolves around untangling purity culture messaging. Normalizing sexual desire and arousal is of paramount importance in embodiment work for many RSAT clients (Estrada, 2022).

Understanding needs connects to relational boundaries and self-advocacy (Anderson, 2023). Kristin Neff's (2021) *Fierce Self-Compassion* encapsulates the duality of being kind to

oneself and the necessary aggression needed for setting and maintaining boundaries. This contrasts with HCR's wherein boundaries set and prescribed for church members. Acceptance and salvation are only obtained via strict adherence to believing, saying and doing the "right" things (Anderson, 2023). The corrective experience of using self trust and compassion to set healthy boundaries with others creates a pathway towards carving out personal agency and tending to the body's needs. Overall, somatic therapies can be very useful for treating RSAT survivors or trauma survivors of any kind (van der Kolk, 2014). One such therapy is AEDP.

AEDP. Diana Fosha developed AEDP in 2000 as an experiential therapy that emphasizes processing emotional and relational wounds through the support and companionship of the therapeutic alliance (Fosha, 2000). Fosha (2000) describes the AEDP "triangle of experience" which is an upside-down triangle with the top two points being defenses and inhibitory emotions while the bottom point is labelled core emotions. The core emotions are characterized as joy, excitement, disgust, fear, sexual desire, sadness and anger (McBride, 2023). These emotions are crucial to accessing our core states where positive functioning occurs more regularly (Fosha, 2000). Self compassion, well being and self esteem grow from the core state.

Inhibitory emotions are emotions that keep people from interacting with core emotions. These emotions may look like guilt, shame, anxiety etc. (McBride, 2023). There is a level of vulnerability required to access core emotions, which makes it understandable that an emotion such as anxiety would cause one to avoid core emotions. To recall from chapter two, HCR's often discourage emotional expression or only allow "positive" emotions so long as they are directed towards God or HCR leadership (McBride, 2023; Stone, 2013). Expressing a core emotion of fear can be chided as a "lack of faith," or expressing sadness is demonstrating that one "does not have the joy of the lord." (McBride, 2023). These emotions are socially learned

and become devices that keep people from encountering their core emotions for the sake of avoiding ostracization. As previously discussed, the nervous system will normally sacrifice authenticity for connection. We are relational beings who need connection for survival.

Defenses operate as devices to avoid core feelings (Fosha, 2000). Common defense examples are numbing through substance use, distracting via constant humour or obsessively exercising to name a few. A popular defense in religion is spiritual bypassing which has been described thoroughly already in chapter two. Spiritual bypassing can work in conjunction with inhibitory emotions. For example, feelings of shame may be described as "being convicted in the spirit," thereby attributing God to explain and legitimize the source of their inhibitory emotions and defenses (McBride, 2023). McBride (2023) distinguishes the difference between how spiritual bypassing feeds into defenses compared to how authentic spiritual practice can help one access their core state. Authentic spiritual practice will incorporate core emotions as one communicates with the divine (McBride, 2023). This might look like praying to God in a state of anger or grief when experiencing a hardship.

Teaching clients about the triangle holds major consequences. First, clients can learn that their core emotions are in fact good and natural, which may run counter to what they were taught in their HCR (McBride, 2023). Second is that inhibitory emotions are now understood as a socially learned brake system of sorts for one's nervous system (2023). The meaning from this is that these emotions are utilized as both a method of conformity and avoidance that come from social context as opposed to divine intervention. Third is that defenses can be confusing at times. Not all defenses are maladaptive (McBride, 2023). Some may incorporate prosocial actions like devoting all of one's time to a charitable cause or organization. Despite this, defenses are still avoidant in nature which requires the client to analyze and learn how to maintain these forces in

their lives while removing their avoidant purpose (2023). Last, McBride (2023) posits that fear is the driver within this triangle. Fear of ostracization from community and fear of pain from experiencing core emotions drives inhibitory emotions and defenses. Learning to engage with core feelings and becoming comfortable with the core state is the key in AEDP (Fosha, 2000).

McBride (2023) suggests the following actions for getting more comfortable with feelings. First is receiving comfort and support in learning about the beneficial nature of feelings. Feelings are ultimately for protection, expression and for flourishing of the self (McBride, 2023). Similar to titration, starting with small feelings and working up to bigger ones will be important to avoid overwhelming the client. Finally, body scanning is important for understanding how feelings manifest in the body as the core state is further experienced (McBride, 2023). Ultimately, feelings and embodiment are crucial towards healing. RSAT survivors are likely carrying a severed body and mind connection. They were taught to mistrust their body and their feelings (Anderson, 2023; McBride, 2023). Tending to the body and restoring the connective trust between the entities is imperative for the client to rebuild trust in themselves and others.

Analyzing Belief Systems and Grieving Losses Through Narrative Therapy

Narrative therapy was chosen in this paper because on the surface it appears to be a conducive vehicle towards untangling unhelpful narratives and theologies in one's life. Narrative therapy offers trauma survivors the ability to re-author their lives and change the overarching narrative that dominates them (Manda, 2015). Narrative therapy carries a theme of empowerment as the client is open to chose how to respond to the events and what meanings they want to carry forward with them (2015). This is especially useful in response to events the client had limited or no control over such as being a target of abuse or grieving a loss of sorts.

Deconstructing HCR Belief Systems. Though people leave HCR's, the belief systems they were imparted with normally remain internally and require untangling. Embodiment work has already been discussed as a method for addressing the implicit, somatic memories that are carried. Through narrative therapy, the client will cognitively analyze, deconstruct and re-author their experience within the HCR to build upon their agency and seek liberation from the beliefs that they identify as maladaptive. Storytelling is a beginning process to re-authoring (Manda, 2015). Now this would need to work in conjunction with titration and pendulation as (depending on the severity) this can be an intense process (Manda, 2015; van der Kolk, 2014). There is an inner tension between needing to protect the self from the trauma and the need for healing that comes from directly facing it (Manda, 2015). At this point safety and support from the counsellor is imperative (Lloyd et al., 2023).

Manda (2015) lists certain "injuries" that may reveal themselves in the storytelling process. The first injury is the shattering of one's world or worldview (2015). There is a deep existential crisis that occurs when one is hurt by or cannot trust their meaning system anymore. The compass for existence is broken, leaving one distraught and directionless. Spiritual injuries work closely with the shattered worldview as they go deeper into questioning the validity of God. Questions like, "why would a good God allow this?" induce anxiety as one's sense of meaning and faith is put under duress. Feelings of abandonment or antagonism from God may accompany this injury, especially if the RSAT was committed at the hands of an authority figure that was representative of God (Ward, 2011). Another injury is a moral injury that may be felt in conjunction with regret (2015). Like PITS that was described in chapter two, moral injury deals with regret, guilt and shame over complicitly or actively being a part of another's suffering (MacNair, 2005; Manda, 2015; McBride, 2023). Those actions may have previously aligned with

the person's values at the time, but now the incongruence causes a psychological discomfort. There will be losses revealed in this process that require processing. Processing this grief will be discussed later as I address other re-authoring processes. However, that does not mean that this is a linear process. Grief work can happen concurrently with re-authoring.

As the client remembers their trauma fully and understands the various injuries they incurred, therapists can help usher in re-authoring through highlighting survivors' positive traits such as resilience, dignity, and hopeful actions that they have taken thus far (Manda, 2015). Manda (2015) suggests that therapists' affirmations and support for the client help in the creation of alternative narratives. Additionally, Manda (2015) posits that deconstructing some of the dominant messages from the client's HCR will aid in re-authoring. Examining the leadership structures at their church, oppressive theologies and God image are examples of narratives to untangle. Estrada (2022) shares how challenging internalized beliefs surrounding biblical womanhood and sexuality was helpful for women who were oppressed from purity culture teachings. Other internal narratives worth addressing are excessive guilt, shame and overbearing sense of responsibility (moralizing the mundane) (Zaeske et al., 2024). Alternate meanings and identities can be crafted through this deconstruction. Manda (2015) optimistically suggests this stage is one where survivors can craft healer or caregiver identities/meanings. Ones where they help usher in healing for peers and provide hope for others who may have similar experiences. Manda (2015) identifies this practice as helpful for shedding a victimhood mentality and for empowering the client. Finally, Manda (2015) lists journalling, poetry, story creation and other creative exercises as particularly constructive towards re-authoring.

Meaning making is a crucial point in narrative therapy that allows the client to both make sense of the past and carve a path forward. Crocker (2022) outlines three prevalent meaning

making processes trauma survivors undergo. One Crocker (2022) identifies is assimilation, where the person alters the trauma's details to match their beliefs. A self-blaming posture can take shape such as, "I did something bad to deserve the abuse." Consequently, the system is protected. The task here for the therapist would be to raise awareness of the violation to address the denial (Crocker, 2022). The second process is called over-accommodation where one alters their internal and external beliefs to increase their feeling of control (Crocker, 2022). In this case, one can identify the trauma as their fault and have a jaded view of others going forward. An example could be, "I'm worthless and deserved this treatment, and I cannot trust anyone to care for me as well." The therapeutic task here would be to investigate the narratives contributing to the belief, seek out potential counter-narratives, and evaluate what is helpful or true of the dominant narrative along with rejecting what is unhelpful (Crocker, 2022). Finally, Crocker (2022) describes accommodation as the other process of trauma meaning making. Crocker (2022) details this as the most adaptive process wherein one changes their beliefs enough to intake the new information from their trauma. This will be a more nuanced conclusion where one might think, "these people here are unsafe, but I can find safety in these other people I know."

In the case that clients want to maintain their faith, Lloyd et al., (2023) and Crocker (2022) expound that traumatized clients were able to positively use their religiosity to cope and make meaning of their situations. Crocker (2022) lists receiving spiritual support from trusted individuals, authentic forgiveness for the perpetrator, collaborative religious coping in a trusted community, and authentic spiritual connection to the divine as various religious coping methods. I think back personally to my own RSAT and how important and healing it was for me to be connected to a community that knew me well and supported me. My perpetrator(s) were from a different church community, so leaning more into my faith community of origin was a healing

experience as the people there provided support, comfort and companionship during that difficult time. Lloyd et al. (2023) suggest scripture reading, prayer and biblical character analysis in therapy as potentially helpful exercises. However, the authors stress the need for nuance and intentionality to be behind these activities as they carry potential for being triggering for clients coming from an ARE. It goes without say that these would be inappropriate methods to use in the case where the client has no interest in maintaining their faith ties. A major part within re-authoring is grief processing as there are many losses that occur from RSAT and ARE's.

Grieving Losses. Chapter 2 already discussed the various losses one encounters post ARE. For those leaving the denial of their trauma, feelings of grief may rise as awareness builds. Processing this grief is tremendously important in the healing from religious trauma. McBride (2023) visualizes grief work as an opportunity for one to reflect on their experience with the grace and compassion that they always deserved. McBride (2023) further describes grief processing as non-violent and non-victimizing. It recognizes where agency was compromised but refuses to name the survivor as powerless. Honest grief will lead to an acceptance that the wound is there whereas denial would allow the wound to fester. Kristin Neff's (2021) self compassion can be utilized to identify what the client needed/deserved in the past and acknowledge those unmet needs as another point of grief. This is an effort to alleviate self blame and give the client on honest perspective of what they deserved in the past and in the present (Neff, 2021). Anderson (2023) details acceptance as allowing oneself to be present in the moment, in observation of each

feeling. It is acknowledging the truth of the loss and pain and allowing it to be healing. This grief work is done concurrently with meaning making, and re-authoring within the narrative approach.

Rebuilding Community

The literature heavily addresses the power that positive relationships have in healing from RSAT (Anderson, 2023; Cashwell & Swindle, 2020; Crocker, 2022; Doll, 2024; Jerome et al., 2023; Lloyd et al., 2023; Nica, 2020; Stone, 2013). Regardless of whether or not these relationships are in religious contexts, authentic and genuine connection amongst others is therapeutic by providing safety and belonging to people who experienced pain, rejection and betrayal at the hands of their HCR's. Nica (2020) explains that social support networks are effective in helping people reconstruct their identities. The reconstruction is tied mostly to being with people who more closely resemble their newfound self concepts (Nica, 2020). Nica (2020) shares how this results largely in improved self-esteem/worth, well-being, self-efficacy and personal mastery. Nica (2020) hypothesizes this may be from embracing roles that more closely resemble their identity, which could look like volunteering for organizations they believe in, advocating for causes they care deeply about or maybe even starting work in a field of interest.

Divine attachment has been portrayed as how one's attachment to God can impact their RSAT (Crocker, 2022; Lloyd et al., 2023; Stone, 2013). Those with insecure attachments will face greater difficulty in healing (Crocker, 2022; Lloyd et al., 2023). These insecure attachments are often exasperated by the HCR leadership, teachings and communities these people belong to (Crocker, 2022; Lloyd et al, 2023). It is plausible to suggest that fostering healthy relationships with others can contribute to providing a more secure attachment feeling for clients. Despite this, one still needs to alter their personal God image to foster a more secure divine attachment (Lloyd et al., 2023). Lloyd et al. (2023) also mention some instances of relationships between fellow

church members acting as familial placeholders where actual family ties were not found. This speaks to how strongly intimate relationships within faith settings can be. Of course, relationships such as these can be created outside of religious settings as well.

Anderson (2023) warns that internal safety needs to be built first before engaging in new relationships. One reason is that tolerance to difference needs to be built for those who were taught to be fearful of it (2023). As mentioned in chapter two, HCR's often teach a rigid binary view of the world where those who do not fit in with the HCR's values are labelled as dangerous or immoral (Panchuk, 2020). Anderson (2023) prescribes forming an ability to tolerate different worldviews to access the healing nature of new relationships outside of HCR's. Anderson (2023) states that this tolerance building comes from the embodiment, self-trust, nervous system stabilization and boundary setting work that clients do to create their internal safety. As Anderson (2023) and McBride (2023) state in their work, the nervous system will almost always choose connection over authenticity. We are made for community. It makes perfect sense that genuine, unconditional connections with others would be an antidote of sorts for those coming from high control environments. Therapy is important, however complete healing cannot solely occur in the counselling room. It takes a village.

Church Community Recommendations

This next section will introduce actions church members and communities can take to create safer, more trauma informed environments that are inclusive of traditionally marginalized people groups within Evangelical Christianity.

What Individuals can Do

Mark Charles, in Hillary McBride's podcast *Holy Hurt,* effectively offers actions for church members to take for supporting others' safety in the church and reconciling guilt they

may feel for previous complicity within abusive systems (2023). Regarding complicity regret, engaging with guilt feelings, grieving related losses and processing the pain were three encouraged actions (McBride, 2023). There is an element of grief entangled within one's realization that they supported an unjust system or event. Recognizing how the guilt reflects the existence of one's humanity and conscience ought to be acknowledged. One feels guilt because they care. Charles (2023) offers steps forward for how people can respond to their newfound awareness.

Two main pillars guide the next steps. First is curiosity. Charles (2023) encourages exploring the history of one's church and church denomination. Beyond historical research, learning more about the multiple systems one inhabits and how power dynamics influence them, be they the church, denomination or even larger society. From there, Charles (2023) encourages members to evaluate their relationship to power. Does power serve you? Do these systems work for your demographic? Do you benefit from these structures? Who is marginalized by these structures? The second pillar is repair work. Charles (2023) describes repair work as being anything that relates to healing the wounds power structures create and that one was complicit with. Charles (2023) emphasizes the importance of the actions being genuine and not being performative. This can look like a man who previously held complementarian views reading books by female theologians, or someone encountering their own journey of personally affirming 2SLGBTQIA+ identities as valid within the church after holding heteronormative views for years. Charles (2023) also places importance on stepping back and giving space to marginalized voices within one's life. This can be as simple as not dominating discussions within church groups and allowing for that vocal space to be available. Overall, curiosity, humility and

encountering grief are the crucial steps/postures Mark Charles (2023) outlines for church members who want to repair past wounds and create safety within the church.

What Churches can Do

Trauma-informed Ministry. Church communities compose of people from many different walks of life. Historically in matters of mental health, the church has not been optimally supportive of those with mental illnesses, rather utilizing spiritual bypassing as a response that invalidates and (in some cases literally) demonizes their experiences (Lloyd, 2024; Mooney, 2022). Guiking and Jacob (2022) critique that the church has historically fixed its attention in the wrong area by focussing on "what is wrong with this person," as opposed to "what has happened to them." Of the research done, three main themes arose regarding creating trauma informed church communities. Education, normalizing mental health needs within the church culture and creating connections and partnerships with the broader community.

Workshops were suggested as valuable resources for church members to partake in, especially church leaders (Franz, 2002; Guiking & Jacob, 2022; Hill & Yancey, 2022; Lloyd, 2024). This can include formal workshops offered to congregational members taught by experts in the field from the broader community or even church members with professional experience in the mental health field. The education would be based on best practices for caring for and responding to those when in crisis along with psychoeducation around trauma. Franz (2002) extends this training to matters of abuse as well, suggesting members should be educated on protocols of reporting abuse when it is suspected or discovered. Finally, the main goal of such training is to enhance members' and leaders' sensitivity to other's mental health and safety needs (Guiking & Jacob, 2022; Hill & Yancey, 2022). This translates directly into cultural practices within the church community.

Culturally speaking, this education can be implemented in myriad ways. Trauma informed mindsets can alter the way church services are run to minimize triggers, adapt how words are spoken from the pulpit, and overall change communal attitudes (Franz, 2002; Guiking & Jacob, 2022; Hill & Yancey, 2022; Lloyd, 2024). Churches can reflect on how their services operate and seek to avoid triggers to accommodate for potential triggers. The worship portions of a conventional church service can carry many triggers for traumatized folks (Aten & Annan, 2023). Possible accommodations could look like providing a quiet space of retreat during this time, holding to strict times of when worship begins and ends so attendees can skip that portion of the service, or even adapt worship so it can compose of diverse actions such as writing, painting or conversing rather than live music (Aten & Annan, 2023). This is one example of tangible actions a church can take in adapting their Sunday service to be more trauma sensitive.

Pastors can implement more sensitive language in their sermons to both validate and comfort those in the congregation who have experienced trauma of any kind. This can be as basic as using inclusive language over androcentric language (Franz, 2002). It can also include speaking for justice within the church, such as challenging patriarchal systems entrenched in North American Evangelicalism (Franz, 2002). Another way is through how God is described. Hill and Yancey (2022) advocate for portraying God as a companion who suffers and delights with us in our pains and triumphs. This can aid in fostering a more secure attachment with God where faith is understood as a coping mechanism through life's hardships rather than a protective barrier that will shield one from experiencing pain (Hill & Yancey, 2022). Beyond this, refraining from typical platitudes such as "everything happens for a reason," "surrender to God," or "it was God's will" will be valuable towards maintaining validation and safety for traumatized church

members (Guiking & Jacob, 2022). These phrases stray into spiritual bypassing and do not serve the congregation in the end.

Culturally normalizing lament within the church is paramount in cultivating safety and intimacy (Franz, 2002; Lloyd, 2024; McBride, 2023; Stone, 2013). Lament is key in biblical literature with many Psalms covering it, a book containing much lament in Ecclesiastes, many lamentations written in the prophetic books to go along with an entire book titled, Lamentations (*New International Version Bible,* 2011). Lament is a posture that honestly recognizes sadness, grief and loss. Lament can be a powerful response to acknowledging pain suffered within the community. It can be powerful too in acknowledging complicit wrongdoing in the past by the community and can provide for a healing experience (Franz, 2002; McBride, 2023). It also greatly contributes to destigmatizing the "negative" emotions that so often are discouraged in HCR's (Anderson, 2023; McBride, 2023; Stone, 2013).

Lastly, Stone (2013) outlines seven cultural practices for building and maintaining healthy spiritual communities. First is supporting members' psychological health through cultural attitudes of unconditional acceptance and respecting autonomy and boundaries. Second is fostering space for diverse worldviews within the community. Third is supporting and caring for leaders while also holding them accountable. Structure the community for interdependency rather than fully dependent on one leader. Much of Mars Hill church's public downfall in Seattle was due to Mark Driscoll refusing support, accountability and having the church revolve around him solely (Cosper, 2021). Fourth is holding core values of love, connection and the flourishing of community members. Fifth is acknowledging the complexity of embodied experiences and understanding how hegemonic power structures historically and currently value or devalue various body types, leading to ableism, racism, sexism, heteronormativity etc. Additionally,

analyzing the church's historical complicity in this, along with engaging in how to reconcile these injustices is important. Sixth is providing clarity that all spiritual and church practices are only entered into with the consent of everyone. There are no mandatory tasks for acceptance. Lastly, Stone (2013) communicates normalizing the complex aspects of human experience such as making space for doubt, grief and lament which has been elaborated upon earlier.

Finally, the suggestions of building partnerships outside the church community with mental health professionals tangibly completes the list of best practices for building trauma informed church communities. Some sources go so far as to recommend churches staffing their own social workers and counsellors, however based on my personal experience and familiarity with growing up in the church, this is not financially feasible for the grand majority of churches (Guiking & Jacob, 2022; Hill & Yancey, 2022; Lloyd, 2024). Alternatively, building partnerships with local community services agencies, shelters for vulnerable populations and other mental health professionals can help make churches better equipped to connect members with important resources (Franz, 2002; Guiking & Jacob, 2022; Hill & Yancey, 2022). Creating partnerships can occur concurrently with education. An excellent method of fostering such partnerships is connecting with professionals to lead educational and informational workshops for church members (Hill & Yancey, 2022). Overall, from a cultural and systemic standpoint, these are some ways churches can construct a more safe and trauma informed atmosphere.

Theological Considerations. The term decolonizing has become a buzz word of sorts in recent years (Hall, 2023). It has been used in many facets when discussing issues pertaining to diversity, equity and inclusion (2023). Sultana (2023) describes the act of decolonization as, "accounting for and reflecting on the past and present, in order to configure future pathways to remove colonial and imperial powers in all their forms." (p. 62). The question then is, what does

this look like in a church context? As established in chapter two, the church has been complicit in many facets of colonialism dawning back to first contact with indigenous peoples in the 15th century. Accountability and reflection to remove colonial influence in the church is a large task on a macro level that may take generations of advocacy and change work. However, on a micro level there are various ways individual church communities can address their colonial roots.

Arenas (2023) writes about how some churches need to expand their leadership circles and create more collaborative structures. To reiterate, expanding leadership to be more community led and driven can alleviate power imbalances within the system. Arenas also proposes incorporating local indigenous narratives around wisdom for instance into church sermons and community for the sake of fostering relationships with local First Nations. This can also reveal shared values that may exist between the belief systems.

Theologically, Dr. Roberto Che Espinoza (2019) advises churches to adopt less dogmatic regard for doctrine and theology. Instead focusing on taking right action and standing for justice principles. For example, letting go of the certainty for hell's existence may allow for Evangelical values like conversion to be set aside for the sake of focusing more on advocacy or justice deeds. Espinoza (2019) alludes to letting go of theological binaries may lower the instance of marginalization for some within the church which can also lower risk for RSAT. Theology is a mystery, and perhaps holding more flexible epistemological regard in Christian theology can spawn a curiosity that invites multiple voices and perspectives, rather than shutting them out.

Original blessing is a theological concept that counteracts original sin completely. While original sin presupposes everyone as fallen sinners due to Adam and Eve's sin in Genesis 3, original blessing challenges that notion by citing how God's first blessed all creation and considered it "good" in Genesis 1 (Fox, 2000; *New International Version Bible,* 2011). Fox

(2000) passionately reveals the consequences such a belief can have for the believer and the church as a whole. He cites environmental ramifications such as if Christians earnestly believe God's blessing over all creation and God's imparted task for them to steward it, then the church ought to be at the forefront of environmental justice advocacy (Fox, 2000; *New International Version Bible,* 2011). Moreover, there are paramount prosocial ripple effects. Pairing the original blessing view with the "Imago Dei" concept of human creation (that humans bear reflection to God) one is compelled to hold their fellow human with complete and utter sacred regard (Fox, 2000). What could this mean sociologically? What could it look like to honour and respect each other's sacredness? How does peace, justice and the liberation of all peoples interact with these concepts on both a personal and collective level? In response a few theologies are introduced that offer ideas on how the church can engage in decolonizing itself. These are brief descriptions of these traditions and the reader is encouraged to explore further reading on these traditions.

Liberation theology is a theological tradition that concerns itself with the plight of the oppressed and marginalized (Singer, n.d.). This tradition originated in the middle of the twentieth century in Latin America through the writings of Peruvian priest Gustavo Gutiérrez. This theology was critical of Catholic church leaders at the time whom Gutiérrez perceived as abandoning their duty to serving the poor. This tradition seeks to understand God and Christianity through the concept of liberation. According to Singer (n.d.) there are three levels of liberation which are liberation from economic exploitation, fatalism (instead believing that all have free will), and sin by having complete communion with God. Consequently, this calls the church to be an agent of change. The church is tasked with being in solidarity with the oppressed and marginalized to seek their liberation, and critique unjust power structures by highlighting biblical themes of justice and God's own solidarity with the oppressed (Singer, n.d.). Essentially,

this means that the church advocates for justice in the physical world rather than only concerning itself with the spiritual domain that Evangelicalism emphasizes (Thomas, 2023). Liberation theology would call churches to turn their focus towards justice by removing colonial and imperial influences and powers from their structures.

Queer theology is another theological tradition that can help dismantle patriarchal and heteronormative structures within Evangelicalism. Queer theology saw its beginnings in the early 1990's spawning from feminist liberation theology's inspiration (Dickinson & Toomey, 2017). It challenges patriarchal norms within the church and aims to remodel what is normative within Christian theology, thus amplifying marginalized voices (2017). Queer theology discusses Christian theology as being inherently counter cultural (2017). Christianity began as a non-normative way of existing that challenged unjust power structures created by the Roman empire and the local puppet leadership serving the empire (2017). This theology speaks largely towards liberation for the collective, however it does highlight the queer Christian's experience to reveal the oppressive nature of patriarchy and heteronormativity. Again, this theology calls the church to challenge colonial power structures within itself and advocate for the same in broader society.

Finally, feminist theology's is another tradition to discuss (Haddad & Esposito, 2020). Contemporary feminist theology arose in the 1960's, coinciding with second wave feminism's rise (2020). However, some feminist theologians argue that feminist theology goes as far back as Jesus' lifetime citing how he included women in his ministry regularly (2020). Feminist theology argues that Christian theology originated as gender inclusive, however Greco-Roman, Hebrew and later European medieval cultures evolved it into becoming a patriarchal religion (2020). As of result, God is understood largely in masculine forms through pseudonyms such as the "Heavenly Father" or "Holy King." Feminist theology aims to raise awareness to patriarchal

domination within the church (like critiquing complementarianism for instance) and proposing alternative traditions or thoughts through descriptions of God's feminine aspects (2020). The task for the church in feminist theology is to reject the restrictions that patriarchal ontology imposes on men and women. This requires rejecting notions of biblical manhood and womanhood or at least holding them more loosely to allow for true autonomous self expressions to arise.

When reflecting on Sultana's (2023) quote on decolonizing which involves making efforts to remove colonial and imperial powers, it is apparent that task is firmly what these theologies set out to do. They aim to carry forth Jesus' ministry of speaking out against the corruption of the Roman empire, challenge patriarchal norms and stand in solidarity with the oppressed and marginalized. Calling back gain to Espinoza's (2019) work in *Activist Theology*, creating an inclusive environment that mitigates marginalization will also mitigate the presence of religious and spiritual abuse.

Ethical Considerations

Of course, there are key ethical considerations to be cognizant of when treating clients who have experienced RSAT. Religious and spiritual matters are deeply intimate for people which ought to be interacted with the utmost respect and competence. The first and foremost ethical consideration relates back to Ward's (2011) map of spiritual abuse. Ward's (2011) map concludes with the person leaving their HCR which leads to a hinge point of sorts where they either choose to let go of their faith altogether or to reframe and reconstruct their beliefs in a way that is congruent to their values. This hinge point requires much space, compassion, and flexibility on the counsellor's part as the client's identity reformation is their own sacred task (Doll, 2024; Zaeske et al., 2024). Due to the intimate nature faith holds in each person's life, there may be a felt need for counsellors to defend their faith tradition as they hear criticisms of it.

This can lead to shifting sole focus of blame on a client's abuser or singular church which then minimizes the impact belief systems or theologies have on the client's RSAT (Gubi & Jacobs, 2009). A common phrase like, "not all churches" can have invalidating impacts upon the client and only serve to undermine their healing process.

Additionally, the literature warns counsellors to be wary of countertransference (Crocker, 2022; Gubi & Jacobs, 2009; Stone, 2013; Zaeske et al., 2024). Again, one's own faith beliefs may interact with client's in session, and it is the counsellor's duty to mitigate that as much as possible (Gubi & Jacobs, 2009). Warnings of the potential for vicarious trauma occurring for the counsellor also were mentioned. Gubi and Jacobs (2009) outline grief, sadness, depression, and somatic/physiological symptoms as possibilities for therapists experiencing vicarious trauma. Gubi and Jacobs (2009) also present emotions such as anger, sadness, powerlessness and a dissociation that reflects the client's own dissociation as possible experiences counsellors may encounter. These impacts on the counsellor make self care ultimately important. Gubi and Jacobs (2009) highlight the value (in addition to typical self care activities) of reflecting and reevaluating one's own faith as they work with RSAT survivors. They inform how helpful it was for counsellors to differentiate their personal relationship with the divine compared to their relationship with the church as an institution (2009).

The Association for Spiritual, Ethical and Religious Values in Counselling (ASERVIC) is a division of the American Counselling Association that is dedicated to researching the inclusion of religion and spirituality in counselling (n.d.). Their ethics page touches on numerous domains within counselling, highlighting cultural differences, counsellor self awareness, communication, assessment, and treatment (ASERVIC, n.d.). Their ethics hold the importance of understanding how intertwined religion is with culture and building sensitivity to that. Their counsellor self

awareness piece reiterates much of what has already been said while emphasizing the need to be cognizant of how one's own beliefs influence therapy and their own limited understanding of other people's personal spiritual experiences. This also requires refraining from presumptuousness on the counsellor's part. North American Evangelicalism is a large and diverse sub sect of Christianity. Not all the beliefs and experiences discussed in this paper will apply to every RSAT survivor. Maintaining a posture of curiosity is crucial so that the client's needs are kept as the priority. Communication deals with understanding religious jargon clients may use while including the need for sensitivity in portraying an accepting posture. Assessment and treatment relate to competently incorporating faith/spirituality into therapy while also accommodating the client's comfort and desires with how much faith is included. Overall, ASERVIC provides a helpful blueprint for ethical treatment regarding the use of faith and spirituality in counselling.

Conclusion

RSAT is a serious issue that plagues many people. Despite this, the literature largely concedes that spirituality and religiosity is monumental in adapting to, coping with and healing from the hardships and pains of life (Crocker, 2022; Downie, 2022; Jerome et al., 2023; Lloyd et al., 2023; Martínez de Pisón, 2022). Recognizing this, it is important to understand what underlying causes contribute towards creating environments where RSAT exist. This paper has analyzed various theological teachings such as notions of biblical manhood and womanhood, purity culture, upholding heteronormativity, "Curse of Ham" theology, whitewashed holy imagery, original sin, and teaching hell as a place of eternal conscious torment. Church structures prominent within HCR's were also detailed in how they factor into religiously abusive environments. These structures consisted of controlling leadership, conditional acceptance, maintaining the system, isolation from the outside world, economic control/dependence, and compromised autonomy (Anderson, 2023; Koch & Edstrom, 2022; Ward, 2011).

After considering all of what the literature has to say on RSAT, ARE's and HCR's, chapter three aimed to promote various findings on how therapists (religious or not) can help religiously traumatized persons heal from their experiences. General recommended practices were offered including a diligence in fostering client autonomy to break down power imbalances, building a trusting relationship, following the client's pace towards healing, becoming familiar with the customs and jargon associated with Evangelical Christianity, and being sure to refrain from inculcating the client towards our own beliefs as they begin to draw their own spiritual/religious conclusions. Cashwell and Swindle (2020) outline four main tasks that therapists ought to address in therapy. Chapter three proposed embodiment, AEDP, and narrative Therapy as helpful tools for addressing those tasks.

Further, the chapter introduced various actions the church can take and theologies the church can embrace to promote safety and healing within its spaces. Actions were suggested on the micro and macro level towards individual church members and to leaders who influence the present cultural structures. The micro suggestions encourage individual church members to encounter discomfort and notice the tensions that they may feel (between righteous anger and grief for the survivor and any existent feelings related to protecting the system) as they reflect on their own complicity. Curiosity is at the crux of these calls as members are nudged to learn more about how they relate to the hegemonic power structures within their church and broader society as well as to invite new epistemological perspectives into their lives (Charles, 2023). Authentic responses (no matter how small) are then urged as a next step for church members to do their part in fostering a healing community (2023).

On the macro level, numerous suggestions were provided, including planning trauma informed church services, staffing counsellors and social workers (if financially feasible), building connections with mental health professionals in the broader community, and normalizing cultural practices such as lament to allow for solidarity in grief and collective healing. As for theologies to be explored, queer and liberation teachings were introduced as helpful alternative perspectives that can empower those typically marginalized within the patriarchal ontology that dominates many North American Evangelical churches. The discussion in chapter three focused on providing possible actions for anyone reading this paper regardless of social position, be it a mental health professional, church leader or member.

Future Research

RSAT is a relatively emerging field with little resources existing before this decade (Downie, 2022). Downie (2022) calls attention to the disparity between literature written on

RSAT and the prevalence of it in everyday life. Part of this challenge Downie (2022) notes is that religious trauma is difficult to discuss in empirical terms. Much of what is written about it is anecdotal. That said, the literature is certainly growing in this field as awareness has increased. One area of future research could be the development of a universal understanding of religious trauma/abuse that distinguishes it from other mental health conditions or events. For example, does one categorize clergy abuse as a religiously or sexually traumatic experience, or both? I feel a more precise categorization of events like these can be beneficial for treatment development.

Another area of the literature that can be expanded upon is the experience of intersectionality within the church. Much of the critiques of purity culture for instance have centred cis-het white women's experiences and often overlook the experience of racialized, queer, or trans women (Natarajan, 2022). While these critiques are still valuable, Cooper (2016) in her blog points out issues that white perspectives may be prone to overlook such as whiteness being propped up as the standard for model femininity and purity. Likewise, much of the analysis of the heteronormative dominance within the church has traditionally only discussed the experiences of gay people and lesbians. As transphobia has risen dramatically over the last handful of years, it may be beneficial to analyze the experience for trans folks within the North American Evangelical church and understand the consequences of heteronormative structures and teaching (Rogers & Radcliffe, 2023). Overall, the literature could benefit to include more commentary from those with intersectional identities.

Much has been made in this paper about heteronormativity and patriarchy. Du Mez (2020) does well in her book, *Jesus and John Wayne: How White Evangelicals Corrupted a Faith and Fractured a Nation* to capture the Evangelical church's shifting into teaching about a biblical manhood that reflected more the ruggedness of John Wayne as opposed to the meekness

of Jesus. These teachings follow hegemonic, western values on masculinity that praise strength and stoicism while deriding emotional vulnerability (Du Mez, 2020). Her book documents how toxic masculinity became a prime preaching topic within North American Evangelicalism (2020). The mental health costs to vehemently conforming to hegemonic masculine values are well known (Booth et al, 2019; Levant, 1990; Vogel et al., 2011; Vogel, 2014; Wester et al, 2010). However aside from Du Mez's 2020 book, there is not much literature discussing the impacts such rhetoric has on Christian men. It may be worth analyzing how religiously tinted toxic masculine messages effect men and what prevalent spiritual and mental outcomes exist.

An interesting concept that arose while of researching this paper was perpetrator regret and possible trauma attached to that via the condition known as PITS (MacNair, 2005). It is fascinating how this can possibly connect to resistance on church members' and leaders' parts in addressing abusive outcomes in patriarchal church structures (Charles, 2023). As Charles (2023) points out, PITS could have generational impacts, which again may contribute to some churches' resistance to holding themselves accountable for past complicity in historical atrocities like Canadian residential schools. Manda (2015) also discusses the concept of moral injury which in conjunction with PITS would be a worthwhile relationship to research further as it affects people trying to reconcile their faith or values with acts they either committed or unwittingly supported.

Lastly, this paper largely discussed embodiment, AEDP and narrative therapy as chosen therapeutic modalities for addressing RSAT. Additionally, attachment theory was mentioned multiple times throughout the literature especially regarding how God is characterized as an attachment figure of sorts within Evangelical Christianity (Crocker, 2022; Hill & Yancey, 2022; Johnston, 2021; Lloyd et al., 2023; McBride, 2023; Stone, 2013; Zaeske et al., 2024). With that, there stands to be an enormous benefit in further developing how attachment theory can be

incorporated into therapy for RSAT survivors with attachment disruptions. Moreover, internal family systems (IFS) is also suggested in a couple resources as potentially helpful (Estrada, 2022; McBride, 2023). IFS could be conducive in liberating one from binary thinking patterns and allowing them to embrace the tension of multiple truths existing simultaneously (van der Kolk, 2014). Parts work has potential in effectively facilitating RSAT healing which creates an intriguing prospect for future research centring around that.

Personal Reflexivity and Why RSAT?

Despite the heavy nature of this paper's subject matter, hope is the word that characterized the writing experience. To restate, the literature on religious trauma is rather sparse, however it is rapidly growing (Downie, 2022). The research community is becoming more conscious of religion and spirituality's place within a person's wellbeing. The purpose for researching this myself was twofold. One to address the gaps in knowledge for counsellors who may potentially work with religiously traumatized persons in the future. I hope this paper sufficiently helped to equip counsellors with insight into some of the experiences these clients may have encountered, and I also hope that this paper also provided useful tools for practicing going forward. The second purpose was to share with church leaders my hope and vision for how the church can be a stronger support to its members. The literature repeatedly revealed how religion and spirituality are healing and comfort resources for many (Crocker, 2022; Downie, 2022; Jerome et al., 2023; Lloyd et al., 2023; Martínez de Pisón, 2022). My hope is that this paper's suggestions illuminate a path for the church to more exclusively embody healing and wholeness. The church has the power to be both an incredibly healing and hurtful place. I have personally experienced this duality in my own church life.

I was fortunate to grow up in a church that fostered intimacy, vulnerability, growth and healing. Albeit, I will say this church was not perfect and that I belong to multiple privileged demographics that shielded me from possible hurts. However, this upbringing is part of what gives me hope for what church can be. This contrasts with my own RSAT experience at a different church that occurred during my early twenties. At times it was discomforting while at other times extremely validating to research things like HCR structures or HCR leadership traits and compare it to my personal experience. While it was liberating to see others so eloquently describe what I experienced and to have them map it out in such a way that abusive church behaviour can be tracked or predicted, I did feel grief for both myself for being caught in such a cycle and for others who find themselves in such cycles without the access to step back and see the behaviours and events for what they are.

This capstone project has become so much more than a research paper. It has become a personal reflection and vehicle for me to make sense of the last eight years of my life starting from my own RSAT experience to growing disillusioned with my faith altogether years later, to taking steps towards rebuilding my faith in a way that is more congruent with my values of love, inclusion, justice, community and hope. This project allowed me to put some of those thoughts and feelings into words for the first time which I am grateful for. With that, I see hope in how healing can be found through encountering a new faith, reshaping an old one, or even by completely letting religion and spirituality go altogether. Lastly, I envision final hope where I can be a part of connecting others to their healing. Whether that be as part of a faith community where I help cultivate a trauma informed, safe and inclusive culture or as a therapist, accompanying clients as a companion in their healing journeys. We are resilient creatures, sustained by hope and community.

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