THE EFFECTS OF TRAUMA ON RELIGIOUS AND SPIRITUAL CHANGE
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Abstract

An emerging area of research on religion, spirituality and trauma has documented religious change in the wake of trauma, with some individuals casting doubt on their faith and others renewing their investment. However, the emotional and cognitive processes involved in faith change remain unclear. This study addresses this gap in the literature through in-depth interviews with eleven participants who experienced changes in their religion as a result of a traumatic experience. The interviews aimed to uncover 1) changes in participants’ worldview 2) changes in participants’ relationship with their deity and 3) personal and social factors that affected participants’ faith change. Data was analyzed thematically using the grounded theory approach and an integrative model of religious change was proposed. Findings indicated that participants engaged in an emotional, cognitive and relational process of faith change that generally followed three paths: weakening of faith, strengthening of faith, and developing an individual spirituality.
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Chapter One: Introduction

Background

Life rarely leaves people unscathed. Community surveys suggest that 50-90% of individuals experience at least one traumatic event in their lifetime (Breslau, 1998; Kessler, Sonnega, Bromet, Hughes & Nelson, 1995). While the psychological literature is replete with studies demonstrating the negative effects of trauma on psychological health and life satisfaction (Schnurr, Friedman & Bernardy, 2002), mythology and literature often paint a different picture. Nearly every culture tells stories in which people undergo positive transformation in the wake of deeply distressing events. The Biblical character Job loses everything during a test from god yet emerges from the ordeal with strengthened faith. Shakespeare’s King Lear loses his kingdom and descends into madness, but ultimately dies a wiser, humbler, and more compassionate man. In Greek tragedies, the hero’s downfall leads inevitably to a moment of powerful revelation and growth. Psychological research is increasingly in agreement with this more hopeful outlook on trauma. Over the past fifteen years, psychologists (Ai & Park, 2005) have begun to document instances of post-traumatic growth, characterized by a renewal of joy and investment in life following traumatic events. Clearly, people’s experience of trauma is not only one of vulnerability and irreparable damage. Recent research (Chen & Koenig, 2006) suggests that religion and spirituality may play an important role in this interplay of vulnerability and resilience to trauma. In many religious narratives of trauma, such as the story of Job mentioned above, post-traumatic outcomes are understood particularly in terms of whether the protagonist’s faith is strengthened or weakened.

Psychologists have devoted considerable attention to spirituality and religiosity in recent decades, in part inspired by the growing body of evidence that religious belief and practice are
associated with a slew of positive outcomes (Galanter, 2005). Given the concurrent growth of academic interest in both trauma and religion, their many possible points of intersection have received only intermittent attention in the psychology literature. The research that does exist raises more questions than answers. Studies consistently suggest a relationship between trauma, religion, and spirituality, but the findings are mixed with regards to what precisely the nature of this relationship is, with some studies indicating positive associations and others negative associations (Chen & Koenig, 2006). Moreover, causation is far from clear, with religion and trauma likely exerting bi-directional influences on each other (Desmond, 2012). Construct and measurement discrepancies, the nature of the trauma and specific belief systems have all been cited as possible explanations of the ambiguous findings, clearly demonstrating the need for further work aimed at disentangling these complex relationships (Chen & Koenig, 2006; Desmond, 2012; Janoff-Bulman, 1992).

One emerging area of research on religion, spirituality and trauma has documented religious change in the wake of trauma, with some individuals casting doubt on their faith and others renewing their investment (Fallot & Heckman, 2005; Overcash, Calhoun, Cann & Tedeschi, 1996). Both reactions are understandable: for some, trauma painfully refutes religious notions of a just universe and a caring god, while for others trauma is seen as a divinely intended test of faith. Less clear are the contextual factors that explain why some individuals experience a weakening and others a strengthening of faith. Moreover, very little is understood about the process of religious change during recovery from trauma. While speculations abound in the literature, almost no studies have investigated specific factors influencing the relationship between religion and trauma.
Guiding Questions of the Study

The current study aims to fill this gap in the literature on religion, spirituality and trauma by exploring the following broad research question: what is the process of religious and spiritual change after trauma? Three specific sub-questions undergird this broader research question:

1) How do individuals’ religious worldview change after a traumatic event?

3) What is the impact of a traumatic event on individual’s relationship with their deity?

4) Are there personal or social factors that affect how individuals relate to religion and spirituality after trauma?

These research questions will be addressed using semi-structured interviews with individuals who have experienced changes in their religious or spiritual orientation following trauma. Drawing upon grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), the data will be analyzed thematically in order to generate a theory to account for these changes.

Definition of Terms

Religion and Spirituality

Over the past several decades, the concept of “spirituality” has become increasingly prominent in both popular discourse and the psychology literature. Yet there is no consensus as to what precisely “spirituality” means, and what its relationship is to the related concept “religion”. Scholars have approached this basic issue in a variety of ways. Frame (2003) understands spirituality as a broad term encompassing “one’s values, beliefs, mission, awareness, subjectivity, experience, sense of purpose and direction, and a kind of striving toward something greater than oneself” which “may or may not include a deity” (p.3). Zinnbauer (Zinnbauer & Pargament, 2005) more narrowly defines spirituality as “a personal or group search for the sacred”,
distinguishing it from religion, which is “a personal or group search for the sacred that unfolds within a traditional sacred context” (p.35). Pargament (Zinnbauer & Pargament, 2005), meanwhile, considers spirituality to be “a search for the sacred” and religion to be “a search for significance in ways related to the sacred” (p.36). In popular discourse, religion and spirituality are often understood to be distinct concepts, with religion referring to traditional, institutionalized systems of worship and spirituality referring to a more personal and dynamic experience of the sacred (Paloutzian & Park, 2005); undoubtedly many religious adherents themselves make such a distinction. Researchers, in contrast, have generally been more cautious about viewing religion and spirituality as distinct or in opposition to one another (Aten & Leach, 2009). Zinnbauer and Pargament (2005) argue that framing religion and spirituality as contrasting concepts is unnecessarily limiting and restricts the full possibility of their expression. For instance, religion can encompass both dogmatic beliefs and embodied, sacred experiences. Likewise, spirituality may be highly personal but can equally be embedded within an established faith community. Distinguishing religion from spirituality is also problematic when spirituality is assumed to be positive and growth-promoting, while religion is negative and restrictive – an unhelpful perspective that potentially reenacts historical practices in psychology of viewing religion as pathology (Aten & Leach, 2009). Moreover, while this distinction may be useful and interesting with respect to current social trends, it is not clear that the function and practice of religion and spirituality differ in any substantial way (Zinnbauer & Pargament, 2005). For example, a study revealed that the majority of adherents consider themselves to be both religious and spiritual (Cook, Borman, Moore & Kunkel, 2000). For these reasons, in this work religion and spirituality will be regarded as substantially overlapping and generally interchangeable. Moreover,
Pargament’s definition of religion and spirituality will be adopted, which assumes that religion comprises the full spectrum of beliefs and practices of which spirituality is one component.

Trauma and PTSD

Trauma is an uncomfortable topic. Addressing it often requires confronting the human capacity for unspeakable cruelty and profound suffering. Perhaps this is why post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) has been mired in controversy since its inception, at times leading to deep divisions within psychology (Brewin, 2003). First included in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders in 1980 (DSM-III), PTSD has received widespread attention since the World Trade Centre terrorist attacks of 9/11 and the beginning of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan (Vieweg et al., 2006). The emergence of the disorder unified the field of trauma studies by combining all traumatic experiences under one diagnosis and provoked numerous scientific investigations into the new construct (Brewin, 2003). At the same time, PTSD incited impassioned debates on topics ranging from the nature of a precipitating traumatic event to symptom inclusion to the very existence of the disorder (Bracken, 2002; Weathers & Keane, 2007). Criticisms of PTSD have been lobbied from both the left and right of the political spectrum, and while the controversies are far too complex to be covered in detail, three main points of contention will be briefly reviewed below.

One point of dispute centers on the definition of “traumatic event”. The DSM-V diagnostic criteria for PTSD defines trauma as being “exposure to actual or threatened death, serious injury, or sexual violence” (APA, 2013, p. 271). Critics have argued that trauma is defined too broadly and detracts from the seriousness of those who have experienced severe trauma such as torture or war (Weathers & Keane, 2007). Of course trauma varies on a number of continuums: frequency, magnitude of stressor, predictability, human-made or natural (Weathers & Keane, 2007).
Moreover, developing an objective criterion is challenging given the subjective experience of trauma: the same event can affect people very differently (Cromer & Smyth, 2010). This particular controversy likely stems from attempts to fit a heterogeneous set of experiences and reactions into one diagnosis. Undoubtedly the traumatic experience of systematic sexual abuse as a child differs from a near death experience in a car accident for example. At present, this debate is far from resolved but has encouraged researchers to better articulate their conception of trauma and its implications for clinical work (Weathers & Keane, 2007).

The existence of PTSD as an innate construct has also been questioned. This controversy hinges on to what extent PTSD is a result of the socio-cultural context in which it appeared. Some viewed the emergence of PTSD in the late 1970s as part of a larger movement against the Vietnam War and an attempt to expose the horrors of combat and prolonged suffering of its victims (Brewin, 2003). Concurrently, the rise of the feminist movement drew attention to previously ignored populations such as victims of rape and domestic abuse (Brewin, 2003). Recognition of PTSD as a legitimate diagnosis allowed previously marginalized groups to access much needed mental health services and shifted the moral responsibility from the victims who “just couldn’t get over it” to the person or event that caused the trauma (Bracken, 2002). However, while the diagnosis clearly made a positive impact in some communities, questions were raised regarding the immutability of the disorder. Is PTSD an innate condition that simply failed to be recognized until socio-cultural circumstances led to its discovery or was it constructed to fulfill certain needs within a particular time and place? Opinions are divided as to whether historical accounts of traumatic reactions conclusively validate the particular cluster of symptoms elaborated in the DSM as innate and historically transcendent (Bracken, 2002; Brewin, 2003). This debate is informed by a much larger, ongoing controversy in the social sciences.
regarding the extent to which taken for granted concepts such as diagnoses are socially constructed.

Relatedly, theorists such as Patrick Bracken (2002) have questioned assumptions built into the diagnosis of PTSD and their applicability across cultures. Bracken (2002) argues that while PTSD legitimizes struggles associated with previously stigmatized atrocities such as war and rape, its focus on individual reactions to trauma is unnecessarily limiting. With its emphasis on genetics and internal cognitions, PTSD represents traumatic reactions as having one universal expression and marginalizes the role of the social and cultural context in the expression of trauma. Bracken (2002) contends that the socio-cultural context is in fact central to the manifestation of traumatic reactions. For instance, research reveals that during times of war, though traumatic experiences are pervasive, reported instances of pathology are low when the rhetoric of war promotes cultural cohesion and solidarity (Curran, 1988). Moreover, researchers increasingly agree that emotional expression is culturally mediated (Matsumoto, Yoo & Nakagawa, 2008). All of this suggests that the definition of PTSD as encompassing an innate cluster of symptoms in reaction to trauma is unduly limiting and perhaps only appropriate within an individualistic, western context (Brewin, 2002). Given the limits of PTSD detailed above, this research project adopts a broader understanding of traumatic reactions. Post-traumatic stress (PTS) has been differentiated from PTSD in the literature (Cromer & Smyth, 2010), and describes individuals who experience symptoms related to the disorder yet fail to meet all diagnostic criteria. Bearing in mind the subjective and culturally mediated experience of trauma, this study includes individuals who experience PTS rather than PTSD in the aftermath of trauma.

Summary

Religion and trauma are widely contested concepts in psychology, as evidenced by the brief
review of major controversies above. This may partly explain why researchers have been slow to conduct a detailed examination of their intersections. This chapter has provided a brief introduction to the study and outlined definitional issues related to religion, spirituality and trauma. The following chapter will provide an in-depth review of the extant literature on the connections between religion and trauma.
Chapter Two: Literature Review

Introduction

The literature review that follows will, broadly speaking, describe how religion and trauma are conceived of and operationalized in psychology and consider the growing literature on the intersection between religion, spirituality and trauma. It will be organized into four sections covering more specific issues. The first section will review the place of religion and spirituality in psychology and their relationship to mental and physical well-being. The second section will address PTSD within the context of trauma, specifically theories of PTSD and established treatment options. The third section focuses on the intersections of religion, spirituality and trauma, and their common ties with meaning-making and coping. The final section of the literature review describes research pertaining to changes in religious orientation following trauma, including evidence for strengthening of faith and post-traumatic growth, weakening of faith and possible factors mediating these changes.

Religion and spirituality in psychology

Despite their many similarities, religion, spirituality and psychology have historically maintained an uneasy and at times hostile relationship (Emmons & Paloutzian, 2003). Only within the past several decades has psychology begun to embrace and even integrate aspects of religion and spirituality (Galanter, 2005). Concurrently, literature on the psychology of religion has steadily grown, providing a more complex and complete picture of how these two constructs intersect (Miller & Kelley, 2005). The following section will provide a brief historical account of the troubled relationship between religion and psychology, and describe current research on the impact of religion and spirituality on mental health.
In many respects religion and psychology are fully compatible practices, as they share a focus on growth, transformation and inner experience. Before psychotherapy emerged as a professional practice, shamans and priests filled the role of the mental health professional in their communities (Galanter, 2005). Clearly, however, the overlap between psychology and religion is not complete. Contemporary psychologists are actually far less religious than the population as a whole. An American survey found that compared to the rest of the population, psychologists are “twice as likely to claim no religion, three times more likely to describe religion as unimportant in their lives and five times more likely to deny belief in god” (Delaney, Miller & Bisono, 2007, p.542). An overwhelming proportion of Americans (95%) believe in god and almost half (40%) attend a weekly worship service (Plante, 2009), and 76% of Canadians claimed a religious affiliation on the Canada 2011 National Household Survey (Statistics Canada, 2011). Meanwhile, psychologists tend to adopt a scientific or naturalistic view of the world (Carone & Barone, 2001). The fundamental philosophical disagreements between secular psychologists and religious clients can lead to a variety of challenges in professional practice. The psychological model of health emphasizes the client’s right to autonomy and self-determination. In contrast, most world religions emphasize the primacy of the collective good, a position that complicates, if not directly contradicts, the psychological model of individual well-being. Psychological perspectives on coping and change also differ greatly from religious models (Carone & Barone, 2001). The medical model, which remains the dominant paradigm in psychology, advocates biological or cognitive interventions as a basis for change, while a religious model allows for the intervention of a greater power in the path toward recovery. Religious and spiritual clients may have difficulty reconciling psychological perspectives on mental health with their own traditions and values, potentially resulting in less effective treatment (Ali, Allmon & Cornick, 2011), and
secular therapists may exhibit bias and a lack of empathy towards religious clients. That being said, dual interventions are increasingly common, with clients visiting a western psychotherapist and traditional healer concurrently (Moodley, Sutherland & Oulanova, 2008). This promising direction of treatment provides clients with access to both spiritual and scientific wisdom regarding psychological well-being, mitigating possible value conflicts with mental health providers (Moodley et al., 2008).

The historic marginalization of religion and spirituality in mainstream psychology stems from the developmental trajectory of the discipline (Emmons & Paloutzian, 2003). Sigmund Freud, in developing psychoanalysis in the early 1900s, presented religion and spirituality as neuroses that limited, rather than enhanced, insight into one’s inner world (Galanter, 2005). Religion was assumed to be a form of denial that served to defend against existential anxieties (Blazer, 1998), an idea that remains influential in the field even today. Psychologists emulated Freud’s anti-religious stance through much of the 20th century, regarding religion and spirituality as defense mechanisms used to justify or deny certain maladaptive behaviours and emotions (Aten & Leach, 2009). The theoretical underpinnings of subsequent popular therapeutic modalities such as behaviourism and cognitive therapy were explicitly at odds with religion and spirituality. Firmly entrenched within a scientific paradigm, leading psychologists such as B.F. Skinner (behaviourism) and Albert Ellis (cognitive therapy) openly expressed their suspicions of religion and spirituality, painting them as irrational forces contributing to psychopathology (Brown & Srebalus, 1996). The uncomfortable paradigmatic fit between religion and psychology coupled with negative perceptions of religion held by influential figures in psychology prevented a thorough empirical examination of religion and spirituality for much of the 20th century.
Despite being largely sidelined, several theorists persisted in pursuing research on religion and spirituality. William James, often deemed the father of modern psychology, wrote extensively on the topic of religion, culminating in his seminal book *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902, [1961]). In this work he argued that investigating individual religious experiences provides insight into the inner workings of the mind, thus legitimizing the value of religion in the scientific study of psychology. Carl Jung, a disciple of Freud, broke starkly with Freud’s views later in his career when he argued for the importance of spiritual experiences, including his notion of the collective unconscious comprised of innate archetypes (Neher, 1996). He contended that versions of these basic archetypes were elaborated within the imagery and myths of all major religious and spiritual traditions. While Freud viewed spiritual expression as a basic drive to be overcome, Jung believed that an individual must embrace his or her spiritual nature in order to achieve peace and self-actualization. Later, in the 1960s, Gordon Allport sought to bring a scientific approach to the study of religion. He was particularly interested in the role of personal motivation in shaping religious beliefs and behaviours. Using standardized questionnaires, he measured the distinction between intrinsic religious orientation, in which an individual genuinely believes in the teachings of his or her faith, and extrinsic religious orientation, in which an individual uses religion as a means for external rewards, such as prestige (Allport & Ross, 1967). He believed that mature religious individuals adopt an intrinsic religious orientation that provides them with a sense of purpose and meaning in life (Allport & Ross, 1967). Later, the "quest orientation" towards religion was identified as a third form of motivation characterized by a conception of religion as a spiritual journey that includes confusion and doubt (Batson & Schoenrade, 1991). The quest orientation has been defined as comprising three main characteristics: “readiness to face existential questions without reducing their complexity”, “self-
criticisms and perceptions of religious doubts” and “openness to change” (Batson & Schoenrade, 1991, p. 431). While intrinsic and extrinsic religious orientations are defined by dogmatic adherence to a religious faith, the quest orientation incorporates elements of doubt and change that can be inherent to the religious journey.

Although the scientific underpinnings of mainstream psychology remain fundamentally at odds with religion and spirituality, a renewed interest in the positive role of religion in psychotherapy has been evident since the early 1990s (Aten & Leach, 2009). Walker and Moon (2011) have gone so far as to claim that psychotherapy has finally returned home. After decades of distancing itself from its spiritual roots through its embrace of the hard sciences, psychology appears once again willing to accept the value of religion and spirituality. This modern integration of scientific empiricism and ancient healing traditions may represent psychology at its very best (Walker & Moon, 2011). Several factors seem to be responsible for this recent upsurge in interest and research on religion and spirituality. First, multicultural counselling practices have gained increasing recognition in psychology, and most training programs now emphasize the importance of mental health practitioners’ awareness and sensitivity when working with clients from a range of social and cultural backgrounds. Although acknowledgement of religion as a component of diversity has lagged behind other of the “Big 7” identities (race, gender, sexual orientation, class, disability, age and religion) (Moodley & Lubin, 2011), researchers are finally beginning to push for its inclusion in multicultural counselling (Schlosser, Rasheed, Ackerman & Dewey, 2009). Second, Marc Galanter (2005) argues that societal trends, in the form of a new spiritual awakening, have contributed to renewed interest in this area. Cultural shifts that took place in North America in the latter half of the twentieth century, such as changes in notions of race and gender, shook traditional beliefs and attitudes and left people without a strong sense of
moral certainty. He argues that this combined with a dogmatic secularism have led to loneliness and lack of purpose, both of which are implicated in mental illness. Religious and spiritual communities offer intimacy, shared values and a sense of purpose and transcendence that many find lacking in a secularized world. A final reason behind this recent rapprochement of religion and psychology is the publication of numerous research studies revealing empirically validated associations between religion and spirituality and positive outcomes (Miller & Kelley, 2005).

Over the past few decades, many studies have been published outlining the positive effects of religion and spirituality. With benefits ranging from greater marital satisfaction to protection against disease, religion and spirituality were in danger of being represented in the literature as a general cure-all (McCullough & Willoughby, 2009; Oman & Thoresen, 2005). In recent years researchers have developed more precise measures to interrogate how specific elements of religion and spirituality relate to aspects of health and well-being. A more nuanced picture has emerged revealing both positive and negative effects of religion and spirituality. For example, religious coping appears to be helpful or harmful depending on the individual’s relationship with their deity and their religious community (Ano & Vasconcelles, 2005). Moreover, Miller and Kelley (2005) caution that the outcomes of published studies on religion and mental health are dependent on the types of religious constructs measured and the cultural context, challenging overgeneralized claims that religiosity is a single variable and a solution to all mental illness.

Despite these cautions, research strongly suggests that religion and spirituality are associated with wide-ranging positive social, physical and psychological outcomes (Shafranske, 2005). Religious individuals live longer: a meta-analytic study on religion and mortality found that religious individuals were 29% more likely to be alive at any given follow-up than non-
religious individuals (McCullough, Hoyt, Larson, Koenig & Thoresen, 2000). Religion is also associated with lower rates of depression (Brown, Carney, Parrish & Klem, 2013; Smith, McCullough & Poll, 2003), greater subjective well-being (Ferriss, 2002), greater marital satisfaction (Mahoney, Pargament, Tarakeshwar, & Swank, 2001) and better self-regulation (McCullough & Willoughby, 2009). Religious youth perform better academically and engage in fewer illegal and sexual activities (Baier & Wright, 2001). Religion also appears to protect against suicide among both adolescents and adults (Regnerus, Smith & Fritch, 2003). Secondary benefits of religious and spiritual beliefs have also been reported. Spiritual communities provide social support and a sense of belonging that enhances mental health (Koeing & Cohen, 2002). Finally, various religious and spiritual practices such as prayer and meditation have been linked with improved mental and physical health (Kristeller, 2011; Walker & Moon, 2011). In sum, the link between religion/spirituality and positive outcomes is extremely robust: during the past 30 years over 500 empirical studies have found a link between spirituality and greater mental health and subjective well-being (Koenig, 2004). However, a dimension of human existence as powerful as religion has the ability to generate both joy and despair among its practitioners, and evidence for negative effects of religion must also be considered.

Evidence suggests that certain aspects of religion and spirituality can be detrimental to healthy functioning. For example, individuals belonging to religious communities that rely on guilt to promote adherence to a strictly prescribed set of values and lifestyle may experience guilt or anxiety related to engaging in forbidden acts (Carone & Barone, 2001). Ironson and colleagues (2011) have noted that a conception of god as wrathful rather than forgiving is associated with lower mental and physical health. Other studies have reported a small association between religion and anxiety, although those studies have been criticized for failing to control for other
variables (Koenig et al., 1993; Miller & Kelley, 2005). Exline and Rose (2005) observe that spiritual struggle is relatively common in religious populations, with one large study revealing spiritual distress in approximately 25% of the sample (Johnson & Hayes, 2003). Religious struggle has been linked with suicidality, confusion over values and higher mortality rates (Johnson & Hayes, 2003; Pargament, Koenig, Tarakeshwar & Hahn, 2001), all outcomes that other religious constructs have been shown to protect against.

The previous section detailed the complicated relationship between religion, spirituality and psychology. Throughout the history, portrayals of religion and spirituality in psychology have ranged from nothing more than neurosis to a panacea for all mental illness. Clearly broad statements regarding religion’s impact on psychological health cannot be made and depend on a host of contextual factors including belief structures, personality and religious institutions. Experience of trauma is one of those contextual factors and an area to which we will turn in the following section.

**Trauma and PTSD**

Traumatic events are extreme, terrifying and outside of normal human experience. Ranging from assault to natural disasters to illness, they directly threaten our safety or that of our loved ones, eliciting intense emotional and physical reactions such as anxiety, helplessness, confusion, and depression (Wilson & Moran, 1998). To some extent these reactions are adaptive, as they most likely evolved as protective strategies that increase our chances of survival in dangerous circumstances (Wilson & Moran, 1998). However, when the symptoms persist long after the trauma has subsided and become chronic, they are no longer adaptive, and are understood as PTSD. It is abundantly clear that trauma disrupts everyday life and produces high
levels of psychological distress and suffering (Wilson & Moran, 1998), yet less is understood about the specific variables that mediate the path toward recovery.

**PTSD: Theory and Treatment**

In the current DSM-V, PTSD is classified under the umbrella of anxiety disorders, but differs from other anxiety disorders in that a clear trigger (traumatic event) is a prerequisite for the diagnosis (APA, 2013). An individual must meet a set list of criteria in order to be diagnosed with PTSD. First, the person must have been exposed to “actual or threatened death, serious injury, or sexual violence” (APA, 2013, p. 271). Second, the person must be persistently re-experiencing the trauma in the form of memories, dissociative reactions (flashbacks), nightmares, heightened arousal and prolonged distress. Third, the individual must engage in effortful avoidance of trauma-related stimuli, as well as experience changes in cognitions and affect (distorted beliefs, dissociative amnesia, persistent negative emotions, etc.) and changes in arousal and reactivity (irritability, hypervigilance, concentration problems and sleep disturbance). Fourth, these symptoms must persist for more than one month and significantly impair daily functioning (APA, 2013).

The lifetime prevalence of traumatic events is very high, with estimates ranging from 50% to 90% over the course of a lifetime (Breslau, 1998; Kessler et al., 1995). Despite these extremely high levels of exposure to trauma in the overall population, the lifetime prevalence of PTSD sits at approximately 8%, indicating that the vast majority of individuals exposed to a trauma adjust relatively quickly and do not develop the disorder (Vieweg et al., 2006). PTSD is especially prevalent among women. Although women experience trauma roughly as often as men, they are four times more likely to develop PTSD in its aftermath (Vieweg et al., 2006). Furthermore, the type of event most likely to lead to the disorder is rape, a trauma experienced
much more often by women than men (Vieweg et al., 2006). Within populations seeking any kind of mental health treatment, the prevalence of PTSD is staggering, above 50%, demonstrating the havoc that trauma wreaks on psychological well-being (Schnurr et al., 2002). Risk factors for developing the disorder are both environmental and personal. Environmental risk factors include exposure to trauma at a young age, low education and socio-economic status, childhood adversity, and poor social support post trauma. Personal risk factors include pre-existing pathology, family history of mental illness, neuroticism, severe initial traumatic reaction and dissociative symptoms (Schnurr et al., 2002). Recovery from PTSD can be challenging. Only 25% of PTSD cases are resolved after one year, and approximately one third of cases become chronic with sufferers never fully recovering (Schnurr et al., 2002).

Since the emergence of the PTSD diagnosis in 1980, various theoretical models have been developed to understand its etiology. Earlier models of PTSD dealt primarily with the social-cognitive dimension of PTSD – that is, how trauma violates existing belief systems and people’s innate need to reconcile incompatible information. Most relevant to this review is the theory of shattered assumptions developed by Janoff-Bulman (1992) who argued that individuals hold optimistic beliefs about the world and themselves, namely that the world is benevolent, the world is meaningful and the self is worthy. Trauma can shatter these unconscious assumptions, requiring people to undergo the difficult process of examining and modifying personal beliefs to fit new traumatic experiences. While this theory speaks to the sense of meaninglessness often experienced by individuals with PTSD, newer models provide a more comprehensive understanding of the disorder. The emotional-processing theory (Foa & Rothbaum, 1998) posits that trauma information is stored in fear networks encompassing trauma related stimuli, responses, and meanings of those stimuli and responses. When these networks are triggered, they
activate a sense of current threat as well as intrusive memories of the past trauma (Resick & Schnick, 1992). In PTSD, the trauma schema is easily activated by ambiguous stimuli leading people to attend to information consistent with the schema and ignore inconsistent information. Individuals with rigid pre-trauma beliefs are vulnerable to PTSD because they have difficulty integrating new information into pre-existing schemas (Brewin & Holmes, 2003). According to the model, treatment involves dismantling the fear schema by first activating it and then adding new information and meanings in a safe environment. Finally, the cognitive model of PTSD (Ehlers & Clark, 2000) attempts to explain the paradox that individuals with PTSD are anxious about the future even though the trauma occurred in the past. The model contends that individuals with PTSD process the trauma information in a way that creates a sense of constant current threat. This occurs in two ways. First, individual appraisals of traumatic events differ and those with negative appraisals (e.g. the world is a dangerous place) selectively attend to information consistent with their negative appraisals and consequently experience more PTSD symptoms. Second, cognitive and behavioural actions, such as avoidance, are activated with the intention of reducing distress in the short-term but in fact serve to prolong distress because the traumatic memory is never properly processed and contextualized within autobiographical memory (Brewin & Holmes, 2003).

Treatments for PTSD range from cognitive-behavioural based exposure therapy to pharmacology to interpersonal and family systems therapy. The current frontline treatment for PTSD is exposure therapy in the tradition of cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT), which has been validated empirically (Cukor, Spitalnick, Difede, Rizzo & Rothbaum, 2009) and will be the focus of this review. Exposure-based therapy generally consists of imagined exposure (recounting memories of the event) and in-vivo exposure (confronting stimuli associated with the
traumatic event), as well as anxiety management techniques such as relaxation training and breathing exercises (Foa, Rothbaum & Furr, 2003). A variation on traditional exposure therapy, cognitive processing therapy (CPT) draws upon the emotional-processing theory of PTSD (see above), contending that effective treatment not only requires exposure and addition of new meanings, but also cognitive interventions targeting distorted beliefs and meanings attributed to the incident. It relies on the idea that PTSD results from both fear schemas and difficulties reconciling the traumatic event with prior beliefs about the world. CPT therefore focuses on identifying and exploring points of tension between prior schemas and the traumatic incident in addition to traditional exposure therapy. This therapy has received substantial empirical support and is the treatment of choice for many clinicians (Monson et al., 2006; Resick & Schnicke, 1992). A final variation on exposure therapy for PTSD is eye movement desensitization and reprocessing (EMDR). Originally conceived and developed by Francine Shapiro (1989), EMDR has, from the beginning, been subjected to intense scrutiny and controversy despite receiving widespread empirical support for its treatment efficacy (Davidson & Parker, 2001). In this therapy, the client attends to disturbing memories associated with the trauma in brief doses, while simultaneously focusing on an external stimulus and engaging in bilateral eye movements (Sikes & Sikes, 2003). The memory is slowly processed until the client reports a reduction in their cognitive and affective distress when thinking about the traumatic experience. Shapiro argues that EMDR facilitates the accessing and re-processing of traumatic memories because the eye movements reduce arousal levels and ground clients in the present moment, facilitating an experiential (rather than intellectual) processing of the event. It is debatable whether EMDR comprises unique therapeutic techniques or simply draws upon traditional elements of exposure therapy such as relaxation and imaginal exposure. Nevertheless, EMDR has been shown to be an
effective treatment for PTSD (Ahmad & Sundelin-Wahlsten, 2008), whatever the underlying mechanisms may be.

The link between religiosity and PTSD is by no means straightforward, and is at present poorly understood. In a review of empirical findings, Chen and Koenig (2006) discovered ten quantitative studies investigating a link between religiosity and PTSD. The findings were mixed. Four studies (Martz, 2004; Maercker & Herrle, 2003; Plante & Manuel, 1992; Witvliet, Phipps, Feldman & Beckham, 2004) revealed an inverse relationship, three studies (Krejci et al., 2004; Lee & Waters, 2003; Sprang & McNeil, 1998) revealed a positive correlation and the remaining studies showed mixed findings. Almost certainly, part of the reason for this ambiguous result is the lack of a standardized methodology: both religion and PTSD are multidimensional constructs that have been operationalized differently in each study (Chen & Koenig, 2006). It is doubtful, though, that this is the only reason for the mixed findings. Both theory and empirical evidence suggest that PTSD has a complex, multifaceted relationship with religion and spirituality in that some individuals strengthen their faith following trauma while others discard it (Ben-Ezra et al., 2010). A study by Falsetti, Resick and Davis (2003) investigating changes in religious beliefs following trauma found that, compared with individuals without a diagnosis of PTSD, those with the diagnosis were more likely to change their religious beliefs, more often becoming less religious. However, this direction of change was not consistent across the participants, indicating that a change in religious beliefs is common in individuals with PTSD but the nature of that change depends on other factors, as yet unknown.

In general, strong religious faith has been associated with reduced PTSD symptoms. Spiritual well-being was found to ease PTSD symptoms in a sample of veterans who participated in a group mantra intervention (Bormann, Liu, Thorp & Lang, 2012), and an intrinsic religious
orientation was found to be associated with less severe PTSD symptoms in a sample of battered women (Astin, Lawrence, & Foy, 1993). Other evidence points in somewhat different directions: Tran, Kuhn, Walser and Drescher (2012) found no link between intrinsic religiosity and PTSD symptoms but a correlation between extrinsic/social religiosity and lower PTSD symptoms among war veterans. The reasons for the inconsistencies are unclear, but it appears that the effects of religiosity on PTSD recovery vary widely according to the particular population and trauma. For instance, it may be the case that the social support aspect of religion benefits veterans coping with the aftermaths of war, while the meaning-making aspect of religion benefits (for example) parents coping with the death of a child. Clearly, further research is needed to clarify these population- and trauma-specific effects.

This section reviewed some of the clinical literature on trauma and PTSD, revealing the extent of controversy and unanswered questions in this area. Interestingly, despite their many points of divergence, all theories of trauma and PTSD recognize the cognitive component of traumatic reactions: core belief systems are violated in the wake of trauma and inform how people make sense of and recover from extreme adversity. It is here, in the realm of “meaning”, that trauma and religion collide. This intersection will be considered in more detail in the following section.

**Intersections of religion and trauma**

The link between religion, spirituality and trauma is meaning-making. It is widely recognized that a central function of religion is to provide a sense of purpose and a framework for understanding existential questions of life and death. In contrast, trauma can abruptly shatter belief systems, leaving its victims struggling to make sense of their lives. Religious coping has become the subject of a growing body of academic literature focused on how people use religion
and spirituality during times of crisis. The mixed findings in this area will be reviewed in the following section.

Park (2005) contends that religious systems of meaning tend to be more comprehensive and satisfying than secular frameworks, which could partly explain why religion is an integral component of nearly every culture worldwide. Indeed, empirical studies reveal an intimate connection between religion and meaning, particularly among older and more intrinsically religious populations (Ardelt, 2003; Krause, 2003). For instance, a study by Ardelt (2003) showed an association between intrinsic religiosity and a sense of meaning in a sample of older adults. Religious beliefs provide assurance that any event “makes sense” because it can be incorporated into a comprehensive system of meaning (Park, 2005). Trauma is also intimately tied to meaning-making, though in an opposite way from religion: while religion provides a system of meaning, trauma destroys such a system by shattering fundamental assumptions about the world (Janoff-Bulman, 1992). The effect can be an overwhelming, pervasive disruption to one’s identity, sense of purpose and psychological well-being, especially when the traumatic event was unjust, random or tragic. Religious beliefs are often central to these disruptions because of their pivotal role in defining people’s worldviews. Park (2005) outlines two ways in which religion figures prominently in people’s lives during times of upheaval. First, religion is central to people’s global beliefs such as “bad things don’t happen to good people” or “god will always taken care of me”, which tend to be challenged during times of crisis. Second, religious frameworks provide adherents with meaningful interpretations of suffering and tragedy, helping them find significance in seemingly random, pointlessly horrific events (Pargament, 1997). Thus religion can be implicated in both the destruction and the rebuilding of meaning after trauma. The specifics of that process, of course, depend on how the individual interprets his or her faith
tradition and the place of the traumatic event within it. For instance, some may interpret the traumatic event as a god-given opportunity for growth, while others may interpret it as a divine punishment (Furham & Brown, 1992). These contrasting approaches may have important consequences for the individual’s capacity to cope, a subject to which we will now turn.

Religion has in part evolved to offer emotional solace in the wake of senseless tragedy and trauma. Most religious traditions prescribe methods for coping with life challenges, whether in the form of a supportive religious community, or in individual rituals and practices. While people vary widely in their coping strategies, religion is central to the process for a large number of individuals (Pargament, Ano & Wachholtz, 2005). The most widely accepted definition of coping in psychology is the “constantly changing cognitive and behavioural efforts to manage specific external and/or internal demands that are appraised as taxing or exceeding the resources of the person” (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984, p.141). While the word generally conjures up positive associations, coping equally includes positive (e.g. social support) and negative (e.g. drugs and alcohol) strategies (Donnellan, Hevey, Hickey & O’Neil, 2006). Religious coping is no different, and in accordance with the finding that religious belief can be both stressful and stress-reducing, religious coping also has both positive and negative manifestations (Ano & Vasconcelles, 2005).

As explored earlier, psychologists have historically dismissed religious coping as maladaptive and avoidant (Pargament et al., 2005). Emerging empirical evidence, however, challenges this perception. Religion can facilitate a deeper processing of difficult events because it provides a framework in which challenging circumstances can be interpreted in positive terms (McIntosh, Silver & Wortman, 1993). A study of parents whose infants died from sudden infant death syndrome revealed that deeply religious parents showed greater cognitive processing and increased self-reported meaning-making in the wake of the tragedy than their more secular
counterparts (McIntosh et al., 1993). Viewing god as an all-controlling, benevolent being allows individuals to interpret the event as a part of gods’ plan and an incitement to personal growth, redemption, and wisdom (Pargament et al., 2005). Indeed, highly religious individuals who reported that they had experienced situations that test their human limits of functioning have been shown to derive greater benefits from religious coping (Ai, Peterson & Huang, 2003).

The particular type of religious coping strategy may affect the outcome. Pargament, Smith, Koenig & Perez (1998) divide religious coping into positive and negative categories. Positive religious coping has been associated with a close and secure spiritual connection to god, social support within the religious community and optimistic religious interpretations of events. Negative religious coping, in contrast, is linked to an ambivalent or fearful relationship with god, struggle to find religious meaning and a perception that god is wrathful and punitive (Pargament et al., 1998). A meta-analytic study (Ano & Vasconcelles, 2005) investigating the impact of positive and negative religious coping strategies on psychological adjustment found positive coping to be linked with desirable outcomes including spiritual growth, positive affect, greater self-esteem and lower depression. In contrast, negative coping patterns were associated with symptoms of depression, anxiety, and PTSD, and in another study (Pargament et al., 2001) with increased risk of mortality among older, medically ill patients. Other studies (Bradley, Schwartz & Kaslow, 2005; Gerber, Boals & Schuettler, 2011; Tran et al., 2012) similarly conclude that a negative concept of god is associated with greater PTSD and depressive symptoms, but find no association between a positive concept of god and severity of symptoms. “Negative” religious coping should not necessarily be entirely dismissed, however, as it has been linked to post-traumatic growth in one study (Gerber et al., 2011) and may, for some individuals, provide a pathway to meaning-making and spiritual growth (Ano & Vasconcelles, 2005).
A variety of variables, including a feeling of attachment to god, individual personality traits, and religious orientation have been found to influence the types of religious coping methods that an individual pursues (Park, 2005). Those with an insecure attachment to their deity engage in more negative coping strategies than securely attached devotees (Belavich & Pargament, 2002). In a novel study focusing on the effects of aggregate life stressors rather than a single stressful event, Bjorck and Thurman (2007) discovered that individuals tend to start with positive religious coping strategies, but increasingly turn to negative religious coping strategies as the number of life stressors increase. Presumably, this is because individuals exposed to recurrent stress grow frustrated or disillusioned with the failure of their coping methods to bring relief, leading to a questioning of religious beliefs and engagement in negative coping. By and large, however, it is positive religious coping strategies that are most prevalent among religious individuals, as most view god as loving and benevolent (Pargament et al., 2005).

Positive religious coping strategies have been widely documented among stigmatized ethnic groups who draw upon their religious beliefs and practices as a source of strength and resilience precisely because of religion’s ties to cultural traditions and practices (Worland & Vaddhanaphuti, 2013). Moreover, individuals from cultural groups with a history oppression and trauma may turn to their religion or spirituality as a means of coping with the pain of subjugation (Boyd-Franklin, 2010). For example, Worland and Vaddhanaphuti (2013) illustrate the role of religion and spirituality as a source of resilience in their study of the Karen people who were forcibly displaced from their homes in Eastern Burma by successive military governments. While the majority of the Karen identify as Buddhist, a substantial minority identify as Christian or Animist. The Karen people view their religion and spirituality as integral to their cultural traditions, and thus turned to their religion as a source of emotional and practical strength during
their forced exile. Christian participants in the study described how celebrating their religious festivals with other families despite their meager resources helped them cope with the fear and confusion of displacement. Animist participants recounted how engaging in rituals that they believed would heal their ill children reduced their fears and gave them a greater sense of control over their future. Spiritual and religious spaces were also significant sources of strength. An abbot of a local monastery described how the monastery was not only transformed into a shelter for many, but became one of the only physical spaces where people genuinely felt safe because it was believed to be a sacred place that evil could not enter.

As in the case of the Karan, many African-Americans consider their spirituality to be a central part of their cultural heritage (Taylor, Chatters, & Levin, 2004). Trauma has long pervaded the lives of African-Americans from the history of slavery to the challenges of the civil rights movement to continued poverty and oppression. Given the widespread experiences of racism within the African-American community, religion and spirituality have been important sources of personal coping and cultural resilience. As with the monastery in Burma, in the African-American community the church provides a physical space where cultural values can be openly articulated and celebrated (Boyd-Franklin, 2010). The church functions as a home away from home and delivers not just spiritual support but also physical and mental support during times of difficulty. Children’s programs, counselling, and financial aid are some of the many resources offered through the church (Boyd-Franklin, 2010). For some African-Americans, spirituality is understood not only as a source of resilience, but also as a political tool for fighting racism and oppression. Agosto and Karanxha (2012) chronicle the lived experiences of a Black woman community activist. They highlight the primacy of her spirituality in empowering her to endure the challenges she faced in her anti-oppression community work. She described using
prayer to give her strength when challenged with changing people’s values regarding equality, as well as when she was confronted with prejudice herself.

This section has outlined several sites at which religion, spirituality and trauma intersect. Positive religious coping is common among ethnic minorities after cultural experiences of trauma because religion is so bound to ethnic heritage and identity. That being said, depending on the individual and their context, trauma can elicit crisis in meaning followed by positive or negative attempts to cope with the overwhelming emotional and cognitive burden of making sense of senseless tragedy. Understanding this complex reaction lays the groundwork for exploring changes in religious and spiritual beliefs in the wake of trauma, an area of research reviewed in the following section.

**Changes in religion and spirituality after trauma**

Theorists have long pondered religion’s role in fulfilling human needs. Emile Durkheim (1915) argued that the central value of religion is to offer social intimacy and human connection to its adherents; religious communities are formed through engaging in shared rituals and practices, motivated by a common desire for connection and belonging. Geertz (1973) took a more cognitive approach, arguing that religion fulfills peoples’ innate search for meaning, providing answers to age-old existential questions of life, death, suffering and injustice. Self-actualization has been cited as another function of religion (Pargament & Park, 1995): virtually all religions contain a humanistic component that encourages individuals to reflect upon the state of their lives and grow to their fullest potential. The connection between religion and trauma seems clear when we consider these functions of religion. Religion presents to us the main constituents of a good life—meaning, intimacy, and self-actualization—and provides a set of guiding principles for achieving these goals. Trauma is characterized by the loss of these essential
components: the shattering of meaning, the disruption of intimate relationships, and a host of symptoms that impede self-actualization. Changes in religious orientation thus seem fitting in the aftermath of trauma: some survivors of trauma reclaim, through religious belief, the meaning, intimacy, and self-actualization that they have lost, while others reject religious belief for having failed to prepare them for that loss. In accordance with this, the literature reveals mixed findings on individual’s religious orientation in the wake of trauma. These findings will be explored in the following section.

*Trauma and Strengthening of Faith*

Overcash and colleagues (1996) argue that because religious beliefs tend to be highly entrenched and stable, individuals are more likely to assimilate the event into their already existing religious framework than change their religious beliefs (Pargament, 1997; Park, 2005). Empirical evidence (Ahrens, Abeling, Ahmed & Hinman., 2010; Schwartzberg & Janoff-Bulman, 1991) confirms this claim, revealing that a strengthening of faith is more common in the wake of trauma. For example, a qualitative report by Tausch and colleagues (2011) on religious coping strategies used among survivors of Hurricanes Katrina and Rita portrayed an intensification of faith in the wake of the disasters. Participants reported relying on their spiritual beliefs, faith community and religious practices to help them manage both physically and emotionally. With respect to spiritual beliefs, many participants considered coping with the disaster to be a personal challenge, noting that god would not deliver them more hardship than they could handle. Moreover, many shared a conviction that god would give them strength and resiliency, and remain by their side throughout the ordeal. While most theorists analyze the relation between religion and trauma within the cognitive context of beliefs, the study by Tausch and colleagues (2011) highlights how religion provides not only an interpretive framework for
working through the trauma, but a rich community of human support and prescribed practices (such as prayer) to help people cope socially and behaviourally, not just cognitively. The important social and behavioral role of religion is further underscored in a more recent qualitative study (Lagman, Yoo, Levine, Donnell & Lim, 2014) revealing that Filipino breast cancer survivors deepened their faith through personal prayer and strong spiritual support from their Catholic community.

These findings are corroborated by Overcash and colleagues (1996) who conducted qualitative interviews about changes in religious beliefs among 25 individuals who recently experienced a major life stressor. The life stressor did not appear to challenge previously held religious beliefs among most participants, with religion instead providing a framework for positive coping and meaning-making. The authors interpreted this to mean that metaphysical beliefs associated with religion are more resilient than secular beliefs in the wake of trauma because they tend to be strongly held and are more difficult to directly disconfirm. Congruent with the findings of Tausch and colleagues (2011), participants in the Overcash and colleagues (1996) study described finding solace in the belief that god was in control of their lives and delivered them challenges to help mature their faith. Likewise, a focus group of cancer survivors (Ardelt, Ai & Eichenberger, 2008) who demonstrated a deepening of religious and spiritual faith after their diagnoses reported, “religion and spirituality helped them to accept or ‘let go’ of things that were out of their control by giving control to god” (p. 296). Together these findings strongly indicate that believing a traumatic event is controllable and meaningful is crucial to positive coping and recovery. Belief in an all-controlling, benevolent deity appears to fulfill this need for meaning and control in the wake of trauma. Interestingly a minority of participants in the Overcash and colleagues (1996) study reported initially questioning their religious beliefs after
the trauma but later renewing their religious investment as a result of working through their doubts. While this experience was not reported in other studies indicating a strengthening of faith (Ardelt et al., 2008; Tausch et al., 2011), it suggests that in some cases timeframe may be central to understanding religious change.

A renewed interest in and deepening of religious faith in the wake of trauma is tied to an emerging area of trauma research: post-traumatic growth. Researchers have long noted the plethora of negative outcomes associated with traumatic experiences, but more recent research has focused on how the “working through” of trauma can lead to positive outcomes including a deeper appreciation of life, greater resilience and subjective well-being (Ai & Park, 2005). Arising from the positive psychology movement that seeks to balance the deficit model of psychology with an appreciation for human resilience and hope (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000), the concept of post-traumatic growth points to the fact that many people not only prevail but indeed flourish in the aftermath of trauma. The emotional growth and broadening of perspectives experienced by individuals after trauma does not replace the suffering and emotional challenges they endure. Indeed, suffering and loss of meaning seems to be integral to the natural working through of trauma, but so too it seems are positive, deeper experiences of joy and well-being (Ai & Park, 2005). Interestingly, rumination, intrusion and avoidance have been associated with greater post-traumatic growth, indicating that a period of sadness and struggle is necessary for growth to occur (Calhoun, Cann, Tedeschi, & McMillan, 2000; Linley & Joseph, 2004). A large body of empirical evidence (Augustine, 2014; Linley & Joseph, 2004; Shaw, Joseph & Linley, 2005) collected over the past 20 years confirms that post-traumatic growth has been reported following a host of traumatic experiences including heart attacks, chronic illness, sexual assault, HIV and AIDS, plane crashes, shootings, bereavement, and recovery from addictions.
The positive effects of post-traumatic growth have been noted in three broad areas of functioning: more intimate and satisfying relationships; self-perceptions of resilience, wisdom, and acceptance; and transformation in one’s life philosophy (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1996). Moreover, the experience of post-traumatic growth has been linked to lower levels of long-term distress, rendering it a potentially important goal of trauma treatment (Linley & Joseph, 2004).

The idea that growth emerges out of challenge and suffering is not new to religion and spirituality. Numerous religious traditions view pain and struggle as crucial to spiritual awakening and wisdom. The Buddha experienced years of physical and mental suffering before attaining enlightenment and likewise in Christianity Jesus Christ endured intense physical suffering to atone for human sin. One would therefore expect that religiosity and spirituality would be strongly associated with post-traumatic growth. Indeed, a number of studies (Calhoun et al., 2000; Kennedy, Davis, & Taylor, 1998; Shaw et al., 2005) report that religiosity and spirituality increase after the experience of trauma and are associated with post-traumatic growth. For example, in a study by Kennedy and colleagues (1998), 70 female victims of sexual assault were assessed on questionnaire measures of well-being, spirituality, intrinsic religiosity and severity of trauma. The participants reported an increase in spirituality in the 9 to 24 months following their attack, which was in turn positively associated with the measure of subjective well-being. Those who reported high intrinsic religiosity prior to the trauma experienced greater increases in spirituality following the trauma. Severity of the trauma and time elapsed since the trauma revealed no associations with religion or spirituality. The results indicate that a strong commitment to religion and spirituality prior to the traumatic event may not only be protective against the ill effects of trauma but also facilitate personal growth and happiness.
Specific dimensions of religion and spirituality (but not others) may be associated with post-traumatic growth. For example, Calhoun and colleagues (2000) investigated three factors possibly related to post-traumatic growth: rumination on the trauma, religious participation, and religious quest orientation. Religious participation, measured by three items assessing attendance at religious services and perceived importance of religion, was not associated with post-traumatic growth. However, a link was found between the quest religion scale (associated with willingness to tackle existential questions and change religious schemas) and post-traumatic growth, suggesting that a religious orientation that includes openness to exploration may be crucial to growth. Rumination was shown to enhance post-traumatic growth, debunking the widely held notion that rumination only leads to negative outcomes (Calhoun et al., 2000). The results of this study suggest that not all facets of religion are equally important to post-traumatic growth: internal indicators of religion, such as a quest or intrinsic religious orientation, may be more helpful in overcoming trauma than external indicators such as religious participation. This may be because internal processing, such as rumination is vital to working through and emerging from trauma with a deeper sense of meaning and satisfaction. Park, Cohen and Murch (1996) supported this conjecture with their finding that intrinsic religiosity and post-traumatic growth were strongly correlated among college students who were asked to identify the most negative event they had experienced in the past year and complete questionnaires assessing optimism, positive affectivity, intrinsic religiosity, perceived social support and event-related growth at two, six-month intervals. Intrinsic religiosity, as well as positive affectivity and perceived social support were associated with post-traumatic growth, suggesting that religion and spirituality are only one of many personal and environmental factors that determine whether an individual
experiences growth after trauma. Likely these contextual factors intersect with religious dimensions, influencing whether one deepens or weakens their faith in the wake of trauma.

Trauma and Weakening of Faith

Religious struggle and a weakening of faith are also common, particularly among survivors of severe trauma and abuse. For instance, in a sample of female trauma survivors with co-morbid mental health and substance use disorders, researchers found a relationship between severity of sexual abuse and negative religious coping strategies (Fallot & Heckman, 2005). Moreover, the women who were abused as children were more likely to experience a weakening of faith and use negative religious coping than those who experienced the abuse as adults. The taboo against sexual abuse and assault in some religious communities may account for the frequently reported association between sexual abuse and decline in faith in the literature (Ahrens et al., 2010; Ben-Ezra et al., 2010; Finkelhor, Hotaling, Lewis & Smith, 1989). Likewise, veterans of war report high levels of religious struggle and diminished religiosity. Using structural equation modeling, Fontana and Rosenheck (2004) revealed that the relationship between war traumas (killing others and failing to prevent others from being killed) and a weakening of faith was mediated by guilt, suggesting that specific emotions elicited by the trauma may impact how individuals relate to their religion. Both sexual abuse and war trauma are associated with stigma and secrecy, and the victims tend to manifest high levels of PTSD (Vieweg et al., 2006). This fits with evidence that individuals suffering from modest amounts of PTSD show the greatest amount of post-traumatic growth, whereas individuals with high levels of PTSD symptoms reveal much lower levels of growth (Joseph, Murphy & Regel, 2012). Presumably high levels of PTSD symptoms interfere with cognitive processing, making it difficult for individuals to process the trauma and find meaning in religion or spirituality.
Relatedly, some traumas may be so terrifying or guilt/shame-inducing that meaning-making and growth become almost impossible, leading people away rather than towards religion.

The apparent inconsistency between studies that find a weakening of religious faith among trauma survivors and studies that find a strengthening of religious faith may partially be a matter of timeframe. Religious individuals may initially find their worldview shattered and consequently exhibit a weakening of religiosity, but in the long term they return to their faith (Ano & Vasconcelles, 2005). For instance, Japanese survivors of the atomic bomb denied the existence of their deity immediately after the disaster but returned to their religious life several years later (Lifton, 1967). Falsetti and colleagues (2003) also examined changes to religious faith over time, finding that individuals who experienced one trauma generally reported a weakening of religious faith; however, individuals who had experienced multiple traumas reported far fewer changes in faith and greater intrinsic religiosity. One interpretation of the findings is that the trauma and subsequent development of PTSD may provoke a questioning of previously held beliefs resulting in a weakening of faith. Yet in the long run, strong religious beliefs may benefit those who have experienced multiple traumas because they provide a framework for interpreting the randomness of life challenges, thus reducing existential anxiety (Falsetti et al., 2003). These findings point to many important questions for further research, and underscore the need for longitudinal investigations into changes in religious beliefs following trauma.

Researchers (Ahrens et al., 2010; Desmond, 2012; Falsetti et al., 2003) have speculated about possible mediating factors underlying religious change. Ethnicity has been cited as one possible factor. Several studies (Ahrens at al., 2010; Kennedy et al., 1998) have found that African-American participants are more likely to experience a strengthening of faith compared to Caucasian samples. Kennedy and colleagues (1998) speculate that African-Americans tend to be
more religious in general and therefore more likely to turn to their religious community for social support and a sense of meaning. Pargament, Magyar, Benore and Mahoney (2005) conjecture that an important mediating variable is the spiritual meaning of a traumatic event. They distinguish between perceiving a traumatic event as a “sacred loss” versus perceiving it as a “sacred violation”, finding that people who perceive a life challenge as a sacred loss are more likely to experience depression, intrusive thoughts, post-traumatic growth and a deepening of spirituality. In contrast, perceiving an event as a sacred violation is associated with anger, low levels of post-traumatic growth and negative religious coping. The results suggest that perceptions of a trauma as a loss, along with the associated emotions of sadness and rumination, allow for a period of reflection that may encourage spiritual growth. Conversely, the perception of a trauma as a violation of the sacred could impede reflection and encourage loss of faith through anger at a deity. Finally, as part of her dissertation, Desmond (2012) used structural equation modeling to investigate the mediating roles of benevolence beliefs, importance of spirituality prior to the trauma, time elapsed since the trauma, and nature of the trauma. Benevolent beliefs about people and the world was found to mediate the association between spirituality and trauma, indicating that those who hold less benevolent beliefs about the world post-trauma report lower investment in spirituality and vice versa. All other mediating factors under investigation were non-significant, however, ceiling effects due to sample characteristics were noted as possibly confounding the non-significant associations. Clearly, more work is needed to untangle the intricate set of circumstances that influence religious change after trauma.

**Rationale for the Present Study**

The above literature review demonstrates that clear gaps remain in our understanding of how religion and spirituality are affected in the aftermath of trauma. This study attempts to
resolve some outstanding questions in the area of religion and trauma by contributing to the extant literature in three significant ways. First, this will be one of the first studies on religion and trauma to focus on process rather than outcome. Three studies (Ardelt et al., 2008; Overcash et al., 1996; Tausch et al., 2011) have primarily used qualitative, process-based data gathering techniques to investigate trauma’s impact on religion. Two of these studies (Ardelt et al., 2008; Tausch et al., 2011) were limited in that they recruited only individuals who viewed religion as a positive force and strengthened their faith following trauma. The third study (Overcash et al., 1996) investigated changes in faith, yet coded the qualitative data in such a way that the outcome of the religious change was revealed but information related to the process itself was obscured. Using grounded theory as an analytical tool to capture nuances in individuals’ experiences over time, this seeks to illuminate the process of faith changes in the wake of trauma. Second, one possible explanation for why some experience a strengthening and others a weakening of religion is that previous studies have failed to investigate the temporal dimensions of religious change. Researchers (Ano & Vasconcelles, 2005; Falsetti et al., 2003) have speculated that individuals may initially experience a weakening of faith but regain investment in their religion after a period of time. This theory has yet to be tested empirically, but exploring the process of religious change after trauma may help illuminate the temporal dimensions of this experience, pointing to future areas of research inquiry. Third, the present study will contribute to the extant literature by identifying possible factors that mediate or moderate how people relate to religion after a traumatic event. Thus far, only one quantitative study has attempted to illuminate some of these factors, but it was largely unsuccessful due to a ceiling effect (Desmond, 2012). The current study will pay particular attention to individual and social factors, including the nature of the
traumatic event, support after the event, prior belief systems and relationship with a higher power that most likely factor into how people experience trauma and religion.

Summary

This literature review provided an overview of the relationship between religion, spirituality and psychology before turning to a description of PTSD theory and treatment. Intersections between religion, spirituality and trauma were considered and current studies investigating religious and spiritual change in the wake of traumatic events were described. In sum, it is clear that trauma provokes changes in religion and spirituality. However, despite various attempts, little is known about why some individuals turn towards and others turn against religion and spirituality. Though speculations abound, only one empirical study (Desmond, 2012) has explicitly investigated factors influencing how individuals relate to their faith in the aftermath of trauma, rendering this a research frontier in the area of trauma and religion. The present study seeks to rectify this gap in the literature by investigating the process of religious and spiritual change following trauma, with a particular emphasis on social or personal factors influencing the trajectory of change.
Chapter Three: Methods and Procedures

The methods and procedures section that follows will begin by summarizing the rationale for why qualitative methods have been chosen for this study. It will then outline the study design and main tenants of grounded theory, the chosen methodological approach for the current study. Finally, this section will detail participant recruitment and inclusion criteria, demographics and participant stories. The procedure section will outline the proposed sampling method, interview approach, data collection process and data analysis for the current study. It will then consider how the subjectivity of the researcher may influence the data collection and analysis process, and outline strategies for reducing researcher influence on the study outcomes.

Methods

Rationale for qualitative research design

The above literature review poses more questions than it answers about changes in religion and spirituality in the wake of trauma, and reveals just how many puzzles remain unsolved. Clearly, research on changes in religion and spirituality following trauma is in its infancy, with studies to date yielding mixed results. While the majority of studies reveal a relationship between trauma and changes in religion or spirituality, the direction of religious change is split with some studies indicating a weakening and others a strengthening of religious faith (Fallot & Heckman, 2005; Tausch et al., 2011). Moreover, the factors underlying these changes remain unclear. Notably, only three studies to date employed qualitative methods to interrogate the impact of trauma on religion and all three reported participants experiencing a deepening of faith following loss, contradicting the results of several quantitative studies revealing a more mixed picture (Ardelt et al., 2008; Overcash et al., 1996; Tausch et al., 2011). Furthermore, only the study by Overcash and colleagues (1996) employed aspects of grounded
theory, the methodological approach of choice for this study, to thematically organize their qualitative data. Moreover, the one study (Desmond, 2012) that specifically interrogated underlying factors influencing religious change relied exclusively on quantitative methods that, while useful for revealing broad associations and outcomes, are less adept at interrogating the complex set of personal and social processes informing how people relate to faith in the wake of trauma (McLeod, 2001). Undoubtedly, more qualitative research is required to discern how religious change occurs in the aftermath of trauma, and particularly which factors influence the trajectory of faith. The current research project will employ qualitative methods. Reasons behind this decision will be elaborated below.

First, why some people turn towards and others turn away from faith after trauma is not straightforward and almost certainly tied to the social environment. Qualitative methods lend themselves well to interrogating how the experience of faith in the wake of trauma is contextualized within a myriad of social forces and competing experiences (Wertz et al., 2011). While quantitative methods fall prey to oversimplification through their reliance on discrete variables, qualitative data collection techniques allow interrogation of the multiple social forces shaping the religious dimension of trauma recovery (Wertz et al., 2011). Moreover, qualitative research is sensitive to the inevitable contradictory experiences and multiple perspectives of the research participants and how these experiences are embedded within their social contexts (Woolgar, 1996). Given that this study is primarily concerned with the subjective experience of religion and spirituality as it unfolds within the social environment, qualitative methods are ideal because they incorporate subjectivity and nuance into the data collection and analysis.

Second, while quantitative studies have definitively established a link between trauma and religion/spirituality, they have been less successful at interrogating the underlying factors
influencing this relationship (Chen & Koenig, 2006), again revealing contradictory findings (for example, some but not all studies found ethnicity to be a mediating variable) (Ahrens et al., 2010). Religious and spiritual change is most likely dependent on context specific variables such as social support, interpretation of the trauma, degree of religiosity and the nature of trauma, yet these factors have yet to be explored empirically (Desmond, 2012). Qualitative methods are often better suited to investigating process rather than outcome and may offer greater insight into the “whys and hows” of religious and spiritual change following trauma. Furthermore, qualitative methods emphasize differences as well as similarities between participants, and allow the researcher to build meaningful theories about how underlying contextual factors differentially affect faith in the wake of trauma (McLeod, 2001). From a clinical perspective, qualitative methods may help illuminate the idiosyncratic ways in which clients understand and relate to religion and spirituality after trauma, helping clinicians tailor treatment plans to the needs and experiences of the individual client.

Third, the relationship between religion and trauma is almost certainly bidirectional, with religion and spirituality likely influencing the experience of trauma and trauma likely influencing the experience of religion and spirituality (Desmond, 2012). This complex interplay between trauma and religion may explain the mixed quantitative findings. Qualitative methods that focus on the process of trauma recovery as it relates to faith may be more appropriate to teasing apart the complicated bidirectional influences exerted by trauma and religion.

Study Design

The primary research question in this study was addressed using in-depth, semi-structured interviews with a sample of individuals who experienced changes in their religious faith
following trauma. A grounded theory methodology (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), discussed in the following section, was employed to analyze and interpret the data.

As noted above, while trauma is a relatively common experience in the general population, the diagnosis of PTSD occurs much less frequently (Breslau, 1998; Kessler et al., 1995). Researchers investigating the relationship between religion/spirituality and trauma have defined trauma differently, with some studies requiring their participants to have a diagnosis of PTSD and others merely requiring their participants to have experienced a traumatic event leading to distress. Changes in religion and spirituality have been noted in both sets of samples (Fontana & Rosenheck, 2004; Pargament et al., 2005). Given the controversies surrounding PTSD and the fact that this study focuses on disruptions to religious and spiritual belief systems, trauma was broadly defined as a highly distressing and disruptive event that produces post-traumatic stress symptoms and may or may not result in a diagnosis of PTSD.

In almost all studies examining the intersection of religion/spirituality and trauma, the terms “religion” and “spirituality” have been taken to refer to a wide variety of religious systems, faith traditions and individual/idiosyncratic spiritual practices and beliefs. Nonetheless, the literature to date has been conducted almost exclusively on Christian populations (Schaefer, Blazer, Koenig, 2008). Investigations into associations between trauma and non-western and/or non-Christian religious samples are an important area of future research and are absolutely necessary to make general claims about the broad construct of religion/spirituality. However, given that research in this area is preliminary, the sample was restricted to those who identified as religiously or spiritually Christian at some point in their lives. While there is of course considerable variety within Christian populations, this eliminated confounds related to religious
differences and allowed for more specific comparisons with the extant literature on religion/spirituality and trauma.

**Grounded Theory**

First elaborated by Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss (1967), grounded theory emerged as a reaction against the overwhelming emphasis on empiricism and quantitative methodologies in the harder social sciences including sociology and psychology (Pidgeon, 1996). A popular and versatile methodological approach, grounded theory applies to a range of data collection techniques and provides a systematic, structured approach to data analysis (Pidgeon, 1996). Three main principles guide this approach (McLeod, 2001).

First, as the title suggests, the theory must be grounded in the data, meaning that the theoretical model should emerge out of and reflect subtlety in the data rather than be imposed on it. In this sense, grounded theory relies on an inductive approach to theory building: the theory is developed to explain empirical observations of specific phenomenon in the real world (Gordan-Finlayson, 2010). This is in contrast to deductive methodologies that begin with specific testable hypotheses and determine whether the data fits their theories. In grounded theory, the researcher is advised to refrain as much as possible from importing prior assumptions about the research area and exercise openness and patience in allowing the theory to emerge from the data (McLeod, 2001).

Second, the focus of the methodology is on understanding how individuals make sense of their social world. Grounded theory considers the social context of the participant as primary and is thus well suited to the current research question that interrogates how the social and psychological context informs changes to religion and spirituality after trauma. Moreover, this methodological approach prioritizes process-oriented research (as opposed to outcome-oriented
research), accounting for how subjective experiences change in tandem with changing social contexts (Pidgeon, 1996). This emphasis on process is well suited to the current research question, focusing on the process of religious change following trauma.

Third, the ultimate goal of grounded theory is to develop a theory to explain some aspect of the social world. This approach requires that the researcher be fully immersed in the data and willing to explore nuances, contradictions and multiple meanings within it (McLeod, 2001). The methodological process is cyclical in the sense that every possible meaning within the data should be carefully considered and integrated into the emerging theoretical framework, requiring a constant cycle between data collection and analysis (Wertz et al., 2011).

Researchers using grounded theory are expected to employ both theoretical sensitivity and theoretical sampling during data collection and analysis (McLeod, 2001). Theoretical sensitivity refers to the researcher’s ability to generate hypotheses from observed trends in the data and to remain sensitive to multiple interpretations of the data, facilitating the development of codes that can eventually be joined together into a comprehensive theory (McLeod, 2001). Theoretical sampling refers to a strategy for collecting data that emphasizes breadth and diversity over generalizability. Participants are selected for their capacity to enlarge the theoretical map of the phenomenon of interest: that is, to provide new information or different perspectives rather than to confirm existing theories (Gordan-Finlayson, 2010). The process of grounded theory comes to a close when the researcher reaches theoretical saturation, the point at which gathering additional data yields no new insights or details (Gordan-Finlayson, 2010).

In grounded theory, data analysis involves open coding: the generation of categories that encapsulate pieces of meaning found within the data (Pidgeon & Henwood, 1996). The researcher must engage in constant comparison, continually examining, comparing and
contrasting categories of meaning in order to identify higher and lower order conceptual
categories and to embrace the full complexity of the phenomena. This was the technique of
choice in a previous qualitative study mentioned earlier that examined changes in religious
beliefs post-trauma (Overcash et al., 1996). Diagrams are used to illustrate the connections
between concepts, with the goal of creating a map of the social processes central to the research
question. This process ultimately results in the development of a theoretical framework to
describe the examined socio-psychological process. The theory is expected to move beyond a
simple description of the process at work, towards a broader interpretation of the dynamics of an
individual’s interactions with their social context (McLeod, 2001).

Grounded theory bridges the divide between post-modern and scientific methodological
approaches in that it embraces post-modern notions of multiple meanings, immersion in the data
and subjectivity of the researcher while satisfying empirical demands for systematicity and
grounding in the data (Pidgeon, 1996). This largely explains the popularity of grounded theory
across a broad spectrum of disciplines. However, the attempt to bridge this deep paradigmatic
divide has also been attended by controversy. Strauss and Corbin (1990) developed a
standardized procedure for undertaking grounded theory, incorporating hypothesis testing into
the process. Glaser (1992) criticized this manualized approach, arguing that a defining
characteristic of grounded theory is the use of inductive investigation with no a priori theoretical
framework to guide the research. One resolution to this dilemma is offered by Pidgeon (1996),
who describes grounded theory as a cyclical process of moving between top-down application of
theory and bottom-up exploration of data. This approach has the virtue of recognizing the need
for a prior theoretical framework while simultaneously insisting that the research be grounded in
contextual detail and hard data. This will be the approach adopted in this research project. In
keeping with the methodology of grounded theory, this study refrains from articulating specific hypotheses and instead establishes broad, open-ended questions to guide the research process.

*Participants: Inclusion Criteria and Recruitment*

Eleven participants were recruited to participate in a semi-structured, in-depth interviews about changes in their religious faith after experiencing a traumatic event. Recruitment primarily took place through study announcements on message boards and email listservs within churches and on university campuses. The researcher also drew upon her personal contacts, in the form of informal discussions, email inquiries and word of mouth. The study announcement (see appendix A) outlined the primary aims of the research project, as well as what the participant could expect and the email contact of the researcher should they have further questions. Potential participants were informed that there was no pressure to participate in the study, that it was entirely voluntary and confidential, and that the participants were free to withdraw at any point.

Participants were required to meet the following criteria:

1. Identified as religiously or spiritually Christian at some point in their lives
2. Expressed an event that was highly distressing and traumatic
3. Experienced some change in their religious or spiritual orientation after the trauma, either in the form of a deepening of faith, a weakening of faith, becoming religious/spiritual or losing religion/spirituality
4. Consider themselves to be emotionally stable and have not been diagnosed with a severe mental illness or personality disorder
5. Willing to speak candidly about their experiences and are available for a face-to-face interview
6. Currently reside in Canada
After reviewing the information sheet (see appendix B) and consent form (see appendix C), eleven participants consented to participate in the study and completed the interview.

**Demographics**

Participants were asked to complete a very brief demographic form (see appendix D) that included their gender, age, education and occupation. In order to protect the confidentiality of the participants, the following demographic information is provided as a group summary:

**Gender:** Seven participants were female; four participants were male.

**Age:** The age of the participants ranged between 21 years and 65 years old, although the majority of participants were in their twenties and thirties.

**Years of Education:** The participants completed between 14 and 24 years of education, with a mean of 17.7 years. All participants had received some post-secondary education.

**Occupation:** Six participants identified themselves as undergraduate or graduate students. Other participants worked in a variety of occupations. Further details regarding occupation will be provided in the participant summary section below.

**Participant Summaries**

Grounded theory analysis is thematic in nature and requires a search for commonalities within participants’ experiences. Although participants shared similar thoughts and emotions as they moved through their process of changing faith, each participant’s experience of their trauma and the working through of their beliefs was unique. In the following results chapter, quotations from the interviews with participants were selected to substantiate the themes and provide a richer illustration of the diverse ways in which similar themes were experienced and interpreted by the participants. As context for the results, each participant will now be briefly introduced and described using a pseudonym.
Participant 1: Alan

Alan is 26-year-old Egyptian man who works as a special education technician. He was raised in the Coptic Orthodox church and was heavily involved in his church community growing up. Near the end of university, Alan came out as gay to his parents and was expelled from his parents’ house, an experience he described as traumatic. In the aftermath of this trauma, Alan began to seriously question the rigidity of his church dogma and consider alternative conceptions of his faith. He currently identifies as having a personal spirituality that is unrestricted by a specific religion.

Participant 2: Kira

Kira is 35-year-old student of Maltese descent who grew up in a devout Roman Catholic home. In her twenties, Kira was hit by a “perfect storm” of traumas: she was left by her fiancé, lost her group of friends, lost her job and developed a severe anxiety disorder. In the aftermath of the traumas, Kira explored a number of religious and spiritual communities and practices. Her conception of her higher power slowly changed from that of a directive force to a guiding presence. Currently, Kira identifies as spiritual but not religious.

Participant 3: Evelyn

Evelyn is a 21-year-old student who identifies as Chinese. She was born into a Christian family but felt little emotional connection to god as a child. While she was in high school, her father got into a serious car accident. Over the next six months, she reflected deeply on her family relationships and her faith, coming to the conclusion that the accident was a lesson sent from god to help her think more deeply about her faith. Since the accident, Evelyn has had a significantly stronger relationship with god and relates her faith back to all aspects of her life.

Participant 4: Charles
Charles is a 26-year-old student who is originally from China. He was introduced to Christianity by his uncle when he was sixteen. At the end of university, Charles’ fiancée broke off their relationship. He became depressed and questioned everything in his life including his faith. Shortly afterward, Charles’ grandmother introduced him to Buddhist texts and after some contemplation he decided to become Buddhist because he felt it better reflected his life experiences.

*Participant 5: Aviendha*

Aviendha is a 24-year-old Caucasian student. After her parents separated when she was fourteen, her father became interested in religion and started bringing her to church. When she was sixteen, Aviendha’s online friend committed suicide, precipitating a period of reflection on broader religious questions. She came to believe that life is chaos and people simply need to do their best in a chaotic world. Aviendha currently identifies as agnostic and does not want to commit to a specific religion at this time.

*Participant 6: Daniel*

Daniel is a 32-year-old teacher of Chinese descent. He grew up in a Christian family and both of his parents were heavily involved in their church. As an adult, Daniel divorced from his wife who struggled with severe mental health problems. Daniel’s faith was tested dramatically during this period in his life but he believes that god put him through the challenges to make him stronger. As a result of working through his grief, Daniel’s faith has deepened, and he is now even more trusting of god and grateful for his church community.

*Participant 7: Cynthia*

Cynthia is a 34-year-old software developer of Chinese descent. Both of her parents were born-again Christians and she grew up attending mass, Sunday school and Catholic school.
Cynthia experienced two distressing events in her late twenties that affected her faith: her father passed away and she was assaulted by a church minister. The assault reinforced her negative beliefs about Christianity as an institution and she decided that she no longer identified with practicing Christians. Cynthia now identifies as spiritual rather than religious.

**Participant 8: Julia**

Julia is a 22-year-old undergraduate student of Filipino descent who grew up attending a large Roman Catholic church. In late high school, Julia’s father passed away from cancer. She had invested hope in god before her father died and felt betrayed, so she decided to invest trust in herself instead. Julia no longer identifies as Christian but she has chosen to keep some aspects of her faith: she believes in a higher power and adheres to Christian-based ethics.

**Participant 9: Michael**

Michael is a 44-year-old Caucasian man who currently works as an ESL tutor. His approach to the Christian faith has always been unconventional and it varied considerably throughout his childhood and adolescence. As an adult, Michael experienced several significant losses: many close friends moved away, and his grandmother and mother passed away. He described feeling profound loneliness and disconnection, and lost the motivation to even wonder about religion. Michael now identifies as an atheist and views religion as an evolutionary defense mechanism that helps people cope.

**Participant 10: Sarah**

Sarah is a 23-year-old Caucasian masters student. Her mother is Jewish and her father is Christian, and she grew up celebrating both traditions in the home. In university, Sarah was sexually assaulted by a boyfriend, and described having a “mental breakdown” and developing PTSD as a result. Sarah recalled losing trust in everything, including god. Sarah currently
identifies as a deist: she believes that a god exists and has power, but that his actions are not necessarily rational or well-intentioned.

Participant 11: Rachel

Rachel is a 65-year-old Caucasian teacher who grew up in a Jewish reform household in the United States. From the age of eleven to her early twenties, Rachel experienced emotional abuse from her mother, which she described as alienating and confusing. In her late twenties, she had a vision of the Virgin Mary during which she was told that her mother had indeed been abusive toward her. This was a huge relief for Rachel who had long questioned the abuse. As a result of this transformative experience, Rachel was baptized and became heavily involved in an established Anglican church community.

Procedure

Sampling

Theoretical sampling is the sampling method most often used in grounded theory. This form of sampling prioritizes breadth of experiences and perspectives over replicability (McLeod, 2001). Participants were selected for their diversity of experiences and perspectives with respect to changes in religious orientation, in order to provide the researcher with a complex picture of the process of change following trauma. Extant literature demonstrates that individuals’ traumatic reactions differ substantially with respect to religion and spirituality, and the researcher strategically recruited both individuals who experienced an increase and individuals who experienced a decrease in their religious and spiritual orientation after trauma. As revealed in the summaries above, participants represented a range of experiences and processes, allowing a more nuanced understanding of the phenomena and leading to the generation of novel theories.

Semi-Structured Interviewing
Traditional portrayals of the interview in qualitative research have represented the process as data-excavation: that is, eliciting objective information from the interviewee. The information gathered is considered to be truthful and unaltered by the interviewer-interviewee relationship (Hugh-Jones, 2010). More recently, theorists in the social sciences have problematized this conception of the interview, arguing that the researcher-participant relationship and the subjective experiences of the participant are inherently bound up with the data that emerges. Contemporary theorists conceive of the interview as co-constructed, acknowledging the role that researchers play in determining how the interviewee shares the information and what information they choose to divulge (Hugh-Jones, 2010). The interview is in essence a social interaction and the information gained depends on the social context in which it was obtained.

A semi-structured interview approach is the most widely used form of data collection in qualitative research and was the method of choice for this study (Hugh-Jones, 2010). This interview style is useful for accessing the inner processes and subjective experiences of research participants and is thus appropriate to this research study focusing on the cognitive and affective dimensions of religious change following trauma. The researcher developed an interview guide outlining six broad, open-ended questions pertaining to the research question that was followed throughout the interview process (see appendix E). The questions were grounded within the existing literature on religion, spirituality and trauma, and focused on how the socio-cultural context of the participant and related beliefs influenced their religious and spiritual change. The use of the guide constrained the conversation to the research topic yet was flexible enough to accommodate the unique experiences of the participants (Hugh-Jones, 2001). The researcher was also attentive to, and respectful of, what the participants considered to be the most important dimensions of the experience, and for that reason the researcher at times strayed from the
interview guide and responded naturally if the interviewee introduced new and unexpected angles (King, 1996). The researcher employed techniques such as probes and detailed questioning to encourage each interviewee to explore the full spectrum of the research question, while staying grounded in their unique experiences (Hugh-Jones, 2010).

Data Collection

Semi-structured interviews lasted approximately 1-2 hours and were audio taped with the consent of the participant. Most participants were interviewed in a private office at the OISE Psychology Clinic. Three of the participants opted to meet at a location that was more convenient for them and in all cases a private space was found that ensured confidentiality and lack of interruptions. To begin the interview, the researcher covered the main goals of the research project, the structure of the interview and addressed any questions or concerns of the participant. Participants were reminded of confidentiality, anonymity and that they were free to withdraw from the study at any time. A written consent form was given, explained orally and signed. Once consent was given, the participants were asked to complete a basic demographic form and were offered the opportunity to create a pseudonym to be used in the reporting of the results. The 6-question interview guide was loosely followed throughout the interview, with the researcher probing further or expanding on topics raised by the interviewee when relevant. Nearing the end of the interview, the researcher debriefed with the participant about their experiences of the interview. Any outstanding thoughts, feelings or questions that arose during the interview process were attended to. The researcher also asked permission to contact the participants later for feedback during the data analysis stage. Given the sensitive nature of the topics discussed, care was taken to ensure that the participants felt comfortable and in control of the pace of the discussion throughout the interview process (King, 1996). Occasionally a participant became
visibly distressed during the interview and the researcher paused the interview and attempted to restore them to a calm state through empathy and validation. The participants were reminded that they could take a break or terminate the interview at any point, but all participants opted to complete the interview.

**Data Analysis**

Pidgeon and Henwood (1996) note that fully documenting the data analysis process is an intrinsic component of grounded theory. Documentation or “memo-writing” not only ensures accountability of the researcher’s decisions throughout the process but also promotes deeper analysis of the topic. Gordon-Finlayson (2010) goes as far as to state that “It is memo-writing that is the engine of grounded theory, not coding” (p.164). While coding promotes the organization of concepts and ideas, memo-writing is the heart of the interpretative and theory-building process. As such, the researcher maintained a research journal documenting the process of narrowing in on the topic, her subjective experiences of the interview process, as well as details of the thoughts, insights and decisions that arose during data analysis.

Once the interviews were complete, the researcher transcribed the audio recordings. The slow task of transcribing the interviews line by line provided valuable time for the researcher to gain greater intimacy with the material and attend to details in the participants’ experiences that may have been missed while conducting the interview. The completed transcripts were saved in password-protected files and deleted several months after the data was obtained.

Data analysis followed the procedure elaborated by proponents of grounded theory (Pidgeon & Henwood, 1996). A main principle of this methodology is flexibility and openness to novel theoretical interpretations; therefore, the data analysis process was flexible, with the researcher freely moving between the data, subjective interpretations and new theoretical insights.
(Pidgeon & Henwood, 1996). An open-ended coding system was used in the initial coding stage where the researcher labeled higher and lower order concepts that were deemed relevant to the research topic (Gordan-Finlayson, 2010). Each of the transcripts was reviewed sentence-by-sentence and labeled accordingly. The initial codes were descriptive in nature and were intended to reflect the data as accurately as possible. The codes gleaned from each participant’s transcript were then entered into a list on a word-processing document to facilitate clustering of similar themes. The researcher then constructed a visual diagram that depicted higher-order theoretical constructs that encapsulated lower-order, descriptive concepts. At this point, the researcher sent a preliminary thematic analysis of each interview, as well as an anonymized version of the transcription, to the participants for feedback and suggestions. Participants were notified that they were not required to give feedback and were given two weeks to offer comments. In particular, participants were asked to notify the researcher if any aspect of the analysis failed to capture their experience. Several participants offered positive feedback regarding the accuracy of the analysis, one participant offered one small change, and the other participants did not respond to the request for feedback.

In the second stage of coding, all of the interviews were coded together. Using the method of constant comparison, themes from each individual participant were compared and contrasted with the aim of developing larger conceptual categories (Pidgeon & Henwood, 1997). Through a process of re-working, merging and refining categories, a conceptual map of the topic was constructed that included three core themes encompassing 4-5 main themes with 2-3 sub-themes. Upon completion of the coding process, a theoretical model was constructed to explain the process of religious and spiritual change after trauma.

Role of the Researcher
Given that the researcher is never entirely removed from the data, I have endeavored to understand how my particular experiences inform this project and my relationship with the participants. This topic is personally relevant to me. After experiencing an extremely distressing life event in my early twenties, I found myself drawn to spiritual practices and beliefs for the first time. This personal experience has inspired me to explore the interplay between trauma and religion as a research topic and surely affects how I approach this project. Moreover, as a volunteer interfaith worker promoting religious tolerance and diversity at my undergraduate university campus, I was exposed to diverse faith backgrounds and honed my knowledge of and ability to speak about religion and spirituality. My proximity to this topic, as well as religion and spirituality more broadly, may help me grasp the experiences conveyed to me by my participants. Moreover, my experience leading discussions about religious diversity informs my understanding of religious struggle, at least among university students. That being said, other aspects of my experiences may differ substantially from those of my participants: I grew up in a secular household with very little exposure to organized religion, I have never experienced religious or spiritual struggle and I do not currently identify as having a religious or spiritual affiliation.

Throughout the data collection I attempted to remain mindful of how my beliefs and experiences could distort my understanding of my participants and endeavored to remain faithful to their voices. I did this by thoroughly reviewing the academic literature on the topic and attempting to understand as specifically as possible the experiences of the participants. Moreover, I created a written summary and thematic analysis of each interview and gave it to the participant for feedback so they could clarify any inaccurate interpretations of the data. I also maintained a research notebook in which I recorded my experiences of each interview, including whether parts of the interview triggered associations with aspects of my own experience. In sum, the intense yet
enigmatic experience of turning to spirituality after a difficult event in my own life has fueled a personal and academic desire to understand the intersections between religion and trauma. I bring this motivation to the current research project. However, given that my experience occurred a number of years ago, I believe I possess sufficient distance and perspective to conduct an investigation of the topic that is well grounded in the data.
Chapter 4: Results

In order to facilitate understanding of the process of religious and spiritual change, participants’ experiences were divided into three core themes that roughly captured the sequence of change: Religious Worldview, Traumatic Disruption of Worldview, and Resolution of Worldview. The first core theme, Religious Worldview, describes the participants’ experience of growing up within a religious community and investing in a Christian worldview. The second core theme, Traumatic Disruption of Worldview, captures participants’ experience of the trauma, followed by a disruption of their beliefs and exploration of alternative frameworks for understanding the traumatic experience. Finally, the third core theme, Resolution of Worldview, captures how the participants reconciled their experience of the trauma with their worldview, which often involved changing their system of beliefs to align with their traumatic experience. Each of the participant’s stories naturally mapped onto these three core themes, with different participants emphasizing some themes over others (e.g. some participants engaged in a lengthy process of searching for meaning while others reached a resolution quickly). The three core themes are each comprised of 4-5 main themes that were experienced by most or all of the participants. Most of the main themes were divided into 2-3 sub-themes that represent specific facets of participants’ experiences. These sub-themes were experienced by at least three of the participants and provide a richer illustration of the unique ways in which the participants grappled with their faith.

Religious Worldview

In order to provide context for participant’s change in faith, participants were asked to describe their experience of religion before the trauma. All but one participant identified as Christian at some point before their trauma but individual experiences of Christianity varied
widely from detached skepticism to dogmatic devotion. However, almost all participants described their faith as playing an important role in their lives and influencing their worldview. This core theme is comprised of five main themes: Initiation into Religion, Attitudes toward God, Religion as Community, Benefits of Religion and Questioning Religion.

**Initiation into Faith**

Almost all participants grew up in a religious household: their parents were Christian and the expectation that they believe in god and the teaching of Christ was an important dimension of their upbringing. Participants reflected that before the traumatic event their religious beliefs and practices were often rigidly dictated by their parents, teachers and religious community. Several participants described being automatically initiated into the Christian church and often unquestioningly accepting religion into their lives. Evelyn reflected:

> My parents have always brought us to church so I didn’t even have a choice. I mean I didn’t know anything as a child about religion or anything. I just followed my parents to go wherever they went. So they go to church every Sunday and bring me to services so that’s what I’ve been growing up with, every Sunday going to church.

Evelyn did not choose to be Christian but rather was initiated into Christianity because her parents structured their family life around faith. Charles also emphasized his lack of religious questioning when his uncle introduced him to Christianity at the age of sixteen. At the time he did not believe in any religion, but his uncle convinced him to become Christian. He attributed his lack of deeper reflection to the fact that he was young and had not yet developed his own beliefs:

> I knew nothing about [Christianity]. I was just a big boy, graduate from high school so [my uncle] said “Hey, this is good, believe it”, I said “Okay whatever”. That’s how it started.

As a boy, Charles did not have the intellectual capacity or life experience to choose his personal set of beliefs. He instead relied on his family members to dictate his belief system and he did not
question his beliefs again until his trauma forced him to reflect on whether his religious beliefs reflected his life experiences. Like Charles, Evelyn commented that the traumatic event precipitated a deeper reflection on her religious beliefs but until the trauma she had no desire to explore her religiosity:

I believed, I never questioned…when church said something I said “Okay no problem”. Like the holy trinity, that’s always been injected into my life. Yes, I never used to question it but then after the [traumatic] event I started to question and started believing because I felt it was true. But before I didn’t care if it was true or not…true or not I still believed because the church said so.

Daniel also described being fully immersed in his religion as a result of his parents’ involvement in their church. However, he recalled a specific moment as a child when he made the conscious choice to accept his parents’ religion into his life:

I think I did a prayer to ask Jesus into my heart or life in around grade five, grade six…I would say there was a little bit of a decision of telling Jesus that [I] wanted him to help [me] to believe. Where before it was like, I guess the analogy would be you have this stereo and you looked at it, you researched it, you looked at the box but you didn’t buy it yet. I think my decision to buy was in grade five or six.

Daniel reflected that he had been initiated into the Christian faith as an infant and that his faith did not change after his private commitment to Christ. However, he reflected that his decision to accept Jesus was an “epic moment” because it represented a conscious decision to ask god to help him find salvation.

While some participants described their structured religious upbringing as resulting in an unequivocal acceptance of Christianity, other participants reported that the rigidity of their religious upbringing provoked a desire to explore outside of their faith. For instance, Julia described being automatically initiated into her large Roman Catholic church because her parents attended every Sunday. She was sent to Catholic School and was not exposed to religious diversity until she started working at a part-time job and met individuals from different faith
backgrounds. Julia described feeling like her church and Catholic school tried to “brainwash” her into adopting only one worldview. In high school, she recalled being frustrated that her religion teachers expected her write essays about parts of the gospel:

Our religion teachers would force us to make essays about certain parts of the gospel and I just didn’t find it very relevant in our lives that love is always the answer, so I just started to question at that point.

Julia experienced her parents’ religious worldview as restrictive and during her adolescent she yearned to explore outside that system of beliefs. Like Julia, Alan described feeling constricted by the doctrine of his parents’ faith and reflected that the rigid belief structure of his Coptic Orthodox upbringing restricted his personal growth. He commented that “orthodoxy” means “straight path” and reflected that it allowed little room for adolescent self-exploration:

I held religious beliefs for sure. I mean I was told that that was the only kind of thing to do. So when you’re exposed to a certain structure of, this is what you’re allowed to believe, this is what you’re not allowed to believe, you’re kind of forced to explore yourself within those parameters and surely enough I did. I think I grew within my experience with the church and it was beneficial in many ways but…it wasn’t a broad enough experience for me to understand myself completely.

Alan suggested that although his religious experience was positive in many ways, in retrospect he realized that he never fully understood himself while adhering to his religious doctrine. In sum, the majority of participants were initiated into Christianity through interactions with their families, teachers and communities, resulting in them adopting a religious worldview. Some unquestioningly accepted this religious framework, while others felt stifled by the restrictive nature of their religious doctrine.

*Attitudes toward God*

All participants reported establishing a perception and/or relationship with god from a young age. For many participants, their relationship with their deity was central to their experience of Christianity and their understanding of their faith. However, participants’
relationship with their god ranged from an intense, personal bond to a vague connection with a
distant force. Moreover, their characterizations of god varied: most participants viewed their god
as a positive presence in their lives but others were also aware of the darker aspects of their
higher power. This main theme is comprised of two sub-themes: Perceptions of God and
Relationship with God.

Perceptions of God

God was conceptualized differently depending on participants’ level of faith, relationship
with god and religious beliefs. Most participants recalled having a positive view of god prior to
their traumatic event and used words such as benevolent, kind, loving and caring to describe their
deity. Many described a sense of comfort in the notion that a benevolent being was controlling
the universe. For instance, Kira reflected that her belief in a benevolent being helped her
construct a worldview based upon comfort and security:

I think it just gave me an idea that there is something bigger out there, I think that’s
the biggest thing. That there’s something more out there, there’s something more than
we are here. I guess the biggest image is of comfort. That idea of there’s something
there, it’s got your back.

Kira described huge comfort in the belief that both she and her deceased family members were
being cared for and protected by god. Sarah also viewed god as benevolent and helpful but she
had a unique understanding of her god(s) because she was raised in a Christian and Jewish home.
She described as a child believing that her Jewish god and her Christian god worked together
with the common goal of ensuring goodness and safety for humanity. She reflected that her bi-
religious upbringing and conception of her gods working in tandem instilled in her a strong sense
of cooperation and respect:

I believed [god] was good and I believed he wanted to help others and I believed that
he watched over you and cared and…I believed that Jesus was good and I believed
that Husham was good and I sort of felt like they worked in tandem for a common goal…. Maybe it’s a good thing because that instilled the work together ethic.

Another commonly expressed perception of god was that he was all-controlling and all-powerful. For instance, Evelyn was taught and believed that god ruled all of humanity and controlled each person’s actions: “I always believed that he was the god that’s controlling over all mankind and all the other religions as well”. Similarly, Daniel believed that god played multiple roles in people’s lives and had complete control over societal decisions:

> [God] plays a parenting role, a justice fairness role, a teaching, a counsellor role… He plays a purpose and direction and guidance role…He can probably physically take out cancer from people…When our court systems make decisions and our police…those [decisions] are secondary to god’s justice. They can say “Oh you did this, you did this, you did this”, but they don’t truly know. God knows.

Daniel perceived his god as all-powerful, reflecting that god is inside all of us so we cannot act without his power.

Most participants had a positive perception of god, but a few were more ambivalent about their deity and described him as judgmental and potentially angry. For instance, as an adolescent Alan began to wonder whether he was gay and feared god’s wrath and judgment toward gay people: “I wasn’t really sure that I was gay but I think even if I knew, the fact that I was part of the orthodox church was so scary because gay people go to hell…they will be spit out by god”. He reflected that he simultaneously held two different perceptions of god. On one hand, he was taught that god was loving and compassionate, but on the other hand, he was taught that as a Christian, god judged him more harshly than non-Christians. He recalled fearing god’s omnipotent gaze especially because he was keeping his gay identity a secret from his family and religious community:

> Definitely some pressure, definitely fear because [god] knows when you’ve been sleeping, he knows when you’re awake, he knows when you’ve been bad or good… “God is watching”. That is my mom’s favourite line.
Similar to Alan, Michael recalled that throughout childhood and adolescence his perception of god ranged from a force that was “basically benevolent” to one that was “judgmental, manipulative and potentially very angry”. During adolescence he described becoming interested in what he perceived to be the negative aspects of Christianity:

I was devout, but also kind of fearful really. I was getting into maybe the negative parts of Christianity, the idea of sin and damnation and that kind of thing...the fact that somehow everyone’s soul was cleansed by Christ’s ultimate sacrifice and that by sinning you were kind of letting down Christ and it was really shameful.

Michael perceived god as having certain expectations regarding people’s behaviour and that god could be potentially punishing if those expectations were not met. Before the traumatic event, most participants had a strong positive perception of their god. However, several already perceived god as being both loving and well intentioned and angry and judgmental.

**Relationship with God**

Many participants reported being encouraged to establish a personal relationship with their god from a young age. They described god as a close friend or a parent-figure who sustained them during difficult times. God was sometimes viewed as a close confidant, especially if supportive human relationships were not available. Daniel recalls having a daily, intimate relationship with god where he talked to him about challenges in his life:

I remember when I was a kid, and looking up thinking about your day and asking god to help you on your homework or friendships or all those kinds of things. Communication was open at an early age.

Similarly, Rachel emphasized the realness of her connection with her Jewish god from a very young age:

It was a real connection for me that there’s a god, that not only that there is a god but I was communicating with god and that basically there was a kind of transcendent goodness that I could communicate with and rely on.
Almost all of the participants were raised in religious households and were guided in how to establish a relationship with their deity. For instance, Julia recalled being taught in school the sequence in which she should pray to god. She also came to relate to god as a parent-figure and confidant who was always present and ready to listen:

When you pray the way I was taught in school it’s like you’re talking to him and first you thank him for stuff and then if you’re experiencing troubles, share your troubles with him and pray for better days…When I couldn’t talk to my parents because they were working and stuff it was just nice every night or so to set aside some time to talk in my head or pray to someone who I assumed was listening to me on the other side. So yeah it felt good to just talk about stuff.

For Julia, god became a confidant that doubled as a parent-figure when her parents were not available to listen to her. In addition to being a good friend or guide, several participants described turning to god when they needed small favours, such as doing well on a test at school or winning a basketball game. For Charles, when his requested favour was granted, it heightened his belief in god. When his favours were not granted, he believed that it was simply bad luck and that god may have been otherwise occupied:

I prayed to [god] when I have some really important thing in my life at that time, like a game, an important exam, something like that. And sometimes I got it, I thought “Whoa, god’s really there”. Sometimes I didn’t make it, I thought “Oh bad luck, I don’t know what he’s doing at that time”.

In addition to asking for small favours, some participants asked god for guidance with interpersonal relationships. For example, as a young child Daniel recalled asking god to help him with his relationship with his mother and had faith that god’s interventions would lead to a resolution:

I remember one night when I was in grade three or four, I was really upset with my mom for yelling at me for a whole slew of things and I didn’t think it was fair. And I like prayed to god that she would understand and he would help me and her and…because there’s god listening, it made it more effective I guess for the soul or for the mind.
Most of the difficulties experienced by the participants growing up were relatively minor and some reflected that because their lives before the trauma were relatively good, they rarely felt letdown by god. For instance, Evelyn reflected that as a child she did not have to pray often to god because he blessed her with a smooth childhood:

My childhood was pretty smooth I guess. That’s why I didn’t really have to pray that hard or I guess because I was so blessed to have a loving family and a relatively smooth childhood compared to, I know lots of families have split families and childhood abuse or problems at school. I never really had any of these problems so I guess that’s why I took things for granted. God blessed me so much that I didn’t really have to pray hard.

Evelyn took her relationship with god for granted and saw little reason to question it until her father got into a serious car accident.

While most participants described a close, one-on-one relationship with god, others never established a personal relationship with their deity. They tended to relate to their deity as a more distant, general force who did not necessarily have power over their lives as individuals. For instance, Michael understood god to be:

Kind of like a distant, all-powerful authority figure who had plans for the human race in general and possibility, but not necessarily, anyone in particular.

Several participants described rejecting the expectation that they should relate to their god as they might relate to a real person, such as a friend or a parent. For instance, Aviendha recalled her attempts at praying to god as feeling hollow and without real significance:

I think I tried praying a couple times but it just felt kind of hollow to me. I appreciate talking to someone face-to-face, not just talking to myself in my room, which is what it felt like.

For several participants, a priest or pastor mediated their relationship with their god. Aviendha described being in awe of god’s power and more comfortable when her personal connection with god was mediated by her pastor:
I remember feeling a strangely, I don’t know if reverence is the right word, but feeling like I was too small to really have a personal relationship [with god], that it was better if someone older was kind of the in-between, you know, my pastor. I don’t remember ever really feeling like I could talk to god personally.

Similarly, Alan described his Coptic Orthodox upbringing as impeding his ability to have a personal relationship with god. His connection with god was scripted by the church and mediated by his priest, allowing him little leeway in developing a natural relationship with his deity:

At that point [my relationship with god] was scripted. It was you teach the kids to do the sign of the cross, say their prayers, take care of mommy, take care of daddy and because I didn’t really know myself I couldn’t really have a relationship with god. It was very superficial. Like when I’d go and confess I’d be like “I lied today or I screamed at my mom” or things that weren’t really about myself and how I felt.

Alan described his relationship with god as superficial because his church did not teach him how to develop a more personal connection. Overall, participants’ relationship with their god differed vastly in terms of intensity and emotional closeness. However, they all reported that god was an important figure in their spiritual life and their perceptions of him determined how they related to their religion more generally.

Religion as Community

The religious community was an important element of almost all participants’ religious experience growing up. It was within their community that they learned the teachings of Christianity, posed questions about their faith and were initiated into the rituals of their church. For many participants, their religious community largely mediated their perceptions of god and the Christian doctrine. Although participants varied in their involvement with their community, most expressed feelings of closeness and identification with their church peers. For some, their religious and cultural identities were so inseparable that they viewed their faith identification as an inalterable part of their personal identity. This main theme is comprised of three sub-themes: Religion as Cultural Identity, Participation in Church Community and Family Involvement.
Religion as Cultural Identity

Participants in this study identified as belonging to a variety of cultural groups. Especially for those who identified as first-generation Canadians, church was often a home away from home and a place where their parents connected with other immigrants who shared their experience of living in a foreign country. Julia reflected that her parents were so dedicated to attending church each Sunday because it represented a social opportunity and provided a sense of belonging in Canada:

I’d see some friends at church and that’s one of the main reasons why I would go but otherwise it’s more for my parents because they really enjoyed being part of the community and seeing people...they all come from the same place in the Philippines and just you know talking and stuff and sharing, having some bond in this foreign land.

Alan had a similar experience of growing up with parents who had immigrated to Canada from Egypt and were tightly connected with their cultural community through the Coptic Orthodox church. He described this sect of Christianity as being extremely community-oriented because there is cultural pride attached to it given that it was the first Christian church founded in Alexandria. His whole family was heavily involved in church activities because it provided a physical space where their cultural heritage could be celebrated:

I grew up in the Coptic Orthodox church that is very community centered. Coptic Orthodox is the Egyptian brand of orthodoxy, also being…the first Christian church based in Alexandria founded by St. Mark. So there’s a lot of cultural significance there and there’s a lot of pride that has to do with the culture.

Some ethnic minority participants, such as Alan, felt that their religious identity was inextricably tied to their cultural identity. Alan reflected that he viewed his religious identity as partly a cultural identity and regardless of changes in his religious beliefs he would always identity as Coptic Orthodox:
Coptic Orthodoxy isn’t just a religion. It’s also a culture and it’s also something that comes from a really long line of Egyptians and the Pharos and Christians. Like everything that happens in Egypt is socio-politically charged and religiously charged and culturally charged, always.

For Alan, being Coptic Orthodox is a cultural identity that can never be lost or dismissed. Instead, while he eventually let go of some of his religious beliefs, he chose to maintain aspects of his religion that he regarded as cultural:

I do enjoy when my mom and grandma choose to fast for lent. I’ll go and break the fast with them. There are specific foods that you have to eat and specific times that you eat. That kind of cultural but not so religious component, which is the family component as well. I really like that part. And I choose to keep that part alive.

Similarly, Kira decided to let go of her formal Roman Catholic religious beliefs but decided not to let go of her cultural identity as a Roman Catholic. She grew up within a large Maltese community of which the Roman Catholic faith was a central part. She reflected that she considered her Roman Catholic identity to be part of her heritage and still identified as Roman Catholic on the census even though she no longer adhered to their doctrine. She commented that her faith was so engrained in her and her family that it was impossible to separate her religious identity from her personal and cultural identity, and that was partly why it was so traumatic to lose her faith:

I think that’s true for a lot of major religions, like Judaism and Islam, is that you know it’s not just like a separate, it’s totally incorporated into your life and it’s really your views on life.

When Kira eventually lost her faith, she felt that a core part of her identity was missing and worked to construct a new personal identity without the structure of her religious and cultural heritage. Participants identified as belonging to a variety of cultural groups and some viewed their cultural identity as inseparable from their religious identity. When a several participants weakened their faith after trauma, they were forced to re-negotiate how they related to their
cultural identities without their religious beliefs, resulting in them redefining their personal identities.

*Participation in Church Community*

Almost all participants reported participating in some church activities, such as Sunday school, outreach programs, and fieldtrips. For many, the church activities were the part of religion that captured their interest and kept them involved in their faith over many years.

Michael recalled being a young boy and enjoying the social activities at his church:

The Christmas pageant I liked a lot. For whatever reason I did a lot of crayon drawings of nativity scenes when I was a kid. I guess the idea of baby Jesus was kind of like the idea of Muppet babies; it’s something small children can relate to more than some of the other stuff.

Michael was initially drawn to church because of activities that made the religious teachings relatable to younger people. Aviendha was introduced to Christianity at the age of fourteen by her father and was initially skeptical of religion. However, she recalled that it was the church activities and the bonds forged with peers at church that made her more open to the teachings of Christianity:

I did grow to enjoy the people’s company and…we would have regular church sessions, maybe an hour, and then we’d spilt up so me and my sister would go with the younger kids. I did identify with them and I really liked talking with them, so I think I got interested in religion through the relationships first and the activities and then I was willing to listen to the message but the message didn’t draw me in at first. I was a bit resistant about it.

Not only did Aviendha enjoy the social activities, but she described the physical configuration of her church as welcoming: her church was held in an elementary school every Sunday and everyone had to sit on plastic chairs. She remembered appreciating the fact that everyone was physically on the same level in the plastic chairs because it felt less hierarchical and she was better able to relate to her pastor and other members of the congregation.
Several participants described being heavily involved in the social component of church to the extent that their whole week was structured around their religious community. Alan recalled regularly attending conventions with other churches where a bishop would be brought in to lecture on Christianity. He also mentored younger children into the church, and attended Sunday school, small discussion groups and Christmas trips:

My weekends would be centered and focused around participating in church and community activities. So for example, in elementary school I would go to church on Saturdays and they’d have a gym and we’d go and play and they’d have a topic of discussion and we’d have Saturday evening prayers. And then Sunday there would be mass and then Sunday school and then community bonding, sharing in the cafeteria and eating together and then whatever activities.

Daniel recalled being heavily involved in evangelical outreach work through his church. He participated in “fellowship”, a faith-based social group that reached out to non-believers who might find church too structured. He remarked that participating in his church activities gave him a spiritual high while in university, during which he lived in a “Christian bubble” with all his friends identifying as Christian. He reflected that his Christian community kept him committed to his faith during difficult times because it was his entire social world:

Although sometimes you’re like oh man, following Jesus is pretty rough and tough. But my community was Christian people and so to fully pull away was more just like take a break and not go to church for a week or something like that. It was never very serious and I brought Christianity into all facets of my life really from the people I hung out with to even at work and things like that.

Although not all of the participants were as involved in their church community as Daniel, most described their church community as a positive experience that provided a social and relatable means of participating in their faith.

*Family Involvement*

The church community provided a space where participants forged social connections and maintained their commitment to their faith. However, for some participants their immediate and
extended families were equally as important in contributing to a sense of religious community and identity. Kira recalled that as a member of her family she was constantly immersed in faith:

    [My faith] was really strong growing up. I come from a very Catholic family so every Sunday we were in church. Constant religion references, we had a letter of the Pope on our wall. My extended family was also extremely spiritual…and they went to church every day…It was almost a constant daily thing.

Kira reflected that at one point in her young life she considered becoming a nun because several of her family members were nuns and she had a cousin who was attempting to become a priest. Her family’s involvement in religion created an environment where heavy involvement in the church was normal and expected.

Extended family members first introduced several of the participants to religion and the authority of family members lent weight to the participants’ decision to become Christian. Although Michael’s parents were nominally religious, he was first officially taken to church and introduced to his faith by his aunt. Likewise, Charles recalled that his uncle first introduced him to Christianity while vacationing with him over the summer. Charles became Christian largely because of the authority of his uncle to tell him what to believe:

    I first started believing in Christianity because of my uncle…At first I knew nothing about religion and I didn’t believe in any religion, but I lived with my uncle for a while during one summer vacation in Singapore and he made me believe in Christianity. I was a little boy at that time so I don’t know anything about Christianity or any stories or histories about it so I just believe it and he just made me believe it.

At fourteen years old, Aviendha was initially skeptical of religion and her father’s motivations for being religious. However, she described her father framing religion as a mystery and her father’s interest encouraged her to give religion a chance:

    It was very important to [my father] that we really tried to engage with it and he framed it as this weird mystery to me: why are these people happier? He was kind of a detective of it and trying to get to the bottom of why he’d noticed these things in their lives and so I really took his lead on it I think.
Family involvement in religion was an important element of most of the participants’ experiences because their families defined the norms and expectations regarding their religious beliefs and practices.

Benefits of Religion

Although some participants eventually lost their faith, many emphasized that they had benefitted from their religious upbringing. Several reflected that their religious beliefs provided them with good values and a moral framework. In the words of Alan: “There are very good values in Christianity and the family values and it’s made me into the man that I am today”. Although Alan had personally experienced the anti-homosexuality prejudice built into his church dogma, he separated the exclusive beliefs of his specific church from the broader teachings of Christianity that encouraged family unity and moral behaviour. Alan reflected that aspects of his religious upbringing, such as Christianity’s emphasis on family cohesion, were beneficial to his personal development.

Other participants also commented that the moral code embedded in Christianity served as a system of ethics they adhered to even after they lost their faith. For example, Michael had a complicated relationship with religion growing up and experienced various levels of devotion. However, he reflected that even during times when he was not committed to religion, he maintained a system of ethics that was largely based upon Christianity. Similarly, Julia asserted that after she weakened her faith, she decided to maintain some of the moral and ethical tenants associated with Christianity:

I do believe in some of the tenants, like some of the ten commandments at least, like don’t kill, don’t steal stuff like that, and being pious and stuff like that…and also…the golden rule thing where it’s “Do unto other as you would want done unto you”. It just really makes sense.
Julia opted to keep aspects of Christianity that continued to resonate with her even after she lost her religion. Likewise, Cynthia attended a progressive church and believed that she had a more “objective” view of religion because her parents were educated and free-thinkers, and because she was aware of religious diversity from an early age. Although Cynthia was opposed to some stances taken by the church, particularly with respect to homosexuality and the status of women, she reflected that the basic teachings of Christianity were beneficial in helping her establish a sense of spirituality and learn how to live a healthy life:

I understood the fundamental concepts of Christianity and trying to be loving of people and thinking…not just about the immediate material needs but more…thinking about your long-term inner life, your spiritual life. I think there are good mental health practices within religion…of reflecting on things and getting support from a mostly friendly environment, people supporting each other and…helping people through difficulties in their lives.

Cynthia acknowledged that Christianity has good mental health practices built into it, such as seeking social support and engaging in self-reflective practices that are separate from the oppressive practices found in some church institutions.

Aviendha recalled that she has always been a skeptical person but committed to Christianity as an adolescent because it appeared to offer peace and happiness that was elusive in her life at the time. She hoped that religion might guide her toward a happier life: “[Religion represented] an avenue to happiness, and that it was well paved and if you just did this then everything would be okay”. The decision to become religious and believe in god represented a path toward relinquishing some of her need for control:

I remember feeling a little sense of relief because as I said I really like control and I couldn’t really exert it on my life during that time and that was hard for me. And it was a sense of relief knowing that maybe someone else has everything under control for you, that they are steering the wheel as they would say and that things would turn out well if I was a good person.
During a confusing adolescence, Christianity offered a framework for how to live her life in a way that would bring her happiness and peace. Aviendha observed that members of her church community who had bought into religion appeared peaceful and kind:

I guess in this weird way I was kind of substituting god for this crappy dad that I had at the time. Kind of like if my dad can’t really teach me how to be a good person then maybe god could, maybe this community could. They seemed to be all really sincere, genuine, kind people. I really wanted to emulate that...when a bunch of church people get together they’re just very welcoming and very sweet and kind and wanting to help. And I wasn’t getting that from my family at the time so I felt that god could give me those things.

As a relative latecomer to religion, Aviendha was drawn to many of the elements of religion that other participants reflected had benefitted them growing up. Some participants eventually decided to discard the dogma of their church but most continued to embrace the larger messages in Christianity related to ethical living, authenticity and generosity. Furthermore, many of the participants reflected that the Christian emphasis on community, family and seeking support within relationships was beneficial to their mental health and well-being.

Religious Questioning

While acknowledging the positive aspects of religion, a number of participants also recalled questioning elements of their religion. Some became interested in religious diversity, leading them to wonder whether Christianity was the only path toward salvation, while others became more critical of the institution of religion and the dogma of their faith.

Intellectual Questioning and Curiosity

Several participants described beginning to explore other faiths during their adolescence, which at times resulted in questioning Christianity. For instance, Julia recalled that growing up she was never exposed to other faith traditions. She was first introduced to religious diversity in her high school World Religions course and at her part-time job where she met people from
different religious and cultural backgrounds. Although it did not lead to her doubting her faith, it provoked a sense of curiosity and questions about whether Christianity was the one true religion:

We learned about evolution and stuff in science, which I found it weird because it’s in a Catholic school, but I found it really one of the most interesting units…so I think that was partly why I started to doubt stuff. But also learning world religions as well, and learning about the different beliefs that each religion had…I didn’t question I should convert or whatever but it just made me question so what’s the real story? Did Jesus really perform these miracles? Did the prophets ever exist?

Julia reflected that as an adolescent she enjoyed expanding her mind and learning about different systems of knowing. Alan also became curious about other systems of faith but his desire to explore was fueled by a sense that his church dogma was overly restrictive and unable to satisfy his thirst for knowledge and understanding. He recalled feeling like the only young person at his Coptic Orthodox church that was asking deeper questions about Christian teachings:

I was one of the people in Sunday school who would always be there very keen to ask questions and…a lot of the time the answers I got were not…good enough. It was kind of like “Oh well that’s because you just have to have faith or that’s because it says so in the bible”…I would challenge people to tell me and give me answers and I would not be satisfied with the answers I got which means I had to look somewhere else. And looking somewhere else deviates from the word orthodoxy...You can’t look anywhere else because there is nothing else.

Alan felt restricted by his faith and began to explore religious diversity through other avenues. He recounted an instance in late high school when he became interested in participating in humanitarian work outside the context of his faith’s missionary work. His parents strongly encouraged him to travel to Africa to live with a bishop and preach about the bible. Instead, he managed to go on a school fieldtrip to Latin America where he volunteered with projects established by secular non-governmental organizations. He loved the experience because he had the opportunity to explore diverse religious sites outside the context of his church community:

I found myself exploring churches and grottos and monasteries…in Nicaragua when I was sixteen and that was fantastic but it wasn’t a missionary trip. And I feel like that
was the first point where I was like I’m going to do something for myself and I don’t care, I’m going to pay for it myself.

Like Alan, Michael became curious about religious possibilities and described going through a phase of intellectual questioning where he was open to belief in god but not fully committed to Christianity. He did a lot of reading about different people’s approach to religion with the intention of expanding his horizons and exploring his beliefs:

When I started reading more seriously I realized that there were quite a few people who were a lot smarter than me, who thought about these things more deeply than I have who nonetheless do believe in some kind of god. So at that point, I think I was more in a sort of listening phase. I guess I was looking for answers to life questions to a certain extent and also just trying to broaden my horizons at the same time.

Michael developed an intellectual interest in how different societies made sense of the world through their religious beliefs, which he explored more deeply in university theology classes. He recalled enjoying the classes because he found them “Kind of weird and almost amusing, the different ways, different places at different times that people have tried to make sense of the world. But also I was just into the music and architecture and literature more than anything really”. Alan also became interested in religious diversity through post-secondary classes in university where he majored in religion and psychology:

I feel like [religion and psychology] were two fields that really helped me solidify my beliefs or explore my beliefs. I got to study things like ritual and ceremonies and death and aging and sexuality within the context of comparative religions, which was really refreshing because I wasn’t even allowed to visit a mosque as a kid.

Like Alan, a number of participants reported feeling restricted intellectually by their faith community and responding by exploring ideas and religions outside of those taught within their church. These early explorations helped participants begin to form their personal system of beliefs and set the stage for changes in their religious orientation after their traumatic experience.

_Critique of the Religious Institution_
While some participants simply questioned their religious beliefs in the context of intellectual curiosity, other participants reported directly critiquing the dogma of their church institution. Kira recalled:

Even from my earlier teens I was starting to be like the dogma of Roman Catholicism is a bit much. I mean oh great we’re cannibals, actually eating the blood of Christ and I remember at one of my catechism classes someone said that and I’m like “No, we don’t believe that” and the teacher’s like “Well, yeah we do” and I’m like “What?”

After her fiancé left her, Kira initially sought solace in her church and attempted to re-affirm her faith. However, when she attended mass again, she became aware of the conflict between her personal beliefs and the dogma of the Roman Catholic church. Kira’s sister is gay and Kira began to question whether she could support an institution that was against homosexuality.

Furthermore, she described attending a church service soon after attempting to re-affirm her faith that elicited anger at the institution of the church:

The priest was celebrating the fact that another priest that was there was going off to Africa to be a missionary. And the priest was going “Let us pray that he will convert all these people” and to me that’s genocide, that’s like a cultural genocide and I’m like, to me this is just not right what’s going on. And so I remember sitting there and just almost spewing with this is not right.

Kira had criticisms of the church as a young teenager that became more deeply entrenched after she experienced several traumatic events.

Many participants reported separating their critique of the church institution and dogma from their spirituality and personal connection with their higher power. For instance, Cynthia recalled always being skeptical of the Christian church as an institution. She described being more politically aware than most people at her church, having an above average knowledge of different religions and approaching religious issues from multiple perspectives. For example, she was critical of the church institution with respect to its history of exclusion and oppression:
I think the main thing I tried to get from the [church] experience was like fundamental concepts of spirituality and stuff. But...there were certain things that were patriarchal and also...I felt that they were kind of against homosexuality, like it was kind narrow-minded. I also knew the whole history of Christianity in terms of colonization and stuff so like I knew how the abuse of...power and how it was connected to abusive institutions and so on, like for instance residential schools in Canada.

Cynthia described separating the broader teachings of spirituality from the practices and dogma of the church institution. Overall, many participants described questioning their faith in adolescence, resulting in exploration of their identities and personal beliefs. Conclusions they reached as adolescents informed later decisions regarding their religious identification post-trauma.

**Traumatic Disruption of Worldview**

In the aftermath of the traumatic event, all participants expressed confusion about their feelings, beliefs and futures. People’s worldview is often tightly intertwined with their religious and spiritual beliefs and the participants described entering a period of doubt and reflection during which they were forced to reconsider previously held beliefs and open their minds to new and different understandings of the world. Five main themes constitute this core theme: Grief, Shattering of Beliefs, Negative Feelings toward God, Seeking Solace in Religion and Exploration of Other Worldviews. The themes and sub-themes that comprise the core theme, Traumatic Disruption of Worldview, will be explored in turn below.

**Grief**

Grief was common to almost all of the participants’ experience in the immediate aftermath of their trauma. Participants expressed confusion about their future and deep lows during which their intense emotions clouded their ability to cognitively make sense of the traumatic event. Many described painful feelings of loneliness and loss while for others feelings
of fear and confusion dominated. For most of the participants, grief seemed to be a necessary first step in the long process of healing from their trauma. This main theme is comprised of two sub-themes: Loneliness and Depression, and Fear and Confusion.

*Loneliness and Depression*

Every participant described some depression and loneliness after their trauma. However, for some, these feelings ran deep and resulted in a sense of disconnection from their social world. After his friends moved away and his grandmother and mother passed away in quick succession, Michael recalled: “I just felt really adrift then ultimately. Nothing mattered. There was really nothing to struggle for so what’s the point of struggling at all.” While Michael’s grief manifested as a sense of meaninglessness, other participants reported a deep sadness that they had never experienced before. Immediately after his wife asked for a divorce, Daniel recalled:

> The day that it happened, I was crying for a really long and I just had to deal with the paper work and stuff like that and having to go find a lawyer and the shock and stuff like that. And then afterwards…I just cried for I don’t know, two to three hours. And that’s not typical of me. I usually can reason things out.

As part of their grief, many of the participants described feeling misunderstood and unable to relate to other people’s experiences. For example, after the suicide of her friend Aviendha turned to her father and pastor for support. However, she felt like her father did not validate her pain and her pastor was unable to understand the depth of her loss:

> I think I’d told my dad [about the suicide] and he went and told my pastor and I remember just sitting on the side of the room just kind of dejected and upset. My pastor came over and he tried to talk with me but I wasn’t engaged, I didn’t really care what he had to say. He said something like “Oh everything happens for a reason” but it just sounded like a canned response.

Aviendha experienced the adult figures that were supposed to care for her as being ineffective at helping her process her experience. For some participants, the sense of disconnection lasted for many years and resulted in a more pervasive sense of alienation. Michael received treatment for
depression in the years after his mother passed away. While he found it helpful in allowing him to express his grief, he ultimately found that the treatment failed to stick because he had a hard time connecting with other people in his group therapy. After his experiences of loss, he found it increasingly difficult to connect with people and described a profound sense of alienation:

Everyone’s different and ultimately unknowable. It’s not like I’m particularly sensitive to other people’s problems, like I will go through the motions of listening and trying to be sympathetic but knowing how it feels from both sides of that, it sometimes feels kind of futile so you might as well just keep [your feelings] to yourself…There’s really as much of a lack of shared experience I think as a lack of shared vocabulary which keeps people from really understanding each other.

Although Michael noted that the intense feelings of loneliness have subsided since his losses, he has noticed that he no longer has the same emotional range: he is unable to experience sadness or joy to the extent that he could before the traumas.

Several participants described their journey through grief as very personal and lonely. Although she had support from a therapist and meditation teachers, Kira ultimately described her recovery and loss of Catholic faith as an extremely “personal journey” because she was alone in trying different treatments and understanding what her losses meant for her life: “It’s been a very personal journey and it’s been very much me searching it out and finding my own path”. Alan also described feeling largely alone in his path toward recovery: “It was really honestly…pretty independent for me… I didn’t have any one person to lean on”. Although Alan reported having friends during this period in his life, he ultimately felt alone in making sense of his trauma and religious beliefs.

In addition to feelings of sadness and disconnection, several participants spoke about a lack of direction and motivation. After his fiancée left him, Charles described entering into a period of depression and losing his life direction:
I didn’t know what to do, lost my faith and direction because I worked really hard in university…so that I can have enough money to raise her and me, to build a small family of our own. And just all of a sudden all of my efforts just seemed vain, didn’t pay off and really didn’t know what I was going to do at that time. I felt very depressed, I lost my mind on everything. I just stayed in my room at home for several weeks thinking about it, couldn’t really get out of it. It just hurt.

Charles had invested in the idea of a future with his fiancée and then lost all direction for his life when they broke up. Participants often described not being able to move forward with their lives until they had properly grieved and made sense of their trauma.

Several participants reflected that the trauma impacted their core sense of identity, and the loss of their identity was almost traumatic in and of itself. When Michael lost his mother, he reflected that because he was adopted and had a small family, he was now essentially disconnected from his family and his early life:

In a way [my mother’s death] was worse because at that point she was really, well aside from a few other people in my family, she was really the only person that has known me all my life. So it was like when you lose connection with someone as close as that then for all intents and purposes half your life has only existed in your mind.

Michael experienced his childhood as not being anchored in anything concrete apart from his own mind. Kira also described the trauma and the loss of her Catholic faith as disrupting her sense of identity because her religion was central to who she was as a person:

Here I am, everything is falling apart…I have literally been left topsy turvy with nothing and suddenly the faith that has been so engrained in me is also losing its, you know what I mean, and so that together is devastating…You’ve basically lost yourself in a lot of ways because the one thing you relied on and thought would always be there is now gone…I just remember feeling so lost…there’s this sense of not only have I lost things externally but internally I’m now not the same.

Kira described the loss of her faith as even more devastating than her other traumas because it was a deeply entrenched part of her identity. In addition to grieving her trauma, she was also forced to grieve the loss of her faith and sense of self. Each participant described feeling lonely and/or depressed in the aftermath of their trauma. Some felt disconnected from significant people
in their lives, while others felt directionless and apathetic about their future. For all participants, these emotions seemed to be a necessary part of the grief process.

**Fear and Confusion**

While loneliness and depression were described by all of the participants, some also recounted strong feelings of fear and confusion. Evelyn recalled feeling terrified when she heard that her father had gotten into a car accident. She described the unknown as the hardest part of the accident to deal with emotionally:

> It was just the unknown that was the scariest thing…After we knew, my mother brought us all to the hospital right away where he stayed. And when we got to the hospital we were weeping, we were just scared and fearful about what’s going to be happening.

For Evelyn, the trauma was a reminder that bad things can randomly happen and that she had little control over events in her life. Sarah also recalled feeling utterly terrified after she was sexually assaulted, resulting in what she termed a “mental breakdown”. She was scared that the trauma would destroy her ability to lead a happy and fulfilling life. Sarah was the only participant who was officially diagnosed with PTSD and she feared that she would suffer from mental health problems for the rest of her life and never be able to develop a career. Furthermore, she worried that if this event had happened to her, other horrible things might also happen in the future:

> I was fearful in some way because it was like if this happened what else is going to happen. It’s like am I going to have a life? Am I going to get a degree? Am I going to be anything or am I going to be this big burden on my parents for the rest of my life and this embarrassment of an adult who lives in the basement and mommy and daddy need to take to the doctors.

Sarah expressed concerns about her future, but also about her reputation in her community. She feared that others would judge her for taking time off from university to resolve her mental health problems and that she would never again be viewed as a successful, independent adult.
Several participants reported experiencing fear related to their relationship with their god.

Alan had been told since he was young that gay people would go to hell and bring destruction to their families, and he described feeling scared that god would judge him for his sexual orientation:

I was terrified because every night was like if I die tonight, I wake up in the morning dead but I will be in hell or I will be judged and I didn’t have enough time to repent or I didn’t have enough time to confess.

Alan commented that to this day his mother believes that his homosexuality will bring destruction to their family and she regularly likens his “sin” to the sin of murder. Although Alan no longer fears god’s wrath, his mother’s words continue to leave him unsettled. Like Alan, Daniel also feared judgment from god and his religious community. One of Daniel’s deepest regrets regarding the divorce was the fact that divorce is disapproved of within his church:

I really questioned the divorce and asked people “Does god think lesser of me for what I did, what I have gone through?”…That part of it really hurt me, that I was maybe further from god because of the situation.

Daniel feared that his relationship with god would be more distant because he had dissatisfied god by getting divorced. Moreover, he feared that his church community might judge him and view him differently. This resulted in him not immediately returning to his home church after the divorce and instead seeking refuge in other church communities where he was relatively anonymous. Rachel’s experience of trauma was somewhat different from that of other participants because her traumatic experience, emotional abuse from her mother, endured over many years. However, she described similar emotions including confusion, alienation and anxiety “I experienced being alienated, being confused, and alienated from my parents”. Unfortunately, Rachel’s emotional abuse was never externally validated by others, resulting in confusion and a sense of alienation from her parents. In sum, many participants described experiences of fear and
confusion resulting from their traumatic event, which were accompanied by doubts about deeply held beliefs about the world.

*Shattering of Beliefs*

In the aftermath of the trauma, many participants reported feeling confused about their beliefs. Some described how the beliefs that they used to hold so tight suddenly became meaningless. Other participants reported beginning to question assumptions they had always held about the world. Often these questions took on religious dimensions and participants questioned god’s role in their lives or found that the church teachings suddenly felt hollow or even amoral. This main theme is comprised of two sub-themes: Meaninglessness of Religious Beliefs and Meaninglessness of Church.

*Meaninglessness of Religious Beliefs*

Many participants described a sense of meaninglessness that accompanied their grief after the trauma. Suddenly their religious beliefs did not hold the same resonance. Michael reflected that although he had been open to the possibility of god before his experiences of loss, after his grandmother passed away he no longer cared enough to even wonder whether there was a god:

> It’s kind of like I was on the fence [about religion] all those years and then the fence just fell down…the questions I was asking, for a while they just didn’t seem to matter at all.

He further expressed feeling like the universe and everything religion represented was meaningless. Prior to his losses, he believed that the world was ultimately a good place and that the human race was progressing in a meaningful way. After his losses, he described his perception of the world very differently “The universe is basically this giant meaningless bulldozer which doesn’t have any purpose but it ends up completely destroying everything around you eventually”.
For Michael, his traumas resulted in him no longer believing that the world is meaningful and good, and that he is a part of a larger network of people working toward a better society:

I still think that society can be improved, sort of built upon. But at the same time I still do feel kind of alone and no longer part of some kind of multigenerational human project, which is trying to make things better.

For many of the participants, the trauma led to a questioning or immediate rejection of their religious beliefs because they felt there was no point in believing in god if he could not prevent the traumatic event from occurring. After Julia’s father passed away, the act of going to church and investing in her religion seemed pointless because her religious beliefs failed to protect her father from cancer:

When I heard the news [of my father’s death] I felt weird cause I couldn’t cry…and then a few days after it just started to hit me and I just didn’t know anymore. Like my mom would be like “Let’s go to church” or whatever and so I did and I just realized like what’s the point in going if it’s not going to bring [my father] back. I mean he’s not here anymore, so what can I do?

Likewise, Charles felt that god had failed him when his fiancée decided to return to her hometown, which caused him to doubt his belief in Christianity:

I pray to god for not letting [my fiancée] leave me. God failed. So I started to doubt the whole thing. [Christianity] is not something that I chose to believe the first time, so I doubted, questioned everything in my life…[god was] not a help when I needed him. That’s why I started questioning.

Charles felt letdown by his god, leading him to question his Christian beliefs and remember that he had not chosen his Christian beliefs, rather they had been dictated to him by his uncle.

Aviendha had invested in religion and felt betrayed when it did not pay off the way that she had hoped. She had dared to believe that religion may provide a larger system of justice beyond that of humans but with the suicide of her friend she realized that bad things can happen for no reason, leading her to re-think her core beliefs about the world:
I remember I was in church and I just wasn’t engaged, I just didn’t care. I thought what’s the point. I kind of thought god was superman coming in to save everything and make everything better and it was just felt like a slap in the face. That’s not true, life is still uncontrollable and bad things happen for no reason sometimes.

Like many participants, Aviendha realized that her belief in god could not protect her from injustice and suffering, leading her to re-think her basic assumptions about the world.

*Meaninglessness of Church*

Some participants described the trauma affecting how they related to their church community, with the rituals and dogma of the church suddenly feeling meaningless and hollow. Kira described seeking comfort in her church community after her fiancé left her but instead found that she could no longer connect with her Roman Catholic mass:

I was looking for that support, I was looking again for that belonging and that assistance. I kind of thought okay this would be a good place to go back to and the mass felt very hollow.

Aviendha also reflected that after her friend’s suicide, church rituals lost their sacredness:

I would go through the motions [at church]. And I remember we were confirmed and I feeling that it was a very hollow experience for me, that I was just kind of dragged there…I was working really hard at the actual words I was going to say but it thought the act was silly because I was just standing in a bathtub and I had a microphone and I was just kind of like “What are we doing here?” It was kind of silly.

After Aviendha began to question her belief in god, the church service lost its meaning and became an empty experience. Michael also described experiencing Christian rituals around death and mourning as hollow after the deaths of his mother and grandmother. He felt that his extended family failed to do justice to their Christian heritage when they organized the funeral for his grandmother and chose not to invite him:

When someone close to you dies and instead of being mourned through a sacrament that your family has inherited, they’re just cremated because it’s convenient and then someone, you’re not even there, and someone recites some lousy poem and then they dump them into the Pacific Ocean. Yeah, it’s not good.
Michael’s anger about the lack of a dignified funeral for his grandmother also called into question his beliefs about the afterlife. He reflected that he always wanted to believe that there was something after death, but the finality associated with the cremation process highlighted the reality of what happens when people die:

There’s something about cremation. When I was staying with my friend and his wife…they actually live next door to this cemetery, which has a crematorium attached to it. And we went there one day to lay flowers on his father’s grave and they were cremating someone but there was some kind of accident and all this incredibly thin, black smoke started belching out and it’s not supposed to do that supposedly…It was like a concrete expression of what the end looks like and what it means.

Michael’s perception of his grandmother’s funeral as tacky and meaningless resulted in him questioning his belief in an afterlife and wondering why the religious traditions that provide dignity during important rites of passage are no longer important and meaningful in our society.

For some participants, their trauma was so tied to the beliefs and behaviours of their religious community that their view of their church was heavily affected. After a church minister assaulted her, Cynthia was uncomfortable walking past churches that reminded her of the incident. Her assault made the systemic oppression she had always been aware of within the church institution more personal and she questioned whether the church as an institution still held meaning for her:

I think after the assault, when I was assaulted by the minister of a church, I wouldn’t like to walk by a church. It just like made me shudder because it just reminded me of the whole system. Because it wasn’t just an assault but basically the organization, they dismissed my claims…they handled it in a demeaning way.

Cynthia’s experience of the assault was similar to Alan’s experience of being gay in the Coptic Orthodox community: they both felt unfairly prosecuted by the institution of the church. In both cases, it led them to re-think their relationship with institutionalized religion but did not
significantly diminish their religious and spiritual beliefs. Like Cynthia, Alan described no longer connecting with his church community after he came out as gay:

> Christians in the church were like “No, homosexuality is wrong and that’s just the way it is.” And so when they go and have their rituals together and have their mass together, there’s the community that I don’t feel part of. And they’ll do things like go on protests against gay marriage. And I can’t do that, it’s hypocritical. So I can’t mediate between the two, I had to cut [the church] off.

Alan’s church doctrine no longer resonated with him after he came out as gay because it directly contradicted his identity as a Christian gay man, as well as his religious beliefs about acceptance and love. For many participants, their traumatic experience altered how they related to their religious institution. The teachings and rituals of their church felt meaningless and they began to seek meaning elsewhere.

**Negative Feelings toward God**

Almost all participants described a range of negative feelings toward their god after the traumatic event, including anger, frustration, and loss of trust. Particularly for those participants who had a personal relationship with their deity, the traumatic event elicited a sense of betrayal and abandonment. They had relied on their god to protect them during difficult times and felt abandoned after the trauma, leading some to consider whether their god was vindictive and vengeful rather than loving and generous. Two sub-themes comprise this main theme: Anger at God and Loss of Trust in God.

**Anger at God**

Almost all of the participants who reported a personal relationship with their god felt angry with their deity in the immediate aftermath of the trauma. Kira, who experienced multiple traumas over the course of a few years, vividly described overwhelming feelings of betrayal and spite:
As time went on and things didn’t improve, they got worse, that’s when it was like, okay what the f***. And that’s when it started feeling like more of a betrayal… because it just kept happening. And the number of times, and that’s when I started being like “Okay, what are you laughing?” And I really had that impression of god laughing…like doing it almost to be spiteful.

Kira had a close and secure relationship with god growing up and after the traumas she felt like her biggest supporter had abandoned her at a time when she needed him most. While at first she felt betrayed and abandoned, as her difficulties continued, she began to wonder whether god might be trying to sabotage her. She imagined god laughing at her while she struggled and used another evocative image of climbing out of a pit to describe her perception of her deity’s purposeful vindictiveness toward her:

I spent several years trying to come back from [the traumas] and use god for it and I’d been trying to do all these different things. And every time, I remember describing it to one therapist, I kept feeling like I was climbing out of a pit and every time I got close to the edge of the top of the pit I felt like [god’s] boot was coming and pushing me back down.

Although her emotions make sense in the context of her long-term personal connection with god, Kira described feeling ashamed of her view of god as vindictive and punishing. She reported that rationally she understood that god did not owe her anything and could not possibly answer all of her prayers. Moreover, given her Catholic upbringing, she reported believing that her anger toward god was a betrayal of her faith. When Kira finally admitted to a therapist her shame around perceiving god as vindictive, she was able to move forward and begin to honestly examine and re-conceptualize her relationship with her god.

Several participants described their anger at god as stemming from their perception of him as irrational and manipulative. After Alan came out as gay, he began to view his god as a vindictive supernatural being that manipulated his life for the fun of it:

The earth is the throne of god. So I imagine this child…playing and being like here’s what happens when you f*** s*** up in the world and let’s make this Coptic kid gay
and see what happens. Like I’m on a reality T.V. show…It felt unfair that I was dealt the cards that I couldn’t deal with. Why would god make a Coptic person gay? Make the people who are gay the people who have parents who can handle it. My parents can’t handle it or understand it.

Alan had a perception of god having complete control over the course of his life and taking pleasure in watching him suffer. He was unable to rationalize his god’s actions so that it fit with his prior view of him as benevolent and loving. Sarah was also unable to rationalize the actions of her god. While Sarah was open to the possibility that her god may have been attempting to teach her a lesson, she could not comprehend why a loving, rational god would let a young woman be sexually assaulted:

Like if god is trying to teach me something, why is this a lesson for someone, let alone a young girl? What do I need to learn from this?...Why couldn’t god just allow me to find somebody at that time who was normal, we’d date, it wouldn’t work out because things don’t work out when you’re a teenager and that’s all it would have been.

Sarah believed that a rational god would have sent her a less terrifying trauma if he wanted to teach her a lesson about dating. Like Alan, she developed an image of a child-like god making flippant decisions about her life that caused her pain and suffering:

I view [god] as someone who sits up in the sky with little dice and says “Okay, I want to make this decision. I’m going to flip a coin and see how to do it”. Almost like a not well thought out teenager or a sixteen year old with good intentions but the delivery sucks.

Several participants, while sometimes admitting that it was irrational, felt angry that there was no “pay out” in being religious. They reflected that they implicitly believed that god provided justice and if they led a moral life, god would reward them by protecting them from harm. For example, Sarah felt angry with god because he failed to make good on their implicit contract: she did her best to be a good Christian but god had not fulfilled his duty in protecting her from suffering. In the words of Sarah:
I had no faith in god, I had no faith in religion because it’s like religion teaches you to be good, religion teaches you to care about others…you’re taught to be generous, you’re taught be kind and [god] just [sends this trauma] to you. So I sort of felt like why do I want to try to be religious? Why am I trying to please somebody who didn’t help me?

Sarah decided to let go of her faith because she found that there was no personal benefit in believing in god. She had been taught to be kind to others but she felt that god failed to demonstrate kind actions when he sent her the sexual assault.

For many participants, the traumatic event precipitated anger at god and the decision to abandon their belief in an all-controlling, benevolent deity. However, it is important to note that all the participants who eventually strengthened their faith continued to believe in god. They described some anger, but primarily a questioning of why god sent the trauma. For instance, after Evelyn’s father got into a car accident she initially prayed to god:

> It wasn’t totally blaming [god] but of course as a human we think “God why is this happening? What did we do to deserve such a great punishment?” and like “What are you trying to teach us?”.

Evelyn reflected that her life had been very smooth up until her father’s accident so she was not angry with god, rather she simply tried to understand why god would have sent the event. Daniel recounted having a similar experience. He did not blame god or abandon his belief in god after the trauma. Although he at times felt some anger toward god, he never turned his back on his faith: “I was angry at god at times, like ‘How did you let this happen? Why did you choose me?’.

But I know that god tests me so I never turned my back on him”. Daniel reflected that his religiosity has matured over the years and allows him to trust in his relationship with god even when faced with challenging situations:

There are different levels of Christian maturity, I would say for myself. Maybe when I was younger, when something didn’t go my way, I would question god, but when I am now older, it’s just life. When life hits you, you know it’s coming from god and it might not be easy going such as the traumatic event but you in a weird way just go
“Okay god, it’s not easy, you’re all powerful, you know what’s going on, I trust in you”.

All of the participants who eventually reported a strengthening of their faith went through a period of questioning god and even feeling angry with god. However, they continued to trust that god would help them find a way through their pain.

Loss of Trust in God

Many of the participants with a personal relationship with their god described losing trust in him after the trauma. For instance, Charles also reported losing trust in his god after his fiancée left him. He explained that when he prayed to god about his fiancée, he prayed harder than he had ever prayed before but still god did not answer his prayers:

When I was praying for a [sports] match, I thought you better let me win but if I lose it’s not a big deal, it’s just a game. But when I prayed for the relationship it’s something I have to make 100% sure. If I lose it, I lose not everything but a big part of my life. It’s like part of my body is cut off.

When Charles’ fiancée left him he decided that he could not trust god to help when he needed him most: “I lost my fiancée and at the time I put a lot of stock in [god] and he didn’t show up so I decided not to put stock in him anymore”. He reflected that he was not angry with god for betraying his trust: he recognized that it was not god’s responsibility to care for him and that people can not ask too much from god. However, the incident resulted in Charles ceasing to invest trust in god and losing his faith in Christianity.

Several participants reported that their loss of trust in god negatively impacted their trust in human relationships. Julia reflected that she had invested faith in god’s power to save her father from cancer. When her father died, she quickly decided that she could no longer trust a higher power to fulfill her wishes and that she needed to place more trust in herself. She reported that her loss of trust in god had both positive and negative effects on her life. She learned to put more
trust in herself, leading to a greater sense of independence and personal achievement. However, Julia also had greater difficulty trusting in interpersonal relationships:

I’ve become more independent but I also have very little trust in other people too. I have trust issues…I trust myself but after trusting god for a while and being disappointed I found it really hard to find people to trust…So I usually have to know a person for a really, really long time and I just don’t trust people I meet right away.

Feelings of betrayal from Julia’s relationship with her deity had consequences for her human relationships where she described feeling anxious when other people had control over the outcome of a situation. Similarly, Aviendha described how her loss of trust in god after her friend’s suicide impacted her interpersonal relationships. She had taken a big risk by emotionally investing in religion with the hope that it would help her find peace and happiness during her difficult adolescent years. Instead, she felt that her trust in god had been broken:

It felt like a betrayal, that I trusted god, that I trusted this process would work and then someone I really cared about that was helping me a lot at a time when I couldn’t get help in a lot of other places was gone like that and it was really disturbing…I took this risk wanting things to be okay and it’s not that my guinea pig died or my grandpa died, my very good friend committed suicide in a very purposeful ending of his life.

Aviendha reflected that as an introvert she had always been slow to trust other people and put herself out there emotionally. After her friend’s suicide she recalled feeling exposed within her religious community and being more suspicious of people’s motivations for being religious. She compared her experience of feeling betrayed by religion to the end of a first romantic relationship:

My parents’ separation was difficult but I knew it wasn’t involved with anything I did…But [becoming religious] was the first time I put myself out there emotionally and maybe that’s what happens when someone first falls in love but I first tried it with religion and it did not work out.

Aviendha reflected that feelings of betrayal after she lost religion have continued to impact her interpersonal relationships. Aviendha notes that she now attempts to read people more closely to
understand their underlying intentions with the hope that she will be better able to protect herself in the future.

Some participants associated their loss of trust in god with the belief that god could not be trusted to maintain a just world. For example, Sarah reported no longer trusting god after her assault because he failed to punish her perpetrator. She recalled feeling enraged that the mother of her perpetrator (who supported her son) appeared happy and unscathed, while Sarah and her family had been unhinged by the assault:

I stopped believing in god because I thought I was being punished, I was being questioned while [my perpetrator] was still somewhere…In the summer I saw [my perpetrator’s] mother who was really awful to me…What bothers me about this is that for her it was just a regular Tuesday. She was enjoying her time off work and meeting a friend…probably having a nice time and nothing happened to her…and her family.

Sarah’s personal experience of injustice led her to consider how god determines who leads a happy life and who suffers. She wondered how a loving god could allow small children to be sold as sex slaves:

In some ways religion teaches you that god is like a parent. There are kids now as we speak who are being forced into these awful situations with men and I’m sure women. Where is god to protect them?

Sarah ultimately decided that god could not be trusted to maintain a safe, just world, and she stopped believing in him as a protective force. In sum, several participants reported losing trust in their deity after their traumatic event. Some felt personally betrayed by god, while others simply lost faith in their god to preserve a just and caring world.

*Seeking Solace in Religion*

While many participants reported distancing themselves from god in the aftermath of the trauma, some also described seeking solace in their religion. Most religions teach people to turn toward their god and religious community during hardship and for some participants their faith
was a natural place of refuge after their trauma. This main theme is comprised of two sub-themes: Seeking Comfort in Faith and Bargaining with God.

*Seeking Comfort in Faith*

Some participants sought solace in their faith immediately after their experience of the trauma. Daniel reported that shortly after he found out that his wife wanted a divorce, he found comfort in his communications with god:

*I just sat there and I started talking to god and looking at bible verses eventually. That was probably a couple days [after learning about the divorce]. And I was just like “God, how am I going to get through this? This is too much, I can’t handle it on my own.”*

Daniel sought guidance from both god and his pastor immediately after the divorce. He recalled that after he learned about the divorce he went straight to his pastor for help, who attempted to contact his ex-wife with the hopes that he could negotiate a plan to save the marriage: “When the incident happened, I went straight to my pastor and my pastor tried to communicate with [my ex-wife]”. Daniel also sought counselling help from family members who held degrees in pastoral counselling and provided a space for him to express his emotions: “The second it happened, that Sunday, I went to my cousin’s church. I went to talk with my family members, my mom’s sisters. They have MDiv counselling”. Although Daniel experienced conflicted emotions regarding his faith after the divorce, his commitment to seeking comfort in god and his faith community helped him to remain connected and devout throughout his challenges. Likewise, Evelyn recalled that she sought comfort in god after learning about her father’s car accident. Initially she questioned why god would send such a horrible event to her family, but she quickly invested faith in him and found comfort in the belief that her father was in god’s hands. She was grateful to god that her father was able to afford private healthcare and advanced medical treatment:
We were all grateful that we had [the money to switch to a private hospital]. I guess we weren’t worried, god was in my dad I guess…god told my dad don’t worry about finances…I will take care of you and I will let you get better medical treatment and care…I really felt like [god] was taking care of my dad.

Evelyn had a strong sense of god literally being inside her father and caring from him throughout the difficult recovery period. Evelyn and Daniel both remained connected and trusting of god in the wake of their traumas, resulting in a closer connection with god and a strengthening of faith.

While some participants found the comfort they sought in their faith, others turned to their faith but were unable to access the comfort they desired. For example, Kira reported that she initially attempted to re-affirm her faith after her fiancé left her. Her Catholic faith had been a huge source of comfort growing up and she hoped it would provide support after the break-up:

I went to the mass after this had happened because I was looking for that support, I was looking again for that belonging and that assistance. I kind of thought okay this would be a good place to go back to. And the mass, it was, it felt very hollow.

Unfortunately, Kira found that the mass no longer held the meaning and comfort she craved and she began to seriously question her faith in the Roman Catholic church. Likewise, Julia invested hope in religion to cope with her father’s terminal illness. When she first learned that her father was ill, she recalled praying more often and attending church more frequently. Deep down she realized that likely her father would not survive, but she invested in religion because it provided some hope and comfort during a desperate time:

I didn’t believe that god would perform a random miracle and save [my father] like my mother did. But I did need some sort of place or something, some source, something to believe in at that time because it is such a depressing situation and if I believed in science, I just couldn’t believe in science actually, just knowing the scientific facts of the whole situation. So it’s like maybe religion might give me some comfort.

After her father’s death, Julia felt betrayed by god and no longer found comfort in her faith.

Neither Kira, nor Julia received the solace they so desperately needed from their faith and
eventually let go of their belief in their Roman Catholic god. This is in contrast to Evelyn and Daniel who sought and found comfort in their relationship with god and their faith communities.

_Bargaining with God_

Only two of the participants reported bargaining with god, but for them it constituted an important element of how they negotiated and re-defined their relationship with their deity. Many participants reported implicitly believing that being religious provided personal benefits, such as protection from harm or greater happiness. For a couple of participants, this contract with god was more explicit and they hoped that negotiation with god could persuade him to alleviate their pain. Daniel reported that after his divorce he started to make deals or requests to god about whether he would re-marry. He reflected that he would love to re-marry and have children but also recognized that his life path was in god’s hands:

To this day, I’m like “Will I re-marry? Will you give me something even better?” Because I guess I’m a little bit of a greedy person too. I kind of want, if you damage me this badly, can you reward me back with something good at the end maybe god, like trying to make a deal…To this day I am still bargaining with god. Which is not a very respectful way of looking at god but that is one of my weaknesses and downfalls.

Daniel hoped that god would somehow reward his suffering. However, he recognized that his life ambitions were ultimately in god’s hands. Likewise, Kira reported attempts at making agreements with god to end her hardships. While she experienced trauma after trauma, she expressed frustration that god punished her even though she strived to be a good Christian:

I remember thinking well I’ve done everything right, and I kept trying to do these things thinking this is what I should do as…a Christian person, forgiving and doing these things you’re supposed to do…And I think that’s the thing that really devastated me, it felt like, I kept almost trying to make these agreements [with god]…I was like okay, I’ll do this and then that will mean that things will turn out okay.
Kira desperately hoped that if she led a morally good life and made a contract with god, he would alleviate her suffering. Unfortunately, Kira continued to experience life challenges over many years and eventually let go of her expectation that god would reward her for good behaviour. Although many of the participants described implicitly believing that god rewarded those who worked hard and were devout, Kira and Daniel reported extremely close relationships with their deity from a young age, perhaps leading them bargain with god as part of re-negotiating their faith. For them, bargaining with god was an important component of coming to terms with their trauma and re-negotiating their relationship with their deity.

*Exploration of Other Worldviews*

For many participants, the trauma precipitated a period of deep reflection during which they became aware of their implicit assumptions about the world and considered alternative perspectives. The trauma disrupted many participants’ religious beliefs as they were unable to make sense of the trauma within their religious framework. This resulted in participants being more open to changing their beliefs and exploring alternative religious philosophies and practices. Two sub-themes constitute this main theme: Exploration of Religious Experiences and Openness to Changing Beliefs.

*Exploration of Religious Experiences*

Several participants reported that in the process of healing from the trauma and re-conceptualizing their beliefs, they were more open to exploring different religious and spiritual practices. Charles decided to abandon his belief in god after his fiancée left him but once his grief began to subside he made a conscious decision to explore new religious ideas. He was aware that he had never chosen to be Christian, therefore, he careful considered his new religious beliefs:

[The break-up] caused me to rethink about what I should believe and to make my own decisions cause I was over eighteen, I was an adult and should make some
decisions for myself…I tried to clear some negative thoughts out of my mind, I tried to absorb new things, new beliefs, new theories, new books into my life and after a couple of months I thought that I should believe in Buddhism.

Charles’ grandmother introduced him to Buddhist texts and he became very interested in Buddhist history and philosophy. Through his readings, Charles was particularly intrigued by the theory of fate and the idea that everything happens for a reason. These ideas helped Charles let go of the pain surrounding the loss of his relationship and alleviated his depressed mood:

It makes me believe in fate. Two people meet each other is fate, two people separate, it’s also fate, it’s no big deal, it’s natural so it kind of pulls me out from that hole of depression.

The Buddhist idea that life is a process rather than an end goal also resonated with Charles and helped him understand challenges in his life. Similarly, Alan searched outside of his own faith for answers that could help him integrate his Christian and gay identities. He joined an interfaith group at his university, which helped him break free of his orthodox upbringing and consider varied religious perspectives:

The changes in my faith happened through meeting people of different faiths and talking about things on the interfaith level…I felt like I could be put on the same playing field in that kind of discussion because it was okay to be gay and Christian. Or it was okay to be someone who is Christian but also has Buddhist or Hindu beliefs.

Through interfaith discussions and explorations of religious plurality, Alan began to integrate different facets of his identity and reconcile his sexual orientation with his religious affiliation. In particular, he drew upon ideas from the Sikh religion to help him re-conceptualize his relationship with his god and find a path that allowed him to be gay and gain salvation within his religion:

In the Sikh faith they have a symbol called Eckankar, which…symbolizes the universal unity of god. And what they mean by that is not “one god” but “god is one”. So god creates the universe…then everything that is the creation is a reflection of that singular point…and in Christianity we often say that we’re made in the image of god,
so that really resonated for me…It made me feel like because I’m an equal and equally part of god, that it’s okay to be gay because god made me that way and that’s my experience. And that path will still lead to salvation.

Alan integrated the Sikh idea that god is all of creation and the Christian idea that humans are the image of god in order to construct a worldview that accommodated his dual identities of being gay and Christian, and provided a personal path toward salvation. For Alan and Charles, different religious philosophies provided new frameworks for understanding the world that accommodated their experience of the trauma.

While some participants reported exploring different religious philosophies to help them come to terms with their trauma, other participants explored diverse religious communities and practices. For example, after his divorce Daniel described not immediately returning to his home church but attending several other churches farther from his house. He was initially wary of returning to his home church because he feared that his church community would judge him for getting a divorce. While attending a different church he spoke with a pastor who had a more liberal perspective on divorce than his home church pastor, helping him to consider his divorce from a different religious perspective:

I really questioned the divorce and like asked people about like “Does god think lesser of me for what I did, what I have gone through?” And the pastor guy told me “No, people go through divorce. It’s what happens. It’s not ideal in some areas but it does happen and you can still be close with god and all that kind of stuff”.

While Daniel appreciated the advice he received, he decided after a year to return to his home church because it was closer to his house and he enjoyed the larger congregation. Kira explored other Christian denominations as part of her attempt to recover from her break-up and anxiety disorder. As she distanced herself from her Roman Catholic faith, Kira felt compelled to join an Anglican church for several years. She reflected that although she enjoyed being part of the choir and spiritual community, the church never felt like a perfect fit:
I got into that [Anglican] church for several years…There were some aspects of it I enjoyed, like I still enjoyed being in a spiritual community and all that but it never felt right because I mean the Roman Catholic mass is so set…and the Anglican, it’s a little different and it kind of veers off sometimes. And I really had trouble with it actually because I still missed the Catholic ritual of it because it had been so ingrained.

Kira and Daniel sought religious communities in different churches with the hope that it would fulfill their spiritual needs. Although they appreciated some aspects of those communities, both Kira and Daniel ultimately decided that those churches were not an ideal fit.

Some participants reported seeking out spiritual practices outside of “traditional” religion. As part of her quest to find peace after her traumas, Kira explored reiki and meditation. She found both of those practices helped her reconnect with her spirituality and become attune to spiritual energy in her body:

[I started] doing reiki and all that kind of stuff and that makes it much more physical in a weird way where you actually sense it much more…there’s an energy there and so just trying to stay attune to it.

Furthermore, participating in mediation retreats and integrating meditation into her daily life helped her begin to accept her life as it was and connect with her higher power:

I think meditation was such a big part of my recovery because it does embrace that idea of…there’s both good and bad, there is no good or bad, it just is…I think that acceptance of what is also helped me reconnect with whatever force is out there.

Kira’s willingness to explore non-traditional spiritual practices created a space where she could begin to connect with her higher power outside the context of organized religion. Cynthia also reported having intense spiritual experiences in the months before her father’s death:

I could feel things, I could sense things…I had a dream, like even before like they told me about [my father’s] cancer and stuff. I had a dream that there was something, like something like that was going to happen. And then during his illness like once his body temperature dropped suddenly while I was at home, like at the same time, the same thing happened to me. So there was a lot of corresponding, like I could feel things basically, like there’s a spiritual sense.
She reflected that although she had always considered herself spiritual, these unusual experiences around the time of her father’s death gave her a more tangible experience of spirituality and solidified her relationship with her higher power outside the context of her religious institution. Likewise, after having a vision of the Virgin Mary that validated her experience of being emotionally abused by her mother, Rachel believed fully in Jesus Christ and decided to convert to Christianity:

I really did feel like that message saved my life…I liked Jesus, I liked the message… the revolution of it, revolutionary part of it. That it’s not by your own work or by following the law, but this follow me, this faith or higher power.

Rachel believed her vision of the Virgin Mary was sent to her from Jesus Christ and saved her life. She was excited by the revolutionary nature of the message and the idea that she could be transformed through following the wisdom of a higher power. In sum, through exploration of religious and spiritual philosophies, communities and practices, participants began to make sense of their trauma and find new ways of connecting with their faith.

Openness to Changing Beliefs

As part of making sense of their trauma, participants reported engaging in a period of reflection during which they were more open to different ideas and beliefs. Charles compared his process of establishing new beliefs after his trauma to the process of conducting research:

It’s just a process of finding [out what] you believe. Like doing research. At first you know nothing about it, you hear people talking about this theory, another theory and then you start to do your own research and you start to have some of your own findings and you come up with your own conclusion. My process went like that.

Like Charles, many participants went through a period of testing out different beliefs and eventually coming to their own conclusions about their trauma and religion. For instance, Aviendha reported that after the suicide of her friend she spent a long time observing religious
people and trying to understand Christianity, but she ultimately decided that the cost of being religious outweighed the benefits:

I really tried, I really gave [religion] a go, I really engaged, I got to know the people well, and I looked at the bible and I looked online… and I just came to the conclusion that’s there’s really, I’m definitely kind of a cost-benefit kind of person and the cost of being emotionally vulnerable did not pay off to believe in religion.

Eventually, Aviendha gave up her belief in an all-powerful god and instead came to view the universe as chaos:

I just kind of realized that life is chaos and to just accept that things happen… I think I stopped trying to explain things because it was distressing to me because it was unexplainable. I still believe to this day that life is chaos. You just try to find your way and just do the best you can and be good to people. But I no longer believe that there’s some god pulling the strings, that this happens because he says it should or it makes you a better person.

Aviendha initially sought religion because she hoped it would bring some element of control into her life. After her friend’s suicide, she discovered that viewing the universe as chaos helped her accept aspects of her life she couldn’t control. Michael’s experiences of loss also led him to reflect on his beliefs and conclude that god does not exist. His rejection of a benevolent higher power stemmed from negative experiences with his family:

If you have this vague notion that there’s a benevolent creator out there, it sort of leads you to believe that whenever people do wrong it’s exclusively because of circumstances, that people are basically good.

After his family failed to properly mark the death of his mother and grandmother, Michael became more skeptical of divine goodness in other people, leading him to question the existence of god. Eventually he determined that while belief in religion may help people cope, a higher power does not exist:

Well, I’m basically glad that [religion] helps people. I don’t really have anything against it. But I now see it as some kind of evolutionary defense mechanism rather than something that really reflects anything deeper about the universe.
Michael concluded that religion is a human construction rather than real force in the universe.

After reflection, some participants concluded that god sends traumatic events as lessons to be learned. For instance, Evelyn reported entering into a six-month period of reflection after her father got into a car accident, during which she thought deeply about her relationship with god, her church and her family. She eventually concluded that god had sent her father’s accident as a lesson because he believed that her faith was not strong enough:

Now that I reflect back, my god thought that my faith wasn’t strong enough…And maybe he thought that it was time, like now that I’m a teenager to strengthen our relationship and believe more in god and self-reflect on the things that I’ve been doing.

Evelyn decided to use the accident as an opportunity to deepen her trust in her god and rely on him even more than before the trauma:

It’s been difficult initially, so many questions and stuff. And it made me do more prayer. That’s one thing I’ve learned is to rely on god, give all our fears to god, pray to him all the time like when I’m feeling scared, I’m feeling stressed out, when I’m feeling worried about anything. I’ve come to put more trust in god, I’ve come to rely on him and just share what I’m feeling all the time.

She described herself as passively religious growing up but her father’s accident precipitated deeper reflection on her religious beliefs, leading to greater religiosity and a stronger perception of her god as ever-present and controlling.

Some participants reported that the traumatic event resulted in not only changed religious beliefs but also changed beliefs about social issues. For instance, Daniel reflected that his divorce was followed by a period of reflection during which he became more open to social diversity. The pain of divorce and his life not unfolding as he had planned helped him develop greater empathy for others and more tolerant beliefs about diversity. Daniel recalled that before his divorce he adhered to the church’s stance against homosexuality, but after his divorce he could better empathize with the pain of being judged and became more accepting of homosexuality:
Maybe three, four years ago…I was like the bible says this, people must follow this, they are bad because they are sin…But now I feel pain and when homosexual people have a complex thing that they have to figure out with their relationship with a god, maybe a god that has some rules against some things, I don’t really care about the rules, I care about their relationship with god…god is for everyone.

Daniel reflected that he began to prioritize human relationships over dogmatic rules, resulting in him expressing more tolerant views of homosexuality to his congregation:

Yesterday at fellowship…they had a question about homosexuality: is it right or wrong. And there’s some hard line answers, some Pope answers, some church answers, and then I said my answer to them which was I would be very disappointed if a homosexual person would not be open-arm accepted into this church. Which is a human answer because it’s what you actually want to see, rather than tell them that it’s some sort of sin…I’ve changed as a person in terms of being more accepting.

For Daniel, the emotional pain of his divorce resulted in him developing more accepting and tolerant beliefs about diversity. Whether they lost their faith or strengthened their faith, most participants began to find peace and hope in their changing beliefs.

Resolution of Worldview

As participants processed their grief and reflected on their beliefs, they came to conclusions about their religious orientation and worldview that made sense within the context of their traumatic experience. All participants described changes in how they understood their higher power, religious community, and religious identity, but the changes varied widely. Three participants emerged from the trauma with a strengthened faith in god, four described a weakening or complete loss of their religion, while the remaining four described developing an individual spirituality marked by religious plurality and deinstitutionalization of their faith. While participants’ religious affiliations and beliefs varied, almost all described experiencing post-traumatic growth in the form of greater resilience and acceptance of life as a result of the traumatic disruption of their beliefs. This third core theme is comprised of four main themes: Re-

*Re-Conceptualizing Higher Power*

As participants developed different religious beliefs and identities, they re-conceptualized their higher power to fit within this new framework. Many participants described a sense of peace in defining their higher power. Once Charles decided to identify as Buddhist and worship the Buddha he commented “I’m settled…it makes me feel peaceful and calm. It just feels right”.

This main theme is comprised of two sub-themes: Personal Conception of Higher Power and God as a Distant Force.

*Personal Conception of Higher Power*

Participants who developed an individual spirituality often commented that their spirituality involved breaking free of institutionalized religion and re-conceptualizing their higher power.

Cynthia eventually identified as spiritual and emphasized that her personal spirituality differed from institutional Christianity:

> I feel like I have a different sense of spirituality than the organization. I think a lot of the people can say that they’re practicing Christians but it’s more of an external thing, so I don’t identity with those people. I just don’t identify with religion enough to say that I’m definitely part of this religion…I’m more inclined to say that I’m spiritual rather than being a particular faith.

She also described her individual spirituality as “awareness” and “connection”, but reflected that it would never be something she completely understood:

> I think that there could be another realm, another spiritual realm that’s not fully understood but I feel like it’s there…It’s not something that I feel I can fully explain or understand…It’s just an awareness and trying to connect to goodness, like goodness in people…and also things that make the world a better place.

Although Cynthia could not entirely articulate her intuitive sense that there exists another spiritual realm, she conceptualized her spirituality as a felt-sense of goodness and striving to
improve the world, which she contrasted with the harm she associated with organized religion.

Likewise, Alan rejected his church dogma that excluded homosexuality and developed a personal spirituality centered on notions of acceptance and love. He drew upon his interfaith education and an image of Jesus to re-conceptualize his god:

   When I think about Jesus… he was a militant, he was passionate, he preached, he fed the hungry, he preached love… Not love everyone but don’t be gay or love everyone but make sure the gay people turn straight before they die or love everyone but Muslims you’ve got to love differently. Not any of that stuff, just love.

Alan reflected that he never lost his relationship with god and the only reason he temporarily rejected god was because he believed that god rejected him for being gay. Once he was able to re-conceptualize god as inclusive and accepting, his relationship with god grew stronger:

   I’ve always believed in god. The reason why I rejected it was because I believed in god but I didn’t feel like god believed in me. I feel like I’m [now] more confident in my ability to have a relationship with god because I don’t feel like I need to prove myself. It’s just being, it’s just experiencing, and I get to express the love that I want to express without feeling that that my love is tainted by sin.

Alan reflected that he now has a more intimate relationship with his higher power, but that this relationship exists outside the confines of a church and a doctrine. Breaking free of the rigid construction of god in the Coptic Orthodox church was the only way that he was able to establish a close and supportive relationship with his deity and accept himself. Kira also rejected the institution of her Roman Catholic church and re-connected with her spirituality by re-conceptualizing her higher power as an energy or force. She gradually abandoned her perception of god as all-controlling and directive, which had the effect of diminishing her feeling that god betrayed her and helping her accept life challenges. Through her spiritual practices, such as meditation and reiki, which focused on the body, she came to perceive her higher power as a felt-sense or energy rather than a god-like being:
I find [there] are pushes sometimes, and I’ve learned more when to listen to those pushes. And I think that that’s what I now more feel with the spiritual. Because it’s funny, even saying god feels weird now to me. I almost want to say something spiritually-based…like a presence, an energy, it’s more how I would describe it because god often for me now reeks of that person with the big robes.

Kira continues to be very connected with her spirituality on a daily basis but her perception of her higher power has changed. Her perception of god as a presence rather than a directive or parental force has helped her be more accepting of her life challenges:

I think before, the image I get more is that [god and I] walked together if that makes sense, and [now] it’s just more that I’m existing in this and it’s not that there’s any control or anything like that, it’s much more that [god and I] are going through this together…The first [image] I’d say is like almost trying to appease or…it was almost more like a parent to a child…and now I feel [god] much more just as a presence.

Kira related that she no longer feels betrayed by god when she encounters difficulties because she no longer expects him to determine her life trajectory. Instead, she experiences him as a loving presence throughout her life journey who gives her gentle pushes that she can choose to follow.

Cynthia, Alan and Kira all moved away from their church institution but maintained a close connection with their higher power that they re-conceptualized as loving and accepting.

God as a Distant Force

Participants such as Julia and Sarah who experienced a weakening of their faith also re-conceptualized their deity as having far less power over their individual lives. After her father’s death, Julia relied on herself rather than on god and stopped attending church. However, she decided to not completely discard her religious beliefs. She continued to believe in a higher power that watched over humanity, but she no longer believed that this higher power controlled her personal decisions and actions:

I do believe in a higher power but I won’t give a name to it. I do continue to pray every night but the prayers have gotten extremely short and it’s not for investing hope or anything, it’s more gratitude stuff or let someone rest in peace…I didn’t want to
completely break ties with religion. Religion did have its redeeming qualities, like it’s ability to bring community or hope and give you meaning.

Julia maintained aspects of her religious beliefs to honour to her family traditions and because she acknowledged that religion has some benefits. However, the reverence and hope she once invested in god disappeared. At the request of her mother, Julia recalled walking the Stations of the Cross while on a school exchange in Jerusalem. Although she could empathize with Jesus as a human being, she reported failing to feel more reverent or connected with god during the experience:

[My friend and I] walked through the Stations of the Cross and we just didn’t feel any different…I can empathize with Jesus walking up that hill, it was hard to walk, it was really high, but I just couldn’t make any more connection with that. I just didn’t feel like wow, I feel closer to god now.

Julia re-conceptualized her higher power as a more distant being that had little impact on her everyday life. She lost the sense of intimacy and awe that she had for god as a child and replaced it with greater trust and confidence in herself. Like Julia, Sarah experienced a weakening of her religion and she too re-conceptualized her god as more distant. She continued to believe in a god, but her god was neither Christian nor Jewish:

I would say that I’m a deist. I believe that there is a god. I don’t really ascribe to any religion, I’m not saying that god is god but I believe that a god exists and does things. I found the definition [of deist] on the Internet and I feel that best describes me now.

Like Julia, Sarah chose to continue believing in some form of a god. However, she now views her god as at times illogical and punishing. After her sexual assault, Sarah grappled with the appalling idea that god sent her a life lesson in the form of an assault. She concluded that god is not logical in his decisions and that he can be heavy handed in his execution:

I think that god can be very heavy handed. I believe he can be [punishing]. I guess I believe that god makes decisions that have some moral backing but do I agree with him? No…I feel like [god] has intention but the choosing of when to express that is...
random in the sense that I don’t believe a logical being would say “Okay, here’s a nineteen year old let’s make this happen and then teach them this lesson”.

Given her distant relationship with god, Sarah prays infrequently and is no longer confident that her prayers will be answered. Both Julia and Sarah de-invested in their relationship with their higher power and re-conceptualized him as less important in their daily lives. They chose to maintain their belief in a god but viewed him as a distant force with little power over their individual choices and behaviours.

Re-conceptualizing Religious Community

The traumatic events experienced by participants not only resulted in them re-conceptualizing their higher power, but also changed how they perceived their religious community. Participants received different levels of support from their religious community in the wake of the trauma, which influenced how they related to their community. Some participants felt judged and excluded by their church or religious community, resulting in a distancing and negative perception of their community. In contrast, other participants were grateful for the outpouring of support from their religious community after the trauma, resulting in strengthened ties. For some participants, the trauma presented an opportunity to think deeply about what motivates people to be religious. For example, the suicide of Aviendha’s friend precipitated a period of reflection on religious individuals’ motivations:

I thought a lot more about religion than I did when I was actually trying to go to church because I think before the suicide it was just the community, just going to see some nice people and having kind of fun. And then after the suicide I really thought hard about why all these people are here, why did people believe in religion, why does religion exist in every culture that’s ever existed in some form and why do humans turn to religion.

Aviendha reflected that while her relationship with god did not change significantly, she became more skeptical of the humans who represent religion and what motivates them:
I watch people who are religious a little more just trying to see how they address their faith, how they got there and why they continue believing...Sometimes I think a little less of them that they can just say some invisible person controls everything and it’s not really acceptable to me...but then other people I have more admiration for them because they, while simultaneously acknowledging that someone else is in control, they also do the best they can through church activities or just being good to people.

Aviendha became aware of how religious individuals filter religion differently, resulting in a more skeptical attitude toward religious communities. Cynthia also reported becoming more skeptical of religious individuals’ motivations after being assaulted by a church minister. This experience understandably made her question the extent to which religious individuals live out their Christian values. Moreover, unsupportive relationships with her Christian parents and another Christian friend reinforced her perception of Christian individuals as not necessarily acting according to religious values and strengthened her decision to reject her identification as “Christian”:

I think after the difficulties of the different traumas, especially where I encountered people who said that they were Christian but were not, who were kind of like bullies or abusive, it made me more distant from the religion, like I was less likely to say “Oh yeah, I belong to the Christian religion”.

Cynthia’s experience attending Catholic school further reinforced her skepticism of individuals who identify as Christian. Although the children at her school identified as Catholic, she observed that they were often rebellious and unscrupulous. She wondered whether external religious identification could in fact impede people from reflecting internally:

Going to my Catholic high school, I was also aware of the...deficiencies in religion where people can say that they’re a certain religion but their behavior isn’t very positive, it’s not very good and so sometimes religion can kind of impede people from reflecting more on themselves and how they behave and how they treat people.

Cynthia ultimately decided not to identify as Christian as a result of her negative interactions with individuals affiliated with the Christian church. Other participants felt personally judged and excluded by their community, resulting in them losing respect for their religious community.
Alan recalled that a turning point from him was when his parents sent his priest to speak with him after he came out as gay. His priest was unable to utter the world “gay” and instead gave him a powerpoint presentation on problem-solving and left him with the words “Remember it’s Adam and Eve, not Adam and Steve”. Alan found his priest’s attempt at communicating with him to be “cheap” and he described losing respect for his priest and church community at that point:

> It was cheap. He couldn’t say the word “gay”, he couldn’t actually give me any pertinent information about the problem itself…The fact that he tried to deal with the issue in a way that he wasn’t comfortable and a way that he was ignorant…and in a way that basically he left with a hallmark reading…Like I don’t expect this representative from the church…to give advice like that to someone. It’s not advice. It was really disrespectful and I lost respect for him at that point.

Through the exchange with his priest, Alan also realized that he would never be able to reconcile his desire to belong to his Coptic Orthodox church community with his gay identity. He accepted that the two parts of his identity could never converge and developed a spirituality outside the structure of his religious community:

> I had this desire…[that] one day I would be the first openly gay Coptic or something and that would be okay in the churches. It’s not going to happen, like maybe not in my lifetime…So that’s when I started going no I can’t reconcile the two and so the way I felt about the church was people go to church because they need a certain amount of structure to have a relationship with god. Whereas I felt that I could not gain anymore from that kind of structure.

Like Alan, Sarah reported pulling away from her religious communities because her perpetrator also came from a Christian/Jewish household and clearly did not live out his religious values:

> I have a lot of negative associations to the Jewish community…because this nice Jewish family with a lovely Christian father allowed this to happen…There’s all of them saying why don’t you find a nice Jewish guy, why don’t you find a nice Christian guy. Nice has nothing to do with it…You can be religious but you can be a terrible person.

Sarah personally experienced the contradiction between the goodness and morality inherent in religious teachings and the (at times immoral) actions of religious people. Furthermore, instead of
being supported after her assault, Sarah felt judged by her religious community after having a “mental breakdown”. She recalled that some community members made negative comments about her mental health issues:

I didn’t feel supported and I felt like [people from my community] were constantly looking down on me and there’s a lot of women…and they’ll talk about what their parent’s kids are doing. And it’s very uncomfortable because I think what you are saying about me when I’m not there…So I would say that again that experience basically made me say I don’t want anything to do with this [community].

Sarah no longer attends church or synagogue and has distanced herself from her religious communities because she has experienced judgment rather than acceptance. Of course, some participants were generously supported by their religious community after their trauma, resulting in strengthened ties. Evelyn commented that her church congregation was extremely supportive after her father got into an accident. The priest and members of the congregation frequently visited her father in the hospital and she felt closer to her religious community as a result:

The pastor really cared about our family and he took the time to come to our hospital to just chat with us…not just the pastor actually, some other church fellows…It was from that I’d really honestly say that I’m really happy I’m in this church…and these people care for us. It’s made me really feel that god cares, god sends these people to care about us.

For Evelyn, the outpouring of support from her religious community resulted in a more positive perception of her church and pastor. The traumatic event gave many participants an opportunity to reflect on their relationship with religious individuals, often changing their perception of their religious community. For some individuals this resulted in a distancing from their religious community and identity, while for others their trauma resulted in a strengthening of ties with their Christian congregation.

*Social Consequences of New Beliefs*
As participants drew new conclusions about their religious orientation, they were required to negotiate these new identities with family and friends, occasionally resulting in conflicts. Participants whose families continued to be strongly religious reported tensions between remaining faithful to their new beliefs and meeting family obligations. Further complicating the issue, many of the participants’ beliefs no longer fit neatly into one religious orientation, resulting in challenging social situations. For instance, Aviendha reflected that identifying as agnostic made social situations more difficult particularly when it was assumed that she was religious:

> It actually makes [social situations] strangely more difficult because it feels like I’m sitting on the fence…I feel uncomfortable when my family wants to do grace at the table. I feel like I’m not being genuine to myself…And people kind of assume sometimes that you’re religious…and that’s hard for me because I don’t want to do a full out argument or a discussion on it because I don’t really know where I stand.

She reflected that her agnosticism actually made discussions about religion more difficult because she didn’t know whether there was a god. Participants frequently reported experiencing social pressures from extended family and being internally conflicted about whether to stand by their new beliefs or appease their family. Kira remarked that her family was displeased with her decision to leave the church: “My family was definitely not happy. That was actually a real trouble point because they wanted me back in the church”. Throughout her loss of faith, she continued to attend church during holidays to appease her family but eventually reached a point where she could no longer walk into a church:

> I couldn’t go to church anymore. Like before I’d been going at Christmas and things like that just to appease my family. I couldn’t walk into a church anymore. It’s like to even walk into one was anger inducing.

Kira eventually decided to stop appeasing her family by attending church, but other participants came to different compromises with their families regarding the extent to which they were
willing to participate in religious activities. Sarah reflected that although her parents knew she was no longer religious, she agreed to partake in religious rituals for the sake of her grandmother:

My grandmother’s a holocaust survivor so I don’t [share my loss of faith]…If I’m asked to go to something I do it but for the sake of my grandmother. I don’t denounce the Jewish religion because of what she went through and because it would be awful to do that.

Sarah no longer feels comfortable in religious institutions but compromises with her parents by agreeing to take part in religious celebrations in the home:

Now I just say to my parents “You know what, shool is not for me or church”. I would be very happy to come to events in the home or dinners or things like this but I don’t feel comfortable in religious institutions and they’ve actually completely backed-off of that.

Other participants negotiated their religious beliefs with their family and eventually reached a compromise that satisfied both parties. Julia’s mother was willing to accept the fact that she no longer attended church but was insistent that she continued to believe in a higher power. The desire to appease her mother’s wishes was a central factor in Julia’s decision to maintain her belief in a higher power. She described how a compromise with her mother regarding her faith developed slowly over time:

I just learned to respect [my mother’s] beliefs and try to earn her respect…I don’t want to go to church anymore and she was really upset and she was really disappointed to hear that... But then after I took on that extra responsibility and seeing that change within me and how I became more mature in a sense after this, she started to respect my beliefs. She’s like “As long as you know there’s a higher power, it’s god, but it’s a higher power, I’m fine. If you don’t go to church it’s okay, but it would be nice at least on Christmas if you can”.

Julia and her mother grew to respect each other, and through their mutual respect and understanding they came to a compromise regarding Julia’s religious beliefs and practices. In contrast, changes in some participants’ beliefs led to a strengthening of family ties and connection within their social group. Charles converted to Buddhism after his trauma and his
conversion brought him closer to his immediate family who all identify as Buddhist: “We are closer because I can now go to temple with them. We have more family activities, more things to talk about…exchange our understanding and ideas about something happening in life and we try to explain based on a Buddhism point of view”. While Julia clashed with her mother over her new beliefs, she found acceptance and understanding from her peer group when she lost her religious beliefs:

A lot of my work friends were once Christian at some point or some other religion and they just converted to being atheists or agnostics or something. So we would have random talks about religion and stuff and what we believe in. So when I explained what I believed in after my dad’s death they understood me completely and I just felt like wow there are other people like me.

Julia described a sense of relief when she learned that her peers could identify with her experience. Given her restrictive Roman Catholic upbringing, Julia now highly values religious diversity and commented that in university she has devout friends from various religions but that they relate to each other with respect and understanding: “They won’t convert me. They just understand me and they’re very empathetic... We don’t talk about religion. If we did, we wouldn’t force beliefs onto each other”. Like Julia, Daniel reported feeling more connected with his social group after strengthening his relationship with god. Daniel was fortunate to receive support from his pastor, extended family and church friends who he described as “angels” sent from god. He credited his social group for helping him through the roughest times during the divorce and noted that his church groups created a structure where he felt comfortable sharing:

I have people around me who are like counsellors. And then there are also people who are just faith-based people. And because part of the community is often being real and sitting in a circle and sharing about your weaknesses…And then those pastors and then the church…I don’t know if I would be where I’m at now. I’d probably be a little bit more angry.
Daniel’s strengthened religiosity further connected him with his faith-community because it was through his community that he received the support necessary to move through his trauma without building up anger and resentment. In sum, for several participants, their new religious beliefs meant that they needed to negotiate how they related to their family and friends. Some faced disappointment and anger from their parents and were found different ways of managing these conflicts.

Post-Traumatic Growth

All but one of the participants reported post-traumatic growth, regardless of whether they strengthened or weakened their faith. Participants who deepened their faith in god reported a greater sense of acceptance because they put their life in god’s hands. Participants who lost their faith also reported a greater sense of acceptance because they no longer expected their god to protect them from negative events. Most reflected that they matured as a result of the experience, became more confident in their belief system, and developed a greater acceptance of life’s challenges. Overall, participants reported eventually coming to appreciate the depth of understanding and appreciation of life that emerged from their pain. This main theme is comprised of three sub-themes: Deepening Trust, Acceptance of Life Journey and Self-Growth.

Deepening Trust

Several participants described developing greater trust in themselves and/or god as they processed their trauma and reevaluated their religious or spiritual beliefs. Julia remarked that she became more confident in herself after her father’s death. As a child she reflected that her self-esteem was low and she tended to rely on others to meet her needs:

When I was younger I was very naïve and I wasn’t very confident about myself and so even in school I was very introverted. I never really participated that much so I just didn’t feel like I had the power to do things or to change things… I trusted people a bit more then because I didn’t know if I could even do it.
After her father passed away, she decided she could no longer depend on god so she took responsibility for her own life. Her increased independence resulted in her taking on more leadership positions and travelling abroad alone, which increased her sense of self-reliance and belief that she could “get by in the real world”. Her loss of faith in god precipitated a growth in self-esteem:

Instead of confiding stuff into god and letting my situation be in his hands, I started more thinking about what I can do as a person to, I guess self-reliance again, to get things done. And I started to love myself more, put more faith in myself and start to trust myself more with making decisions.

Aviendha also reflected that her loss of religion deepened her trust in herself. However, her process occurred over a longer period of time and was tied to deepening self-knowledge. She reflected that although it was difficult, the suicide of her friend made her stronger and taught her how to cope with adversity at an early age. Her experience of deeply questioning her religious beliefs helped her appreciate her highly analytical mind. While she admitted that this trait at times worked against her, she also recognized it as a gift:

I think sometimes being really analytical works against [me], at least being an American because a lot of my friends… they only care about themselves and their own personal life and things that personally affect them. And I could never be like that. So I guess it can be more difficult, but it in the end I am happy for who I am and that I need to ask questions and I’m proud of that…I need to know and I will ask questions and I will not let things go if they’re uncomfortable to ask questions about.

She came to view her experience of losing her religious beliefs as a process of growing up, gaining greater self-understanding and trusting in her ability to make sense of the world.

Participants who strengthened their faith also reported a deepening of trust. Daniel reported that he became more trusting of god. He compared his relationship with his deity after his divorce to having a fight with a best friend:
I never lost my relationship with [god]. He was constantly there for me. Maybe god is like that loyal friend where whether you go through anything he’s always there and he’s pretty consistent for me. I never forgot about him and he never forgot about me.

For Daniel, temporarily distancing from god actually resulted in him developing greater trust in god because they “[went] through more” together and he came to know different aspects of his deity. Likewise, Evelyn reported that she became more trusting of god and learned that she could not control everything in her life:

It’s a lot of trust I’d say that I’ve developed…I’ve come to realize some things are, as a human, you can’t really control everything in our lives, that we just have to let god do whatever he wants. We just pray to him the challenges we’re facing…and just trust what would happen for good, for bad. That’s just life.

Evelyn reflected that although she has become more trusting as a result of her traumatic experience, at times she still struggles to implement her trust in god in her daily life. As a young student, her future is not yet clear and she worries about her life path even though she knows intellectually that she should put all her faith in god:

I still get worried a lot, especially as a student. There’s still, I mean life as a young person at least, there’s a lot of unknowns that happen. I don’t know what is going to happen when I graduate, or I don’t know what kind of job I will get… It’s up to god and myself whether he thinks that it’s a suitable job for me in the end and whether he feels my passion for the job is strong enough.

Evelyn reflected on the challenges of fully trusting in god but emphasized that she remained committed to working toward an even deeper relationship with her deity. Rachel also reported greater confidence and trust in herself after her vision of the Virgin Mary validated her experience of emotional abuse by her mother. She reflected:

It was so validating. It was so nice to hear the truth…it gave immediate, just an overwhelming experience of you were right. And truth, whatever it is, is actually better than non-truth.
For much of her young life, Rachel struggled with whether to trust her perception that her mother had emotionally abused her. Her vision finally validated her experience and helped her develop greater confidence in her own perceptions and beliefs.

Acceptance of Life Journey

Participants reported developing greater acceptance of their life journey. They learned to let go of their need for control and accept that life can be challenging and unpredictable. Some participants reflected that prior to their trauma they had a plan for their lives that involved achieving certain life goals, such as getting married or developing a career. The traumatic event often disrupted this path and participants were forced to abandon their prior goals and re-evaluate their priorities. This process involved accepting imperfection and appreciating life’s gifts in the present moment. Charles reflected that as a result of working through the loss of his fiancée, he re-conceptualized success as a process rather than an end goal, and he learned the importance of letting go:

[I am more accepting] of what success means. I think we cannot just judge it by results and we should also take a look at the whole process as well and if that thing is not successful eventually just let it go, have a new plan.

In accordance with his Buddhist beliefs, he commented that “it is natural” to be both successful and unsuccessful. All he can do is to put forth his best effort and then “let fate decide the result”. Charles reflected that these insights made him stronger and gave him a “better understanding of grieving and losses in life”. Overall, his new Buddhist beliefs provided him with a framework for living out his life with compassion and self-acceptance.

Other participants reflected that they accepted that some life goals simply could not be attained, and through abandoning their goals they found a sense of peace. Alan had long
struggled to reconcile his homosexuality with his religious affiliation, and finally found a way to accept his different identities:

The other analogy I used was the mountain that I needed to surpass, well this mountain was just getting bigger and bigger and yet I felt more comfortable not being able to surmount the mountain. Because surmounting the mountain meant denying part of myself and really struggling all my life…I could spend my entire life waking up and going…I’m still gay, I can’t be this way. Or not. I could spend my life going it’s okay to be gay…Mountain, I’m going to walk around you. It doesn’t have to be a struggle.

Alan eventually found a way to reconcile his gay identity and his religious beliefs by abandoning the Coptic Orthodox doctrine. He used the metaphor of a mountain to describe his struggle, and his acceptance came when he decided to “walk around the mountain” rather than attempt to surmount the insurmountable.

Several participants remarked that they increasingly accepted that their relationship with god would always be “in progress”. Daniel reflected that while his relationship with god had deepened as a result of his traumatic experience, after two years he was still in the early stages of recovering from his divorce and was uncertain how his life and his relationship with god would unfold. When asked how he characterized his relationship with his religion and spirituality in the present, he commented that the word “seeking” summed up his current religiosity. He reflected that his faith had “deepened” and “diversified” as a result of his trauma, but that he was still in the process of “discernment” and attempting to understand what god wanted for his life.

Likewise, Evelyn reflected that her relationship with god was “in progress” rather than fixed. She commented that although her faith in god had strengthened, at times she still struggled to fully trust in god, especially as a young student with many future unknowns. For instance, she described feeling regret that she was unable to change some of her university marks. During these times she had more difficulty completely trusting in god:
Once I do really badly in a course, there’s no way I can change that mark anymore and it really pulls down the entire grade of my whole university career. I know that there are ways to change it and god, and I can trust god in that but it’s just sometimes I can’t help but worry, or get sad that this has happened and there’s no way I can change that exact mark.

Despite her fears and regrets, Evelyn reflected that her relationship with god was “in progress” because she continued to pray to god for help cultivating greater acceptance of her mistakes. Her belief that god is a part of every human helped her be more accepting of god: “God is part of me so in a way when I’m judging myself I’m judging god because god made me...so sometimes I try to be aware of that and not be so harsh”.

Finally, several participants remarked that the process of making sense of their trauma and religious beliefs gave them a deeper appreciation of life. After having experienced deep grief after their trauma, they discovered that they no longer took their lives for granted and could appreciate their life in the present. For instance, Evelyn came to the conclusion that she would never be able to predict how her life will unfold so she should appreciate each moment:

My perspective is that things happen for a reason and…you can’t predict what’s going to happen. Something totally drastic could happen to your life that you’d never have expected in a couple hours time…So I just really appreciate every moment that I have especially with my family, with god. My life could end at any moment I would say. People always say that but I really feel that’s true.

As a result of her father’s car accident, Evelyn was faced with the reality that people’s lives can drastically change or end at any moment. This understanding helped her appreciate her life in the present moment. Similarly, Kira reflected that after living through seven dark years of processing multiple traumas, a period of her life that she called her “lost years”, she developed greater appreciation of her life in the present:

When you’ve had that darkest moment, you’ve literally had that dark night of the soul as they call it…I kept reading these books, I can see the dark night of the soul and then everything turned around. And I kept having these moments of “When is my turn around?! How many dark nights do I need?”…But after being through that and
having those nights where everything does feel so lost, I mean man you appreciate the good times…I’m always taking moments now and being like wow this is pretty damn good.

Kira reflected that after having been though challenging times, she is better able to appreciate the small, positive events in her life. The grief and sorrow following her traumas helped her recognize that life is full of highs and lows, and that the good times should be appreciated. Many participants remarked that as a result of working through their traumas they became more accepting of challenges in their lives. They learned to appreciate the present moment and abandoned their need to control their future.

*Self-Growth*

Almost all participants reported some form of self-growth as a result of processing the traumatic event. Many reflected that the pain of the trauma helped them develop greater empathy for others who were suffering, while other participants described the trauma as a catalyst for investing greater passion into their careers. For instance, Daniel reflected that his divorce helped him develop greater empathy, which proved useful in his career. Trained as a teacher and counsellor, Daniel noted that before his divorce he often had difficulty connecting with people emotionally and could not identify with other people’s pain. After his divorce, he was better able to connect emotionally with his students:

> I found that I did not connect with my [female] students as well versus the boys…with the girls I was like how do I connect with them? And I actually can now feel their pain or I’m inferring some sort of pain that they feel with others.

As a teacher, Daniel discovered that the empathy he developed after his divorce was useful in his classroom, particularly with female students who he believed were inclined to relate to him emotionally rather than cognitively. Other participants noticed that they developed greater empathy toward themselves after the traumatic event. Alan described developing greater empathy
toward himself after working through his sexual orientation and religious beliefs, which helped him develop a stronger connection with his higher power. He reflected that before the trauma, he was emotionally numb because he believed that he was not allowed to love romantically:

If I’m not allowed to love romantically, why should I love anything? So that was really tough. So I was kind of numb for a really long time. I didn’t want to talk about feelings.

Alan reflected that when he rejected a part of himself, he was unable to love and accept himself. Now that he is able to accept all aspects of himself, he can love himself and that translates into a closer relationship with god:

My perception [of god] is synonymous with my perception of myself so when I rejected god I rejected myself...Now that I accept myself, I can accept having a relationship with god.

For several participants, including Alan, the traumatic event forced them to think deeply about their relationships in their lives, including their relationship with themselves, resulting in greater empathy for themselves and others.

Many participants described learning valuable life lessons through the process of coming to terms with the trauma and their religious orientation, and some were motivated to teach those lessons to others. For instance, Daniel described feeling more passionate about his teaching and counselling practices after processing his divorce, and he hoped this passion would motivate his career:

Now when I talk to students I am passionate...and the passion I find in the working world is very important. Because if you don’t, after you do it one or two years, you don’t understand it. But the emotional passion will drive me I think for a long time.

In particular, Daniel reported that he was considering practicing as a marriage counsellor because his experience of going through a divorce provided him with a valuable perspective on relationships:
I can now have some passion towards when people meet other people and keeping marriages together. I’m not an expert, but I’m very interested in how people make it work. Where before I was really just like hoping god could make it work. But now I would want to do marriage counselling.

Through his divorce, Daniel became interested in the details of how couples make relationships work and this personal interest gave him professional motivation to branch out into marriage counselling. Evelyn also described volunteering more in her community after her faith was strengthened in the wake of her father’s car accident. She believes that her desire to volunteer and interact with new people is part of god’s plan to help her grow and develop as a young adult:

    I’ve done a lot of volunteering. It also strengthens my relationship with god too. God let’s me meet a whole variety of people, people I never encountered before…I’ve gotten a lot more life experiences after being in Canada because god’s given me these opportunities and it’s really enhanced my view of the world.

Evelyn believes that god provides her with opportunities to give back to her community and gain new life experiences. Alan also chose to give back to his community after recovering from his trauma, and for him it involved sharing his traumatic story with others. Alan currently works in education and views himself as an “ambassador” who is on earth to spread acceptance and understanding:

    I like being in the role of an educator. I get to teach people life skills, I get to share my knowledge, I get to share my experiences and a lot of the time I relate to my students by telling them stories about my past and my sexuality and that struggle.

Alan feels that his experience of coming out as gay and working through his religious identity has provided him with valuable insights that he now shares with young people who may struggle with similar forms of discrimination or identity conflict. In sum, almost all participants reflected on the positive, growth-enhancing effects of working through their trauma and religious beliefs that included greater wisdom, empathy and resilience.

**Summary**
The results outlined in this chapter can be summarized in relation to the three guiding questions of this study presented in chapter one. The findings that relate to each question will be described in turn below:

1) *How do religious worldviews change after trauma?*

The results chapter divided participants’ experiences into three stages that broadly capture the chronological process of faith change as it relates to worldview: religious worldview, traumatic disruption of worldview, and resolution of worldview. Each stage will be elaborated below. Prior to the traumatic event, individuals growing up in a religious environment appear to give little consideration to their religious and spiritual beliefs. Many are initiated into a family and community of worshipers that teach, validate, and enforce particular religious practices and beliefs. Individuals express holding a basically positive view of their religion, religious community, and higher power. While some individuals do question their religious beliefs at this stage, the questioning rarely results in doubt or disbelief.

The experience of trauma and the ensuing grief serves as a catalyst for religious questioning and change. The trauma shatters individuals’ assumption that the world is predictable, fair, and safe, challenging core religious tenets. Hitherto implicit worldviews enter conscious deliberation for the first time. Individuals begin to examine their prior guiding assumptions, and suspect that these assumptions are irreconcilable with the experience of trauma. This period of grief and confusion is typically followed by a period of more sober reflection and exploration during which individuals attempt to arrive at a meaningful interpretation of the trauma. This often involves exploration of alternative philosophical frameworks and diverse religious perspectives and practices. While many seek answers outside of their religious
denomination, some find solace and understanding within their faith community and existing relationship with god.

Eventually, individuals manage to resolve their worldview by cognitively integrating the experience of trauma with pre-existing religious beliefs, with newly adopted religious beliefs, or with secular or anti-religious beliefs. In this study, three individuals reported strengthening their religiosity. They assimilated their trauma into their pre-existing religious framework by interpreting the trauma as a lesson delivered by a benevolent god. Individuals with strengthened faith found comfort in their god and religious community after the trauma, resulting in enhanced trust and intimacy. Four participants reported weakening their faith after trauma. Typically, these individuals were unable to assimilate the experience of the trauma into their pre-existing religious beliefs and experiences. Consequently, they abandoned their belief in an all-controlling, benevolent deity and many distanced themselves from their religious communities. As their trust in god declined, most reported that they developed greater trust in themselves and came to view themselves as capable and resilient. Four participants reported developing a more individual, idiosyncratic spirituality after trauma. These individuals typically lost their pre-existing religious beliefs and came to reject conventional doctrines of faith. However, they remained devout and drew upon beliefs and practices from diverse religious and spiritual traditions to develop a worldview that accommodated their traumatic experience. Often, they re-configured their perception of their higher power as less dogmatic and more loving and fluid in its manifestation.

2) What is the impact of trauma on individuals’ relationships with their deity?

Most participants reported that, before the experience of trauma, they felt closely and securely connected with their god. They perceived their god to be benevolent, forgiving, and
protective, and trusted his power to ensure their health and well-being. This secure relationship was tied to the belief that the world is basically good.

After experiencing a traumatic event, many individuals reported a disruption in their relationship with their higher power. Some individuals perceived god as having deliberately caused the traumatic event, and therefore came to doubt his benevolence. Other individuals perceived god as having merely failed to prevent the traumatic event, and therefore came to doubt his protective power. The extent to which individuals perceived this as a betrayal was related to the outcome of the post-trauma process. For example, those who strengthened their faith after trauma reported some initial anger toward their god but they never lost trust: they maintained faith that he had sent the trauma for a good reason and would support them during recovery. In contrast, individuals who weakened their faith or developed a personal spirituality often experienced a deep sense of abandonment and betrayal by their god. Some questioned the rationality behind god’s decisions and wondered if god took pleasure in their suffering. Others reported anger and frustration toward their god for failing to protect them.

Strong feelings of anger toward god generally subsided as participants processed the traumatic event. Individuals who weakened their faith eventually established a distant, less-trusting relationship with god, or ceased to believe in god’s existence entirely. Some individuals who developed a personal spirituality were able to re-connect with god, but only by abandoning the notion that god is all-controlling and protective. Those who did reconnect with their higher power after a rupture in the relationship appeared to achieve that only by significantly reframing their understanding of their high power and rebuilding trust within that new relationship.

3) Are there individual or social factors that affect whether individuals strengthen or weaken their faith after trauma?
As mentioned above, the nature of the rupture in an individual’s relationship with god appears to influence the trajectory of their post-trauma religiosity: those who maintained trust in their god despite questioning god’s intentions strengthened their faith, while those who lost trust in their god tend to abandon their faith or to develop a personal, alternative spirituality.

The conceptual interpretation of the traumatic event also appears to influence whether individuals strengthen or weaken their faith. Those who interpreted their trauma as a life lesson and believed that god had provided them with the ability to overcome their grief strengthened their faith post-trauma. Typically, they were able to quickly identify the eventual positive effects that the trauma could have on their lives. This cognitive interpretation allowed these individuals to maintain their view of their deity as basically benevolent, and therefore to avoid dissonance with their pre-existing religious worldview. In contrast, those who weakened their faith attributed their trauma to the actions of a neglectful or even malicious god. Some believed that the trauma would not have occurred in a world with a god and therefore god could not exist. In essence, individuals who lost their faith were unable to assimilate their trauma into their religious framework and were therefore forced to radically reformulate their religious beliefs.

Social support within the religious community appears to be an important causal factor as well. Individuals who strengthened their faith reported receiving strong support from their Christian communities in the form of visits from their pastor, a close circle of Christian friends, or an outpouring of support from the congregation at large. Support from the religious community alleviated the emotional distress of the trauma and kept individuals connected to their faith throughout their recovery. In contrast, individuals who weakened their faith or developed a personal spirituality largely reported feeling disconnected from a religious or spiritual community after the trauma, heightening feelings of loneliness and alienation. Some decided that they no
longer fit into their religious community because they began to doubt the dogma of their church. Others questioned the motivations and actions of religious people, concluding that they directly contradicted the positive teachings of Christianity.

Post-traumatic growth also appears to influence the post-trauma trajectory of faith. Almost all participants, even those who abandoned their faith, reported some post-traumatic growth, but the degree of growth varied widely between individuals. Individuals who strengthened their faith or developed an individual spirituality identified multiple ways in which they had grown as a result of the trauma. Individuals who weakened their faith identified fewer ways in which they had grown, described them in less pronounced terms, and interlaced them with descriptions of the negative effects of the trauma. A willingness to view trauma in a positive light is congruent with a religious interpretation of adversity and may explain why those who remained religious reported greater personal growth. It should be noted that this process is likely bi-directional: while post-traumatic growth may encourage strengthening of faith, strengthened religiosity likely also contributes to post-traumatic growth.
Chapter 5: Discussion

The present study aimed to qualitatively explore religious and spiritual change after trauma. An important rationale for this study was to understand the process of faith change over time, given that almost all research to date (e.g. Desmond, 2012; Fallot & Heckman, 2005; Finkelhor et al., 1989) has been outcome-focused. A further aim was to shed light on why some individuals undergo a strengthening of faith and others a weakening of faith after trauma, given that prior studies have yielded contradictory findings in this regard (Ahrens et al., 2010; Falsetti et al., 2003; Fontana & Rosenheck, 2004). The study results will be discussed in relation to the extant literature on religious and spiritual change to demonstrate commonalities and differences between the current findings and the literature. This section will be divided into four themes that emerged from the results chapter. The process of strengthening or weakening faith will be described in relation to the contradictory literature on religious change. Emotional shifts regarding an individual’s relationship with a higher power will be explored within the context of attachment theory. Cognitive shifts in religious beliefs will be addressed in relation to theories of belief falsification, accommodation, and assimilation. Finally, post-traumatic growth as an outcome of trauma recovery and faith change will be considered within the literature on the intersections between spirituality and personal growth. This chapter will conclude by proposing a theoretical model that represents the cognitive, affective and relational processes associated with religious and spiritual change after trauma.

Strengthening or Weakening of Faith

The participants in the present study all described a process of faith change that resulted in a strengthening or weakening of their faith. This is consistent with the extant literature that has noted changes in religious and spiritual orientation after traumatic events ranging from sexual
assault to war (Ahrens et al., 2010; Fontana & Rosenheck, 2004). Religious beliefs constitute the backbone of a religious individual’s approach to the world. If their religious worldview is shattered through an unexpected and terrifying traumatic event, changes in their religious framework is often necessary to accommodate the traumatic experience. The shattering of beliefs and loss of meaning that so often accompanies trauma can lead to either a strengthening or weakening of faith. Fontana and Rosenheck (2004) explain this interesting paradox:

One of the most pervasive difficulties experienced by persons who have trouble coping with trauma is a loss of meaning or purpose to life that is often experienced as a weakening of religious faith. Paradoxically, although traumatic exposure often has a weakening effect on religious faith, it can also lead to its strengthening. Some writers have suggested that such a strengthening effect may come from embracing the redemptive role that suffering is accorded by many religions or from accepting the invitation to spiritual growth that trauma poses by virtue of its destructive effects on existing ideas of meaning and purpose (pp. 579).

Consistent with the above conjecture, participants in the study described a period of deep grief during which they experienced a sense of meaninglessness and lack of direction in their lives. Many expressed confusion about their core beliefs and questioned their devotion to god. However, as has been proposed by previous theorists (Janoff-Bulman, 1992), participants eventually emerged from their grief with a changed meaning framework that incorporated their experience of the trauma, and which manifested as strengthened faith, weakened faith or individual spirituality.

While both strengthening and weakening of faith was observed in the present study, the participants’ reports of religious change tended to be more varied than those reported in the literature. While some participants described clear-cut experiences of strengthened faith or weakened faith, more frequently they articulated a non-linear and often unresolved process of change. For instance, participants described their experience of faith change as ‘deepening’ or becoming more complex rather than ‘strengthening’, and many chose to maintain some elements
of their faith while discarding others. Furthermore, participants reflected that their faith change was an ongoing process, and that they could not easily articulate their current religious and spiritual beliefs. This is in contrast to prior literature on trauma and religion has hitherto largely framed their findings in terms of the more categorical terms “strengthening” and “weakening” of faith. For instance, Falsetti and colleagues (2003) created the Changes in Religious Beliefs Scale to assess strengthening and weakening of faith. This scale included forced choice questions that assessed whether an individual became less religious, more religious or did not change in their faith. This type of scale did not allow for the nuanced conceptualization of faith change found in the current study. In this respect, the findings of the present study expand upon previous categories of religious change by demonstrating that religious change may be more fragmented and process-based than previously described in the literature.

Even though the participants in the present study described a non-linear process of religious change, their eventual faith could be roughly classified into one of three orientations: strengthened faith, weakened faith and individual spirituality. These results diverge with previous literature (Falsetti et al., 2003; Overcash et al., 1996) that has divided individuals into two orientations: strengthened and weakened faith. The results of the current study found that participants made sense of their religion and trauma in unique ways and for a substantial minority this involved developing a personal spirituality that did not fit into a traditional religious category. While these individuals described themselves as devout, they did not adhere to a recognized religious identity, thus blurring the lines between “strengthened” and “weakened” faith. Most published questionnaire-based studies exploring religious change after trauma do not differentiate between different manifestations of “strengthened faith” (Ben-Ezra et al., 2010; Fontana & Rosenheck, 2004). For example, as part of their study on Jewish women and sexual
assault, Ben-Ezra and colleagues (2010) permitted only four options for religious orientation: secular, traditional, observant and ultra-orthodox, obscuring less conventional faith orientations such as a personal spirituality. Some individuals who endorsed “strengthened faith” in previous quantitative studies in fact may have developed a more personal religion, but this failed to be captured in questionnaire-based assessments. Moreover, participants in the present study who reported weakening their faith differed considerably in their beliefs with a few participants becoming agnostic or atheist, but others remaining more ambivalent about their belief in god or continuing to believe in some form of a higher power. These subtle differences are not captured in research that simply examines the strengthening and weakening of faith, obscuring important details about the nature of religious change. The findings of this study therefore demonstrate the importance of conducting exploratory, qualitative studies in new research areas prior to conducting quantitative studies. Rather than imposing categories (such as strengthened faith/weakened faith) onto individual experiences, categories must be constructed from the ground up and based upon complex individual experiences that are can be gleaned from qualitative methodologies.

This study was motivated by the intriguingly contradictory findings in the literature vis-à-vis whether individuals strengthen or weaken their faith after trauma. Most studies (e.g. Ahrens et al., 2010; Schwartzberg & Janoff-Bulman, 1991; Tausch et al., 2011) have found that a strengthening of faith after trauma is the norm, as people tend to turn to their religion for psychological comfort and social support. Survivors of trauma may find solace in communicating with members of their faith community and contemplating religious teachings on the meaning of life and suffering. For example, Fontana and Rosenheck (2004) noted that for veterans of war “Social support from fellow believers is available from attending religious services and
participating in religious activities” (p. 579), while Ahrens and colleagues (2010) demonstrated that survivors of sexual assault engaged in relatively high levels of religious coping that focused on finding meaning and emotional comfort in the beliefs and activities of their spiritual community. These findings that the majority of individuals move toward their religion during times of distress is in contrast to the findings of the present study, in which only three of the eleven participants experienced a strengthening of faith. This discrepancy may result from methodological differences in the current study versus previous studies (Ahrens et al., 2010; Tausch et al., 2011).

First, the discrepancy may be a result of the temporal dimension of post-trauma religious change. The present study showed that individuals fluctuate in their level of faith throughout their process of recovery. Therefore, if one study records attitudes one month after trauma, and another study records attitudes ten years after a trauma, this may create a false impression of two very different “outcomes” even if all individuals are in fact undergoing the same process of change. In one of the few qualitative studies on religious change after trauma, Overcash and colleagues (1996) reported that a minority of participants described initially questioning their faith after the trauma but later strengthening their religiosity after working though doubts. Likewise, Japanese survivors of the atomic bomb lost their faith immediately after the catastrophe but reported returning to their religion several years later (Lifton, 1967). These findings corroborate the results of the current study in which several individuals reported losing their faith and then developing a personal spirituality after deeply reconsidering the nature of their higher power and religious beliefs. Moreover, even individuals who strengthened their faith reported grappling with questions and doubts related to their faith immediately after the trauma. Taken together, these findings reflect on the importance of attending to the timeline of religious change post-trauma,
given that faith change is often a long process and individuals relate differently to their faith at points during recovery.

Secondly, the discrepancy may be the result of differing numbers of traumatic events. A study by Falsetti and colleagues (2003) examined changes to religious faith over time in relation to the number of traumas experienced. They found that individuals who experienced one trauma generally reported a weakening of religious faith, while individuals who had experienced multiple traumas reported far fewer changes in faith and greater intrinsic religiosity. The current study broadly confirms these findings: most of the participants who experienced multiple traumas described themselves as devoted to a personal spirituality. Falsetti and colleagues (2003) surmise that people who experience multiple traumas are more likely to be intrinsically religious because it helps them cope with the unpredictability of life. In addition, it appears that individuals who experience multiple forms of adversity think more deeply about their core beliefs, resulting in the development of a deeper intrinsic spirituality and distancing from conventional faith.

Finally, previous literature and the current study results converge on the notion that the process of religious change is similar across all individuals, regardless of their eventual religious orientation. Falsetti and colleagues write:

> When individuals are confronted with new information that does not fit their belief system, such as being confronted by a traumatic experience, they may become overwhelmed by this information and its accompanying emotions…Victims attempt to integrate the new information regarding the traumatic experience through either assimilation, accommodation, or over-accommodation (p.391).

Falsetti and colleagues suggest that trauma victims all go through a similar process of attempting to make sense of their trauma by re-formulating their religious beliefs. While religious beliefs can diverge vastly among previously religious survivors of trauma, it appears that that similar psychological processes, such as self-understanding or acceptance, can be achieved through
different external frameworks of meaning, indicating that the process rather than the beliefs themselves is crucial to healthy development after trauma. Whether participants ultimately strengthened or weakened their faith was highly influenced by their relationship with their deity, a topic to which we will turn in the following section.

**Attachment to God**

Participants in the current study described strong feelings of attachment toward their deity, which was frequently disrupted in the aftermath of the trauma. While for some participants this involved a temporary distancing or questioning of their god, for other participants this meant an irreparable betrayal by their higher power. Regardless of their perceptions of god post-trauma, the participants’ relationship with their deity emerged as one of the most emotionally-charged and salient experiences associated with religious change.

Janoff-Bulman (1992) contends that all individuals unconsciously hold positive assumptions that our world is benevolent and meaningful, which can be shattered in the aftermath of trauma. The results of the current study extend this theory by demonstrating that for many religious individuals, positive assumptions about the world are interpreted within the context of their personal relationship with their deity. The belief that the world is basically a good place is often tied to the perception of god as a protective being with a benevolent plan. The belief that the world is fair is associated with the notion that god provides ultimate justice. Participants described how after the trauma their religious beliefs were shaken because they were forced to consider the fact that their god may not be benevolent, protective and just. Because god was central to most participants’ religiosity, their relationship was often where the most emotionally devastating effects of their trauma were registered. These findings are supported by the extant literature on religious change. Ben-Ezra and colleagues (2010) write:
Because of the trauma, the belief in a just and benevolent world is shattered. The negative schema change can also obstruct one’s religious belief and faith. For a religious person, faith is an essential part of life. The effect of trauma may lead to the feeling that God had forsaken the survivor (p. 7).

Ben-Ezra and colleagues (2010) describe how the perception of god as a protector is central to their schemas about themselves and the world.

The majority of the participants in the current study reported a personal connection with god. Pre-trauma, most participants communicated with god daily and felt that god was always present in their lives. Participants described their deity as a ‘good friend’ or a ‘parent-figure’ who provided them with comfort on a daily basis. This is congruent with literature that conceptualizes god as an attachment figure that provides religious individuals with a sense of safety and comfort (Kirkpatrick, 1992). Attachment theory (Bowlby, 1969) contends that infants are evolutionarily programmed to develop attachments with adult caregivers who provide them with basic physical and emotional needs. In optimal situations, the infant develops a secure attachment with their mother or primary caregiver who is perceived as protective, comforting and stable. A secure attachment is characterized by a desire for proximity and comfort, and the perception of the caregiver as a secure base from which to explore and a safe haven during times of distress (Bowlby, 1969). Attachment theory can provide a framework for understanding relationships with a higher power (Cicirelli, 2004; Cooper, Bruce, Harman & Boccaccini, 2009; Kelley, 2009; Kirkpatrick, 1992). Kirkpatrick (1992) writes:

There appears to be persuasive evidence not only that people turn to religion, and to God in particular, in response to the same sorts of events known to activate the attachment system, but that doing so often provides the comfort and security associated with attachment relationships (p. 9).

The results of the current study demonstrate that many participants viewed their deity as a safe haven and sought wisdom and comfort from their god when they encountered challenges in their
life, consistent with a study revealing that prayer and worship increased during times of danger and stress (Pargament & Hahn, 1986). However, it should be noted that while the majority of participants reported a personal relationship with their god, this experience was not universal. Some participants conceived of their god as an abstract force without human characters. Therefore, the results qualify attachment theory as a useful construct for understanding the religious experience of many Christians but one that can by no means be generalized to all adherents (Kelley, 2009).

Participants in the current study depicted differing relationships with their god. While some related to him as a benevolent parent, others characterized their god as mercurial in temperament and potentially angry, indicating that individuals develop different attachments with their deity depending of their perception of him. The different attachment relationships found in the present study are consistent with research (Ainsworth, Blehar, Waters & Wall, 1978) concluding that individuals vary in their human attachment styles and can be divided into three categories: secure, resistant-ambivalent and avoidant. Secure infants trust in their caregivers’ ability to provide comfort and security and do not need frequent reassurance of this. Resistant-ambivalent infants fear rejection from their caretakers and become preoccupied with seeking reassurance that they are in fact accepted. Avoidant infants expect rejection from their caretakers and respond by suppressing their desire for connection (Kelley, 2009). Participants differed in the level of intimacy and security they experienced vis-à-vis their god. For example, some participants’ relationship with god resembled the resistant-ambivalent attachment style where rejection by the attachment figure is feared and signs of approval are constantly sought, while others derived comfort and security from their god in a securely attached relationship.
The study results confirm variation in attachment styles toward god but also complicate previous findings that a secure relationship with god is associated with positive religious interpretations of events during times of crisis, while an insecure relationship with god is associated with a failure to find religious meaning in crisis (Ano & Vasconcelles, 2005; Ellison, Bradshaw, Flannelly & Galek, 2014). While some participants with a secure attachment to their deity interpreted their trauma within a positive religious framework, an equal number of participants described positive, secure relationships with their god but reported that this relationship was damaged after their trauma, leading to difficulty finding positive religious meaning in the event. This could be explained by an important distinction between a human attachment figure and a god attachment figure: god is perceived as having infinite supernatural powers. While parents are expected to meet the needs of their children to the best of their abilities, it is understood at a relatively young age that there are limits to parental power. Parents cannot, for example, stop a child’s best friend from moving away. However, adherents are often taught from a young age that god created and controls the universe, and has the power to alter any aspect of people’s lives. The results of this study suggest that this prevalent Christian belief in an all-powerful deity can deeply damage even secure attachments because individuals expect their god to be both able and willing to prevent harm.

Attachment to god after a trauma depends not only on how god is perceived, but more importantly on how his actions are interpreted. The current study revealed that participants interpret the actions of their god in several different ways, resulting in vastly divergent patterns of relating to their higher power. In a book-length study of religion and coping, Pargament (1997) outlines six ways in which a trauma can be reconciled with one’s relationship to god, which
serves as a useful framework for categorizing the different interpretations of god’s actions found in the current study.

Trauma can be viewed as a *spiritual opportunity* for growth and self-understanding that has been sent by god to initiate change. Several participants who ultimately strengthened their faith unfailingly believed that god had a good reason for sending the trauma and that the rewards of the experience would be revealed with time. Trauma can also be understood as a result of *human sinfulness*: one does not deserve a good life or it being punished for their sins. This interpretation was not observed in the current study. Although some participants considered the possibility that god thought they deserved the trauma, none believed that their negative actions precipitated the distressing event. A trauma can be viewed in terms of *limited ability to understand* the divine workings of god. This view was expressed by some participants who came to believe that god works in irrational or mysterious ways.

A trauma can also be understood as an action by a *punishing god* who may be vengeful or angry. Pargament (1997) argues that “Typically this [view] is the last resort” because “People are for the most part reluctant to change their conception of the sacred” (p.226). He suggests that people tend to assume that a divine punishment is deserved, because they are unwilling to abandon their belief in a just world. The present study contradicts Pargament’s (1997) view: the results suggest that trauma is in fact often interpreted in terms of unjust divine punishment. Indeed, it is often that sense of injustice that disrupts the trauma survivor’s worldview and attachment to god. Several participants reported feeling betrayed by a punitive and unfair god, sometimes causing irreparable damage to the relationship.

Another way a trauma can be viewed is as the *devil’s doing*. This is an attempt to deflect the blame from god towards competing evil force. This interpretation was not observed in the
current study. Finally, trauma can be understood as being the result of a *limited god*. In this reframing, individuals recognize the limitations of god’s power over human lives. The study results suggest that this interpretation may be more common among individuals who have a distant or nonexistent personal relationship with god. For example, some participants believed that god had power over the overall workings of universe, but not over their life specifically and therefore did not experience anger toward their deity after their trauma. Reframing god as limited can also help repair a damaged attachment to god. Some participants who believed in an all-powerful, omnipotent god, reframed their deity’s powers as limited after their trauma, allowing them to reestablish a secure attachment with their higher power while also taking on greater responsibility for their own fate.

Previous scholarship has suggested parallels between attachment to humans and attachment to god. Kirkpatrick (1992) presented two hypotheses that outline how individual differences in attachment to god can be traced back to early human attachment relationships. The compensation hypothesis proposes that humans who fail to develop secure attachments with primary caregivers may develop a secure attachment with god to compensate for their insecurity in their human attachments. The correspondence hypothesis suggests that individuals who develop secure attachments with primary caregivers are likely to develop a secure attachment with their god because attachment models tend to be consistent over time (Rowatt & Kirkpatrick, 2002). The present study results suggest that in addition to early childhood experiences affecting attachment to god, the nature of an attachment relationship to a god can impact on future adult relationships. Several participants expressed that after losing trust in god to protect them from trauma, they had more difficulty trusting in human adult relationships. Beginning with the seminal publication by Hazan and Shaver (1987), an abundance of research has demonstrated the
influence that early attachments to primary caregivers exert on romantic attachments in adulthood. To date, no known studies have investigated the impact of ruptures in attachment to god on human attachment relationships, but preliminary results from this study indicate that this could be a fruitful area of future research.

Participants reported experienced significant changes in their attachment to god after processing their traumatic event. Some reported a preoccupied attachment to god before their trauma but a secure attachment after working through their trauma and re-conceptualizing their deity as loving and accepting. One way in which an attachment relationship to god is different from an attachment relationship to a human being is that (according to a naturalistic scientific perspective, at least) god is constructed in the mind and has no existence independent of human belief in him. Therefore, attachment relationships to a higher power may be more malleable than human attachment relationships. Recent research by Cooper and colleagues (2009) revealed that unlike human attachment relationships (where approximately 50% of individuals are securely attached [Webster, 1998]), only 26% of individuals in their study reported being securely attached to god, with the other 74% roughly divided between “preoccupied”, “dismissing” and “fearful” attachment styles. The authors interpreted this difference as existing because attachment to god is symbolic rather than concrete, which could result in more fluid attachment relationships with a higher power. This was demonstrated by the current study where participants frequently changed their attachments to god as they moved through their process of healing from the trauma. In the following section, we will turn from a discussion of attachment to god to an exploration of the cognitive dimensions of faith change.

**Cognitive Changes in Worldview**
As discussed above, trauma has the capacity to disrupt deeply held cognitive schemas regarding the self, others and the world (Janoff-Bulman, 1992). All of the participants in the current study described traumatic changes in their worldview that impacted on their religious or secular beliefs. Participants were unable to make sense of their traumatic event using their prior religious framework and were forced to either assimilate the trauma into their prior religious framework (thus strengthening their faith) or develop a new worldview that accommodated the traumatic event (thus weakening their faith or developing an individual spirituality). This process of cognitive change demonstrated in the present study is consistent with cognitive theories of trauma (Ehlers & Clark, 2000; Janoff-Bulman, 1992; McCann, Sakheim & Abrahamson, 1988; Resick & Schnick, 1992) proposing that the experience of trauma disrupts personal schemas and implicitly held propositions about the world, and that it is the contradiction between the trauma and prior beliefs that lead to emotional distress and PTSD symptoms. Janoff-Bulman (1992) contends that people hold three basic assumptions: the world is benevolent, the world is meaningful and the self is worthy. He argues that the tendency to view the self and the world in optimistic terms arises out of positive attachment relationships. As children, many of us learn that our caregivers are trustworthy, benevolent and protective, and we generalize these specific personal experiences to beliefs about the broader world. Indeed, ample research reveals that healthy functioning adults hold unrealistically positive beliefs about their competencies, their future success, and the likelihood that disaster will befall them (Robins & Beer, 2001).

Most of the time, positive beliefs about the world are adaptive in that they allow individuals to pursue new experiences with confidence and expectation of success (Janoff-Bulam, 1992). In the aftermath of trauma, however, the falsification of these beliefs may be one of the major sources of emotional distress. In the current study, participants reported holding
religiously-based optimistic beliefs about the world. Congruent with Janoff-Bulman’s (1992) first basic assumption (“the world is benevolent”), participants by-and-large believed that god is kind, protective, and helpful. In keeping with Janoff-Bulman’s (1992) second basic assumption (“the world is meaningful”), participants reported a desire to comprehend apparently random and senseless events as meaningful and sensical within their religious frameworks. For example, several participants reported implicitly believing that god ensures that bad things only happen to bad people. Congruent with Janoff-Bulman’s (1992) third basic assumption (“the self is worthy”), several participants reported implicit prior beliefs that religiosity had a payoff: they assumed that if they acted as good Christians they would be rewarded. Janoff-Bulman (1992) remarks that we are often unaware of our basic assumptions and indeed participants reported only becoming aware of their core religious beliefs after their trauma.

When trauma befalls individuals who hold these positive assumptions about the self and the world, underlying beliefs can be shattered and cognitive disintegration can result (Janoff-Bulman, 1992). For example, Perloff (1983) found that rape survivors who previously believed they were invulnerable to crime had a more difficult time recovering than rape survivors who believed that they were as vulnerable as anyone else to crime. The implication is that it is the conceptual disjuncture between prior beliefs and the traumatic event, rather than just the distressing nature of the traumatic event itself, which causes emotional distress. This conceptual disjuncture was apparent in all of the participants who described a period of cognitive disintegration during which they were unable to make sense of their trauma within their prior system of religious beliefs. This post-trauma phase was marked by depression, grief and cognitive states of bewilderment, confusion and apathy. Participants who strengthened their religious beliefs generally described less cognitive dissonance after their trauma, consistent with
research showing that those who hold more benevolent beliefs about people and the world post-trauma report greater investment in spirituality (Desmond, 2012). Cognitive reframing that allows for continued belief in the benevolence of god protects individuals from the extreme cognitive dissonance that is more apparent in those who lose or greatly alter their faith.

Inhelder and Piaget’s (1958) theoretical constructs of assimilation and accommodation are helpful for understanding the cognitive dimensions of trauma processing. Assimilation is the act of interpreting new experiences in ways that make sense within an existing schema without changing that schema. Accommodation is the process of changing an existing schema to fit with a new experience and is associated with adaptive learning. Research (Overcash et al., 1996) in the area of religion and trauma has suggested that, in the wake of trauma, the trauma is usually assimilated into existing religious frameworks rather than the religious frameworks being accommodated to the trauma, due to the fact that religious beliefs tend to be resistant to change. However, Hollon and Garber (1988) contend that, from a therapeutic perspective, accommodation is often preferable to assimilation: assimilation leaves individuals vulnerable to a future repetition of belief-shattering and its emotional devastation. Results of the present study diverge from previous scholarship in that participants more often engaged in accommodation, rather than assimilation. Participants who strengthened their faith largely assimilated the traumatic experience into their pre-existing religious framework; they decided to interpret the trauma as a lesson from god. All other participants modified their religious framework so as to accommodate their traumatic experience, either by abandoning their religious beliefs or developing a personal, alternative spirituality. Consistent with the theorizing of Hollon and Garber (1988), almost all participants who changed their worldview to accommodate their trauma
developed adaptive frameworks that maintained an optimistic worldview, tempered with greater realism.

One interesting conjecture is that individuals who, in the aftermath of trauma, develop an individual spirituality that draws upon a myriad of religious and spiritual traditions may hold a more cognitively flexible worldview that could render them more resilient to trauma in the future. This hypothesis has yet to be investigated but the present results indicate that trauma compels many individuals to be creative and flexible in their thinking, possibly resulting in greater resilience to future events that are incompatible with their worldview. While assimilation of a traumatic event into one’s religious framework also appears to result in personal growth, assimilation could leave individuals more vulnerable to cognitive disintegration if a future event is again incompatible with their religious framework.

Not all individuals who engage in accommodation experience adaptive growth. Resick and Schnick (1992) caution that over-accommodation can be problematic for survivors of trauma because it can lead to maladaptive, unrealistically negative basic assumptions such as “the world is dangerous” or “I can trust no one”. Over-accommodation may explain the experience of the participants who did not report some form of post-traumatic growth. After the trauma, these participants reported no longer believing that people are basically good or that the world is a safe place. These broad, negative generalizations about our social world can be understood as over-accommodations resulting from their attempts to make sense of the intense pain and fear resulting from their trauma, which impedes individuals’ ability to grow from their experiences.

While participants’ experiences can be interpreted within the dichotomy of assimilation/accommodation, results also complicate this theoretical framework. Some individuals demonstrated ambivalence about whether to assimilate or accommodate their
traumatic experience. For example, some participants alternated between opposing narratives of their religious beliefs, sometimes expressing their belief that the trauma was a lesson sent by god, while other times reflecting that they had lost faith in their god as a result of the trauma. This demonstrates the tenacity of people’s basic assumptions: although most participants altered their belief structure to accommodate their trauma, some appeared to experience a psychological pull toward their prior belief system. The fact that many participants were unwilling to completely lose their faith in god also speaks to the resiliency of pre-existing belief structures. Most of the study participants who weakened their faith opted to maintain their belief in a higher power but adjusted their perception of god’s power in their lives. Overcash and colleagues (1996) write:

> Although the empirical assumptions about the safety and predictability of one’s world can be directly disconfirmed by traumatic events, most fundamental religious assumptions (e.g., “God has a plan”) cannot be so viewed. Given the potential resilience of religious beliefs to empirical disconfirmation, then, it seems reasonable to expect that such beliefs will be less likely to be accommodated when an individual experiences major stressful events (p. 456).

The results of the current study dispute this claim that fundamental religious assumptions cannot be directly disconfirmed by trauma. Many participants expressed changed ideas regarding the nature of their god and his power in their lives. However, participants did exhibit enduring tensions between their pre- and post-trauma religious frameworks even years after the event, speaking to the resiliency of religious beliefs articulated in the above quote.

McCann and colleagues’ (1988) model of psychological adaptation post-trauma further elaborates the interpretation of the current findings as a process of cognitive reframing and adaptation. Their model proposes five major areas of functioning that shape fundamental views of the self and others: safety, trust, power, esteem and intimacy. Core beliefs within these five domains develop as a result of life experiences and social context. Survivors of trauma can develop negative schemas about themselves and the world within each of the five domains, and
their schemas differentially impact psychological functioning. When discrepancies exist between prior cognitive schemas and new experiences, cognitive processing occurs until the conflict is resolved. The current results can be interpreted within this domain theory of cognitive adaptation, as many of the shattered beliefs expressed by participants fall into the five categories of functioning. With respect to safety, some participants expressed feeling that the world is unpredictable and god could no longer be counted on to be protective. Within the domain of trust, multiple participants verbalized a loss of trust in god and their religious community. Interestingly, some participants who lost their trust in god modified their schema to include a greater trust in themselves. Participants revealed diverse schemas with respect to power: some lost their faith in god’s power, others strengthened their belief in his control in their lives and still others developed a greater awareness of their personal power to enact change. Participants expressed fewer schematic changes with respect to the domains of esteem and intimacy. This theoretical framework is useful for understanding the differential impact of different types of traumas on domains of functioning. For example, the two participants who experienced assaults reported schematic changes primarily in the areas of safety and trust, while the multiple participants who experienced loss displayed schematic changes primarily in the areas of trust and intimacy. Knowledge of which schematic domains are most often affected by particular sorts of traumatic events may help therapists focus their cognitive interventions in the specific areas of belief that have been negatively affected by trauma. Once participants successful reframed their religious beliefs in a way that gave meaning to their trauma, many reported experiencing personal growth. This experience will be explored in the following section.

Post-Traumatic Growth
In the process of resolving their trauma, participants were worked through emotional attachments to their higher power and cognitive changes in their worldview. This required deep contemplation, and indeed participants described a period of reflection and exploration during which they grappled with new philosophical or religious ideas and were open to different spiritual practices. Almost all participants reported emerging from this period of exploration with sense that they had grown and deepened their sense of self, and indeed this is consistent with evidence that post-traumatic growth is apparent within most populations of trauma survivors (Joseph et al., 2012; Linley & Joseph, 2004). Tedeschi and Calhoun (1996) observed that three main areas of positive growth have been identified within the literature; these domains are consistent with those identified in the present study. First, individuals report enhanced relationships. Several participants reflected that as a result of working through the pain of their traumas they developed greater empathy for others, which proved helpful in their roles as teachers and mentors. Second, individuals develop more positive views of themselves. Participants reflected that they perceived themselves as more resilient and wise after recovering from their trauma. Third, individuals report changes in their life philosophies. Participants reflected that they had a deeper appreciation for the positive in her life and that they came view life as a process rather than a series of end-goals.

While growth was noted in all three of the areas outlined by Tedeschi and Calhoun (1996), study results indicate that the type of religious change is roughly associated with different types of post-traumatic growth. Prior research (Calhoun et al., 2000; Kennedy et al., 1998; Shaw et al., 2005) has indicated that strengthening of religion or spirituality is associated with post-traumatic growth. However, the present study discovered that individuals who weakened their faith also experienced post-traumatic growth, albeit to a lesser extent than those who
strengthened their faith. Those individuals who weakened their faith appeared to experience post-traumatic growth mostly in the area of changing views of self: as they abandoned their reliance on god, they became more aware of their personal power, wisdom and resiliency. In contrast, those who strengthened their faith most often cited enhanced relationships and changes in their life philosophies, while those who developed a personal spirituality noted positive changes in all three domains of growth.

These associations between religious orientation post-trauma and areas of post-traumatic growth could be explained by the fact that only some facets of religiosity are associated with post-traumatic growth. For example, a study by Calhoun and colleagues (2000) demonstrated that rumination and a “quest” religious orientation were associated with post-traumatic growth, while religious participation alone revealed no association. The quest orientation involves a willingness to tackle existential questions and alter pre-existing religious schemas (Batson & Schoenrade, 1991), which may explain why participants who developed an individual spirituality described growth in all three domains of positive change. Those who develop a personal spirituality are particularly open to exploring alternative beliefs, re-conceptualizing their religious schemas and exploring alternative worldviews, resulting in enhanced connections with themselves and others. Moreover, those who weaken their faith may still experience post-traumatic growth (albeit to a lesser extent): although they did not participate in religious activities, many reported engaging in rumination and exploration of existential questions after their trauma, which is associated with growth. Through exploring their beliefs, participants who strengthened and weakened their faith reported becoming more appreciative of and accepting of their lives even though they reached different conclusions regarding their faith orientation. Consistent with the results of the above study (Calhoun et al., 2000), it appears that a willingness to engage in productive rumination and
exploration of beliefs are the most important ingredients for post-traumatic growth; religiosity alone is not sufficient. That said, intrinsic religiosity (genuine belief in god) and social support have been shown to enhance post-traumatic growth (Park et al., 1996) and indeed the participants who strengthened their faith demonstrated high levels of intrinsic religiosity, social support within their church congregation and post-traumatic growth in the areas of enhanced relationships and changes in their life philosophies.

The process of religious and spiritual change observed in the current study demonstrates the close relationship between religious change and post-traumatic growth. Both religious change and post-traumatic growth generally involve positive changes to one’s worldview that accommodate existential beliefs around suffering, purpose and acceptance. The current study found that shattering of beliefs and emotional distress is in fact necessary for religious change and post-traumatic growth to occur. As such, the process of religious change observed in this study can be mapped onto models of post-traumatic growth (Joseph & Linley, 2005; Joseph et al., 2012; Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004), most of which are based upon Janoff-Bulman’s (1992) theory of shattered assumptions. The first comprehensive model of post-traumatic growth proposed by Tedeschi and Calhoun (2004) posit that a “seismic event” disrupts prior beliefs, life narratives and means of coping with emotional distress. This results in cognitive processing or rumination that gradually leads to reduced emotional distress and more deliberate exploration of new beliefs. Self-disclosure and social support are important components of this process. Eventually, new schemas are established and newfound wisdom and post-traumatic growth result. In this model, rumination is proposed as a productive and meaningful process in making sense of trauma, consistent with participants’ descriptions of engaging in a period of reflection and exploration, resulting in a new belief system and post-traumatic growth. In contrast to the model proposed by
Tedeschi and Calhoun (2004) that included social support as a necessary element post-traumatic growth, several participants in the present study who reported post-traumatic growth reflected that they felt alone during their process of change. This suggests that social support may be a helpful but not a crucial aspect of growth after trauma for religious individuals.

The present study also diverged from theories of post-traumatic growth with respect to the notion that accommodation of the traumatic experience alone produces post-traumatic growth. Joseph and Linley’s (2005) organismic valuing theory of growth through adversity built upon Tedeschi and Calhoun’s (2004) model but emphasized humans’ innate tendency to be active and growth-oriented as an explanation for why post-traumatic growth occurs. Furthermore, they proposed the concepts of assimilation, negative accommodation (also termed over-accommodation) and positive accommodation to explain why not all individuals who experience trauma report post-traumatic growth. Joseph and Linley (2005) contend that only positive accommodation produces post-traumatic growth, while assimilation prevents learning and growth, and negative accommodation results in a pessimistic worldview. In contrast to this proposition, the study results revealed that participants who assimilated their trauma into their pre-existing religious worldview experienced the greatest amounts of post-traumatic growth. An explanation for this is that while these individuals did not change their core religious faith, they did change their understanding of god’s role in the world to accommodate the traumatic experience. For example, the participants who strengthened their faith reflected that they learned to trust in god’s benevolent plan even if it involved personal suffering. Of course, assimilation may leave religious individuals more vulnerable to future adversity if the adversity is such that it cannot be assimilated into their perceptions of a protective and benevolent god. Small discrepancies notwithstanding, the existing models of post-traumatic growth capture the process
of religious change and post-traumatic growth observed in this study. In the following section, an integrated model of the process of religious and spiritual change will be described.

**Integrated Model of Religious Change after Trauma**

The results of this study demonstrate that religious and spiritual change after trauma occurs through a cognitive-affective process of reconceptualizing one’s faith in relation to one’s core beliefs and relationship with a higher power. In the aftermath of trauma, religious beliefs about the self and world can be shattered, leaving individuals to grapple with how to make sense of a world that contains senseless tragedy. Individuals’ relationship with their higher power often plays a central role in the process of meaning building after trauma, and directly impacts whether individuals will strengthen their faith, weaken their faith or develop a personal spirituality. Regardless of individuals’ final faith orientation, the process of working through their trauma and religious beliefs results in post-traumatic growth in the form of greater resiliency, acceptance, and appreciation of life. In this section, I will propose a model of religious and spiritual change following trauma that integrates the cognitive, affective and relational processes involved in trauma recovery and religious change.

The results of this study demonstrate that religious change after trauma is a complex process that involves at its core the cognitive process of developing religious beliefs that account for and give meaning to a traumatic experience. This cognitive process of meaning-making coincides with an affective process of grief and a relational process of negotiating one’s attachment to a higher power. This suggests that a model of religious and spiritual change should necessarily reflect the cognitive, affective and relational processes that compromise religious change after trauma. Of course, these processes are not mutually exclusive and as such, the proposed model captures the integration and bidirectional influences of cognition, emotion and
relationships. The results indicate that while individuals follow a general progression from traumatic loss to exploration to resolution of their trauma and religious orientation, these transitions are non-linear and at times involve cycling back to moments of loss after establishing a new belief or re-exploring alternative meaning frameworks after having established a new faith orientation. In this respect, the model reflects the disjointed and at times cyclical nature of individuals’ process of religious change, while still acknowledging the general progression towards a resolution experienced by the participations in the current study. All of these experiences take place within the socio-cultural context of the individual that is comprised of cultural meanings, social supports and family influences.

Visually, the model (see Figure 1) consists of a large circle containing three sets of overlapping circles that are connected via bidirectional arrows. The large circle represents the socio-cultural context of the individual. Within this circle, the trauma that triggers a crisis in faith is situated at the top of the diagram. Three sets of three circles represent the different stages that individuals move through in their process of faith change: traumatic loss, exploration, and resolution and growth. Within each stage, overlapping circles represent the cognitive, affective and relational experiences of the individual as they process their trauma and reconsider their faith. These circles are interconnected to reflect the integrative nature of cognitions, emotions and relationships. The cognitive process of religious change represents a movement from shattered beliefs to curiosity to the development of new religious beliefs or strengthening of previous beliefs. The affective process of religious change represents a movement from depression to openness to deeper appreciation of life. The relational process of religious change represents a movement from disrupted attachment to a higher power to fluid attachment to either reattachment or resolution of a severed attachment with a higher power. These three processes are not
necessarily linear and the individual moves back and forth between the stages of traumatic loss and exploration before achieving full resolution and growth. This fluidity of movement is represented by bidirectional arrows between each of the stages. In summary, this model captures the internal cognitive, affective and relational processes associated with religious and spiritual change as individuals move through loss and exploration to achieve a meaningful resolution to their trauma and religious beliefs.
Figure 1. Model depicting process of religious and spiritual change
Chapter 6: Conclusions

This chapter will explore the implications of the present study’s findings for both counselling practice and research. The chapter will begin with a discussion of how the current findings can be used to help practitioners develop strategies for working with clients who experience a crisis in faith after trauma. Suggestions will be based upon the participants’ experiences, as well as empirical research examining the process by which clients undergo post-traumatic growth after trauma. This chapter will then briefly discuss the implications of the current study for research in the area of trauma and religion. Finally, the chapter will conclude by outlining limitations of the study and suggesting areas of future research.

Implications for Counselling

The findings of the current study offer insight into preferred methods for counselling clients who experience a change in their faith after a trauma. Basic therapeutic interventions such as empathy, active listening, a non-judgmental approach and the development of a safe and nurturing therapeutic alliance are essential for any client who has experienced a traumatic event or rupture in their religious worldview. More specific interventions for individuals grappling with religious beliefs after a trauma are outlined below.

Consistent with the results of the current study, research shows that trauma therapists believe that a discussion of religion and spirituality is particularly beneficial for trauma survivors because treatment often involves addressing existential questions and finding meaning in the trauma (Zenkert, Brabender & Slater, 2014). Moreover, most religious clients believe that counselling is an appropriate forum to discuss religious concerns and express the desire to explore their faith in therapy (Rose, Westefeld & Ansley, 2001). Although discussions of religion and spirituality can be a crucial component of trauma treatment, religion and spirituality are
highly personal and require particular sensitivity when working with clients. It is important for counsellors to withhold their own beliefs and experiences with religion and spirituality so that they do not inadvertently impose their religious or secular values on their clients (Frame, 2000). Particularly with respect to clients who are in the process of re-conceptualizing their religious beliefs, counsellors should maintain focus on the process of working through religious beliefs rather than the eventual set of beliefs they develop. Finally, given that the client may feel more comfortable discussing faith-based concerns with a counsellor who has some knowledge of their religious or spiritual tradition, it would be important for counsellors to develop greater knowledge and competency in the areas of religion and spirituality (Schlosser et al., 2009).

One counselling technique that may be especially beneficial for participants who experience religious change is helping them develop a meaningful narrative of their trauma and religious change. Narrative therapists contend that telling stories helps people construct their identities and imbue their lives and relationships with meaning (Combs & Freedman, 2012; White & Epston, 1990). They argue that clients can tell their life stories in different ways and that some narrations open up possibilities for viewing their experiences within more positive and action-oriented frameworks. In keeping with the narrative therapy model, counsellors working with clients who experienced changes in faith after trauma may encourage them to experiment with telling different versions of their faith story that situate them as active and resilient agents in their own lives. Creating a “preferred story” of their faith change may help clients resolve internal conflicts and develop a greater sense of power and agency as they move forward (Combs & Freedman, 2012). Furthermore, the use of images and metaphors stood out in many of the research interviews conducted for this study. Clients grappling with intense and conflicting emotions may find imagery or metaphor to be a useful means of expressing themselves and
working through difficult emotions. Guided imagery has long been used in counselling to help clients relax, resolve inner conflicts and generate non-verbal interpretations of experiences (Arbuthnott, Arbuthnott & Rossiter, 2001). In conjunction with developing a preferred narrative, counsellors may encourage clients to construct meaningful images, religious or otherwise, that capture their complex experience.

The results of the study clearly support a cognitive model of trauma recovery given that most clients largely described a process of working through conflicting beliefs resulting from the trauma. Therefore, the primary work for the therapist is to facilitate emotional and cognitive processing of the trauma and associated religious beliefs. Ehlers and Clark (2000) suggest that a cognitive approach to trauma treatment requires that the trauma memory be “elaborated and integrated into the context of the individual's preceding and subsequent experience in order to reduce intrusive re-experiencing” (p. 335), effectively describing a process of assimilation and accommodation. It may be helpful for the counsellor to encourage the client to identify and explore stuck points between their prior beliefs and their new experiences. Rumination is not always a negative behaviour, and deliberate rumination on the traumatic event can in fact help integrate the trauma into an individual’s worldview (Stockton, Hunt & Joseph, 2011). The counsellor can facilitate reflection through a variety of interventions including expressive writing, creating “preferred” narratives of the trauma and guided imagery. It may be helpful for counsellors to remain attune to possible over-accommodation of the traumatic information (e.g. “danger is everywhere”), gently challenge those assumptions and guide the client in developing more balanced beliefs about the world (Joseph at al., 2012).

Individuals who report social support after their trauma tend to experience quicker recovery and greater post-traumatic growth (Belsher, Ruzek, Bongar & Cordova, 2012).
Counsellors may encourage clients to reach out to friends and family as a means of coping with strong emotions (Joseph et al., 2012). The client may also benefit from developing a list of coping strategies they can use to reduce their distress, particularly if human support is sometimes unavailable, that could include deep breathing, meditation, musical distraction or mindful exercise. As the client comes to conclusions regarding their trauma and religious beliefs, the counsellor can encourage post-traumatic growth and positive emotional states through gratitude exercises, meditation and exploring existential beliefs about the significance of suffering.

**Implications for Research**

The present study highlights the need for process-based, qualitative research particularly at the early stages of investigation into a research area. While most quantitative research to date has focused on whether religion is strengthened or weakening in the wake of trauma, the present study demonstrates that religious and spiritual change is far more complex and does not always fit neatly into categories of “strengthened faith” and “weakened faith”. It appears that individuals move through different levels of religiosity after trauma and that a sizeable minority distances from institutionalized religion in favour of an individual spirituality. This research has illuminated the process of religious change, while demonstrating that qualitative investigations are crucial for helping future quantitative researchers develop the categories necessary for capturing the subjective experiences of their research participants. Quantitative studies are certainly necessary for providing more objective corroboration for the present findings, but it is hoped that this research will encourage quantitative researchers to consider the temporal, process-based dimensions of faith change, as well as the myriad of ways that faith changes after trauma, resulting in more specific representations of the intersections of religion and trauma.
A current finding that has not been previously discussed in the literature is that there are multiple paths to trauma recovery and growth. Empirical studies (Calhoun et al., 2000; Kennedy et al., 1998; Shaw et al., 2005) have found associations between strengthened religion and post-traumatic growth, but no association between weakened faith and post-traumatic growth. The present study suggests that post-traumatic growth can also be associated with loss of faith. It appears that whether one weakens or strengthens their faith is not as important as whether one spends time thinking deeply about the purpose and meaning of life, and coming to conclusions that help them develop greater resiliency and acceptance of life. While acceptance, wisdom and resilience can be easily incorporated into a religious framework, they can also be understood within secular or humanistic frameworks. Notably, individuals who lost their faith reported developing a greater sense of personal power and resilience than those who strengthened their faith. Future researchers may find it more productive to focus on the process of developing meaningful interpretations of trauma and suffering, rather than the religious beliefs themselves.

Finally, the present findings support previous research (Kimball, Boyatzis, Cook, Leonard & Flanagan, 2013) demonstrating that some Christian individuals develop attachment relationships with their god. The current research extends these findings by exploring how individuals manage ruptures in their relationship with their deity after a traumatic event. While some participants are able to maintain or re-establish a connection with their higher power, often by re-conceptualizing their god, some report losing their trust in their deity, sometimes resulting in less trusting human relationships. The current findings suggest that attachment to god is not only associated with parent attachment styles (Cooper et al., 2009), but that changes in attachment to god can impact on human attachment relationships.

Limitations
The sample size (n = 11) of the current study is small given the constraints of the project and the aim of conducting a detailed exploration of faith change after trauma. While the study designed allowed for an in-depth exploration of individuals’ subjective experiences, the small sample size limited the generalizability of the present findings to other populations. In particular, while the participants were diverse in terms of ethnicity, religious experiences and gender, the sample was over-represented by young adults and students, which limited the extent to which these findings can be generalizing to older and non-student populations. The over-representation of young adults likely resulted from the recruitment process that focused on institutions and churches near or on university campuses. It is possible that older, non-student populations may have a different experience of religious change post-trauma given that they are at a different life stage and are more likely to have experienced multiple traumas though their life.

As with all qualitative research, the current study is limited by subjective bias given that the data was compiled and organized into themes designated by the researcher. Efforts were made to minimize subjectivity within the data, including sending each participant a copy of the themes extracted from their interview to verify that the themes reflected the participants’ experiences, keeping a research journal to reflect upon any thoughts or emotions that arose during the interviews that may bias interpretation of the results, and grounding the themes within the interview data by consistently comparing the main themes against the participant transcripts. However, no qualitative study is immune from subjectivity and more quantitative research is needed to support the findings and interpretations of the present study.

Finally, the present study purported to explore religion and spirituality in general but all participants were drawn solely from the Christian faith in order to facilitate comparison of religious experiences. A richer understanding of religious and spiritual change after trauma would
require the inclusion of perspectives from faiths outside of Christianity, such as Islam, Judaism, Hinduism and Buddhism, because some aspects of Christianity that were explored in the current study (such as the belief in one god) are not evident in other religious traditions. Although the current study aimed to offer a preliminary investigation into faith and trauma more generally, the current findings can only be generalized to Christian populations.

**Future Directions**

The limitations above demonstrate that additional research is needed to document the experiences of adherents from non-Christian faiths with respect to religious change after trauma. A comparative research study that includes participants from multiple religious backgrounds may be useful in exploring how an individual’s specific faith influences their understanding of trauma. For instance, monotheistic faith traditions may conceptualize trauma differently than polytheistic traditions, which in turn may impact on how trauma is processed and understood.

Furthermore, future researchers may wish to explore the effects of multiple traumas on changes in religion and spirituality. The results of the current study suggest that individuals who experience multiple traumas may develop a more flexible conception of their deity, however, the sample size of the present study is so small that these tentative results cannot be confirmed. Research that specifically seeks to understand the process of faith change over multiple traumas could illuminate whether and/or how individuals construct a faith-based or secular worldview that is resilient to adversity.

Finally, future research may address the effects of different types of traumas on religious change. Preliminary results from the current study suggest that the type of trauma affects which aspects of faith are questioned (for example, victims of assault may be more likely to question the protective nature of their higher power). Future researchers may wish to conduct a larger and
more rigorous investigation into differential effects of different forms of trauma on weakening or strengthening of faith. Relatedly, the effects of PTSD on faith change is a fruitful area of future research given that the present study included individuals who experienced subjective distress related to the trauma but did not necessarily fit criteria for PTSD.

**Conclusion**

This chapter presented the implications of the current findings for counselling and research, with a focus on how a theoretical understanding of religious change post-trauma can be helpful for developing therapeutic interventions for trauma survivors. More generally, this study has offered a qualitative exploration of religious and spiritual change following trauma with a focus on three dimensions of experience: cognitive shifts in worldview, affective experiences of grief, and relationship with a higher power. A theoretical model was developed to explain the cognitive, affective and relational shifts that individuals experience as a result of moving through their process of religious and spiritual change. The present study found that there are three potential outcomes of this experience: weakening of faith, strengthening of faith and development of an individual spirituality. Regardless of their eventual faith orientation, individuals generally demonstrate post-traumatic growth following resolution of their trauma and religious beliefs, resulting in deepening trust and greater appreciation of life. The results of this study will enable to therapists to better understand the psychological processes associated with faith change after trauma and aid them in developing appropriate treatment interventions. This study provides further insight into an under researched area of psychology, religion and trauma, with the hopes that future researchers will continue to explore the intersection of these universal human experiences.
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Appendices

Appendix A: Study Announcement

My name is Claire Barnes and I am a graduate student in Clinical/Counselling Psychology at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education (OISE), University of Toronto. For my master’s thesis, I am conducting research on how people’s religious or spiritual beliefs may change after they experience a traumatic event. We know that some people deepen their religious faith after a traumatic experience or turn to religion and spirituality for the first time in their lives, while others question their beliefs or lose their faith altogether. But we know very little about how and why these changes occur. I am interested in exploring people’s process of religious and spiritual change after trauma, in order to better understand this common experience.

I am searching for individuals who have experienced a change in their religion or spirituality after a traumatic event and would like to participate in this research project. This would involve volunteering for a 60-90 minute interview about your personal experience of changes in your religious or spiritual orientation. For this study, I am looking for people who experienced an event within the last 5 years that they found highly distressing or traumatic and who experienced some change in their religion or spirituality after the event. To qualify for this study, participants must also 1) live in Canada 2) consider themselves to be emotionally stable and not have been diagnosed with a severe mental illness and 3) be willing to speak openly about their experiences. If you are interested in participating, I would be happy to provide you with more information. You can contact me at claire.barnes@mail.utoronto.ca. Finally, if you yourself are not interested in participating or don’t fit the description I provided, but know someone else who might be interested, please feel free to pass on my contact information to them. Thank you for your time.
Appendix B: Information Letter

My name is Claire Barnes and I am a graduate student in Clinical/Counselling Psychology at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education (OISE), University of Toronto. I would like to invite you to participate in a study that I am conducting with individuals who have experienced changes in their religion or spirituality after a traumatic event. This study is supervised by OISE professor, Dr. Roy Moodley, and will partially fulfill my masters requirements.

WHAT IS THIS STUDY ABOUT?

I am conducting a study to examine the process of religious and/or spiritual change following trauma. Research shows that the majority of people experience a traumatic event in their lifetime, and religion/spirituality can be an important part of the recovery process because it provides people with a framework for making sense of their lives. One area of research on religion, spirituality and trauma has documented religious change in the wake of trauma, with some individuals doubting their faith and others deepening their faith. Both reactions are understandable. For some people traumatic events disprove religious beliefs in fair world and a protective deity, while for others trauma is seen as a divine opportunity for growth and wisdom. Since we know very little about how and why these changes occur, I am interested in exploring people’s process of religious and spiritual change after trauma, in order to better understand this common experience. I hope that the findings of this study will encourage greater sensitivity and understanding among mental health practitioners working with religious and spiritual survivors of trauma.

In this study, I will conduct interviews with 10-12 individuals who have experienced changes in their religious or spiritual beliefs after a traumatic event. Specifically, I want to understand in what ways people’s relationship to their religion change after a traumatic event, the progression of people’s relationship with their faith as they recover, the impact of the traumatic event on religious or spiritual beliefs, and personal or social factors affecting how people relate to their religion or spirituality.

For the interview, I am looking for individuals who:

7. Experienced an event within the last 5 years that was highly distressing and traumatic (Traumatic events range from the death of a loved one to assault or abuse to serious injury or illness. The nature of the traumatic event does not matter as long as you experienced it as deeply emotionally distressing and out of the realm of your normal life experiences).

8. Experienced some change in your religious or spiritual orientation after the trauma, either in the form of a deepening of faith, a weakening of faith, becoming religious/spiritual or losing religion/spirituality.

9. Consider yourself to be emotionally stable and have not been diagnosed with a severe mental illness or personality disorder.

10. Comfortable speaking candidly about their experiences in some depth.

11. Currently reside in Canada.

WHAT WILL I BE ASKED TO DO?

You will be asked to participate in an interview that lasts 60-90 minutes. It would be good to set aside two hours if possible, to account for the informed consent process and debriefing after the interview. However, I will respect necessary time constraints.
In the interview I will ask you to speak broadly about how you experienced changes in your religion or spirituality following a traumatic event in your life. I will begin by asking you to tell your story of how your faith changed in the time after the trauma. Then I will ask you to reflect in more detail on how your beliefs changed during this time and whether there were specific experiences or factors that influenced these changes. The interview will be audio taped.

About 3 or 4 months after the interview, I will contact you in the manner you specify in the consent form (email or Canada Post) with the findings of this research (my summary of your interview, as well as a collection of themes generated from all the interviews describing changes in religion or spirituality following trauma). You will be asked to provide your feedback on the findings. This feedback will be incorporated into the final report.

DO I HAVE TO PARTICIPATE?

Your participation in this research is completely voluntary. You may refuse to participate at any time, decline to answer any questions, and even withdraw during the course of the interview without any negative consequences. You may withdraw from the study at any time up until the final stage of analysis. I will notify you of this deadline at least two weeks before it occurs.

ARE THERE ANY RISKS AND/OR BENEFITS TO PARTICIPATING?

During the interview, you may choose to share some sensitive information that elicits difficult feelings and memories. This has the potential to be emotionally upsetting, which is the only foreseeable risk associated with your participation in this research. If, at any point, you wish to take a break, change topics, or stop the interview, you may do so without any negative consequences. Once the interview is complete, I will guide you through a debriefing process during which you will have the opportunity to discuss your experience of the interview.

Your participation in the research may have the following benefits:

- Sharing your experience of changes in faith following trauma can illuminate the complex ways in which people understand and relate to religion or spirituality over the course of their lives.
- Understanding how people are unique in relating to religion and spirituality after trauma could help clinicians tailor treatment plans to the specific needs and circumstances of each client.
- Some people find that retrospectively speaking about a difficult time in their lives can give them insight into themselves and the ways in which they may have grown or changed as a result of the experience.

COMPENSATION

No compensation will be offered for participation in this study.

WHAT WILL HAPPEN TO THE INFORMATION AFTER I HAVE PARTICIPATED IN THE STUDY?

All of the information collected as a result of your participation in this study will remain strictly
confidential; you will be referred to by a pseudonym in all transcripts and analyses, and all other identifying details will be disguised. The data collected in the course of this research may be used for publication in journals or books, and/or for public presentations, but if you so choose, your identity (as mentioned earlier) will absolutely not be revealed. The data will be retained for a period of seven years by Dr. Roy Moodley, and will be kept in a secure location at the University of Toronto. It will be accessible only to the principal investigator (Claire Barnes) and her supervisor (Dr. Roy Moodley). The tape recordings will be erased within two months of transcription.

If you would like a copy of the results of this research when it is available, we would be very happy to offer it to you. If so, please fill in your name and mailing or email address on the consent form.

If you have any questions about your rights as a participant, you may contact the Research Ethics Review Office by e-mail (ethics.review@utoronto.ca) or phone (416-946-3273).

If you have any questions about the study please feel free to contact me or my supervisor, Dr. Roy Moodley. Thank you for considering participating in this research.

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Appendix C: Consent Form

If there is anything you do not understand about the information letter or this consent form, please speak to the researcher.

1. Volunteer’s declaration of informed consent

I have been given a written explanation of the study by the investigator (Claire Barnes), including full details of any potential psychological risks and what participation entails. I have been given the opportunity to ask questions. I have had enough time to think about the study, and to decide without pressure if I want to take part. I am free to answer some questions and not others, and I can withdraw from the study at any time up until completion of the final analyses (and I will be given at least 2 weeks’ notice of that deadline). I have been assured that all information collected in the study will be held in confidence. I understand that the only instance in which confidence would be broken would be if I were to share information suggesting that I may be at risk of harming myself or others, or if a child is potentially being abused (due to legal requirements).

1. Contact information and request for research summary

☐ I am willing to receive a copy of the transcript and preliminary analysis of my interview with the opportunity to provide feedback.

☐ I would like to receive a copy of the completed study.

Please send me the above item(s) by:

☐ E-mail

☐ Canada Post

Address: ______________________________________________________

City and Province: __________________ Postal Code: ______________________

E-mail address: ____________________________________________________

2. Signature

I have received a copy of the Information Letter and Consent Form, and have had all my questions about this study answered to my satisfaction.

I agree that I will participate in this study.

Name: ______________________ Signature: ______________________ Date: ____________
Appendix D: Demographic Form

Demographic Form

Desired pseudonym:________________________________________

Age:___________________________________________________________

Occupation:_____________________________________________________

Years of education:______________________________________________

Current religious or spiritual affiliation (s):___________________________

Previous religious or spiritual affiliation(s):___________________________

Number of years you consider yourself to be religious or spiritual:___________________________
Appendix E: Interview Guide

Introduction: I am interested in your process of religious or spiritual change after you experienced a traumatic event. I would particularly like to hear about your thoughts, feelings or any internal conflicts that you experienced during this time of your life.

The following questions will used sparingly as prompts and guides if needed by participant:

Question 1: What was your experience of religion or spirituality growing up and until the traumatic event?
   a) Did you identify as religious or spiritual or both?
   b) What role did your religion or spirituality play in your life?
   c) What types of religious or spiritual beliefs did you hold?

Question 2: Could you give me a sense of, in as much or little detail as you feel comfortable, the traumatic event that triggered changes in your faith?
   a) How did you react immediately after the event?
   b) What were some of the thoughts and emotions that arose in the aftermath of the trauma?
   c) How did the traumatic event impact your life?

Question 3: Could you tell me about your relationship to religion or spirituality in the aftermath of the trauma?
   a) Did you experience doubts related to your faith?
   b) Did you experience your faith as strengthened?
   c) Did you experience any internal conflicts around your faith or the trauma?
   d) Could you describe the chronological progression of changes in your faith?

Question 4: Did, and if so how did, your religious and/or spiritual beliefs change in the wake of trauma?
   a) Can you give examples of specific beliefs about yourself or the world that changed as a result of the trauma?
   b) What was the process like for you to work through changes in beliefs?
   c) Did changes in your religious or spiritual beliefs help you cope or hinder your ability to cope with or heal from the trauma?

Question 5: Were there specific factors that influenced how your religion or spirituality changed as a result of the trauma?
   a) Did social support or relationships with friends/family factor into changes in your faith?
   b) Do you believe the nature of the trauma influence changes in your faith?
   c) Were there internal factors (such as your personality or personal beliefs) that influenced changes in your faith?

Question 6: How have changes in your religion or spirituality impacted your life?
   a) How have the changes affected your community and relationships with others?
   b) How have the changes affected your sense of self?
c) How would you characterize your relationship with your religion or spirituality today? Do you belong to a faith community?

Debrief:
   a) Is there anything else you would like to tell me about your experience that I did not cover during the interview?
   b) What was it like for you speak to me about changes in your religious or spiritual orientation after trauma?
   c) Is there anything I could have changed or done differently in the interview?