

## ABSTRACT

Title of Thesis: THE IMPACT OF RELIGION ON HUMAN  
TRAFFICKING VICTIMIZATION

Jillian Tryon, Bachelor of Arts, 2024

Thesis Directed By: Associate Professor Bianca Bersani, Department  
of Criminology and Criminal Justice

Human trafficking is a prevalent global issue that transcends demographic boundaries, affecting millions of individuals worldwide, yet trafficker conviction rates remain low. Addressing this complex issue requires a nuanced, victim-centered approach. Despite this necessity, current anti-trafficking policies lack sensitivity towards the needs of individuals impacted by human trafficking situations. However, there is a growing advocacy for further victim-centered strategies, which this research seeks to inform. Recognizing the significance of the role of religion in shaping individuals' experiences of trafficking, this study seeks to explore the holistic impact of religion on trafficking victimization in order to inform such victim-centered strategies.

While existing research has examined how religion could serve as an asset or risk factor, most of the literature dichotomizes religion's impact as either positive or negative. This study looks to explore religion's impact on human trafficking victimization more comprehensively by exploring how religion can serve as both an asset and risk factor for trafficking victims. By

conducting a series of semi-structured interviews with members of faith-based and non-faith-based anti-trafficking organizations, this research seeks to provide a more nuanced understanding of how religion intersects with human trafficking experiences. By filling this research gap, this study contributes towards a better understanding of human trafficking by examining both the positive and negative impact of religion on individuals impacted by human trafficking victimization. Furthermore, this study demonstrates how religion can inform a more victim-centered approach to combating human trafficking, potentially reducing rates of victimization. By highlighting the multifaceted impact of religion, policymakers can develop more effective strategies for addressing the needs of trafficking survivors and preventing future victimization.

THE IMPACT OF RELIGION ON HUMAN TRAFFICKING VICTIMIZATION

By

Jillian Tryon

Thesis submitted to the Department of Criminology and Criminal Justice at the

University of Maryland, College Park, in partial fulfillment

of the requirements for the degree of

Bachelor of Arts

2024

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## Acknowledgements

First and foremost, I would like to thank Dr. Bianca Bersani and Casey Kindall for their consistent guidance and support throughout every stage of this process. Their help has played such an important role with not only this project, but my academic career. I would also like to thank Dr. Wendy Stickle, who started this journey with me and helped me research a topic I am so passionate about.

Additionally, I am extremely grateful for Jenna, Danielle, Jason, and Nick who have listened to me discuss my thesis endlessly for months and have been nothing but supportive throughout the entire process, especially when I left my charger. Special thanks to Rhiannon, Dylan, and the rest of my cohort for spending hours in the library with me and giving me critical feedback to help shape my thesis. Finally, I want to thank my family for always encouraging me and for supporting me all the way from New Jersey.

# Table of Contents

Abstract.....	i
Acknowledgements.....	v
Table of Contents.....	vi
Chapter 1: Introduction.....	1
Chapter 2: Literature Review.....	3
HUMAN TRAFFICKING.....	4
THE INFLUENCE OF RELIGION.....	7
RELIGION AND HUMAN TRAFFICKING.....	10
Religion as an Asset.....	11
Religion as a Risk Factor.....	12
THE CURRENT STUDY.....	14
Chapter 3: Data Source and Methods.....	14
DATA.....	15
SAMPLE SELECTION.....	16
INTERVIEW QUESTIONS.....	18
DOMAINS.....	19
ANALYTIC STRATEGY.....	20
Chapter 4: Results.....	20
DOMAINS.....	21
Religion as an Asset.....	21
Religion as a Risk Factor.....	25
Characteristics of Human Trafficking.....	28
Chapter 5: Discussion.....	34
FINDINGS AND IMPLICATIONS.....	35
LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS.....	40
Chapter 6: Conclusion.....	42
Appendix: Interview Questions.....	43
Bibliography.....	44

## Chapter 1: Introduction

Human trafficking is a global issue that crosses gender, racial, and class lines, impacting virtually every demographic (Hepburn and Simon 2010). This multifaceted issue takes on various forms including labor exploitation, sex trafficking, child victimization, organ harvesting, domestic servitude, and debt bondage. Each case of human trafficking is distinct, reflecting the diverse tactics traffickers employ to exploit their victims. The way that human trafficking defies demographic distinctions in addition to the complex exploitation methods of traffickers sheds light on why human trafficking is such a pervasive issue. According to the United States Department of State (2023), an estimated 27.6 million people are victims of human trafficking worldwide at any given time. This staggering number becomes even more pronounced when compared to the global number of convictions of traffickers in 2022 which was 5,577 (UNODC 2023). This stark disparity between estimated victimization and convictions suggests a need for a reevaluation of current anti-trafficking approaches.

In an increasingly interconnected world, addressing human trafficking requires a nuanced approach, particularly at the individual level. Current research on victim-centered approaches has focused on how law enforcement should tackle criminal justice issues by putting the needs of the victims first (Goodey 2004). Current anti-trafficking policies, while well-intentioned, often lack victim sensitivity, making these policies less effective when it comes to working with trafficking survivors (Graw Leary 2015). Therefore, it is important for law enforcement to recognize the impact of their approach in order to effectively combat human trafficking. Prior research has demonstrated that an individually tailored and victim-centered approach is imperative for shaping effective anti-trafficking policy (Goodey 2004). By understanding the complexities of human trafficking in the context of diverse perspectives, policymakers gain insight into the

unique vulnerabilities and needs of victims. One effective way to implement this victim-centered approach is by looking at human trafficking through a religious lens.

Religion can function as an asset or risk factor for victims of human trafficking, serving as a medium that protects and provides support to individuals impacted by human trafficking, but also as a means of heightening an individual's likelihood of exploitation (Pertek et al. 2023). However, the majority of the current literature explores the relationship between religion and human trafficking dichotomously, focusing on how religion has *either* a positive or negative impact for victims of human trafficking. For example, prior research articles focus solely on how a particular religion has served as a risk factor, only looking at how religion can be used to manipulate individuals as well as keep individuals in their trafficking situations (Muazu 2022; Msuya 2019; Ikeora 2016; Potrafke 2016). Conversely, other articles have focused solely on how religion has served as an asset for individuals impacted by trafficking victimization, demonstrating how religion can impact individuals positively by serving as a source of resilience and protection (Pati 2014; Zimmerman 2011; Wilson 2010). This research can be puzzling because how can religion both help and hurt individuals in the context of human trafficking?

Understanding this dual nature requires a nuanced examination of the impact of religion on human trafficking victimization, yet most of the existing research tends to oversimplify this relationship. The existing literature typically generalizes victim-centered approaches without specifically addressing religion or categorizes religion's influence as strictly positive or negative. Consequently, the current literature overlooks the potential benefits of looking at how these positive and negative aspects of religion can inform policy together. A more comprehensive research approach would explore how these contrasting dynamics interact, potentially providing valuable insights into the complexities of human trafficking for policymakers and law



enforcement. Embracing a more holistic perspective that acknowledges the diverse impacts of religion, researchers can contribute to more effective strategies for combating human trafficking.

Therefore, the current research study seeks to fill this gap in the literature through a series of semi-structured interviews conducted with members from various anti-trafficking organizations. These semi-structured interviews will provide insights into their perceptions of the impact of religion on human trafficking, drawing from their experience working with victims. This research study examines the impact that religion has on trafficking victimization with the research question: How does religion impact the experiences of individuals impacted by human trafficking victimization? This study builds upon prior human trafficking prevention research but examines an alternative avenue that could help prevent trafficking victimization. It looks at human trafficking from a more victim-centered standpoint, which focuses on the individual needs and vulnerabilities of victims from a religious lens.

## Chapter 2: Literature Review

### **HUMAN TRAFFICKING**

Human trafficking has uprooted the lives of millions of victims worldwide, affecting people regardless of gender, race, religion, age, and nationality (United States Department of State 2023). Human trafficking can be defined as the “recruitment, transportation, transfer, harboring, force, fraud, or coercion for the purpose of exploitation” (United Nations 2004: 4). The United Nations’ (2004: 4) definition of human trafficking is wide-ranging as it includes sexual exploitation, forced labor or services, child trafficking, domestic servitude, the removal of organs, as well as any type of practice that is similar to slavery. While the definition of human trafficking may be considered broad, the United Nations needed to be able to encapsulate the entirety of this multifaceted issue including its capacity to exist in multiple different forms (Cockbain and Bowers 2019). The crime of human trafficking is often considered a crime that is hidden in plain sight due to its ability to occur under the radar (Hepburn and Simon 2010; Shoop 2020). Traffickers are able to keep their activities hidden by disguising their exploitative actions under the guise of a legitimate business in order to avoid detection (Shoop 2020). Due to its covert nature, communities often perceive human trafficking as a crime that happens in other parts of the world, but would never happen in their own neighborhood (Hepburn and Simon 2010). However, regardless of location, human trafficking will exist in some manner as it exists in many different forms through various tactics (Cockbain and Bowers 2019). Due to its widespread, global impact, human trafficking should be at the forefront of security issues. However, since human trafficking is considered to be a “crime hidden in plain sight,” many trafficking incidents go unnoticed and therefore its prevalence is often underestimated (Hepburn and Simon 2010).

Traffickers go through great lengths to coerce their victims into trafficking situations. Most commonly, traffickers will utilize recruitment deception which occurs when traffickers prey on their victims' economic desperations, offering promises of a better life typically within a foreign country (Roby 2005). Upon arriving in a foreign country with distinct culture and language differences, victims find themselves isolated and unable to escape their exploitative situations (Roby 2005). Often, the reality of their current situations dawns too late, leaving individuals stuck in a cycle of exploitative conditions (Jones et al. 2011). These individuals find themselves in terrible working conditions and indebted to their traffickers as they were the ones that gave them this "opportunity" in the first place (Jones et al. 2011). These victims find themselves in endless cycles of debt bondage where traffickers force victims to pay a continually growing debt at inflated rates in order to keep victims in this cycle of exploitation (Basu and Chau 2004). The language and cultural barrier makes it difficult for victims to seek out help and immigration law may prevent victims from coming forward as they may face legal repercussions as well. In general, many states have some form of immigration restrictions, which could be an issue for those looking to escape as they typically should not even be in that state in the first place (Hepburn and Simon 2010). Therefore victims may fear arrest or deportation if they were to seek help from law enforcement, especially when they had been coerced into participating in illegal activities as many see themselves as offenders (Farrell, Mcdevitt, and Fahy 2008; Villacampa and Torres 2017).

To keep victims in their trafficking situations, traffickers will often utilize various threats and manipulation tactics. Traffickers will threaten to hurt victims or to have family members of their victims hurt or killed if an individual attempts to leave their current situation (Hepburn and Simon 2010). In the case of religion, traffickers will manipulate victims by claiming to have a

spiritual connection with a “higher power” and if these trafficking victims disobey their traffickers, they will not only suffer earthly punishments, but spiritual ones as well (Heil 2017). Traffickers will also create situations of dependency where victims are unable to leave their trafficking situation due to how reliant they are on their traffickers (Lutya 2012). Traffickers are able to create this sense of dependency in a variety of different ways which could include psychological manipulation, confiscation of identification documents, or creating substance or drug addictions (Cockbain and Bowers 2019). This makes it extremely difficult for victims to leave their trafficking situations as they feel as if they cannot be without their traffickers. These coercive tactics highlight the urgent need for policy interventions that prioritize the safety and well-being of individuals impacted by human trafficking victimization.

However, current anti-trafficking policies do not address the pressing need for a victim-centered approach when combating human trafficking. For example, while the U.S. Trafficking Victims Protection Act (TVPA) of 2000, the first anti-trafficking legal framework in the United States, aimed to address the issue of human trafficking comprehensively, it ultimately has been described as “limited and indirect” (Chacon 2006). Although the TVPA has been amended multiple times to provide greater resources and protections for survivors, it has not made many prevention-related changes. While other states have their own anti-trafficking protocols as well as international organizations, these actors all face challenges when it comes to directly tackling trafficking. These actors are often challenged on both the ethics and effectiveness of their approaches (Lobasz 2009). Critics argue that current human trafficking approaches are flawed as they put the security needs of the state before the needs of the victim, which is ineffective as trafficked persons are often deported, arrested, or imprisoned which ultimately could lead to revictimization (Coontz and Griebel 2004). Therefore, much of the

research has demonstrated that current anti-trafficking approaches, instead of taking into account the needs of the victim, prioritize the conviction of traffickers (Goodey 2004). In terms of crime victimization research, when law enforcement has utilized victim-centered approaches, victims have been more cooperative with authorities (Shapland, Willmore, and Duff 1985; Wemmers 1996; Hamber and Lundy 2020). In order to combat human trafficking more effectively, there needs to be more of an emphasis on looking at trafficking from a victim-centered standpoint which entails examining the vulnerabilities and experiences of each individual victim to meet their specific needs. Human trafficking scholars have suggested that future anti-trafficking policy should take a victim-centered approach to address this issue (Goodey 2004).

Therefore, focusing on a victim-centered approach is important for human trafficking research as it provides insight towards the unique vulnerabilities and needs of victims. According to the European Committee on Crime Problems, a victim-centered response focuses on keeping the victim informed, treating victims with care and respect, protecting the victim's privacy, ensuring victims have a voice, and prioritizing restitution (2010). Given the variability of human trafficking cases, it is crucial for research to look at this victim-centered approach in order to gain a better understanding of each trafficking case. Examining human trafficking within the framework of religion may offer a valuable entry point for this victim-centered approach.

## **THE INFLUENCE OF RELIGION**

While about 84% of the world identifies with a religious group according to the Pew Research Center, there is a lot of disagreement when it comes to actually defining religion (Harrison 2006). Therefore, this study will be using a general definition of religion defining it as a system of beliefs and practices that are upheld by a community of people with a common faith (Hodge et al. 2001; Good and Willoughby 2008; Bryant-Davis 2009). With this definition of

religion, this section of the literature review will analyze the impact religion has had on an individual's thought process. While it is understood that there are people who may not give much weight to the influence of religion, there are many that do (Fox 2001). Most scholars argue that religion influences how individuals think. Research has demonstrated that religion has influenced individuals' perceptions of abortion (Hess and Rueb 2005), divorce (Call and Heaton 1990), LGBTQ+ rights (Westwood 2022), capital punishment (Rade et al. 2017), etc., demonstrating the influence religion has on individuals' perceptions. However, despite religion playing such an influential role in decision making, religion has received very little attention in terms of international issues.

The social sciences have a tendency to downplay the significance of religion, a perspective that traces back to many nineteenth-century theorists including Emil Durkheim, Auguste Comte, and Karl Marx (Shupe 1990; Buddenbaum 2002; Dalton et al. 1992). These theorists believed that religion would one day become obsolete, and this sentiment still persists throughout many social sciences today, contributing to the oversight of religion (Stark, Iannaccone, and Finke 1996; Toft, Philpott, and Shah 2011). Another reason why religion has not often been included in the literature could be because it can be an extremely difficult variable to measure as many are unsure of how to both measure it and then how to measure it accurately, especially with the lack of attention given to religion in the first place (Fox 2001). In this continuously modernizing world, some scholars argue that religiosity and therefore religion's influence, is actually increasing (Thomas 2005; Toft, Philpott, and Shah 2011; Bentzen 2021). Some scholars argue that religiosity is increasing due to the rise of adversity and insecurity in the world, while others argue that it is increasing due to it becoming public, global, and assertive (Toft, Philpott and Shah 2011; Bentzen 2021). This shift can be attributed to individuals now

having the freedom to choose their religion they practice, a choice that not everyone was able to make in the past (Fox 2001). Although the world is rapidly evolving, the lack of sufficient attention to the impact of religion in the case of international research highlights the necessity for a greater scholarly focus.

As the demand for a greater focus on the role of religious influence becomes evident, recognizing the impact that religion can have on individuals becomes increasingly important. Research has demonstrated that religion has played a significant role in helping individuals deal with traumatic events (Gow 2012). Those who have experienced trauma often use religion in order to make sense of the trauma that they have experienced or are currently experiencing (Walker et al. 2009). Whether it is through independent prayer or the reframing of events through a positive religious lens, many individuals seek to find hope in the midst of trauma (Bryant-Davis and Wong 2013). Faith-based organizations could also serve to help victims of trauma by providing congregational support as well as support from its religious leaders which could help victims cope with their trauma experience as well as contribute to this sense of hope (Bryant-Davis and Wong 2013). Additionally, research that looks at the relationship between religion and criminal desistance has demonstrated that religion can help inmates develop prosocial values and reduce recidivism rates (Clear et al. 2000; Giordano et al. 2008; O'Connor 2004). Because of the notable influence that religion has on individuals, redirecting research efforts towards understanding of human trafficking through a religious lens holds the potential to offer insights into understanding the experiences of trafficking victims.

However, research on religion has also demonstrated that religion is capable of having a negative impact on individuals. Prior literature looks at how religion can harm individuals by exemplifying how religion has been utilized to legitimize violence against women and other

religions, discriminate against the LGBTQIA+ community, and normalize patriarchal norms (Pertek et al. 2023; Potrafke 2016). Negative religious coping has also harmed individuals who have endured stressful situations, meaning that instead of using religion to help them persevere through traumatic situations, religion has the capability of causing further stress for individuals (Pargament, Koenig, and Perez 2000). Individuals in these circumstances may blame God for the stressful situation which ultimately leads to negative mental health outcomes (Pargament et al. 2000). In terms of research and criminal desistance, religion has been used to radicalize individuals within prisons (Pluchinsky 2008). While research generally focuses on how religion can positively impact individuals, it is important to acknowledge the research that has looked at religion's capacity to influence individuals negatively as well.

## **RELIGION AND HUMAN TRAFFICKING**

Anthropologist Clifford Geertz believed that most people “find religion necessary to interpret the world around them, especially when bad things happen,” demonstrating that religion can serve as a critical framework for individuals, especially in times of adversity (Fox 2001: 60; Geertz 1973). Therefore, an individual's tie to religion has the ability to influence the experiences of victims impacted by human trafficking situations. This research aims to delve deeper into the nuances of religion's influence. Religion could serve as an asset in multiple different ways where faith-based organizations can help identify and assist victims in trafficking situations as well as serve as a source of resilience (Graw Leary 2015). However, religious leaders are also capable of misusing their power and weaponizing religion in order to exploit the faiths of their victims for trafficking purposes (Heil 2017).



### *Religion as an Asset*

Faith-based organizations which integrate religious beliefs into their work, can serve as an asset for human trafficking victims because they are better equipped to meet the needs of victims than many law enforcement agencies and legal professionals (Graw Leary 2015). Oftentimes, many law enforcement personnel and legal professionals who are designated to help trafficking victims have very little understanding of the victim's cultural values or religion (ten Kate et al. 2021). This limited awareness may contribute to the reason that many victims do not go to law enforcement or legal professionals as they are not able to adequately provide the support that these victims need (ten Kate et al. 2021). Instead, victims may feel more comfortable reaching out to faith-based organizations that do understand their values. Therefore, faith-based organizations are often better at identifying and assisting victims in trafficking situations as they have a better understanding of victims' needs (Graw Leary 2015). Research has demonstrated that when faith-based organizations pair with state agencies and non-government organizations, they are able to better help identify victims as well as identify and prosecute traffickers (Wilson 2010). Additionally, religious leaders can also identify and combat human trafficking. Leveraging their role of power and trust in the community, they can establish collaborative efforts with law enforcement as well as provide support and assistance for trafficking victims (Bernadin 2010).

Religion can also play a role in helping individuals prevent, endure, and stop trafficking situations as religion provides a pro-social framework, a framework which puts an emphasis on behaviors and attitudes that help promote positive social outcomes (Malhotra 2023). Prior research has demonstrated that religion can influence people's perception of events and therefore help victims stay resilient in difficult situations (Walker et al. 2009). By providing individuals

with a sense of support and community, religion could serve as a means to help prevent them from becoming victims, provide emotional support, as well as help pull individuals out of trafficking situations (Graw Leary 2015). The pro-social behavior that religion encourages may also help individuals endure trafficking situations. When victims are enduring and coping with trauma, a relationship with the divine may help individuals find the strength to overcome these traumatic experiences (Celinski and Allen 2012). Therefore, religion's pro-social nature provides an avenue to facilitate the collaboration between religious leaders and law enforcement in both actively addressing and preventing trafficking situations.

### *Religion as a Risk Factor*

While religious leaders have been demonstrated to be in a unique position of power and trust, they are capable of weaponizing this power in order to exploit the faiths of their victims for trafficking purposes (Ehsan 2021, Heil 2017). Many traffickers use religion as a means of coercing victims into and perpetuating their exploitative conditions. Traffickers often capitalize on the faith of their victim and use their religion to discourage questioning or resistance, which in turn, makes it easier to deceive or manipulate victims (Heil 2017). Religious leaders and institutions may also be involved in human trafficking schemes by either turning a blind eye or contributing to trafficking efforts themselves. In these cases, religious figures claim to have a connection with a "higher power," using their position of authority to exploit victims. Disobeying the trafficker or "higher power" would lead to both earthly and spiritual punishments, so victims feel obligated to obey because they believe that is what God wants them to do (Heil 2017).

Traffickers will also take advantage of practices in different religions and use them against victims. For example, a common practice in African Traditional Religions (ATR) is

oath-taking which is often tied to various cultural and spiritual rituals (Msuya 2019). Ritual oaths and juju are “built on the fundamental theological view in ATR that God has appointed spiritual beings as rulers and judges to preside over the affairs of men,” where those who were selected by God were supposed to enforce God’s will (Muazu 2022: 148). Traffickers in these circumstances claim to be chosen by God and abuse these traditional oath-taking rituals to control their victims, exploiting tradition to silence them (Muazu 2022). Victims who are subject to this oath-taking ritual by their traffickers are forced to swear that they won’t reveal the identity of their trafficker as well as promise to pay their debts (Msuya 2019). If these oaths are broken, illness, death, infertility, or insanity would wreak havoc on either the oath-breaker, or their friends and family, which is how traffickers prevent victims from testifying (Msuya 2019). However, these oaths are not only able to prevent victims from testifying against their traffickers, but are able to keep them in their trafficking situations as well (Ikeora 2016). Victims may refrain from seeking help out of fear of retribution or the social stigma associated with help seeking within their communities (van der Watt and Kruger 2017). Trafficking cases that involve religious exploitation are extremely difficult to prosecute as victims may not even be aware that they have the freedom to escape their trafficking situations as they are under such strong coercion from faux religious figures (Heil 2017). It is important to note that while most of the research does focus on non-dominant religions, traffickers who seek to exploit religion do not just target those who practice ATR, traffickers have a history of exploiting all religions including Christianity, Judaism, Islam, etc. as well (Pertek et al. 2023).

Although a significant amount of literature has focused on how many of the world’s religions are committed to tackling human rights abuses, in some cases, religion can also be found to foster these abuses. Some religions can be interpreted as perpetuating the idea that

certain people are inherently inferior to others, which leads to the creation of riskier environments where trafficking is more likely to occur (Usman 2014). Many religions can influence cultural valuations which portray women as inferior to men (Peach 2000). This hierarchical way of thinking puts women and children in particular at risk for human rights issues (Potrafke 2016). Thus, religion has the ability “to function as a source of liberation as well as a source of oppression,” for marginalized groups (Peach 2000: 66). Therefore, religious beliefs and practices could increase the likelihood of human trafficking victimization.

## **THE CURRENT STUDY**

This current research study will look at how religion plays a role in the experiences of individuals impacted by human trafficking victimization by focusing on the perspectives of members of anti-trafficking organizations. Members of anti-trafficking organizations play a unique role in preventing human trafficking, actively engaging with survivors who share their first-hand accounts and experiences with them. This direct interaction provides valuable insights to research that helps foster a better understanding of how religion impacts individuals with experiences of human trafficking victimization. This study informs current research because it sheds light on the multifaceted role of religion as both an asset and a risk factor. The findings have the potential to inform research on victim-centered approaches which is one of the current recommendation strategies for improving anti-trafficking strategies.

## Chapter 3: Data Source and Methods

### DATA

This research analyzed individuals who work for anti-trafficking organizations in order to gain a better understanding of how religion could serve as both an asset and risk factor for victims. To examine the role that religion plays on an individual's experience with human trafficking victimization, a qualitative approach was chosen where respondents from these various religious anti-trafficking organizations were interviewed about the victims of human trafficking that they had worked with. The interviews were semi-structured with the purpose of demonstrating how anti-trafficking organizations can provide insight for victimization research. In a semi-structured interview, the interviewer can ask specific questions and focus on overarching topics, but has the flexibility to probe deeper depending on the respondent's answer. A qualitative approach was chosen for this study due to its ability to comprehensively capture the unique perspectives of members of anti-trafficking organizations whose viewpoints are valuable when examining the influence of religion on an individual's experience with human trafficking victimization.

Interviews were conducted with different faith-based and non-faith-based anti-trafficking organizations that specialize in awareness, prevention and victim services. Although this research did not study human trafficking victims directly, this sample has worked very closely with victims and was chosen to prevent victims from being retraumatized. To ensure full confidentiality, the identities of the participants were kept confidential throughout this study and were only known to the researcher. Interviews were conducted over Zoom and some were recorded with the permission of the interviewees. To protect the identities of participants, these interviews were stored in Box, an encrypted database. Each participant was also given an ID

number, to ensure that there was no identifying information that would be able to link the participant to the study. To examine the role that religion plays on an individual's vulnerability to being trafficked, members from six anti-trafficking organizations were interviewed about their experiences with working with victims of human trafficking. Qualitative data was chosen for this study due to depth of analysis which allows for a more comprehensive understanding of the varying impacts of religion on human trafficking victims.

## **SAMPLE SELECTION**

The selection of anti-trafficking organizations within this study were chosen by using a purposive sampling style. This style is typically used when trying to access unique populations with a particular set of characteristics. In this study, the members interviewed from each of the six anti-trafficking organizations had thorough background knowledge on human trafficking victimization, a characteristic that was essential for this research. Each of these members worked for an anti-trafficking organization in the United States which specialized in combating human trafficking by raising awareness, supporting survivors, and preventing future human trafficking incidents. Additionally, each of these members had direct contact with trafficking victims as well as had at least two years of experience with their organizations. These individuals were contacted via email. Members of anti-trafficking organizations were chosen deliberately for this study in order to prevent the retraumatization of individuals with experiences of human trafficking victimization.

In order to be included in this study's sample, members from faith-based organizations needed to have experience with both human trafficking and religion. It is important to note that all three members worked for an organization that integrated Christianity into their anti-trafficking efforts. The three members from non-faith-based organizations were also selected

due to their experience with human trafficking, but without the religion requirement. Both faith-based and non-faith-based organizations were chosen in order to examine if faith-based and non-faith-based anti-trafficking organizations had varying perspectives on the impact of religion. While the sample size in this study was small, the purpose of this research was to gain a better understanding of the role religion plays when it comes to trafficking victimization based on the insight of professionals.

Throughout this study six anti-trafficking organizations were interviewed, three of which were Christian affiliated and three of which had no faith-based affiliation. These participants were located all throughout the United States and were able to provide invaluable insight about their experiences with human trafficking survivors within their areas. However, prior connection to religion did seem to have an effect on these individuals' perceptions of the impact religion has on trafficking victimization, and therefore it is important to distinguish the difference between each of the participants. In this next section, there will be a description of each of the six anti-trafficking members using pseudonyms in order to protect their identities. Participants will also be differentiated based on whether they worked for a faith-based (FBO) or non-faith-based (NFBO) organization.

Ms. Anderson (NFBO) is a female, middle-aged participant who works with a Southern non-faith-based anti-trafficking organization that focuses primarily on female minors who had been or are currently victims of sexual abuse.

Ms. Brennan (NFBO) is a female, middle-aged participant who works with a Northwestern non-faith-based anti-trafficking organization that focuses on survivors of all ages and genders. She also has experience with working with law enforcement.

Ms. Carter (NFBO) is a female, middle-aged participant who works with a mid-Atlantic non-faith-based anti-trafficking organization. She founded and is the current executive director of her organization and works with survivors of all ages and genders.

Ms. Daniels (FBO) is a female, middle-aged participant who works with a Northwestern Christian affiliated anti-trafficking organization that focuses predominantly on minors, but has been increasingly working with adult survivors as well.

Ms. Elliot (FBO) is a female, middle-aged participant who works with a Southern Christian affiliated anti-trafficking organization that focuses on survivors of all ages and genders.

Ms. Fisher (FBO) is a female, senior participant who works with a Southern Christian anti-trafficking organization that focuses on survivors of all ages and genders. She has been involved with the anti-trafficking initiative within her church.

## **INTERVIEW QUESTIONS**

In order to determine this role, semi-structured qualitative interviews were conducted where a series of predetermined questions were asked to each of the six participants. However, given the flexible nature of this approach, participants were asked to elaborate on certain responses in order to ensure that the topics discussed were explored in detail. This exploratory approach was chosen for this study due to its capacity to reveal unexpected insights and ability to delve deeper into specific topics within the limitations of its small sample size. While other limitations may include the lack of consistency of semi-structured interviews, this interview type was the most suitable for this research because of its ability to gather the intricate details and experiences that were shared. These questions were asked specifically to gain perspective on



religion and its perceived impact on human trafficking victimization as well as provide insight on the current issues and challenges with combating trafficking throughout different areas in the United States. These interviews averaged about half an hour and nine common questions were asked to each of the six participants like “In your experience, does religion play a role in human trafficking?” and would be probed by questions like “Could you elaborate a little on how this plays out?” for more details (See Appendix for complete interview guide).

## **DOMAINS**

To assess the themes and patterns within these qualitative interviews, this study analyzed a number of domains including: religion as an asset, religion as a risk factor, and characteristics of human trafficking. The domain religion as an asset will include findings from participants that detail how religion can be beneficial to individuals impacted by trafficking situations while the domain religion as a risk factor will detail how religion can also be used to harm individuals. Participants were also asked general questions about human trafficking and additional findings were able to be derived from these interviews under the domain: characteristics of human trafficking. The characteristics of human trafficking domain should help provide insight on these professionals’ perception of human trafficking as a whole. These three domains should provide a better understanding of the multifaceted role that religion plays when it comes to trafficking victimization.

## **ANALYTIC STRATEGY**

For this research study, thematic analysis was chosen as the strategy to examine the data collected from each of the semi-structured interviews. Following the transcription of each

interview, an inductive approach was used to analyze the patterns that emerged organically from the data. This inductive approach involved identifying and coding recurring themes across all six interviews. These themes were then further analyzed and broken down into more specific sub-themes which was able to increase the depth of these findings. After these themes and sub-themes were identified, they were sorted into broader domains which allowed for a more comprehensive understanding of the data.

## Chapter 4: Results

### DOMAINS

#### **Religion as an Asset**

The first domain that was identified throughout the research process was how religion could be used as an asset in order to help provide support for victims and anti-trafficking efforts as well as help prevent individuals from victimization. When asked about their perceptions of the role of religion as an asset, many participants distinguished the role of religion as a resource from the impact of religion on individuals.

#### *Religion and Donation*

When these members of the anti-trafficking organizations were asked about their collaboration with other organizations, all six of the participants noted that religious institutions played a role in the donation of money and resources. While religious institutions contributed to all six of the anti-trafficking organizations, these organizations had differing opinions on the extent to which these religious institutions contributed. One participant noted after being asked if they had worked with any religious institutions that:

Ms. Anderson (NFBO): “There's churches that donate food to us, so like in that capacity, we do. But here specifically, you know, religious entities don't play a big part in any of our decision making or engagement when it comes to providing services, maybe the way court or law enforcement would.”

While another participant noted that the church enabled the expansion of their organization and provided opportunities for survivors that would have not been possible without the donations of the church:

Ms. Fisher (FBO): “So the church provided all the financial resources and we not only built an anti-human trafficking organization. We also created a safe house... we had a safe house for girls under the age of 18 that had been trafficked and a total of 37 young ladies came through our doors.”

Therefore, the participants agreed that religious institutions seemed to play a role in the donation of resources to each of the six different anti-trafficking organizations. While some participants believed that financial contributions were the extent of which religious institutions contributed, other participants believed that they had played a far greater role. Four out of the six participants believed that religious institutions had a larger impact on human trafficking prevention and believed that religious institutions are also able to help with advocacy efforts, provide survivors with support, and are able to help remove individuals from their trafficking situations.

### *Religion and Advocacy*

Two of the participants believed that religious institutions could help with advocacy efforts. In certain instances, religious congregations had been used as a means of spreading awareness about human trafficking where one participant explained:

Ms. Carter (NFBO): “And, you know, they do a lot of advocacy, they will create speaking opportunities for their congregations to learn more about human trafficking. And we have a lot of events that we participate in order to be in front of their congregations so that they can learn about what we do and make decisions on ways to support us.”

By leveraging their reach and influence, religious institutions are able to address human trafficking by helping raise awareness about this complex issue and therefore are able to drive meaningful change within the community.

### *Religion and Emotional Support*

In addition to the advocacy efforts of religious institutions, they have also been able to provide support for survivors. One participant provided an example for survivors who have Post Traumatic Stress Disorder:

Ms. Daniels (FBO): “When they call in the middle of the night and they're having a night terror, then we can pray with them and just kind of talk them through that way.”

Another participant noted that traffickers will often allow their victims to attend religious institutions if they are starting to break down:

Ms. Fisher (FBO): “Traffickers often allow their victims to go to church, especially if they're starting to mentally break down. Or spin out of control if they're addicted to drugs because they get them addicted to drugs a lot. So traffickers will be like, go to church, girl, calm down, you know, so traffickers actually will allow, now they'll bring them there, they'll drop them off, they'll be waiting for them in the parking lot and then they'll take them back. So we also have to kind of watch for that as well, but even traffickers know that the church can calm the emotion down, which is very crazy.”

These participants commented on both current trafficking victims and trafficking survivors, demonstrating that individuals that have been impacted by trafficking victimization have been able to turn to religion to cope with their trafficking experiences.

### *Religion and Identification & Removal*

Additionally, two participants found that religious leaders were able to identify and help victims escape their trafficking situations:

Ms. Daniels (FBO): “But even like the one I was telling you about where her Dad, it was a familial sex cult. She actually, how she came to us was through a pastor. She ended up at some church and the pastor called, in pastor, being a woman in this situation called and said, I have this person that just came to me and told us, you know, she'd been coming to our church for a little bit. So she was already even in a church, which surprised me actually. And so that was, you know, it just because that happened doesn't mean that there isn't something that's already built inside of them that knows that that wasn't right.”

These participants found that religious leaders were able to play a direct role in anti-trafficking efforts as their unique position of trust and power enabled them to be able to pull victims out of exploitative environments and help them escape.

### *Religion and Resilience*

Participants also have suggested that religion could also be used as a source of resilience for victims to help them endure their trafficking situations as well as help survivors cope with the trauma they had experienced. One participant discussed general experiences that clients had shared with them:

Ms. Daniels (FBO): “Oftentimes you'll see, you know, a client at a point where they'll say, wow, I was never alone. How, how can somebody who's been chained in a shed or, you know, like, and beaten so badly come back and tell me you didn't feel alone in that moment, you know, like you knew that there was somebody else there.”

While not all participants went into detail about the specifics of religion being used as an asset, there was a general consensus that religion could be used as a coping mechanism by victims of human trafficking. However, many participants noted that religion could also be used as a coping mechanism post victimization.

Ms. Fisher (NFBO): “One of the neatest things is that oftentimes survivors will only go to church because they feel like that's the safest place that they can just kind of go and be. And even if they're just there to listen and absorb and maybe cry a little bit, they feel like it's a very safe place.”

While Ms. Fisher specifically touched on the role of religion in providing support to survivors to help them cope with trauma. Ms. Anderson (NFBO) and Ms. Daniels (NFBO) also emphasized the need for a safe and stable support system in order to prevent revictimization.

The findings from this domain reveal the potential for religion to serve as a significant asset for individuals. Participants revealed that religion has the ability to positively impact human trafficking efforts by explaining that religion helps with donations, advocacy efforts,

emotional coping, the ability of religious leaders to pull individuals out of their trafficking situations, and help individuals remain resilient. These participants from both faith-based and non-faith-based organizations found that religion overall provided a sense of comfort, safety, and community, and can help individuals endure their trafficking situations as well as help assist their healing journey. While religion can serve as a source of strength and support, participants also found that it also can serve as a risk for some individuals.

### **Religion as a Risk Factor**

A second domain that was identified in this study was how religion could be used as a risk factor and can increase an individual susceptibility to trafficking situations. While all six of the participants agreed that religion could serve as an asset in terms of combating human trafficking, five out of the six participants believed that religion could also serve as a risk factor. When asked about their perceptions of the role of religion as a risk factor, participants identified two distinct risks: religion being used as a manipulation tactic and religion enabling victimization.

#### *Religion as a Manipulation Tactic*

Most of the participants generally agreed that religion could be used as a manipulation tactic, but participants had differing perspectives as to how traffickers were manipulating victims. For example, some participants believed that victims are manipulated by traffickers because of their desire to be closer to God:

Ms. Fisher (FBO): “You've also had so-called religious organizations that have actually trafficked people. I would like to say that they're really not religious, that they're kind of like faking their religion, but they're using it as a manipulation factor. You know, you know, once If you had a corrupt priest or pastor or religious leader and they were corrupt. Most people are trying to get to God so they'll do whatever that man in the robe says, you know people have been manipulated by the church.”

A few participants felt comfortable with sharing survivor experiences which helped put this manipulation tactic into perspective:

Ms. Daniels (FBO): “ Like I said, with familial trafficking, I've had experience with familial sex cults. So basically where they have raised or born children to be their sex slaves, basically, in their homes.... Yeah I mean her dad was God. And, you know, you're going to do this in my name. And this is what we do... This is God's desire. This is what you're supposed to do. This is what he wants. And so, yeah, there's, there's a lot of that. And, they're sitting in all of that confusion because of this manipulation.”

Ms. Fisher (FBO) also provided an example where entire religious institutions will be involved in trafficking schemes whilst using religion to manipulate their victims:

Ms. Brennan (NFBO): “There was some cases with Scientology where with that religion you grow up through that religion and this is public information but there were some cases where they were forced to work on a boat and they were forced to do hard labor and if they refused they were punished and sent to the steam room or engine room. A couple of the victims claimed sexual abuse and sexual harassment, things like that. And it was all done under the church. I know that there is another church. I cannot say what church it is because I know that there is a documentary currently being made on it where there is forced labor in the chain. And again, this is God's will, this is what we do, this is what God wants you to do, so I think that's probably more common in the really larger churches.”

These two participants were able to share survivor experiences with religion being used as a manipulation tactic for both sex and labor trafficking. In these cases, traffickers would claim that it was “God’s will” for victims to perform exploitative acts and were able to manipulate their victims by using religion in this regard.

While some participants believed that religion itself is used as a manipulation tactic, others believed that religious authority was the method in which traffickers manipulated their victims. These participants argued that it was not the use of religion itself that was manipulating individuals into trafficking situations, but instead the abuse of power that religious figures held. This was made clear by one non-faith-based organization member:



Ms. Carter (NFBO): “Oh, for sure. I mean, we've had women who have been victimized by clergy... Someone who uses their power in a faith role, like a clergyman or a pastor who, um, um, coerces these boys and girls to perform sex acts for benefit or gain... They're using their power and their position as a leader in the church to coerce women more than I would say religion, not like God said to do it, but I, as the faith leader in this church, who you should respect and admire.”

Ms. Carter makes the distinction between religion being used as a manipulation tactic and the abuse of religious authority and believes that trafficking occurs only when there is an abuse of this power. She explains that the power that religious leaders have over members of their congregation can be abused in order to exploit their victims.

### *Religion Enabling Victimization*

Religion is also able to serve as a risk factor because it could be used to enable trafficking situations. For example, members of the church are able to enable trafficking situations by protecting the trafficker:

Ms. Elliot (FBO): And then yes, and there's been stories, and you know, experiences we've, you know, heard about where where there's been religious abuse, and when there's been a victim that did go to somebody in a church and disclose what was happening to her, and they told her to not do anything about it, or they told her that that she needed to submit or listen to her abuser, the trafficker. Whether that was a family member in her life, someone of authority, or that was her husband, or you know spouse. And so we've seen that even be used within a trafficking situation... instead of empowering the person to leave or protecting them, they end up enabling the trafficker.”

Although the church was not the direct cause of the trafficking situation, Ms. Elliot demonstrated that religious leaders can enable traffickers by encouraging victims to remain in their current situations.

The findings from this domain showcase how religion can be used to negatively impact individuals impacted by trafficking situations. All three members of faith-based anti-trafficking organizations as well as two members from non-faith-based anti-trafficking organizations were able to provide insight into how religion can serve as a manipulation tactic. These members

explained that traffickers are able to exploit a victim's desire to be closer to God or the power that comes with being a religious leader. Additionally, two members from faith-based organizations were able to provide insight into situations where religion serves as an enabling tactic, exemplifying situations where religious leaders encourage the trafficking situation.

### **Characteristics of Human Trafficking**

While these interviews were conducted in order to determine the impact of religion on human trafficking victimization, this third domain captures the additional insights on participants on the general issue of human trafficking. Each participant was asked about their definition of human trafficking and common challenges they found throughout their anti-trafficking efforts. Participants also highlighted the need for a victim-centered approach to be used among law enforcement.

#### *Definition*

At the start of each interview, each of the participants were asked to define human trafficking. All six participants referenced the use of "force, fraud, or coercion" for exploitative purposes, which is used within the UN's definition of human trafficking. However, multiple participants noted that human trafficking does not have a simple, concise definition, and that human trafficking is capable of taking on many forms and provided various examples of what human trafficking could look like including:

Ms. Daniels (FB): "Trafficking can be anything from being pimped out by somebody, or it can be self exploitation. So meaning you are being bought online or pictures and that kind of thing. Or it could be anything, anything in exchange of value."

Ms. Elliot (NFB): “But you know a sex buyer could easily say: ‘Hey, I’ll buy you some weed, or I’ll give you a place to stay. But you gotta, you know, have sex with me first.’ That’s actually considered sex trafficking when it comes to a minor.”

Ms. Brennan (NFB): “So the trafficker is getting all the money or not paying the victim what they should be paid. And it often entails I could go on forever. If it often entails a promise of something that doesn’t exist. And then once they get here and are in the real job, they’re manipulated. Human trafficking is about vulnerability. And traffickers traffic people for money, but they do it because they’re able to find that vulnerability that the individual has, they manipulate it and they exploit it. And everyone has a vulnerability. I mean, it’s just human nature.”

While these broader definitions of human trafficking were all quite different, they encapsulate the complexity of the definition and demonstrate some of the various trafficking manipulation tactics. This study will specifically explore how religion could be used as one of the many manipulation tactics.

### *Challenges with Victimization*

Each of the six participants identified similar common challenges when asked “What are some of the common challenges when identifying potential victims/survivors of human trafficking?” and “What seems to be the biggest challenge when combating human trafficking?”. Throughout these interviews, three common challenges with victimization prevalence were identified including: lack of victim awareness, lack of community awareness, and the lack of a support system. Throughout the six interviews, these three challenges were identified as reasons for why human trafficking continues to remain such a prominent issue.

#### Lack of Awareness: Victim

Many of the participants explained that one of the common challenges faced when identifying individuals involved in trafficking situations was victims not being aware that they are being trafficked:

Ms. Brennan (NFBO): “So most victims don't know that they're victims. They just believe this is their life and this is the situation they're in. They don't know that there's a name to what is being done to them. I think that's one of the hardest things because they're hidden in plain sight. We can't find them. They don't come out and raise their hand and say, hey, I'm being victimized. I'm a victim of human trafficking because they don't know that.”

Another participant added on to the sentiment that victim awareness has been a challenge and explained that:

Ms. Elliot (FBO): “So there are times where many victims don't identify as a victim of trafficking because they may not have the language, for they may not understand that what is actually happening to them is trafficking. You know, many times the majority of victims are trafficked by somebody they know and trust, and they love, or they're in some kind of a relationship with whether that's a romantic relationship or professional relationship, like a job setting or a relationship like a family member. So if that's all they've known then they're not going to recognize that that's actually wrong and that they're actually a victim.”

Ms. Elliot highlights the complexities of victim awareness noting that traffickers are commonly loved ones of their victims and that it may be difficult for victims to identify that they are in an exploitative situation.

#### Lack of Awareness: Community

Community awareness was another common challenge that participants identified when discussing common issues with identifying victims:

Ms. Brennan (NFBO): “And just the other big problem is because there's so little awareness with the community and people in general, they don't know what they're seeing. So you can't identify human trafficking if you don't know what it looks like.”

This participant believed that this was such a pressing issue because:

Ms. Brennan (NFBO): “I feel like as a country, we're not aware of the situation at hand and that the risks our children are facing every day on social media. And as a country, we don't want to be aware of it. And that's what is dangerous to our children. I don't feel like our legislators are in touch with what's going on. I don't feel like people care. When people think about human trafficking, they think about what's going on in India and

Thailand and Africa. They don't know what's happening here... Nobody wants to know about it. And the more ignorant we are, the more at risk our children are and people are. People like to know that it's not happening here. It's not in my town. Not in my country. They're like, oh yeah, no, my child doesn't need to know about this. This isn't happening here.”

A different participant expanded upon this idea:

Ms. Daniels (FBO): “The fact that everybody thinks it's just the overseas, they're kidnapped and they're taken overseas, you know, or they're just the missing children that never have been found or whatever, you know, and it's like just, I think that was probably the biggest issue and even still kind of sometimes is when you talk about, ‘Oh, I work with survivors of trafficking,’ and it's like, oh, you know, nobody thinks it happens here.”

Overall, all six of this study’s participants discussed the challenges of this general lack of awareness about human trafficking explaining that it is hard to identify victims when victims do not even know they are victims themselves and when individuals are unaware of what human trafficking looks like.

#### Lack of Awareness: Law Enforcement

Many participants commented on the lack of awareness of law enforcement personnel in terms of both education about human trafficking and their behavior when working with victims as there was a general consensus that law enforcement has not been treating victims appropriately. Despite these beliefs, most participants acknowledged that law enforcement generally has “good intentions” and “are trying” where one participant explains:

Ms. Daniels (FBO): “their intentions of doing more are there. But I think because it's so underground, it's not out there. You don't see it every day. It doesn't take precedence over other things. And like, we were getting ready to do something on a regular basis with our law enforcement here. And I didn't hear from them and when I saw them, I was like you know, hey, what's going on? And they're like, yeah, we had like three murders last week and that takes precedence, you know, I mean, the guys are out there, they need to catch them. Well, yeah, so are the traffickers, you know, but because it's so underground, you don't see it. It's like, yeah, it's, it's hard to make it, make them understand and realize how important it is. And I think that there's also still that, I talk to officers all the time that have no clue about trafficking.”

Another participant highlights the importance of the appropriate treatment of victims by explaining:

Ms. Elliot (FBO): “Yeah, it's so important for law enforcement to really understand the mindset of a victim, and you know they're like not going to be cooperative, and they're going to be awful to you and probably cuss you out or whatever like, but you gotta keep showing up like and keep showing them that you care, and that you're there for them. And you know that comes with the training and education like in learning how to be victim centered. These are victims that have been like so like manipulated and psychologically coerced like they're psychologically changed. So it's not like you're interviewing a rape victim. That's like, I've been raped. I want help. Like I want justice. Like usually I mean, and I could be wrong, but the victim doesn't have a strong emotional bond with the rapist, but with the trafficker they usually do. So you know, they had this strong trauma bond with them. So it's really hard for that victim. It's really hard for that to be broken. And so law enforcement have to have patience and the willingness to build that relationship and help the victim learn to trust them.”

While this participant captures the issue of law enforcement’s lack of understanding when it comes to survivors of trafficking situations and the importance of law enforcement taking a more victim-centered approach, another participant shared her experience with the mindsets of law enforcement officers:

Ms. Anderson (NFBO): Officers and often a lot of other adults, too, will say, well, if she's going to act grown, we're going to treat her like she's grown. But that's just not the case. There's still children. And when we look at really young minors like the 12 year old, I was telling you about, you know, she got introduced to sex at such a young age, it quickly became normalized that sex for an exchange of a good is what sex is. So how could she know any different if no one was ever there to teach her or show her that this is extremely inappropriate or even keep her safe? You know, so for me, with that law enforcement specifically, it was, you know, how dense can you be? Like she is 12, you're telling me that it's normal for a 12 year old to make these choices that you're saying.”

The lack of awareness about the issue of human trafficking and how to handle it has been an issue that was largely identified by participants as a challenge to combating human trafficking. Participants agreed that if law enforcement was properly educated about this issue and approached situations with victim needs in mind, they would be better apt at combating this issue.

## Lack of a Support System

Participants also identified many victims' lack of a stable support system as a common challenge when asked about the biggest issues when combating human trafficking. One participant touched on the difficulty for victims who do not have a good support system:

Ms. Fisher (FBO): Once we get victims, if they don't have like a good familial support system and they need a place to stay to recuperate. If they're a minor they're pretty much in the foster care system then if they don't have like parents to go home too. We call those community survivors or, you know, in the foster care system. If they're adults and they're trafficked. If they don't have a good support system, it's very hard for them to live, so housing is the number one challenge across the board."

Another participant went into more detail about the importance of a supportive family unit:

Ms. Anderson (NFBO): "I think if there was more support for the guardian or the family unit so that they can stabilize and then to provide a healing and safe place for the trafficked minor I think oftentimes when I reflect on the members we have now that are still kind of in crisis mode it's because their family unit is still in crisis... I think it's it's providing that support to the family unit because we can only do so much with the individual and if they go back home to the same bullshit they're only going to hold on to so much."

One participant shared her experience with a survivor where she explained:

Ms. Elliot (FBO): "It took a year for this one girl to finally say, Okay, yes, that's what was. That's what's happening to me and that was because she was addicted to drugs, and so she was getting, you know her fix from this from her pimp. So that kind of kept her there. And you know sometimes that you know that a lot of times these traffickers and pimps, I mean, they're meeting the victims needs. So that's definitely a reason that they're staying there like they're getting their needs met. And so they may not look at programs like us, or they may not feel like they have the support system to leave or to speak up."

Ms. Elliot suggested that trafficking situations could be prevented if victims had a stable support system. Many participants also stressed that a stable support system also can play a protective role when it comes to preventing revictimization.

These findings were able to showcase opinions on human trafficking through the lens of anti-trafficking professionals. When prompted for their definition, each member noted that human trafficking deals with “force, fraud, and coercion,” but then were able to elaborate on what trafficking can look like. Additionally participants highlighted a general lack of awareness as one of the main challenges when combating trafficking, explaining how the lack of awareness from victims, the community, and law enforcement as well as a lack of a support system contribute to the prominence of this global issue.

## Chapter 5: Discussion

This current study fills a gap in the literature about the interplay of religion as both an asset and risk factor. Prior research has mostly looked at religion as solely an asset or religion as solely a risk factor, but this study argues that the role of religion is not so dichotomous. By holistically examining the role of religion on human trafficking, this research can provide insight to different victim vulnerabilities as well as different prevention and support methods. Interviews with members of anti-trafficking organizations were able to exemplify the impact of religion on individuals who have experienced human trafficking victimization. Additionally this literature is able to inform victim-centered research as it provides a specific avenue on how to inform one aspect of this highly demanded approach. These interviews helped highlight how religion can serve as both an asset and risk factor as well as called attention to the current challenges with identifying and combating human trafficking.



## **FINDINGS AND IMPLICATIONS**

All participants acknowledged that religion could serve as an asset for victims of human trafficking; explaining that through religious institutions, religious leaders, and Christianity itself, religion can help individuals prevent and escape trafficking situations. In addition to financial and resource contributions, this study highlighted the use of religion as a source of advocacy, support and identification. These findings demonstrated that religious institutions play a role in advancing human trafficking awareness. Due to the church's ability to reach large audiences and their influential role within the community, prior research has found that they have been an effective means of advocating for social issues (Bormet et al. 2021). Thus participants found it helpful when religious leaders created speaking opportunities for their congregations so that they could raise awareness about human trafficking, an issue scholars argue that many are not familiar with due to its "hidden nature" (Shoop 2020). Participants also noted that religious organizations and leaders are also able to provide emotional support where victims are able to go to church in the midst of an emotional breakdown as well as confide in trusted members of the community about their trauma. In many cases, religious leaders were also able to identify and help remove trafficking victims from their current situations. Due to the fact that religious leaders often find themselves in positions of trust and power, they are able to play a crucial role in identifying victims and ultimately helping remove them from their trafficking situations (Ehsan 2021). Therefore, all participants acknowledged that religion could be used as a resource to help victims of human trafficking, to varying extents. These findings were consistent with the current literature, but were able to delve deeper into detail explaining the benefits of these resources.

Religion was also found to be a source of resilience for victims of human trafficking. While most of the current literature on religion and resilience is more general, this study was able to look at religion as a source of resilience specific to human trafficking situations. Participants found that religion was able to benefit individuals both during their experiences in trafficking situations as well as after they had escaped them. Religion has been found to give some victims the strength to endure their trafficking situation which is in line with prior studies which have demonstrated that religion has been able to help individuals endure traumatic circumstances (Eriksson and Yeh 2012; Gow 2012). This study also found that religion has been able to help survivors of human trafficking cope with trauma. Specifically, many faith-based anti-trafficking organizations commented on how they were able to see individuals who used religion as a coping mechanism make significant healing progress. Scholars have previously discussed these benefits when discussing how spirituality and religion could be used as a source of posttraumatic growth and transformation for general trauma (Eriksson and Yeh 2012).

Religion was also identified as a means to coerce and enable victimization. It is important to acknowledge that Christianity was not the cause of any of the trafficking situations discussed throughout this study, but was instead used as a tactic by traffickers to manipulate their victims or used by religious leaders to enable victimization. While the prior literature has focused on less dominant religions when examining how religion could be used as a risk factor, this study highlights that any religion could be used as a means to enable victimization. However, most of the existing literature explores the role of non-dominant religions as a risk factor, while this study provides insight to how dominant religions could use religion as a tactic by traffickers as well.

Religion was demonstrated to be used as a manipulation tactic in order to force and keep individuals in trafficking situations. A common manipulation tactic was traffickers would either claim to be some “higher power” or claim to have a spiritual connection with one to control their victims. Due to religion’s influence over an individual’s actions and perceptions of events, many individuals fall victim to this deception and are unknowingly exploited in their attempts to be closer to God (Fox 2001). This has also occurred with religious leaders where they will use their position of power and religious authority to exploit individuals (Heil 2017). However, there were some discrepancies in what participants believed to be the trafficking manipulation tactic of religious leaders. Both faith-based and non-faith-based members believed that religious leaders would use religion as a manipulation tactic making claims that “God is speaking to them” to force victims into exploitative situations. However some non-faith-based members believed that religious leaders are able to abuse their positions of power in order to traffick their victims, but religion itself did not actually have an influence. While some participants did not agree on the trafficking tactics that religious leaders utilize for exploitation purposes, they did agree that religion could serve as a risk factor in terms of human trafficking.

Religious leaders have also been found to enable human trafficking situations where they use their position of power to discredit the victim and empower the trafficker by convincing them to stay in their current situations. In these circumstances, religious leaders were informed about potential trafficking victimizations and due to the perceived dynamic of the trafficker and victim, religious leaders would tell victims “to not do anything about it.” Participants suggested that religious leaders were more likely to enable traffickers in cases where victims were family members and female which is supported by the literature that demonstrates that some religions

have histories of perpetuating the idea that a certain gender or race is inferior (Pertek et al. 2023; Potrafke 2016).

This study also identified variations in perception regarding the impact of religion based on whether the participant belonged to a faith-based organization (FBO) or a non-faith-based organization (NFBO). Participants who were members of faith-based organizations were more likely to perceive religion as having a greater impact on human trafficking than members of non-faith-based organizations. While the three members of the FBOs had similar perceptions of the impact that religion had on human trafficking, the perceptions of the NFBOs differed. One NFBO member believed that religion had no influence on human trafficking, while another NFBO member suggested a moderate impact. A third NFBO participant held a similar perspective to the three faith-based organizations, meaning that four out of the six participants asserted that religion is able to have a strong impact on human trafficking.

Additional findings hinted at the challenges faced when identifying and combating human trafficking and put great emphasis on the general lack of awareness of individuals about this issue. Highlighting the lack of victim, community, and law enforcement awareness, participants generally noted that if people were more informed about human trafficking, then human trafficking would not be as prevalent. Participants found that the lack of victim awareness about human trafficking provides a challenge to identifying individuals who are victims of human trafficking because they are not even aware they are being trafficked themselves. Victims in these circumstances may not understand the reality of victimization or may see themselves as offenders in the case of individuals who are forced to commit illegal acts (Villacampa and Torres 2017). The lack of community awareness was also identified as an identification issue as

individuals are so often unaware of what human trafficking looks like and are not aware that this is an issue that occurs within the United States (Hepburn and Simon 2010).

Law enforcement methods of handling trafficking situations were also recognized as one of the many issues faced when combating trafficking because of their lack of victim sensitivity. Participants commented that law enforcement personnel were generally uneducated about the issue of human trafficking and were not trained in handling victims. Many of those in law enforcement fail to understand the needs of trafficking victims and treat them inappropriately as well, with participants highlighting that some officers possessed victim-blaming mentalities, blaming and often criminalizing victims for taking part in illegal acts. This ultimately leads to distrust in law enforcement officials and causes victims to be less likely to seek out help (ten Kate et al. 2021). In search of other trusted authority figures, many victims would turn to religious leaders instead to help them cope and escape their trafficking situations. The issues participants identified with law enforcement highlight the need for a victim-centered approach. While victim-centered human trafficking literature remains broad and does not extensively explore specific factors which would be able to address victim needs, this research highlights the significance of looking at the impact of religion. By looking at religion as a specific influence on individuals affected by human trafficking, this study contributes to victim-centered research. Being able to address the individual needs of victims is important in order to effectively combat human trafficking. If law enforcement officials changed the way that they approached combating human trafficking, approaching each situation with the needs of each victim in mind, individuals impacted by human trafficking situations may feel more comfortable turning to law enforcement for help and ultimately help reduce the number of individuals impacted by victimization.

## LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

It is important to acknowledge that there are several limitations that may impact the interpretation of these findings. While this study sought to engage with a diverse array of faith-based anti-trafficking organizations, it was only able to reach Christian-based organizations within the time constraints. This restriction is a limitation of this study and highlights the need for future research to take a more holistic approach. In order to understand the complex interplay between religion and human trafficking, future research should examine how religion impacts human trafficking beyond the constraints of a singular faith. This broader exploration should include various religious frameworks to gain a more comprehensive understanding of how religion impacts human trafficking by not just looking at the impact from the perspective of a singular religion.

The current study is also confined to interviews conducted solely with individuals from anti-trafficking organizations within the United States, a limitation that can be viewed as having regional implications. It is important to note that the United States holds a Tier 1 status in the Trafficking in Persons Report (TIP Report) for the year 2023. A Tier 1 ranking indicates that the country is making effective efforts to combat human trafficking and has demonstrated substantial progress in addressing this issue (Trafficking in Persons Report 2023). Focusing solely on members of anti-trafficking organizations within the United States, this study is unable to look at countries with different human trafficking prevalences and therefore is not able to explore the impact of religion on human trafficking across different global contexts. Future studies may want to look at religion's multifaceted impact within different geographical scopes, looking at countries with varying TIP Report rankings.

Another limitation of this research is that it only captures the perspectives of individuals who work with survivors of human trafficking, but not the perspectives of the survivors themselves. This was a deliberate choice made with the intention of preventing potential retraumatization of survivors during the interview process. However, by relying solely on the perspectives of members of anti-trafficking organizations, there is a risk of diluting the authenticity and depth of survivor experiences. While there is an ethical trade-off that should be considered heavily, future inclusion of survivor perspectives may offer a more accurate understanding of this issue that anti-trafficking professionals may not be able to provide.

This research has the potential to also provide insight to research on the victim-centered framework. Prior research has suggested that human trafficking policy would benefit from a victim-centered approach (Goodey 2004). Research on the issues with combating human trafficking also highlight the lack of victim sensitivity within legal professional approaches which has caused victims to distrust legal professionals and ultimately dissuade them from seeking help (ten Kate et al. 2021). Looking at human trafficking through a religious lens would allow scholars to understand one of the many factors that contribute to a victim-centered approach. Current victim-centered research focuses on the general needs of victims but does not explore in depth individual factors that would help inform these different needs. Therefore, this study finds that there is a demand for victim-centered research to be explored through a religious lens as it would contribute to the better understanding of a victim's needs.

## Chapter 6: Conclusion

After conducting interviews with members from both faith-based and non-faith-based anti-trafficking organizations across the United States, it became apparent that current strategies that seek to combat human trafficking often overlook the needs of individual victims. The current research study revealed several insights into how to account for the needs of individuals by looking at how religion shapes the experiences of those impacted by human trafficking. This study found that religion can serve as both an asset and risk factor which helps inform research. By recognizing the different ways that religion can intersect with trafficking, these findings can have important implications for policy. If law enforcement incorporated cultural and religious sensitivity into their practices, they would be able to better support trafficking survivors after learning how to account for their individual needs and vulnerabilities. The current literature has demonstrated that adopting victim-centered approaches would increase law enforcement effectiveness in addressing human trafficking (Goodey 2004). This research fills the gap in the current literature as it looks at the interplay of religion as both an asset and risk factor instead of looking at the role of religion dichotomously. By examining religion's interplay, this study was able to explore the various ways Christianity could be used to help and harm individuals which in turn could help inform anti-trafficking policy.



## Appendix: Interview Questions

- 1) Can you tell me a little about your role with XXXXX organization?
  - a) PROBE: How long have you been working with XXXXX organization?
  - b) PROBE: What does a typical day look like for you?
- 2) Could you describe to me what human trafficking is?
- 3) What are some of the common challenges when identifying potential victims/survivors of human trafficking?
- 4) Do you collaborate with other organizations to prevent human trafficking (ex. NGO's, law enforcement, religious organizations)
- 5) Do you believe that law enforcement has been tackling human trafficking in the right way?
  - a) PROBE: Why or Why not?
- 6) Do you think that current anti-trafficking policy is effective?
  - a) PROBE: Why or Why not?
- 7) In your experience, does religion play a role in human trafficking?
  - a) PROBE: Could you elaborate a little on how this plays out?
  - b) PROBE: Would you say that religion is a protective factor for human trafficking?
    - i) Have you encountered situations where beliefs or practices have protected individuals from trafficking situations
  - c) PROBE: Would you say that religion is a risk factor for human trafficking?
    - i) Have you encountered situations where beliefs or practices have made individuals vulnerable to human trafficking
- 8) What seems to be the biggest challenge when combating human trafficking?
- 9) What has been your favorite part about doing the work you do?
  - a) PROBE: Can you tell me about something that makes you feel hopeful for the future of individuals impacted by human trafficking?

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