ABSTRACT

Title of Dissertation: "SOMETHING TRULY GOT BROKEN": A QUALITATIVE INVESTIGATION OF THE EXPERIENCES AND IMPACT OF SPIRITUAL ABUSE ON EAST ASIAN AMERICAN CHRISTIAN WOMEN

Katie L. Rim, Doctor of Philosophy, 2025

Dissertation directed by: Professor Clara E. Hill, Department of Psychology

Religion/spirituality (R/S) can promote well-being and mental health, but it can also inflict significant harm when misused by those in power. Recent research on spiritual abuse has suggested it may be prevalent in religious communities and can negatively impact one's spiritual and mental health; however, no study has examined spiritual abuse among East Asian American Christian women, despite cultural factors that may render them particularly vulnerable to spiritual abuse. In this study, we sought to address this critical gap in the literature by qualitatively examining the experiences and consequences of spiritual abuse among East Asian American Christian women. Data was analyzed using Consensual Qualitative Research (CQR). Findings from this study include that spiritual abuse involved marginalization, pressure to participate in the church, and moral/spiritual judgment; spiritual abuse was perceived to be related to certain cultural and religious values; spiritual abuse negatively impacted participants' mental health and had mixed impact on spiritual health;

positive interpersonal experiences and the development of new perspectives on the abuse facilitated healing from abuse, while negative interpersonal experiences and isolation hindered healing from abuse; spiritual abuse resulted in long-term changes in identity; and survivors of spiritual abuse believe mental health professionals should have an understanding of spiritual abuse and recognize the importance of providing safe, client-centered spaces for survivors of spiritual abuse. Implications for practice and research are discussed.

“SOMETHING TRULY GOT BROKEN”: A QUALITATIVE INVESTIGATION OF THE EXPERIENCES AND IMPACT OF SPIRITUAL ABUSE ON EAST ASIAN AMERICAN CHRISTIAN WOMEN

by

Katie Lee Rim

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Advisory Committee:
Professor Clara E. Hill, Chair
Professor Dennis M. Kivlighan, Jr.
Associate Professor Richard Q. Shin
Associate Professor Wonjin Sim
Associate Professor Jennifer L. Wessel

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Dedication

To the women who shared their stories with me,

and to all whose stories have still to be shared.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Religion/spirituality (R/S) has generally been associated with well-being (Weber & Pargament, 2014), including greater meaning in life, self-actualization, self-esteem, happiness, and optimism (Green & Elliott, 2010; Ivtzan et al., 2013; Steger & Frazier, 2005; Sternthal et al., 2010). However, recent research (see Ellis et al., 2022, for a systematic review) has also highlighted the harm that is inflicted when R/S is wielded as a weapon by those with power.

Spiritual abuse (sometimes referred to as "religious abuse," "religious/spiritual harm," or "religious/spiritual trauma") can be defined as a "form of emotional and psychological abuse characterised by a systematic pattern of coercive and controlling behaviour in a religious context or with a religious rationale" (Oakley et al., 2024, p. 190) and can have devastating mental and spiritual health consequences (Ellis et al., 2022).

Victims of spiritual abuse often experience psychological distress, as well as disruptions in their R/S communities and R/S health (e.g., questioning their R/S beliefs) (Ellis et al., 2022). In addition, victims of spiritual abuse have also reported a secondary process of re-victimization as their experiences were delegitimized by their R/S communities (Krueger, 2018). Although studies examining R/S abuse are limited, the existing literature presents a sobering picture that warrants greater investigation.

In addition, spiritual abuse has been primarily examined in predominantly White, female, Christian samples. To our knowledge, spiritual abuse has not been studied among East Asian American Christian women, even though certain cultural factors may render them particularly vulnerable to experiencing spiritual abuse. Although spiritual abuse in Asian American churches has not been examined empirically, it has been highlighted in recent national news. One recent

article discussed the rigidly “controlling” and “coercive” culture inside one large, predominately Asian American college church network founded in Berkeley, California (Yee, 2022). Thus, there is sobering but compelling anecdotal evidence that this neglected topic warrants further investigation.

Spiritual Abuse

Research on spiritual abuse has only recently begun to emerge. In the following section, I focus on the definition and prevalence of spiritual abuse, the measurement of spiritual abuse, and research on spiritual abuse within intimate partner violence and religious communities.

Definition, Prevalence, and Measurement of Spiritual Abuse

Johnson & VanVonderen (2005) provided one of the earliest definitions of spiritual abuse as the “mistreatment of a person who is in need of help, support or greater spiritual empowerment, with the result of weakening, undermining or decreasing that person's spiritual empowerment” (p. 20). Another commonly used definition of spiritual abuse was suggested by Oakley and Kinmond (2013), who defined it as

> coercion and control of one individual by another in a spiritual context. The target experiences spiritual abuse as a deeply emotional personal attack. This abuse may include: manipulation and exploitation, enforced accountability, censorship of decision making, requirements for secrecy and silence, pressure to conform, misuse of scripture or the pulpit to control behaviour, requirement of obedience to the abuser, the suggestion that the abuser has a ‘divine’ position, isolation from others, especially

those external to the abusive context. (p. 25)

Recently, Oakley & Kimmond (2024) provided an updated definition of spiritual abuse as a "form of emotional and psychological abuse characterised by a systematic pattern of coercive and controlling behaviour in a religious context or with a religious rationale" (p.190). In addition, three core components of spiritual abuse emerged from a systematic review of the literature on spiritual abuse: misuse of power (e.g., coercion, control, or exploitation of another), psychological harm (e.g., depression, negative view of self), and negative spiritual health consequences (e.g., distance from God) (Ellis et al., 2022).

Relatedly, five measures of spiritual abuse have been developed and used in the existing literature: (a) The Religious/Spiritual Abuse and Neglect of Children (RSANC; Kvarfordt & Sheridan, 2010) scale, which measures 10 types of spiritual abuse (e.g., misuse of religious teachings, use of religion to justify harsh punishment); (b) the Spiritual Abuse Questionnaire (Lawson, 2016), which was developed to help individuals reflect on whether they have experienced spiritual abuse; (c) a measure of spiritual trauma among LGBTQ+ individuals within the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints (Simmons, 2017), which assesses abusive experiences with leadership and abusive teachings; (d) The Spiritual Abuse Questionnaire (SAQ; Keller, 2016), which consists of two subscales: Power-based Affective Wounding (PBAF; i.e., misuse of power and resulting emotional injury) and Conditionality (i.e., the belief that one's status with God and/or the church/religious group is dependent on behavior); and (e) the Spiritual Harm and Abuse Scale (SHAS; Koch & Edstrom, 2022) , which consists of six subscales: maintaining the system, internal distress, embracing violence, controlling leadership, harmful God-image, and gender discrimination. Although these measures provide a foundation for future research, most have not been widely used, and only

two (the RSANC; Kvarfordt & Sheridan, 2010 and the SHAS; Koch & Edstrom, 2022) were published in peer-reviewed journals; minimal validity has been provided for any of the five measures. Furthermore, many researchers developed their own items for assessing spiritual abuse rather than using measures with known psychometric properties (Ellis et al., 2022). Thus, measurement of spiritual abuse is in its infancy.

In their systematic review, Ellis et al. (2022) found six studies that addressed the prevalence of spiritual abuse. They cited Oakley and Kinmond (2013) who found that 70% of participants in the United Kingdom endorsed feeling manipulated at their current church, 84% endorsed feeling manipulated at a prior church, and 45% endorsed that scripture was used to control behavior. In addition, spiritual abuse may be even more prevalent within some subgroups. For example, 95% of LGBTQ-identifying individuals who were current or former members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints (LDS) reported at least one experience of spiritual abuse and 86% potentially met the criteria for post-traumatic stress disorder related to their experience (Simmons, 2017). In addition, high rates of spiritual abuse (ranging from 65 to 82% reported by social workers) have been reported for children within foster care systems (Kvarfordt & Herba, 2018; Kvarfordt, 2010; Kvarfordt & Sheridan, 2007) and 49.5% by Native American children within foster care (Landers et al., 2021).

Spiritual Abuse and Intimate Partner Violence

Spiritual abuse has been examined within the context of intimate partner violence (IPV). Bagwell-Gray et al. (2021) examined experiences of reproductive coercion and pregnancy avoidance in 660 women recruited from domestic violence shelters. They found that 21% of women reported experiencing spiritual abuse (assessed by the question, “Has your partner used religious teachings or traditions as a reason to control your daily activities?”), and that the

likelihood of experiencing reproductive coercion was significantly higher for women who experienced such partner-based spiritual abuse. Similarly, Hassouneh-Phillips (2003) found that while R/S was often a source of strength for Muslim women experiencing IPV, it was also sometimes a point of vulnerability. Specifically, some women believed that this life did not matter, which rendered them vulnerable to staying in abusive situations, and that perpetrators of IPV sometimes misused religious texts to exert control. Finally, spiritual abuse has also been examined as a specific dimension of "wife abuse" among Haredi (Ultraorthodox) Jewish women (Dehan & Levi, 2009). The authors argued that spiritual abuse was distinct from other forms of abuse and conceptualized it within the context of wife abuse as "any attempt to impair the woman's spiritual life, spiritual self, or spiritual well-being" (p. 1300).

Researchers have also examined the perspectives of clergy about the relationship between spiritual abuse and intimate partner violence. In their interview study of 13 Black clergy about spiritual abuse within intimate partner violence and abuse, Davis and Johnson (2021) found that clergy viewed spiritual abuse as a spiritual problem/demonic, as a misinterpretation of God's word, and as sometimes perpetrated by religious leaders. They emphasized the importance of victims of spiritual abuse knowing the word of God as a tool for themselves and also utilized scripture to address IPV-related spiritual abuse. Furthermore, Bent-Goodley and Fowler (2006) conducted focus groups with 19 African American church members and leaders on the topic of domestic violence within faith-based communities. They found that the topic of spiritual abuse arose as participants discussed the ways that spirituality interacted with domestic violence. Although participants hesitated to define spiritual abuse, (preferring to conceptualize it broadly), they recognized how R/S could be used to perpetuate abuse. They also acknowledged that clergy missed opportunities to confront IPV and were

sometimes complicit in perpetuating it, and that spiritual abuse could not be separated from the ways in which the church functions in regards to gender. Finally, participants agreed that it was important to understand spiritual abuse more clearly to understand its impact on survivors of IPV and the responsibility of faith communities in addressing it.

Spiritual Abuse within Religious Communities

A growing body of research has examined experiences of spiritual abuse within religious/spiritual communities. Bilsky (2013) used grounded theory methods to investigate abuse of religious authority (ARA) experienced by individuals from Christian faith traditions. They defined ARA as "a) the misuse of excessive authority and power (derived from a divine source) that b) exploits, harms, controls, or shames an individual with less power" (p. 137). Bilsky found that for many participants, experiences of the religious community were initially positive but became negative over time, and that the most positive factor – community and social support – became a means through with spiritual abuse was reinforced (e.g., through peer pressure). In addition, ARA impacted participants' spirituality primarily through questioning one's beliefs, experiencing a disruption in one's relationship with God, and developing a sense of mistrust toward religion/religious individuals. In contrast, for some individuals, experiences of ARA positively impacted their spirituality (e.g., through spiritual growth, change in beliefs, and/or spiritual perspectives that no longer included God).

Krueger (2018) used a mixed-methods approach to examine experiences of clergy nonsexual misconduct among 148 individuals. Using a phenomenological approach, Krueger (2018) found that victims of clergy misconduct experienced intense negative emotions and a changed sense of identity. In addition, many participants experienced both primary and secondary victimization as church members protected clergy after the misconduct and engaged

in ostracization and shaming of the victims. These experiences severely impacted victims' spiritual (e.g., altered church involvement) and mental (e.g., social hypervigilance, chronic rumination) health.

Research has also explored the relationships between spiritual abuse, mental health, and meaning-making. Johnston (2021) studied 67 people who reported experiencing a traumatic or abusive experience within a religious setting and found that spiritual abuse was positively correlated with presence of meaning in one's life. Furthermore, religious trauma and spiritual abuse both positively correlated with depression. It is important to note that while Johnston found positive correlations between spiritual abuse and both presence of meaning and depression, predictive relationships were not significant (i.e., spiritual abuse did not significantly predict presence of meaning or depression in multiple regression analyses). In addition, Johnston assessed spiritual abuse through the Religious and Spiritual Struggles Scale (RSS; Exline et al., 2014), which was not specifically designed to measure spiritual abuse.

Glasscock (2019) examined the experiences of seven former cult members who reported experiencing spiritual abuse. They found that many participants had pre-cult vulnerabilities (e.g., prior trauma history, seeking answers) that were exploited by the cult leader. In addition, cult leaders conflated the idea of following themselves with following God. Participants were also required to make extreme sacrifices in their personal lives for the sake of the group, felt extreme pressure to conform to group norms, felt threatened by use of labels (e.g., "enemy of the church) to conform, and overall experienced "totalitarian" levels of control within the cult. As a result, participants experienced a range of negative emotions toward themselves (e.g., shame, self- condemnation) and the group leader (e.g., disillusionment), experienced estrangement from social relationships because of their

affiliation with the cult, and suffered through painful emotional consequences from their experience (e.g., PTSD symptoms).

Gomez (2005) interviewed seven individuals who had experienced interpersonal trauma that was denied by their Christian community. They found that participants experienced denial from their churches as marginalization and re-traumatization, involving feelings of betrayal and loss, and that the spiritual abuse affected participants' experiences of communal worship and understanding of God.

Finally, Kamminga (2018) found that spiritual abuse and problems with prescribed opioid use were positively correlated. In open-ended questions, some participants reported that they used opioids to cope with emotions related to their spiritual abuse. It should be noted that the sample size was too small (n = 33) to examine higher-level, predictive relationships, and that spiritual abuse was assessed through the Spiritual Abuse Questionnaire (SAQ; Lawson, 2016), which has not been examined for reliability or validity and lacks psychometric data.

Religious Trauma

In the popular (non-academic) literature (e.g., Hake, 2021; Taylor, n.d.; Willowcounseling, 2022), religious trauma has been distinguished from spiritual abuse, with religious trauma referring more broadly to the psychological and spiritual consequences that can result from experiences of spiritual abuse. Empirical literature has been more mixed in distinguishing between religious trauma and spiritual abuse.

Psychologist Marlene Winell was the first to describe "religious trauma syndrome" based on her own experiences and clinical work. She categorized symptoms into four clusters: cognitive (e.g., identity confusion, difficulty making decisions), affective (e.g., anxiety, guilt, lack of meaning), functional (e.g., disturbed sleep, substance abuse), and social/cultural (e.g.,

interpersonal dysfunction, employment issues). While Winell applied the concept of religious trauma primarily to individuals leaving fundamentalist Christian backgrounds, Stone (2013) offered a broader definition of religious trauma as "pervasive psychological damage resulting from religious messages, beliefs, and experiences" (p. 324). Unlike acute trauma, religious trauma can develop through long-term exposure to harmful beliefs and messages (Stone, 2013).

Crocker (2021) interviewed ten sexual minority Christians on their experiences of religious trauma and spiritual resilience. They found that religious trauma was associated with mental and physical health challenges, including symptoms of depression, anxiety, and trauma and negative coping behaviors. They also found that religious trauma resulted in changes in participants' religious beliefs and practices. Finally, Crocker (2021) found that several factors were associated with maintenance of participants' faith despite experiencing religious trauma, including education and social support.

Rationale for Examining Spiritual Abuse among East Asian American Christian Women

Although (to our knowledge) spiritual abuse has not been empirically examined specifically among East Asian American Christian women, there are compelling reasons to address this gap in the research. Specifically, there may be cultural factors that render East Asian American Christian women particularly vulnerable to spiritual abuse. In this section, we begin by briefly summarizing the prevalence and sociological context of Christianity among Asian Americans before discussing specific cultural factors that may be relevant to spiritual abuse.

Prevalence and Context of Christianity Among Asian Americans

Although often portrayed as a single, homogenous group, the racial category of Asian Americans includes individuals from more than 50 groups who speak over thirty languages (Sue, Nakamura, Chung, & Yee-Bradbury, 1994, cited in Tan & Dong, 2014). Furthermore, there is significant heterogeneity in religious traditions and affiliations within Asian Americans; one recent survey found that 42% of Asian adults identify as Christian (specifically 22% as Protestant, 19% as Catholic, 1% other), 26% identify as unaffiliated, 14% identify as Buddhist, 10% as Hindus, 4% as Muslims, 2% as other religions, and 1% as Sikh (*Asian Americans*, 2012). The diversity of religious affiliations within Asian Americans varies widely by ethnicity; for instance, Protestant Christians make up 61% of Korean Americans, 33% of Japanese Americans, 22% of Chinese Americans, and 4% of Vietnamese Americans (*Asian Americans,* 2012).

In addition, it is important to note the influence of Evangelical Protestantism among Asian American Christians, particularly Korean Americans; for instance, Asian American Evangelical Protestants are among the most religious groups in the United States (*Asian Americans*, 2012). The strength of this cultural identity can be seen perhaps most easily through college campus parachurches, such as Campus Crusade for Christ and Intervarsity Christian Fellowship, which were formerly predominantly White in composition and which now are heavily populated by Asian Americans (Park, 2009). For instance, 80% of the more than 50 Evangelical campus organizations at UC Berkley and UCLA are Asian Americans (Kim, 2006). Some of these parachurches have formed specific chapters targeted toward Asian Americans, which provide "culturally similar community… and protection from marginalization" (Kim, 2006, cited in Hong, 2019, p. 5)

Scholars have argued that the prevalence of Christianity among Asian Americans may reflect two processes: first, there may be a self-selection bias among religious immigrants (Park, 2009). In other words, the individuals who choose to immigrate may be more likely to be already affiliated with the primary religion (i.e., Christianity) of the United States. This proposition is supported by statistics on both Korean Americans and Filipino Americans, which suggest that the proportion of Christians in the United States are significantly higher than in their countries of origin (Park, 2009).

However, the prevalence of Asian American Christians may also reflect a new embrace of Christianity within America stemming from the hardships of immigration (Park, 2009). For instance, some scholars have referred to immigration as a "theologizing" experience (Min, 1992, cited in Kim, 2011; Smith, 1978, cited in Park, 2009); in other words, the challenges of immigration (such as navigating cultural uprootedness, language barriers, and economic difficulty) created a need for meaning that religion was able to fulfill (Park, 2009). In addition, the church also provided a critical resource for meeting immigrants' social needs. Within ethnic churches, Asian immigrants were welcomed into a group of others who shared their language, culture, and the difficulties of adjusting to a new home country. In this way, the ethnic church has been a site of cultural expression and preservation (Park, 2009). As the Christian church was a site of cultural expression and preservation for displaced Asian immigrants, it also became a site of cultural transmission to the next generation of Asian Americans (Park, 2009).

Minority Stress and Cultural Betrayal Trauma

Asian Americans may be at risk for mental health challenges related to their experiences of marginalization as racial minorities. According to Minority Stress Theory

(MST; Meyer, 2003), individuals with stigmatized identities experience unique stressors due to structural oppression that put them at higher risk for mental health problems. Although MST was originally developed to explain the experiences of sexual minorities, it has been applied to other marginalized groups, such as racial/ethnic minorities (e.g., Arbona & Jimenez, 2014; Wei et al., 2005), religious minorities (e.g., Bassioni & Langrehr, 2021; Every & Perry, 2014), and individuals with disabilities (e.g., Lund, 2021). MST has been especially used to examine the experiences of individuals with multiple minority identities, such as LGBTQ people of color (e.g., Cyrus, 2017; Ramirez & Paz Galupo, 2019).

Although their experiences of racism are often denied through underreporting and stereotypes of the "Model Minority" myth, Asian Americans have a long history of experiencing oppression and xenophobia in the United States (Lee, 2021; Lei et al., 2022; Litam, 2020). In addition, the surge of reported hate crimes against Asian Americans in the wake of Covid-19 has brought greater recognition of anti-Asian racism (Jin, 2021; Lee, 2021). Recent research (e.g., Lei et al., 2022; Wei et al., 2011) has applied MST to explain how race-related stress contributes to negative mental health outcomes for Asian Americans.

In the face of racism and discrimination, Asian Americans may find safety and support in Asian American spaces. According to cultural betrayal trauma theory (CBTT; Gomez, 2017a), societal oppression, such as racism and discrimination, leaves marginalized groups feeling unsafe; as a result, some group members turn to each other for support and safety, developing "intracultural trust" (i.e., "attachment, dependence, loyalty, and responsibility with other ingroup members;" Gómez, 2017b, p. 432). In this context, within-group interpersonal trauma is experienced by members as "a violation of this (intra)cultural trust and is conceptualized as cultural betrayal" (Gómez, 2017b, p. 432). This echoes aspects of Janoff-

Bulman's (1992, 2010) "shattered assumptions" theory of trauma, which suggests that traumatic experiences "shatter" our core, fundamental (sometimes unconscious) assumptions of other people and the world (e.g., "The world is a good place"), leaving trauma victims upended in a dangerous, meaningless world. CBTT extends the "shattered assumptions" theory of trauma by highlighting the unique distress minority group members may experience when core assumptions of intracultural trust are violated. This may also pose implications for help-seeking, as it may be harder for marginalized individuals who experienced trauma by someone within their cultural group to disclose their trauma, given their knowledge that the perpetrator also experiences oppression within the majority culture (Delker et al., 2019).

Cultural betrayal has been associated with psychological distress, such as internalized prejudice and anxiety. Gómez (2017b) found that among Asian American and Pacific Islander (AAPI) college students, cultural betrayal predicted disassociation, hallucinations, posttraumatic stress symptoms, and hypervigilance. These findings suggest that Asian Americans who experience spiritual abuse by other Asian Americans (e.g., at an Asian American church) may experience a sense of cultural betrayal and may be at heightened risk for mental health problems.

Cultural Values

In addition to risk factors associated with belonging to a marginalized group, certain cultural values might also render East Asian American Christian women vulnerable to spiritual abuse. Although it is important to acknowledge inter-ethnic cultural differences (Kim et al., 2001), East Asian Americans generally share certain cultural values stemming from the strong influence of Confucianism in East Asia (Chuang, 2012; Ozaki & Otis, 2017). These cultural values provide relevant context for the importance of examining spiritual

abuse among East Asian American Christian women.

Patriarchalism. East Asian cultures are generally considered patriarchal, referring to a societal structure that places men in positions of privilege and domination over women (Gao et al., 2012; Ozaki & Otis, 2017). Within patriarchal cultures, men are generally seen as dominant both in the family and workplace while women are expected to occupy positions of obedience (Ma et al., 2021; Ozaki & Otis, 2017). These patriarchal values are embedded into the cultural socialization process of Asian Americans (Koo et al., 2012), and research has found that greater adherence to Asian values was associated with higher endorsement of patriarchal beliefs among Asian American young adults (Yoon et al., 2019).

The influence of patriarchalism can be seen within many Asian American churches, in which women are often excluded from serving as pastors or elders (Park, 2009; Tan & Dong, 2014). Cha et al. (2006) noted that the "authoritarian" leadership culture within many Asian American churches, particularly the Korean American church, is a result of the "intersection between Confucianism and church life" (Cha et al., 2006, p. 61). In churches with this leadership style, the spiritual authority of church leaders is rarely questioned (Oh, 2003, cited in Cha et al., 2006) and church members may not feel free to voice differing opinions. These patriarchal norms may serve to augment the power held by male leaders within Asian American churches, furthering the power differential between church leaders and the congregation. Cha et al. (2006) noted that male pastors in particular can be elevated to an "unhealthy role of father figure" (Cha et al., p. 62). These gender dynamics may serve to augment the inherent power differential between church members and leaders, potentially rendering Asian American women particularly vulnerable to abuse.

Collectivism. Although portrayals of Asian cultures as uniformly collectivistic are

oversimplified (Cohen et al., 2016; Wang & Chen, 2010), it would be remiss not to consider the influence of collectivism on Asian cultural norms. Within collectivistic cultures, individuals are viewed as interdependent, and the needs of others tend to take priority over the needs on the individual (Cohen et al., 2016). Specific collectivistic values within East Asian cultures include respect for hierarchy and authority, familism (e.g., importance of the family) and filial piety (i.e., honoring one's family and elders), and avoidance of direct confrontation (Chang, 2015; Tan & Dong, 2014; Zhang et al., 2005).

Collectivistic cultural norms may have important implications regarding social support seeking, including mental health utilization; Chang (2015) found that despite believing that familial support was generally available, Asian American undergraduates reported concerns that self-disclosing one's problems to others would result in criticism and that this presented a barrier to seeking social support. Additionally, findings from the broader trauma literature have similarly suggested that for those who upheld Asian values of interdependence, individuals who were relationally very close to perpetrators of emotional and sexual abuse were less likely to disclose the abuse compared to individuals who were not close to perpetuators (Foynes et al., 2014). These findings can be interpreted in relation to concerns about "face loss," or the loss of one's social image due to one's performance in interpersonal contexts (Liu et al., 2017). Previous research has found that Asians reported greater face loss concerns compared to White individuals, and that face loss concerns are associated with greater psychopathology and less help-seeking behaviors (Liu et al., 2017). The saliency of face loss in Asian cultures has led some to characterize Asian cultures as "shame-based" (Zane & Ku, 2014).

In addition, Asian American undergraduates reported learning the importance of

forbearance from their parents, which refers to one's ability to endure difficulties with emotional restraint (Chang, 2015). As Chang discussed, forbearance and self-reliance may be adaptive for Asian Americans when facing minor challenges, but may become hurtful when dealing with significant stressors. In comparison to Latino students, who similarly reported cultural barriers to seeking social support, Asian students reported greater concerns over other peoples' opinions and fear of disgrace, perhaps because Asian cultures are generally considered "tight" (i.e., there is strict adherence to social norms) (Chang, 2015). These findings potentially explain why Asian Americans are the least-likely to utilize mental health treatment among all racial/ethnic minority groups (Lee et al., 2021).

The Present Study

The original purpose of this study was to examine the experiences and impact of spiritual abuse on East Asian American Christians. We focused specifically on East Asian Americans, given the particularly strong influence of Confucianism on East Asian cultures (Ozaki & Otis, 2017) that may be relevant to spiritual abuse. Our specific research questions were as follows:

1. What kinds of spiritual abuse do East Asian American Christians experience?
2. How does spiritual abuse impact their mental and spiritual health?
3. How do cultural factors influence the experiences and consequences of spiritual abuse for East Asian American Christians?
4. What factors facilitate healing from spiritual abuse?

After initial recruitment efforts, we decided to further narrow our sample to East Asian American Christian women, due to the high proportion of respondents who identified as female and cultural values regarding patriarchalism that might render East Asian American

women particularly vulnerable to spiritual abuse.

Given the dearth of psychological research on this topic and the exploratory nature of this study, we decided to use Consensual Qualitative Research (CQR; Hill & Knox, 2021), a rigorous and established qualitative method, to investigate this topic. CQR is rooted in postpositivist and constructivist perspectives, which emphasize truth as a constructed reality and the subjectivity of researcher interpretation.

Chapter 2: Method

Participants

Our sample was composed of nine East Asian American Christian women. They were between the ages of 19 and 41 years old (M = 30.3, SD = 5.6). Six identified as Korean/Korean American and three identified as Chinese/Chinese American. Seven identified as heterosexual/straight and two did not identify their sexual orientation. On the Spiritual Abuse Questionnaire (SAQ; Keller, 2016), participants' total scores ranged from 37 to 66 (M = 49.9, SD = 9.6), with a possible range of 17-68. See Table 1 for participant demographics and background information on the spiritual abuse.

Research Team

The first author of this study conducted all interviews and led the research team. She is a doctoral student in counseling psychology with previous experience using CQR methodology. She identifies as a Korean American, heterosexual, cisgender, Protestant Christian woman in her late twenties. Her parents immigrated to the United States from South Korea as children. She grew up attending predominately Korean American Protestant churches and her father was a pastor within Korean American churches throughout much of her life. She has heard (directly and indirectly) stories of spiritual abuse within predominately Asian American churches from friends and acquaintances. She has not experienced spiritual abuse herself.

The first author recruited research assistants to form her CQR team through an online post in her university's psychology department e-news blog and through reaching out to peers in her graduate program. The team originally consisted of 8 members. One Korean American,

31- year-old, heterosexual, cisgender female graduate student withdrew from the team due to scheduling conflict before the analysis began. Another 21-year-old, bi-racial Asian/White, bisexual, cisgender female undergraduate student withdrew from the team after the domaining and coring stages of CQR (around halfway through the analysis) due to scheduling conflicts. Six remaining team members, excluding the first author, completed the entire CQR analysis: a 21- year old, Asian, Muslim, heterosexual, cisgender male in his first year of a masters in professional psychology program; a 22-year old, White European/Pakistani American, agnostic, bisexual, cisgender female senior psychology major; a 19-year old, Chinese, agnostic, heterosexual, cisgender male sophomore biology major; a 19-year old, Malaysian Chinese, Christian, heterosexual, cisgender female sophomore public health major; an 18-year old, Middle Eastern, Muslim, heterosexual, cisgender female senior psychology major; and a 20-year old, Taiwanese American, heterosexual, Agnostic male junior public health major.

Before beginning data analysis, the research team wrote about their biases and expectations on religion/spirituality and spiritual abuse. Six members of the team described having positive views of religion, two described feeling ambivalent or neutral toward religion, and one described having a negative view of religion. Initial associations around the concept of "spiritual abuse" included manipulation, using guilt to control others, misuse of scripture, abuse of power, and sexual abuse in the Catholic church. Two team members reported having experienced or possibly experienced spiritual abuse; five reported knowing someone personally who they believe experienced spiritual abuse. Expected themes or findings from the study included spiritual abuse harming individuals' mental health, spiritual abuse having a lasting effect, victims of spiritual abuse having pre-existing vulnerabilities, shame/guilt,

gender norms, and individuals' religious faith either buffering against the effect of the abuse or becoming stronger through the abuse. All team members were encouraged to set aside their biases and expectations as much as possible during the data analysis process.

A licensed counseling psychologist who is also the first author's graduate advisor served as the auditor for the study. She identifies as a White, heterosexual, cisgender woman in her 70's with extensive clinical, research and teaching experience. Although no longer spiritual and never having experienced spiritual abuse, she grew up in a religious home and church, and her father was trained as a minister.

Measures

Eligibility and Background Survey

Interested participants were asked to complete a Qualtrics survey containing eligibility screening items, an online consent form, demographic questions, the Spiritual Abuse Questionnaire (SAQ; Keller, 2016), and a request for a brief summary of the spiritual abuse experience (See Appendix A).

Spiritual Abuse Questionnaire. The Spiritual Abuse Questionnaire (SAQ; Keller, 2016) consists of 17 items that assess two dimensions of spiritual abuse, using a 4-point scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 4 (*strongly agree*). The first subscale, Power-based Affective Wounding (PBAF), captures misuse of power and resulting emotional injury (e.g., "I now feel cynical about church/religious groups"). The second subscale, Conditionality, reflects the belief that one's status with God and/or the church/religious group is dependent on behavior (e.g., "I believed God would punish me if I didn't do what my church/group encouraged me to do"). A total score was calculated by summing all item responses; higher scores reflect higher levels of spiritual abuse. Keller (2016) demonstrated that the SAQ had

convergent validity through positive associations with measures of religious and spiritual struggle, PTSD symptoms, and institutional betrayal, and good internal consistency (α = .98).

Interview Protocol

Interviews were semi-structured, such that the interviewer asked standardized questions while also using additional probes (e.g., "Tell me more about that"). The protocol was developed by the first author, reviewed by her advisor, and revised after completing one pilot interview with a personal acquaintance of the first author who identified as experiencing spiritual abuse. The protocol included questions about participants' religious/spiritual and ethnic backgrounds, their experiences of spiritual abuse, its impact on their mental, physical, and spiritual health, what factors contributed to and hindered efforts to cope and heal from the abuse, and their perspectives on spiritual abuse (see Appendix B).

Personal Introduction

At the start of each interview, the first author read a personal introduction in order to situate the interviewer's positionality to the study topic and to help establish rapport with participants. The introduction briefly described the first author's identities, cultural and religious background, and interest in the topic of spiritual abuse (see Appendix C).

Procedures

Recruiting the Sample and Data Collection

Approval was obtained from the university Institutional Review Board on July 13th, 2023 [2048608-1]. Participants were recruited via email listservs, social media posts, and personal contacts. Recruitment materials (see Appendices D and E) included a definition of spiritual abuse, a description of the study procedure, eligibility requirements, a copy of the

interview protocol, and a link to the eligibility and background survey.

The original eligibility requirements for the study were that participants must be a) 18 years or older, b) identify as East Asian American, and c) have previously experienced spiritual abuse within a predominantly Asian American, Protestant Christian church or ministry in the United States at 18 years or older. Exclusion criteria for the study were if (a) the spiritual abuse was still ongoing and/or (b) the spiritual abuse was accompanied by physical or sexual abuse.

After initial recruitment efforts, we decided to limit participation in the study to only women. This was due to the fact that initial respondents to the survey were predominantly women, and we speculated that experiences of spiritual abuse among Asian Americans might differ based on gender. Given that we aimed for a relatively small sample of 10-15 individuals and might not have enough participants to create sub-groups based off gender, we felt that limiting the sample to only women would allow us to reduce heterogeneity in responses and better analyze the experiences of this particular group.

In total, 96 individuals completed the Eligibility and Background Qualtrics survey, including individuals who partially completed the survey. Eighteen of those individuals were contacted by the first author to schedule a 60-90 minute Zoom interview, with the first author striving to choose individuals who met the eligibility requirements for the study and who we felt, based off the brief summary of their experiences that participants provided in the survey, would be able to discuss their experience of spiritual abuse in detail and depth. Twelve of the 18 individuals who were contacted ended up completing the interview, including one individual whose interview was only partially completed due to ineligibility concerns. After completion of the interview, participants were provided with a list of emotional and spiritual

support resources (see Appendix F) and a $25 Amazon gift card. Three participants ended up being excluded from the final analysis: one participant who had partially completed the interview due to eligibility concerns, one participant who requested after the interview to withdraw from the study before data analysis had begun, and one participant who requested her data be withdrawn from the study after data analysis had been completed.

Interviews were transcribed verbatim by research team members; all identifying information was removed and code numbers were used. Transcripts were sent to participants to review for accuracy and confidentiality; all were approved with a few minor changes to protect participant confidentiality.

Data Analysis

Data analysis was conducted through weekly Zoom meetings. Before data analysis began, research team members all read Hill et al. (2005) as an introduction to Consensual Qualitative Research and discussed biases and expectations regarding the study topic. The team also acknowledged existing power dynamics within the team (e.g., first author vs. team members, graduate students vs. undergraduate students), discussed ways to reduce power differentials to create a non-hierarchical team culture, and discussed the importance of and strategies for self-care throughout the project.

The first step in CQR involved creating a list of domains, or discrete topics that emerged from the data. The team created an initial domain list after reading one transcript and continued to modify the domain list after reading two more transcripts. The domain list was then sent to the study auditor and revised based on her feedback. Next, team members coded two transcripts, assigning all data chunks to one or more domains. Throughout the coding, the team continued to make revisions to the domain list based on the transcripts and feedback

from the auditor until it was “stable”.

Next, the whole team constructed core ideas, or summaries of the data, for one transcript. After all team members understood the domaining and coring process, they were divided into subgroups to code and create core ideas for the rest of the transcripts. A consensus version (table that contains all of the raw data from the transcript with corresponding domains and core ideas) was created for each case. Each consensus version was reviewed by the first author and auditor, who provided feedback. Revisions were made by each subgroup through consensus and additional discussion with the first author as needed. Throughout this process, the domain list continued to be modified as needed based off the transcripts and auditor feedback. Once all transcripts were coded, the final domain list was numbered and a final table, which consisted of all of the consensus versions merged and ordered by domain, was created.

Finally, the team conducted the cross-analysis. Team members read Chapter 9 (“Cross- Analysis”) of Hill (2012) and discussed the steps for conducting the cross-analysis. The first author then independently identified possible themes for one relatively simple domain, which were then modified based on the team discussion until initial categories and subcategories were developed. The team then together coded each core idea within that domain into one or more categories and subcategories. The team then together created a list of categories and subcategories for the rest of the domains, following the same process. Once team members understood the process, they were divided into subgroups to then code core ideas into categories within each domain. When discrepancies arose, the team returned to the raw data to stay as close to the data as possible. Each cross-analysis was reviewed by the first author and team auditor, who provided feedback. All edits were made through consensus by

the subgroup responsible for the coding and with additional consultation with the first author and auditor as needed. The first author and auditor then worked together to make final revisions to the cross-analysis.

After data analysis had been completed and a draft of the manuscript had been written, all participants were invited to review the manuscript to ensure that confidentiality was maintained and to solicit feedback regarding the study findings. Three participants responded with positive feedback and one participant responded with a request to be withdrawn from the study. The first author and auditor worked together to make revisions to the cross-analysis and manuscript to reflect the removed participant.

Throughout the data analysis process, the first author worked to ensure that all team members' voices were heard and given equal weight. She saw her role as one of facilitator and consultant on the content area and methodology. The first author strove to reduce inherent power dynamics by continually asking how people felt, inviting differing opinions, and making all decisions by consensus. All feedback was provided as suggestions and decisions regarding revisions were made by the subgroup responsible for that portion of the analysis, often in consultation with the first author. The team dynamics were collaborative and positive, and no problems were mentioned by any team members. Throughout the data analysis process, which was completed over 1.5 years, the team met for three in-person social gatherings to facilitate team rapport and celebrate progress on the project.

At the end of the data analysis process, the team reflected on initial expectations and reactions to the findings. Some team members reported that their views on religion and/or Christianity changed, with some sharing that their perspectives became more positive based on participants' reliance on faith for healing, and many sharing that they developed a more nuanced

and mixed attitude toward religion and/or Christianity through seeing both the positive and negative aspects of faith and religious institutions. Team members also shared that their understanding of spiritual abuse became broader and less rigid. Team members reported being surprised by the severity of spiritual abuse and its impact on participants, as well as how much spiritual abuse some participants endured before leaving their church. Finally, team members shared that they enjoyed the team meetings, found the analysis process sometimes "tedious," and developed better understandings of qualitative research.

Chapter 3: Results

Table 2 presents the frequencies of the categories and subcategories within six domains. Categories that included core ideas from all or all but one of the participants (8 or 9) were considered general, those that emerged for more than half up to the cutoff for general (5 to 7) were typical, those that emerged for two up to half of the sample (2 to 4) were variant.

Results are presented below in descending order of frequency. We provide quotations from cases to illustrate the data, removing filler words (e.g., "uh," "you know") and deleting sections of quotations as indicated by ellipses (. . .) to enhance readability. At times, we paraphrased the actual quotes for sake of clarity and brevity. We used pseudonyms for all participants.

Type of Spiritual Abuse Experiences

In this domain, participants described their experiences of spiritual abuse. Four categories emerged from the data: marginalization and "othering," pressure to participate in the church/religious organization, moral/spiritual evaluation, and interference/control in personal life.

Marginalization and "Othering"

Typically, participants described experiences of being excluded, "othered," and treated as second-class citizens at their church, often due to their gender. Jane described being dismissed as a "raging feminist" and excluded by the male leaders at her church when she worked there as an intern. The male leaders would ignore her when they passed her in the hallway and excluded her from email communications about events she was supposed to be helping with. Jane said:

> I was set aside as a separate tier, sort of a "You're not really one of us" kind of thing. And actually, it's even funny, because for the longest time, they didn't want to use the word "intern" with me because that made them feel uncomfortable because they believe that authority should be given away to the men pastors . . . So they were trying to think of new titles for me. One of them was "woman's coach," but functionally, I was doing everything. It was really confusing.

Stacey described being excluded by the other members of her Christian campus organization:

> I got this language from some of the peers from that group as if like, "This is not what you're supposed to do. This is not the image that you want to portray in our group. You're not doing your responsibilities" . . . I don't speak Cantonese, so I only speak Mandarin. A lot of them are Cantonese . . . they would say, "This is not what you should be doing reflecting the values of this group."

Mina said that she was often treated like a "servant" by her pastor and his wife due to her status as a female seminarian. For instance, she was asked to cook for the church and carry heavy furniture for the pastor. Mina recalled one example:

> [The pastor's wife] had a huge bag of bagels and she was giving that to all the lay people in the church. And I was also passing by and I thought she was giving that to me. And I kind of automatically said, "Oh, thank you *Samonim* [pastor's wife], and then she's like, "No, no, no. This is not for you . . . You're not a lay person. This is not for you. You shouldn't eat this." And I was like, "Oh, okay." And she was like, "Yeah. But can you deliver this to my son who lives near your home?" . . . I felt like I was treated as like a servant in the church.

Pressure to Participate in Church/Religious Organization

Typically, participants described being pressured or coerced into participating in their church. Stacey described feeling pressured by her Christian campus organization to participate in their activities, even when she needed to focus on her schoolwork and job:

> I prioritized myself for the things that I have to do . . . I just had to skip some of the activities in order to do what I had to do in order to graduate, or to support myself . . . Sometimes I just said, "Oh, this semester, I really can't do this xyz activity. Going to this church activity, I can't do that." And then they just couldn't accept that.

When she declined participating in certain activities, Stacey recalled being asked, "Why would you only think about yourself?"

Jenny recalled studying a bible passage with her mentor within a Christian campus organization and the mentor interpreting the passage by telling her that she shouldn't care so much about her academics and should be more involved in the organization. She was repeatedly pressured to attend the organization's retreat and recalled their response when she declined:

> So [church mentor] says "Okay, well . . . Imagine you are juggling and so your life is like juggling and as you grow more skilled in juggling as you grow older, you can juggle more balls . . . Imagine your life, your relationship with Christ and you coming to this retreat is the glass ball. So you're juggling a bunch of balls, but this one's a glass one. If you drop that, then you know, if you drop the other balls, you can always pick them up. But this is glass, so if you drop it..." and then they would raise their eyebrows at me and it would just be silent.

Moral/Spiritual Evaluation

Typically, participants described feeling morally or spiritually judged by leaders in

their church. When Grace told her pastor that a conflict with her friend was due to miscommunication, he insisted, “It’s not a miscommunication. It's a heart issue. It's a pride issue.” She also recalled that in her first mandated “counseling session” with the pastor,

> [The pastor] used Paul's epistles against me. Like the verse about “Do nothing out of selfish ambition.” He said that I was pursuing my Ph.D. selfishly and people who pursue a Ph.D. usually don't get into heaven.

Grace was told her personal therapy was “clearly not working” and she needed “soul surgery.”

Christine recalled being berated by her church leader for going on a “personal retreat” to work through her jealousy over not getting a lead role in her church’s skit and being “corrected” for her lifestyle:

> She started yelling at me and she's like, “How dare you run away and just fall into your own self-pity party and worry all of us,” and like, “You are having jealous thoughts, you're such a sinner, you’re so sinful that you have these kinds of jealous thoughts” . . . getting these corrections more about my character, like that I was being lazy if I didn’t wake up on time for DTs, that I wasn’t being thoughtful if I didn’t bring soup over to my roommate or something, if she was sick. That I wasn’t being spiritually passionate if I wasn’t getting that many students in my ministry.

Interference/Control in Personal Life

Variantly, participants discussed experiences in which they felt church leaders exerted control and regulation of their personal lives. In one example, Grace’s pastor interfered in her relationship with her fiancé after finding out about a conflict between Grace and one of her friends, who also attended the same church. Grace recalled:

> The pastor went to . . . girls that I had supposedly hurt while at that church. And then

> he had them all write up letters on how I hurt them. And then the pastor presented all those letters to my husband, at the time fiancé, and he said, "[Participant] has a sin of pride. The wedding needs to be postponed. You guys can't get married in this state."

The pastor also mandated that Grace attend "counseling sessions" with the church leaders, in which Grace recalled them "gaslighting me the entire time with scripture" and asking for pictures of her personal journal. During that time, Grace and her fiancé were told they were not allowed to talk to each other for four weeks. If Grace didn't "show progress," she was told that she and her fiancé would need to cancel their wedding.

In another example, Anna's church enforced strict rules around church members' choices in relationships, entertainment, and general lifestyle, such as limiting interactions between men and women, restricting social media use, and forbidding members to watch Korean dramas. Church members were told to "confess" their "sins" to leaders and were punished through "corrections" when they broke church rules. For instance, Anna was told to write a 20-page "reflection" because of her views on opposite-gender relationships and her choices in her dating relationship. She was also told by her church leader to stop seeing her therapist because she was trusting her therapist more than her church leaders.

Impact of Spiritual Abuse on Health

Participants described how the spiritual abuse impacted their mental, spiritual, and physical health during the time they were experiencing the abuse.

Impact on Mental Health

In this subdomain, three categories emerged from the data: psychological symptomology/negative affect, interpersonal challenges, and academic/career disruptions.

Psychological Symptomology/Negative Affect

Generally, participants reported experiencing psychological distress and negative emotions in response to the spiritual abuse. Grace said, “Because of the gaslighting, it was so severe. I wanted it to stop. I seriously contemplated suicide because it was just so much.” Mina said,

> At one time, I felt so insecure and I still remember, I woke up in the middle of the night because of a panic attack I had at 3 AM in the morning. And I didn't know it was a panic attack. I thought I just had a nightmare, and then that continued for one month. And I could see myself changing. And I felt anger, disappointment, also despair.

Anna described experiencing depression as a result of the spiritual abuse:

> I just want[ed] to not live because I [felt] like, “If I die, well, at least I'll be in heaven. And heaven is where all things broken will be made right. So maybe I'll work right in heaven” . . . It's kind of weird, because it's not like I was like suicidal . . . It was more like, “Oh, I just kind of want to be in heaven because it's rough down here.”

Interpersonal Challenges

Generally, participants reported that the spiritual abuse resulted in interpersonal challenges. Jane reflected:

> A lot of my anger went towards men at the time. I had a severe distrust of men . . . I guess a lot of people would have said that I was very hostile at the time . . . I realize now that was actually me functioning out of a lot of anxiety, of feeling like, “I need to take control of my situation because no one else will protect anybody here.”

Grace described feeling anxious and alone, “I was afraid someone would reach out to me that I didn't want to talk to . . . And I didn't know who was actually there for my best interest or

who wanted to control me." Stacey noted that the abuse she experienced in her campus organization made her wonder, "Why can't I bond with other people in the group?"

Disruption in Academics/Career

Variantly, participants noted that their professional and academic lives were disrupted as a result of the spiritual abuse. Grace remembered, "I took two incompletes on that semester because I was in two classes. And I didn't turn on my computer those entire four weeks. I could barely function." Jane said, "I barely got through college because of what had happened. It was really hard for me academically because I was just so depressed. I just had such a hard time focusing and had a hard time really doing anything." Christine said, "I would take the day off from work because I was feeling just overall like malaise and sick and just not wanting to do anything, because I feel like my leader doesn't like me or is displeased with me."

Impact on Physical Health

In this subdomain, two categories emerged: somatic symptoms related to mental health and physical health problems not related to mental health.

Somatic Symptoms Related to Mental Health

Typically, participants discussed physical health problems related to their psychological distress. Grace said she "wasn't eating" due to her depression and anxiety. Tiffany remembered, "I cried a lot, didn't eat a lot. I had a really hard time sleeping." Christine described "stomach aches or digestive issues or headaches . . . I would get sick pretty frequently."

Physical Health Problems Not Related to Mental Health

Variantly, participants discussed physical health problems not specifically related to

mental health concerns that were direct results of the spiritual abuse. Mina was injured as a result of being asked by her pastor to help carry furniture, "That actually made me to have [a] hernia . . . So I had to go back to Korea and get a surgery." Anna recalled being in physical pain when she was required to wash dishes for four hours, "my back was dying. I had my period that day and I get the worst cramps. I had cramps and I was not looking happy."

Impact on Spiritual Health

In this subdomain, four categories emerged: disengagement from God or church, greater closeness/dependency on God, questioning God, and negative beliefs about God and/or self.

Disengagement from God or Church

Variantly, participants reported that they experienced greater distance and disengagement from God or church during the time of their spiritual abuse. Jane remembered:

> There was like maybe a solid 6 month to a year period where I was truly angry, and I was angry at God. I just did all the stereotypical college things like went partying and was just really rebellious and did not care about church and did not go.

Erin stopped going to her church to avoid abusive pastors. She said the experience also caused her to feel guarded and not want to participate at her next church:

> I remember getting very tense whenever someone asked me to serve at the third [new] church. It was like, "Can I say no?" . . . I was like, "Okay, I don't think I want to go to a Korean church ever again."

Greater Closeness/Dependency on God

Variantly, participants reported that while they were experiencing spiritual abuse, they became more dependent on God and experienced greater relational closeness to God. Tiffany

said, “In that particular time, I did feel really close to God, because I had no one else really to rely on.” Mina described how her relationship with God became a place of healing for her during the abuse:

> I was more depending on God, asking for His help. And because my church community and my school Christian community was not safe for me, I was really focused on studying and my relationship with God. So, for me, the only healing space I could have was in class, where I could study about God, and my personal practice time with God, like praying or praising. So it even strengthened my relationship with God.

Questioning God

Variantly, participants reported that the spiritual abuse they experienced caused them to question and/or doubt God. Tiffany said,

> After that whole incident with the male leader shutting me down, I went home and I just opened my Bible just cried to God, cause I was like, “Is this really what this Word means? Is this really what this verse is talking about?” . . . I think I was really struggling with “God, is this the kind of leader that You are? . . . Why would you allow this to happen?”

Anna stated,

> It's hard for me to think that, “Oh, God still loves [the abusers] though.” For me, it's like “God, they're wrong, though. But yet You stand behind them . . . You're also for those people. You're for me. But you're also for them. So are You on my side or not?”

Negative Beliefs about God and/or Self

Variantly, participants reported struggling with negative religious beliefs about God and/or themselves due to the spiritual abuse. Christine remembered how she felt after being punished by her religious leader for crossing “physical boundaries” in her relationship:

> That ended up being the start of my soul just literally dying because I felt like that sin was too shameful to ever recover from. I was never going to be good enough to do college ministry or to be a lead for [Church] because I've just sinned so bad, like I've fallen so bad that I'm going to be a useless person in [Church].

Anna described the impact of the spiritual abuse on her beliefs about herself:

> "Oh, my gosh! God must be so upset with me." And "Wow, I'm such a horrible person" and "Wow, God is barely putting up with me". That was my constant understanding of God. So basically, how I've viewed my leaders ended up being how I view God.

Factors that Impacted Coping or Healing

In this domain, participants identified the actions and experiences that helped or hindered them on their journey of coping and healing from the abuse.

Actions/Experiences that Promoted Coping or Healing

In this subdomain, six categories emerged: positive interpersonal experiences, developing new perspectives on the abuse, focusing on meaningful activities, engaging with religion/spirituality, gaining distance/space from the abuse, and mental health treatment.

Positive Interpersonal Experiences

Generally, participants reported that having experiences of being supported and validated by others helped them recover from the abuse. Erin described how important it was for her to be around other Christians who accepted her:

> And if it wasn't for [pastor] and having this other church I could go to, I could very much see myself just sinking into despair, being like, "Oh, I'm going to hell, this whole church

rejected me." But since I was able to go to a different church, I was like, "Oh, okay, these are other Christians who accept me."

Anna stated,

> Just having people who understand . . . There are a lot of [former church members] who experienced the spiritual abuse. So just talking to them about my experience, and kind of breaking it down, and seeing them get angry for me. I think that's really helpful, because initially, I was like "I'm not angry. I was in the wrong" kind of mentality, and I was defending [the church] too when I talked to other people . . . I think that helped.

Developing New Perspectives on the Abuse

Typically participants reported that developing new understandings of their spiritual abuse experience helped them move on from the abuse. Mina said,

> I found that from the Bible, Jesus did not judge anyone. And he really showed love and he was not demanding. He was embracing. And just from that, I realized what my pastor was doing was wrong. He wasn't showing any love. He wasn't showing any respect. He was just abusing his authority. So, I think I also realized that he was wrong and the Church was wrong.

Christine said,

> When I started to learn about spiritual abuse, at first I was like, "No, I can't even research that term" because "abuse" is such a strong word . . . I'm like, "No, this couldn't be it." And then but as I kept learning more about it and reading other books and listening to podcasts and reading articles, I was like, "Oh, my gosh, this really was." And all these things started to like click together in my mind . . . because of that knowledge, I feel like my eyes were open to properly process my experience.

Tiffany became able to see multiple sides to her experience and have more compassion on herself and others:

> At the time, it was really easy for me to be like, "These men are oppressive, they are silencing me." . . [Now], I also recognize that there are different sides. There are different perspectives . . . And so, in that way, when I'm thinking about more of the different pieces of the story at the time, I think I found that I've been able to have a lot more compassion and grace for myself, in terms of how I handle[d] the situation.

Focusing on Meaningful Activities

Typically, participants described how investing in meaningful activities and goals helped them move on from the abuse. Stacey said that "keeping busy" and focusing on her academics helped lessen the impact of the abuse. Tiffany found healing in her job as a teacher to immigrant students:

> I feel like [the students] were very healing for me . . . These were students from different countries around the world and their only connecting point was learning English so it was really lovely in the classroom, hearing these students . . . try their best to connect with each other with the one language that could get them to communicate . . . I was like "This is what community feels like" and I think that felt really redemptive for me.

Engaging with Religion/Spirituality

Variantly, participants reported that engaging with their faith helped them cope and heal from the abuse. Christine said,

> A huge part of it was reading through Scripture without the [Church] lens. [There were] so many things we had to unlearn about what church was. . . We read through

> Paul's letters, and were like, “You know, he isn't yelling at them, he isn't making them feel bad and he isn't correcting them about these little character type of things, about whether you smiled or how you dressed or if you're losing weight, he wasn't correcting them about that . . . so we had to correct our beliefs and our theology.

Erin said,

> I did think [about] how Jesus said up on the cross, “God, please forgive them, for they do not know what they do.” And so, I was like, “Okay, if I am to be like Jesus, or strive to be like Jesus, that means people are just really flawed, and they're going to hurt me. But that doesn't mean God isn't good.” And so I think in that regard, and having that mindset, I was able to not hate God and turn away from Christianity.

Gaining Distance/Space from the Abuse

Variantly, participants reported that simply having time and distance from the abuse helped them move on and heal. Jane said, “It was the physical moving away [that helped]. Getting married and moving away to different church that really helped me.” Jenny said,

> Time - definitely time. I think if I jumped out and jumped into the second semester immediately and joined another Christian group that wouldn't have been necessarily good for me, I think, just kind of the same for like processing a loss or a [big event] even. It's just you just need time to think about things.

Mental Health Treatment

Variantly, participants identified therapy as helpful in their journey of coping and healing from the abuse. Tiffany stated:

> She [therapist] helped me process through a lot of what I was feeling. So, even though I still chose to silence myself in the church, that I was able to have that space to talk

> about it with my therapist, and I think she was able to connect a lot of my tendencies and my behaviors to early childhood dynamics, things like that. And that was very helpful for me to understand why I react the way that I do.

Jane said, "I was going through therapy . . . to sort of unpack a lot of the things I went through. So I think, because of that, my mental health was in a better place."

Actions/Experiences that Hindered Coping or Healing

In this subdomain, four categories emerged: harmful interpersonal experiences, feeling isolated/alone, experiencing self-doubt/blame, and experiencing reminders/triggers of the abuse.

Harmful Interpersonal Experiences

Typically, participants discussed experiences of being invalidated or dismissed when they shared about the abuse. Tiffany shared,

> However, when I shared it with another one of my friends that I thought was really close, she was like, "I understand that you're really stressed about this instance, but you sharing this with me, it's actually not helping me see [church leader] in a good light, and I want to make sure that I maintain good feelings about this person. So I would appreciate if you don't talk about this anymore" . . . And she made it a point to say, "He's your small group leader. He's the spiritual leader. So maybe it is worth thinking about what he said." . . . I think in some ways that was probably more hurtful for me because I felt like "Am I crazy?"

Jane recalled,

> And so there were a lot of times when I would openly share with other leaders within

> the church where I would want to voice my concerns and the general instinct would be, "Ugh, pastors go through so much and so we need to honor them."

Christine shared about the response of church leaders after she sent an email to many members of the church speaking up about her experiences:

> One of my former leaders was calling up some people that I had cc'ed on that email saying, "Oh it didn't happen the way [Participant] said it. And you can't really believe what she's saying right now." . . . So it's been kind of a retraumatizing time.

Feeling Isolated/Alone

Typically, participants reported that feeling isolated and not having close community hindered their ability to cope or heal. Erin said:

> I still feel stuck in some ways. And maybe it's because I don't necessarily feel like I have a community that emulates the kind of community and closeness I had with people in the second church . . . I miss that kind of community and intimacy and I haven't found a good substitute for it.

Tiffany said,

> It also didn't help that I was living by myself. So I think that really encouraged me to just kind of silo myself off from people. I didn't really connect with my college friends from [College]. I was like, "I have no energy to talk to you, because I'm tired all the time from student teaching, from dealing with church stuff whatever." So, I think that prevented me from reaching out and getting support.

Christine recalled her loneliness after leaving the abusive church:

> Because we were really discouraged from having close relationships outside of the

> church, when I left, I realized how little I had any sort of relationship with anybody else. I barely knew any of my co-workers because [it was] kind of looked down upon to hang out with your coworkers after hours and stuff . . . I wasn't close to my parents too much . . . I had constantly said no to any of their offers to go on a family trip because of [Church] that I didn't have any rhythms with them and I didn't have any other friends in any other sphere of life . . . So when I left I felt like I had nothing . . . I was pretty depressed and really doubting that "Oh, maybe I didn't make the right decision. Maybe I should go back, because this is so hard."

Experiencing Self-Doubt/Blame

Variantly, participants discussed how doubting, questioning, or blaming themselves for some aspect of their experience hindered their ability to move on or heal from the experience. For Jane, self-doubt hindered her from reaching out:

> It's just confusing mostly, like was my experience really as bad as I feel like it was? Even like thirty minutes before coming onto this call, I was thinking, "Was this really spiritual abuse? I don't know." I still feel kind of confused.

Tiffany said,

> As an Asian woman, I'm very aware of certain stereotypes that we have . . . and it just always felt like I didn't fit the mold of what a woman should look like, what Asian women should look like. And then, in that experience with that church kind of like, "Oh, but fit the mold of a Christian woman," and I think because of that, it really led me down this path of questioning myself. Who am I supposed to be? And how am I supposed to act within my role as aa Christian woman, as an Asian Christian woman? I think those are still questions that I wrestle with today.

Experiencing Reminders/Triggers of the Abuse

Variantly, participants reported that being reminded of the spiritual abuse hindered their ability to move on from the experience. For Grace, her choice to "stalk" her church's social media page kept her from moving on:

> I would go on [the church] Instagram or Facebook and stalk them and see what they've been up to, and finding more proof that it was good that I left . . . I kept looking back for validation and proof that I was right to leave and that I wasn't crazy.

Christine said she and her husband felt "pressured" to join a new church right away so that other people didn't think they "became non-Christians." She remembered struggling with how different the churches were from her former church and feeling triggered:

> At one point I really broke down at a prayer meeting . . . I was just crying. And looking back at that point, I was like wow, I was really shell-shocked by these different churches, and how different their culture was, and how insulated and kind of in-our-own-world we were in. I didn't know how to just operate in these other church settings . . . all of a sudden there were too many things at Sunday services that were starting to trigger me.

Anna had a negative experience in counseling that reminded her of her abusive church:

> I found something that's called "biblical counseling." I just thought it was Christian counseling. But it's actually not . . . How it works is you'll list out your problems, you'll go to the Word of God, and you figure out in what ways you're not living the Word out correctly, that is causing those issues. You basically have to confess it and work through them with the therapists that you have. And for some people that works out great. But then, for people like me, I don't think that worked well because it felt

exactly like what [Church] did. So I felt really triggered.

Cultural Values Associated with the Abuse

In this domain, participants discussed cultural values they perceived to be related to their experience of spiritual abuse. Although most values were related to Asian culture, some were related to Christianity. Four categories emerged: respecting hierarchy, patriarchal values, maintaining harmony, and enduring through suffering. We note that participants' experiences of spiritual abuse were embedded within their specific cultural context, and thus it is artificial to "separate out" the impact of culture from other domains. However, we found that creating a specific domain for relevant cultural values allowed us to highlight these results more clearly.

Respecting Hierarchy

Typically, cultural values around hierarchy and the importance of respecting authority figures impacted participants' experience of spiritual abuse. Jenny said,

> It's just like an Asian value to respect. So respect your elders and so it kind of implies [that] you should respect the people and listen to the people who are leading you, even if it doesn't make sense.

Christine discussed how her Korean ethnicity related to her experience of abuse:

> I did feel like the way I've experienced spiritual abuse was tied to the fact that I was Korean, and a lot of the leaders were Korean. Because there is so much of Korean culture, and some Asian cultures at large, where there's this kind of unstated given that you respect your elders, you submit to them. And anyone who's older has every right to speak into your life and give you their unsolicited advice . . . [The church] knew that they could rely on that cultural trait of people speaking into your life . . . They use that

> and spiritualize it and call that “discipline,” because then you can't push back, like I can't say “no” to that, it's not just their unsolicited advice, it's my leader discipling me and so when she does say something . . . I need to obey my leader in this, because she's trying to disciple me.

Patriarchal Values

Typically, participants discussed patriarchal values within their culture impacted their experience of abuse. Mina said,

> I felt like because I was a single woman and I was young - I was in twenties - I think they were able to treat me like that because I was a single woman seminarian. If I were married and if I had a husband who can be with me, I think that it might have been a little different . . . I didn't have anyone. So, that's why they knew they could treat me like that . . . They were judging me based on my status as a single woman seminarian. They just wanted to abuse their authority to show that I am below them. I'm the lowest status.

Grace said,

> They were definitely misogynistic. When I said that marriage was a partnership and they were like, “Oh, that's not biblical,” I knew instantly like, “Oh, it's because I'm not the typical wife.” Actually, my mom pointed it out, because she asked me for the age of the girls that I had hurt and whether they were married or not. And I said, “Yeah, actually all of them are married minus [church member].” And my mom was like, “That's it. They're all married. Of course, you're not fulfilling the married wife standard.” Like I had no intention of changing my last name. I still don't. And I know that was a big contentious issue in the church. It was definitely a gender thing. It was

more of a patriarchy thing and I wasn't matching the picture of a “biblical woman” for them.

Maintaining Harmony

Variantly, participants discussed cultural values around maintaining harmony, even at personal cost. Jane described how speaking up at her church caused her to feel ashamed:

> Also the shame I feel of just questioning, “What’s wrong with me, going against the flow and disrupting harmony in what seems peaceful otherwise? Everyone else seems okay with this, so why can't I be okay with this?” I feel ashamed. I think that’s very deeply cultural too.

Messages Tiffany received as a child about restraining her emotions to avoid making others uncomfortable caused her to silence herself about the abuse:

> I didn't want people to see that I was angry. I didn't want people to see that I was upset or scared . . . I chose to keep it to myself, because again, it's the value that my mom had instilled in me of like, “You don't want to make people uncomfortable” . . . I felt like it was important for me to essentially sacrifice myself, sacrifice my own needs and my own desires to be seen and heard. To be like, “I don't want to cause any problems in this community. I don't want to be the one that's creating division.” I think that's more Christian. But similarly, a collectivistic kind of value of “Let me hold back . . . So that I can protect the harmony of this community” . . . It's such a convenient blending of the two, the convenient blending of the need to prioritize community and harmony blending with the Christian need of “We are one body, don't create division, be peacemakers.”

Enduring through Suffering

Variantly, participants described how values around perseverance, forbearance, and endurance through suffering shaped their response to the abuse. Tiffany said:

> I don't know how much of this is stuff that I've learned from my culture, from my family, but it's like, if I'm committed, I'm committed. If I'm committed, if I say I'm committed to a community, [then I] should stick with it, even though they're so painful to be around . . . I felt like "I'm sticking with it because that's what community is about, you can't just dip out, you can't just 'shop for churches.'" People talk about that all the time.

Mina said,

> I think this belief I had in my mind, I thought it was a spiritual trial, like shown in Bible that I had to win over or go through. But actually, it was not. It was something that I had to run away from. But I think that value, that thought, really hindered me to move on quickly after I realized that it wasn't a good place for me to be.

Long-Term Changes as a Result of the Abuse Experience

In this domain, participants described how they had changed as a result of their spiritual abuse experiences. Four categories emerged from the data: personal growth, religious/spiritual changes, loss of health, wholeness, and identity, and using their experiences to help others.

Personal Growth

Generally, participants reported that their spiritual abuse experiences resulted in personal growth. Tiffany learned "to see things in different perspectives, and to also have more compassion for myself." Christine changed how she engaged with others:

> Because when I was leader at [Church], it really did feel like people were projects . . .

> Now I'm trying to go back to that place of really allowing people to be themselves and with all their baggage, and trying to show more compassion and understanding of that . ., . I'm able to see people in a more human way and in a more compassionate way.

Religious/Spiritual Changes

Typically, participants reported experiencing changes in their religion/spirituality as a result of the spiritual abuse. There were two subcategories.

Continued Struggle or Moving Away from Christianity

Participants typically noted that their spiritual abuse experiences resulted in struggle and moving away from Christianity and/or the church. Grace said, "I haven't gone to church or opened my Bible in a year mainly because I don't want to. It just keeps bringing back those memories of the Bible verses that were used against me." Christine found the "whole Christian industrial complex" to be "off- putting" and was no longer interested in doing ministry. Erin's spiritual abuse experience was the "beginning of the end" for her "Christian church Evangelical walk." Anna said, "It's hard for me to step foot in a church . . . or let alone trust spiritual authorities."

Strengthening of Faith

In contrast with the first subcategory, participants variantly reported that the spiritual abuse experience ultimately strengthened their faith. Jenny stated:

> My faith grew more, which is weird, because now that I look back, it's a pretty interesting experience to say, "Yes, I'm a Christian" but that didn't hinder my relationship with God over time in the long run.

Jane stated, "[The spiritual abuse] helped me grow spiritually. It really made me evaluate my faith for what it is and what exactly I believe and if my beliefs really help build this system of

people being abused or if God's okay with that.

Loss of Health, Wholeness, and Identity

Typically, participants described how their spiritual abuse experiences resulted in a sense of chronic loss of health, wholeness, and identity. Anna described:

> I'm still struggling with it. Another thing is because I spent almost nine years at that church, I'm like, wow, like the feeling that I experienced after leaving was so disorienting, because the world operates so differently than how that little small ecosystem at that church worked. I think I still have a hard time, wondering about all my lost hours, or the amount of money that I gave away to the church, and all the sleep that I lost, all the time that I didn't get to spend with my family, all the unnecessary stress, and all the health consequences that I have now because of that church. And it's really frustrating and I guess sad.

Mina described changing from being confident to being "sensitive about how people react about how I talk, how I behave, how I look." Mina also changed her career path:

> They really stole away my passion and my dream. . . After [the abuse], I kind of decided, "Oh, I'm never going to reveal my identity that I'm a seminarian." So, I moved to a different church in [City] and then I did not share that I was a seminarian. I just said that I'm studying something else.

Christine described her sense of loss of wholeness:

> I don't know if I'll ever kind of quote unquote get over it. I mean, I think I'll be able to manage my functioning in this world a little bit better as time passes, but I think something truly got broken.

Using Their Experiences to Help Others

Participants variantly noted that their spiritual abuse experiences left them with a desire to use their experience to help others. Grace planned to write a book on her experiences to help others who also experienced spiritual abuse. Jane used her power as a pastor's wife to "speak out" for others: "Being a pastor's wife, I think I take the role a lot more seriously and feel much more responsibility holding my husband accountable . . . I think that's been my way of redeeming the situation too." For Christine:

> I just want to help people now who've gone through this and I never thought that would be part of my journey, I just thought, "Okay, I'll you know, process this and heal from this on my own" but now I feel very moved to help others.

Mina, who was now in a doctoral psychology program noted, "I may be able to help people who went through similar experiences and let them know that they're really being abused."

What Mental Health Professionals Should Know

In this domain, participants noted what they want mental health professionals to know when working with clients who have experienced spiritual abuse. Two categories emerged: definition, signs, and impact of spiritual abuse, and the importance of providing a safe, client- centered space.

Definition, Signs, and Impact of Spiritual Abuse

Typically, participants reported that mental health professionals should have foundational knowledge of spiritual abuse and its impacts. Jane wanted mental health professionals to be aware of the impact, "the shame that people experience and self-doubt, like constantly wondering whether it's really abuse and trying to pin down that feeling of

"What exactly is my experience?" Christine wanted mental health professionals to recognize the depth of the impact of spiritual abuse, "it just goes straight to who I am and my spirit and my relationship with God."

Importance of Providing a Safe, Client-Centered Space

Typically, participants highlighted that mental health professionals should create safe, client-centered spaces when working with victims of spiritual abuse. Tiffany emphasized the importance of listening to understanding clients, "It is really important to first really hear from the person who experienced spiritual abuse what they experience, but also how they define their experience, how they perceive their experience." Jenny recognized the need for mental health professionals to respect differences in worldviews: "Christian victims of spiritual abuse might not feel 'safe' if they feel like they have an 'anti-Christian psychologist.'"

Chapter 4: Discussion

Through interviewing nine self-identified East Asian American Christian women, we gained an illuminating picture of the kinds of spiritual abuse this population can face and the impact of spiritual abuse on their health and sense of identity. We briefly summarize our findings within each domain that emerged from the data (without consideration of the original research questions), compare our findings with previous literature, and discuss key takeaways. We then discuss how our findings relate back to our original four research questions. Finally, we discuss limitations of the study and implications for practice and research.

Domain 1: Types of Spiritual Abuse Experiences

First, participants typically reported experiences of feeling marginalized or ”othered” within their religious communities. Although participants did not always discuss their understanding of why they were marginalized, those who did named factors such as their gender, language, mental health problems, and marital status. Many of the tactics used to marginalize participants align with past findings on spiritual abuse, such as the use of public shaming, isolation, threats, and gossip to target specific individuals (Bilsky, 2013; Krueger, 2018).

Furthermore, the idea of “othering” or marginalization is aligned with earlier definitions of spiritual abuse, such as Oakley and Kimmond’s (2013) definition, which includes “isolation from others” as one form of spiritual abuse. Isolating individuals from their communities also occurs during emotional abuse (Karakurt & Silver, 2013). In their examination of young adults’ perceived pathways toward experiencing intimate partner violence, Barnest et al. (2022) found that feeling “othered” resulted in a “negative feedback loop,” in which individuals’ attempts at help-seeking resulted in silencing and dismissal, which led to a feeling

of being "othered" and isolated, which then increased their vulnerability to further abuse. Marginalization can thus be a risk factor for cumulative abuse and trauma. Finally, identity-based marginalization and spiritual abuse also have been studied through the experiences of religious trauma among LGBTQ+ individuals within the church (see Crocker, 2021; Simmons, 2017).

Second, participants also typically reported feeling pressured to participate in the activities of their church or religious organization. This pressure often involved church leaders using shame, repetition, and spiritual threats to pressure participants to maintain involvement in church life (e.g., meetings, retreats, activities) and/or "serve" church leaders, often at the cost of their own personal and professional pursuits. Similarly, Glassock's (2019) study of ex-cult members found that individuals were required to make extreme sacrifices in their personal lives for the sake of the group. Similarly, Kvarfordt and Herba (2018) found that spiritual abuse of children often involved forced attendance at religious services or other forms of religious observance. Our finding also aligns with definitions and measurements of spiritual abuse that highlight the use of manipulation and exploitation (Oakley & Kimmond, 2013).

Third, participants in our study typically reported being morally and/or spiritually judged for behaviors such as interacting with individuals of the "opposite gender," struggling with mental health concerns, and prioritizing academics. Similarly, previous studies highlighted harsh critique and "scolding" (Keller, 2017), the use of religion to teach hatred toward one's self (Kvarfordt & Herba, 2018), the use of power to shame church members (Krueger, 2018), and critique of one's spiritual journey (Kvarfordt & Herba, 2018) as forms of spiritual abuse. Previous studies (e.g., Krueger, 2018) have also highlighted how religious leaders' poor understanding of mental health can form the basis of spiritual abuse against

those who struggle with depression and other mental illness. This form of spiritual abuse often involved assigning moral and spiritual value to seemingly innocuous behaviors (e.g., one participant was scolded for laughing too loudly) and in this way, participants were repeatedly given the implicit or explicit message that they were sinful and flawed.

Finally, participants variantly reported that church leaders exerted undue control and influence in their personal lives, such as their choices in romantic relationships, media consumption, and career pursuits. This finding is well-captured in the language of Oakley and Kimmond's (2013) definition of spiritual abuse as including "censorship of decision making." Such abuse explicitly and implicitly used religious authority to strip individuals of their personal autonomy. Similarly, Krueger (2018) identified "violating privacy and interfering with private lives of parishioners" as a form of clergy nonsexual misconduct, and Glasscock (2019) found that ex-cult members described experiencing extreme pressure to conform to group norms and "totalitarian" levels of control. Specific areas of control identified in previous studies that align with the present study's findings are around physical appearance, media consumption, and marriage and other relationships (Bilsky, 2013; Krueger, 2018).

Although we found four types of spiritual abuse, these types shared core themes, such as violation of autonomy, misuse of religious power, and devaluation of the individual. Although spiritual abuse was most often perpetrated by those in positions of religious power (e.g., pastors and other church leaders), participants occasionally described experiences of spiritual harm inflicted by other church members. This finding highlights the question of whether the concept of spiritual abuse should be limited to experiences of harm inflicted by religious leaders or broadened to any form of harm perpetrated in a religious or spiritual context. It is worth noting that even when harm was inflicted by non-leaders, such harm

always implicitly invoked religious power through the context of occurring in a religious setting. In addition, one could argue that such acts of harm, while perpetrated by non-leaders, reflect the greater abusive culture within that church or organization created and modeled by those in power. Therefore, whether perpetrated by religious leaders or not, spiritual abuse seems always to involve misuse of power.

One primary takeaway from our results is that spiritual abuse is deeply insidious due to its inherently ambiguous nature. Spiritual abuse is a distortion of religion/spirituality, in that it misrepresents religious doctrines, weaponizes out-of-context scripture, and exploits religious values. Because spiritual abuse is a distortion of religion, it implicates accepted religious doctrine, truth, or values. Thus, the boundary between adherence to religion and inappropriate misuse of religion is difficult to define. For instance, many of our participants described abusive experiences of being marginalized and excluded on the basis of their gender. However, within many traditions of Christianity, women willingly accept doctrines of female submission to male headship and the exclusion of women from positions of power within the church. At what point does belief in "male headship" cross from religious belief to abusive oppression? In another example, participants reported abusive experiences of being morally and spiritually evaluated and judged. However, one core doctrine within traditional Christianity is the belief that all humans are flawed and sinful. At what point is the suggestion of sin in someone's life in line with biblically sanctioned confrontation and accountability (see Matthew 18:15-17, 1 Timothy 5:20) and when does it become an abusive attack more in line with spiritual gaslighting? The purpose of this discussion is not in any way to invalidate the abuse experienced by our participants, but to highlight how difficult it can be to recognize abuse within a community when it is a distortion of the beliefs held by that community.

Recognizing spiritual abuse within Christian churches without, by implication, calling entire Christian traditions abusive, is a difficult line to draw.

Another takeaway is that the spiritual abuse our participants experienced were inherently gendered. Even though only some of the experiences of abuse reported by the women in our study were explicitly tied to their gender, the fact that patriarchal values are historically ingrained in both Christianity and Asian cultures (Cha et al., 2006; Gao et al., 2012; Ozaki & Otis, 2017) means that the experiences of the women in our study cannot be separated from their gender. In fact, multiple participants noted that, even when the abuse they experienced was not explicitly about their gender, their experiences were noticeably more severe or even categorically different than what their male partners or other men in the church experienced. This discrepancy is important to acknowledge because although men undoubtedly experience spiritual abuse and warrant further research, women may be particularly vulnerable to spiritual abuse within the Asian American church (further discussed under Domain 4).

Finally, we highlight that spiritual abuse was almost always shame-based. Experiences of marginalization described by our participants often involved ostracization, which has been theorized to threaten fundamental needs of belonging, self-esteem, control, and meaningful existence (Williams, 2009) and which can lead to feelings of dehumanization (Mao et al., 2018). In addition, the pressure participants experienced to participate in church and the efforts of church leaders to control their personal lives were often enforced through moral and spiritual evaluation, and this was also fundamentally shaming. The explicit or implicit message communicated to participants who resisted such control were that they were sinful people in need of correction. Relatedly, the types of spiritual abuse described in our study

were closely related to popular conceptions of "spiritual gaslighting." Gaslighting refers to a form of psychological abuse that causes an individual to question their experience of reality and thus their sanity, and often it is most effective when it is rooted in unequal power dynamics (Sweet, 2019). "Spiritual gaslighting" as a term has not yet emerged in the empirical literature but can be found online in blog posts and articles as referring to abuse that causes an individual to question or doubt their own spirituality (Anchored Counselling Services, 2024; McConnaughey, 2017). Though there is significant overlap in the concepts of spiritual abuse and spiritual gaslighting, the term "spiritual gaslighting" can be helpful in conveying the devastating effects of spiritual abuse on individuals' perceptions of their relationships to God and the resulting shame they can experience.

Domain 2: Impact of Spiritual Abuse on Health

Participants reported that spiritual abuse impacted their mental, physical, and spiritual health. Although we discuss these three areas separately, we stress that they are inextricably intertwined, which we discuss at the end of the section.

Impact on Mental Health

Participants generally reported experiencing psychological symptomology and negative affect, including anxiety, depression, guilt, nightmares, shame, panic attacks, hypervigilance, and suicidal ideation. These findings are consistent with previous studies on spiritual abuse (e.g., Bilsky, 2013; Glasscock, 2019; Krueger, 2018; Simmons, 2017). Many of the psychological symptoms found in ours and previous studies are also aligned with Winell's (2013) conceptualization of "religious trauma syndrome." Furthermore, several of the symptoms that participants endorsed (e.g., hypervigilance, anger, nightmares, negative beliefs) are consistent with symptoms of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, despite the fact that the

spiritual abuse they experienced would not meet the DSM-V's current definition of a Criterion A trauma (American Psychological Association, 2013). Ellis et al. (2025) similarly found that spiritual abuse was associated with symptoms of traumatic stress, even when controlling for the effects of other past traumatic experiences. In addition, the psychological symptoms reported by our participants are also similar to those reported by survivors of psychological abuse within intimate partner relationships (Coker et al., 2002; Tiwari et al., 2008). Together, these findings highlight the need for recognizing spiritual abuse as a valid form of abuse with significant harmful effect on survivors' mental health (Ellis et al., 2025).

In addition, participants generally reported that their experiences of spiritual abuse resulted in interpersonal challenges, including specific relationship problems, difficulty trusting others, feeling like they did not belong, and lack of confidence around others. Previous studies (e.g., Bilsky 2013; Crocker, 2021; Krueger, 2018) have similarly found that spiritual abuse negatively impacted interpersonal functioning, including feelings of isolation and estrangement, impaired trust in authority figures, and lower social interest and engagement.

Participants variantly reported that the spiritual abuse resulted in academic/career disruption. These participants described the mental health effects of the spiritual abuse as so detrimental that it interfered with their ability to function in their professional and academic roles. Although past studies on spiritual abuse (as far as we are aware) have not specifically highlighted academic/career disruptions in their results, Krueger (2018) found that some participants described the interpersonal challenges as generalizing to their workplace relationships and Crocker (2021) found that at least one participant described "avoiding life" due to the spiritual abuse. Given the significant psychological distress described by

participants in past studies of spiritual abuse (e.g., Bilsky, 2013; Crocker, 2021; Krueger, 2018) we would speculate that these participants also experienced disruptions in their professional or academic lives, even if this was not highlighted through the results.

Impact on Physical Health

Participants typically endorsed somatic symptoms related to their mental health, including appetite changes, sleep disturbances, fatigue, headaches, and gastrointestinal concerns. Similar results were also found in previous studies on spiritual abuse (Bilsky, 2013; Krueger, 2018; Crocker, 2021).

Participants variantly discussed physical health problems and injuries that were directly caused by the spiritual abuse (e.g., a hernia from being asked to carry heavy furniture for the church). Although somatic symptoms related to spiritual abuse have been consistently found in the literature, to our knowledge, only one other study (Glasscock, 2019) discussed physical injuries resulting from spiritual abuse.

Impact on Spiritual Health

Participants variantly described decreased engagement with God or church while they were experiencing spiritual abuse. Similar findings regarding decreased engagement in church or religious practices were found by Bilsky (2013), Crocker (2021), and Krueger (2018). Given that, for Christians, spiritual abuse is centered around God and church, this can be at least partly understood as potentially related to post-traumatic stress, as participants sought to avoid reminders of their traumatic experiences. This can also be related to negative emotions toward God and/or other Christians.

In contrast, some participants variantly reported that they experienced greater dependency and closeness on God during the spiritual abuse. Positive spiritual effects of

spiritual abuse have been less commonly reported in the literature, with the exception of longer-term effects (discussed later under Domain 5). Only Crocker (2021), to our knowledge, similarly found that religious trauma experienced by sexual minority Christians sometimes led to increased closeness with God.

Participants also variantly resulted in questioning God, including questioning why the abuse occurred and "whose side" He was on. Previous findings on the impact of spiritual abuse have broadly included disruptions in one's relationship with God (e.g., Bilsky, 2013; Crocker, 2021; Glasscock, 2021; Krueger, 2018); however, to our knowledge, studies have not specifically discussed questioning God as a result of spiritual abuse. Questioning God can be understood as related to "divine struggles" and "doubt struggles," two components of spiritual struggle (Exline et al., 2014; Pargament & Exline, 2021).

In addition, participants variantly described negative religious beliefs about God or themselves, such as believing God must be "so upset" at them. Krueger (2018) similarly found that individuals who experienced nonsexual clergy misconduct described beliefs of not being "good enough for God." Crocker (2021) found that sexual minority Christians who experienced religious trauma felt distant from God due to beliefs of having to earn God's love. Glasscock (2021) found that ex-cult members endorsed "phobias" that sometimes extended to God, such as believing that God was "like a guru" and would kill you "rather than bring slander and shame to his name" (p. 168). Tensions around one's understanding of God is also understood as a component of spiritual struggle (Pargament & Exline, 2021).

Although we discussed the mental, physical, and spiritual health effects of spiritual abuse separately, the three areas of health were clearly intertwined. Participants' mental health impacted their physical health as they experienced somatic symptoms (e.g., sleep and appetite

disturbances, headaches, fatigue) that generally align with symptoms of anxiety, depression, and trauma. In addition, participants' mental and spiritual health also seemed to be reciprocally linked. For instance, participants' psychological distress impacted their engagement with their faith (e.g., attendance at church), even as their decreased engagement with their religious communities seemed to contribute to their feelings of isolation and loneliness. Research has established a clear link between spiritual struggles and mental health challenges, including anxiety, depression, post-traumatic stress, and suicidality, although the direction of the relationship has yet to be clearly understood (see Pargament & Exline, 2021).

We highlight two takeaways from this domain. First, spiritual abuse directly assaults one's sense of self. Our participants repeatedly described how the spiritual abuse resulted in negative self-judgment (e.g., being a "mess up"), negative self-conscious emotions (e.g., guilt, shame, insecurity), and questioning of themselves (e.g., wondering if they were "crazy"). Furthermore, participants' view of themselves and their views of God were directly related. Although only two women described negative religious beliefs about God and themselves, their words were striking. They believed they were sinners, and so God must be "displeased" at them. They believed they were "going to hell" and that God must be "barely putting up with" them. The impact of the spiritual abuse on their beliefs was inherently relational. The abuse did not just target their theoretical image of God but their beliefs about how God must see them, their very "loved-ness" by God. For Christians who believe that the love of God is the foundation of their identity and self-worth, the spiritual abuse essentially targeted their very value as a person.

Secondly, spiritual abuse has both positive and negative impacts on spirituality. We note that prior research on spiritual struggle indicates that positive feelings toward God and spiritual

struggle can sometimes co-exist (Pargament & Exline, 2021). Although we can only speculate based off what participants discussed, it seems that one determining factor for the kind of impact the abuse had on participants' spirituality is whether participants were able to separate out their image of religious leaders from their image of God. Some participants explicitly stated that they were able to recognize that their church leaders did not represent God, while others stated exactly the opposite – that the way they viewed their leaders became over time the way they viewed God. Our study was not designed to answer the question of *why* or *how* some individuals are able to make this distinction and others are not. However, previous research has suggested that one's attachment style to God (Beck & McDonald, 2004) may influence one's response to suffering, such that individuals who are more securely attached to God may engage in efforts to gain proximity to God after traumatic or stressful experiences and may experience greater meaning- making and post-traumatic growth, compared to those with insecure attachment to God (see Vazquez et al., 2022 for review). In addition, Pargament & Exline (2021) also suggest that certain factors may place individuals at higher risk for experiencing spiritual struggle following trauma and hardship, such as having experienced trauma that was interpersonal in nature, cumulative, or that occurred during formative stages of development (e.g., adolescence, emerging adulthood). Similarly, we would guess that the duration, severity, and type of abuse would contribute to differences in the impact of spiritual abuse on individuals' spiritual health.

Domain 3: Factors that Impacted Coping or Healing

Participants identified several actions/experiences that facilitated or hindered healing from the abuse.

Actions/Experiences that Promoted Coping or Healing

Participants generally reported that having positive interpersonal experiences of validation and support promoted their healing from the abuse. Similarly, extensive literature both specific to spiritual abuse (Bilsky, 2013; Crocker, 2021) and trauma more broadly (Zalta et al., 2021) have found social support to be a significant protector factor against the effects of trauma. For some of the women in our study, being validated by those specifically in positions of religious authority (e.g., pastors) was especially helpful. This finding aligns with those of Harris et al. (2014) that religious comfort, which includes receiving support from those within a religious community, was associated with decreased trauma symptoms. Participants stated that validation from others assured them that they were not "crazy."

Developing new perspectives on the abuse also typically helped participants cope or heal from their experiences. Thus, most of the participants developed a new understanding through educating themselves or reading the Bible that what they experienced was abusive and wrong. Previous studies have similarly found that engaging with educational resources helped individuals maintain their faith after religious trauma or spiritual abuse (Bilsky, 2013; Crocker, 2021). A study by Flasch et al. (2017) on intimate partner violence similarly found that learning about intimate partner violence and recognizing one's experience as abuse helped survivors make sense of their experiences and empowered them to move forward with their lives. In addition, Delker et al. (2019) traced how narrative identity reconstruction from trauma "victim" to "survivor-advocate" can be empowering, while also accompanied by greater challenges for certain marginalized groups. This shift in narrative language often involves the recognition that one has experienced trauma and a sharing of one's story with others (Delker et al., 2019). Our participants' involvement in this study can in and of itself be

seen as part of this developmental progression.

In addition, participants typically reported that focusing on meaningful activities, such as their careers or journaling, helped them cope with the abuse. These activities might have provided distractions from thinking about the abusive experiences, which aligns with avoidance as a primary form of coping through disengagement (Waugh et al., 2020). Although disengagement strategies are generally considered to be less adaptive, positive distraction, or distracting oneself through engaging with an activity that induce positive emotion, has been associated with positive outcomes for individuals navigating chronic stressors (Waugh et al., 2020). Similarly, Kleiber (2002) found that engaging in leisure activities can help individuals cope from negative events through providing a sense of continuity in identity (i.e., going back to "normal," p. 228) and creating a sense of optimism for the future. For participants who engaged in reflective activities like journaling, this might have facilitated coping and healing through emotional processing and meaning-making (see Park, 2010).

Engaging with their faith through prayer or reading the bible also variantly helped participants cope or heal from the abuse. Religious coping, or dealing with stressors through reliance on the sacred has been well-established as a strategy for dealing with difficult or traumatic experiences (Pargament et al., 2011). Positive religious coping has also been found to be associated with positive psychological adjustment after stress (Ano & Vasconcelles, 2005). For some of the participants, engaging with the Bible also allowed them to develop their own understandings of verses and doctrine, apart from what they had been taught in their churches. Previous studies on spiritual abuse have also found that reliance on God and faith was one strategy individuals used to move forward from their abusive experiences (Krueger,

2018; Swindle, 2017).

Furthermore, gaining space (e.g., leaving the church, moving to another state) and time from the abuse was variantly helpful for coping and healing. It is notable that several of the women in our study took action to put an end to their experiences of spiritual abuse, including through informing other leaders of the abuse and leaving the church or religious group. Crocker (2021) similarly found that for sexual minority Christians, leaving traditional churches to find LGBTQ+ affirming congregations was beneficial (Crocker, 2021). Additionally, models of overcoming intimate partner violence highlight the choice to leave abusive relationships as one of the first stages of recovery from abuse (Flasch et al., 2017). These findings emphasize the importance of empowering individuals who might be experiencing spiritual abuse with a sense of agency to make choices to leave their abusive environments. However, it is also important to highlight that for many, leaving one's church community also constitutes a significant loss. Krueger's (2018) study on individuals who experienced clergy non-sexual misconduct found that 96% of participants chose to leave their churches and that this was experienced as a devastating loss of social relationships and belonging. Other studies (Bilsky, 2013; Glasscock, 2019) found similarly mixed results in their studies of religious/spiritual abuse, with participants reporting both positive emotions (e.g., relief, joy) and ambivalence or negative emotions upon leaving their abusive groups. These findings do not negate each other but point to the complex emotional experience that can come with one's decision to leave a church environment, even one in which someone experienced abuse.

Finally, therapy was variantly helpful in facilitating participants' coping and healing from the abuse, as has been reported in previous studies (Bilsky, 2013; Crocker, 2021;

Swindle, 2017). Notably, only three of the ten participants discussed the benefits of receiving therapy, so we do not know if other participants found help in therapy but did not mention it in their interview. However, Asian Americans have often been found to utilize therapy at significantly lower rates than other racial groups (Lee et al., 2021).

Actions/Experiences that Hindered Coping or Healing

Experiences of being invalidated and dismissed typically hindered the recovery journey for participants, as has been shown in the previous literature on spiritual abuse (e.g., Bent-Goodley & Fowler, 2006; Kreuger, 2018; Swindle, 2017). Ellis et al. (2022) highlighted the "secondary traumatization" individuals can experience when they are blamed or minimized by the religious community. A couple of our participants also noted the harmful, if well-intended, impact of hearing others offer overly simplistic advice or "platitudes," such as telling them that things would get better if they prayed more or expecting healing to happen linearly or quickly. Similarly, Gilbert-Reed (2023) found problems related to "spiritual bypassing," which refers to an individual's effort to avoid negative emotions through overreliance on spiritual elements and "bypassing" psychological needs for healing. However, Gilbert-Reed (2023) applied the concept of spiritual bypassing to study the experiences of Christians who received spiritual bypassing from others. They found that spiritual bypassing often included reliance on "spiritual mantras" or cliches and resulted in negative emotions toward one's self and others (Gilbert-Reed, 2023).

Participants also typically reported that feeling isolated/alone during or after the abuse hindered healing. The negative effects of lacking social support following trauma have been well-established in the broader trauma literature (Brewin, 2000; Revranche, 2023), as well as the literature specifically on spiritual abuse (Bilsky, 2013). For individuals who experience

spiritual abuse within their church setting, this can be especially difficult, as their choice to leave the abusive setting often involves the loss of a primary source of community (Bilsky, 2013; Kreuger, 2018). Furthermore, for some participants, the lack of social support after leaving the church was directly tied to the spiritual abuse, as was the case for some women whose churches pressured members to prioritize their church responsibilities and relationships over non-church relationships. Some participants also felt isolated because of their difficulty reaching out for support due to fears of being misunderstood or simply not having the emotional energy to do so.

In addition, experiencing self-doubt and blame related to their abuse variantly hindered participants' recovery. Some women doubted whether their experience actually constituted abuse. Others questioned the veracity of abusive messages around their identities or personalities. Just as recognizing one's experience to be abuse can be empowering for survivors of interpersonal violence, questioning one's experience or blaming oneself can hinder efforts to heal from abusive. This finding is supported by the literature on intimate partner violence, which highlights self-blame as a common cognitive distortion hindering women's decisions to leave abusive relationships (Badenes-Sastre et al., 2025). Doubting whether one actually experienced spiritual abuse or blaming oneself for abuse have also been previously found in the spiritual abuse literature (Bilsky, 2013; Glasscock, 2019; Krueger, 2018) and self-doubt may be associated with shame (Krueger, 2018).

Finally, experiencing reminders/triggers of the abuse variantly hindered participant's ability to move forward from the experience, particularly when participants either encountered people associated with the abuse or entered church spaces. Previous studies (e.g., Crocker, 2021; Krueger, 2018) have similarly found that church or religious practices can serve as

triggers for victims of spiritual abuse. A couple of the women in this study also highlighted the pressure they felt to quickly join a new church, either so that their acquaintances would not think they were no longer Christians or so they themselves would not feel like "bad" Christians. These women described experiences of emotional distress associated with these church experiences. Krueger (2018) similarly found that some participants who had experienced clergy non-sexual misconduct highlighted the time they needed before they felt ready to find another church. Krueger also found that participants reported engaging in "chronic rumination" years after the abuse, sometimes as a result of frequent reminders or triggers. Relatedly, Bilsky (2013) found that individuals experienced "situational difficulties" around situations that reminded them of their abuse.

Conclusions about What Facilitates or Hinders Healing

Our findings indicate the significance of interpersonal experiences in impacting, both positively and negatively, individuals' efforts to heal from spiritual abuse. The categories that participants most frequently endorsed as facilitating or hindering healing were all relational in nature. Participants most often cited positive interpersonal experiences of support and validation as helpful in their healing process. On the other hand, participants most frequently reported that experiences of invalidation and dismissal hindered their efforts to cope and heal from the abuse. It is particularly sobering that these invalidations were sometimes perpetrated by mental health professionals. In addition, the second most commonly identified negative factor in the healing process was feeling lonely and isolated. Thus, not perceiving oneself to have available social support was also significantly harmful in participants' efforts to cope and heal. These findings are important, given the commonly reported finding in the literature that spiritual abuse survivors often experience negative reactions from their religious communities

when they disclose their experiences (e.g., Bent-Goodley & Fowler, 2006; Kreuger, 2018; Swindle, 2017). These findings highlight the need for community-level interventions to educate people about recognizing spiritual abuse and responding appropriately to the disclosure of abuse.

Domain 4: Cultural Values Associated with the Abuse

Respect for hierarchy was typically described as a relevant cultural value to the experiences of spiritual abuse. Participants discussed how expectations of obedience to elders made it difficult for these young women to speak up or to say no to requests or mandates. Asian communication style has been described as "flowing down from those of higher status" (Tan & Dong, 2014, p. 428); and that "negotiation and open discussion are foreign in a cultural tradition that prescribes deference and obedience to those of higher status" (Tan & Dong, 2014, p. 428). This norm regarding respect and obedience can be seen in church structures, where male pastors can be "elevated to the unhealthy role of father figure" and religious leaders are "rarely questioned" (Cha, 2006, p. 62).

Similarly, patriarchal norms within Asian culture were typically described as relevant to the experiences of spiritual abuse. Participants discussed how their gender (particularly as unmarried women) rendered them more vulnerable to being targets of abuse and made it more difficult to speak up against what was happening. The incorporation of patriarchal values into the Asian American church can often be seen within the structure of church leadership, in which women are excluded from positions such as pastors or elders (Park, 2009; Tan & Dong, 2014). Importantly, for some participants the patriarchal or sexist values were explicitly related to the spiritual abuse (e.g., being silenced by a church leader during conversations because "wives should submit to their husbands"), for others the influence of patriarchy was

implicit in their experiences of being dismissed, treated as second-class, or more severely punished than the men.

In addition, cultural norms around maintaining harmony were variantly described as relevant to experiences of spiritual abuse. Participants discussed how messages around the importance of maintaining harmony within the community made it difficult for them to talk openly about their experiences. This "group orientation" common in many Asian cultures places higher value on the community over the individual and prioritizes upholding the respect of the group (Tan & Dong, 2014). The potential for collectivistic group norms to pose a barrier to help- seeking is supported by research by Foynes et al. (2014) that found that those who upheld Asian values of interdependence were less likely to disclose psychological or sexual abuse when they were relationally close to the perpetrator of abuse. This relational pattern can be understood to be adaptive in some contexts, given the increased risk of rupture within one's community and potential loss of one's close relationships. However, it also presents relevant implications for Asian Americans experiencing spiritual abuse. For many Christians, the church is a primary source of social support and community (Mengestu, 2013). This may be even more so for Asian American Christians attending Asian American churches, for whom the church may be a place of refuge, self-definition, and empowerment amidst the stressors of belonging to a marginalized group (Kim, 2010). Furthermore, it may be harder for marginalized individuals who experienced trauma by an individual from within their shared cultural group to disclose their trauma, given their knowledge that the perpetrator also experiences oppression within the majority culture (Delker et al., 2019). This aligns with Gomez's (2017a, 2017b) cultural betrayal theory, which posits that individuals experiences of trauma may be uniquely complex and distressing when it is perpetuated by someone within

their cultural group.

Finally, cultural expectations around enduring through suffering were variantly described as relevant to the descriptions of spiritual abuse. One young woman cited Christian influences in her former belief that spiritual abuse was a "spiritual trial" she was intended to "win" by endurance. Such sentiments can be found in verses such as "Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith produces perseverance. Let perseverance finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything" (James 1:2-4, NIV). Another participant cited both cultural and familial influences behind her attitude of unwavering commitment, even to people who had hurt her. Forbearance, or one's ability to endure difficulties with emotional restraint, has been studied in connection to help-seeking patterns among Asian Americans (Chang, 2015), and the concept of forbearance has also been lauded among Christianity. For instance, Davis (2017) called the church to "pursue what we believe to be right with equal dedication to the maintenance of community, even with those with whom we painfully disagree" (p. 2). Davis traced the value of "forbearance" within Christianity to the Greek word "enecho" in Scripture used to encourage "bearing with one another" within the church (e.g., Ephesians 4:1-3, Colossians 3:12-14).

Together, these findings highlight how certain cultural values can render Asian American Christian women particularly vulnerable to spiritual abuse. First, certain cultural values can make it even more difficult for Asian American Christians to confront or refuse abusive requests or directives. Hierarchical values that are common in Asian cultures and patriarchal values embedded within both Asian and Christian cultures exacerbate already existing power differentials between religious leaders and female church members. These

values can increase the pressure that Asian American Christian women experience to submit to and obey spiritual abuse. Second, certain cultural values can create challenges for Asian American Christians in seeking help regarding the abuse. Collectivistic values around preserving group harmony and forbearance, and Christian teachings that uphold perseverance through trials, can create barriers for Asian American Christians to disclose spiritual abuse, thus rendering them vulnerable to remaining in abusive environments. The pressure to silently endure can be both internal, as Asian American Christians may experience ambivalence around disclosing the abuse due to internalized cultural values, and external, as the social consequences of deviating from cultural norms and losing "face" pose significant threats to those for whom the church comprises a significant source of belonging.

Domain 5: Long-Term Changes as a Result of the Abuse Experience

Spiritual abuse generally resulted in personal growth, including greater compassion for self and others, greater critical thinking, more inclusive beliefs, and greater ability to detect "red flags." Similar results including greater empathy for others (Bilsky, 2013; Crocker, 2021), greater sense of autonomy and freedom (Bilsky, 2013; Kreuger, 2018), and revised beliefs (Bilsky, 2013; Crocker, 2021; Kreuger, 2018) have been found in previous studies of spiritual abuse. These findings align with the concept of post-traumatic growth, or positive psychological changes resulting from traumatic events (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004). However, we note that some of the changes participants identified, such as greater ability to recognize "red flags," reflected a sense of pain or grief in the personal growth.

Spiritual abuse typically resulted in lasting religious/spiritual changes. Some participants variantly reported continued struggle or distancing/disengagement from Christianity, whereas others variantly reported an overall strengthening of their faith. These

findings align with previous studies on spiritual abuse (e.g., Bilsky, 2013; Kreuger, 2018; Crocker, 2021) and the broader trauma literature (De Castella & Simmonds, 2013; Falsetti et al., 2003). Research on spiritual struggle, or "experiences of tension, conflict, or strain that center on whatever people view as sacred" (Pargament & Exline, 2021, p. 3) also suggests that certain factors may place individuals at higher risk for experiencing spiritual struggle following trauma and hardship, such as having experienced trauma that was interpersonal in nature, cumulative, or that occurred during formative stages of development (e.g., adolescence, emerging adulthood; see Pargament & Exline, 2021). Pargament and Exline (2021) posited that the outcome of spiritual struggles depends on one's degree of "wholeness" and "brokenness," arguing that wholeness encompasses seeing life in its breadth and depth, having an orientation of life affirmation, and coherence.

Furthermore, participants typically described spiritual abuse as resulting in a chronic sense of loss of wholeness, health, and identity, including losing their "past versions" of themselves, grieving the health and time they would never get back, loss of relational health, and a sense of being forever "broken." For all of the participants, there was a sense of chronic pain and grief in all that they had lost, which maps onto Kreuger's (2018) finding of an "altered sense of self," or an identity loss and a feeling of being broken and damaged. Bilsky (2013) similarly found that abuse of religious authority resulted in chronic negative emotions, loss, mistrust, and negative self-beliefs (e.g., being broken). In addition, the language of grief and "brokenness" seems to be shared by survivors of other forms of abuse (Bryngeirsdottir & Halldorsdottir, 2022).

Spiritual abuse variantly changed participants through their desires to use their experiences to help others. For some, this was through entering a helping profession, for

others it was by spreading awareness of spiritual abuse, and for others it involved using positions of power to keep other leaders accountable, as was found by Bilsky (2013) and Crocker (2021). The related idea of the "wounded healer" who uses one's suffering to help others reaches far back and has been explored as a mechanism of meaning-making (Thompson, 2024; Zerubavel & Wright, 2012). Similar findings highlight how survivors of intimate partner violence use their experiences to advocate for and help others who may be experiencing abuse (Flasch et al., 2017).

In conclusion, the results from this domain make it clear that spiritual abuse leaves a lasting impact. Although the women in this study experienced spiritual abuse of varying durations and at varying points of recency, they almost unanimously reported that the abuse changed the person they were. We highlight two primary takeaways from these findings. First, spiritual abuse seemed to result in meaning-making. The women in this study identified personal growth and positive changes that resulted directly from their experiences of trauma. The meaning-making literature uses many names to capture the shared experience of finding good amidst difficult or traumatic experiences, including benefit-finding, stress-related growth, and posttraumatic growth (Helgeson et al., 2006). Furthermore, meaning-making after trauma or bereavement has been studied in terms of identity reconstruction, or the integration of trauma and loss into one's altered life narrative and sense of self (McAdams & Jones, 2017; Neimeyer & Anderson, 2002). We are cautious about implying that spiritual abuse always leads to positive change; we simply note that, consistent with empirical and non-empirical literature over decades, participants seemed driven to find or create meaning from their pain. Secondly, and relatedly, spiritual abuse resulted in chronic sense of loss. It is evident that, regardless of efforts to make meaning from their experiences, spiritual abuse

stole much from the participants – their health, their trust (in God, the church, themselves), their career dreams, their closeness with family, their innocence. Participants expressed a feeling of being irreparably "broken" - not in a self- condemning sense, but in a sense of being forever bereaved. In many ways, the participants' words recall meaning reconstruction models of grief, in which individuals are forced to re-author narratives for lives that have been forever changed (Neimeyer, 2000).

Domain 6: What Mental Health Professionals Should Know

Participants typically urged that mental health professionals must possess foundational knowledge of spiritual abuse, including knowledge on what spiritual abuse is, how to recognize it, and how it can impact individuals. Working with religion/spirituality, let alone spiritual abuse, is often neglected in mental health training programs (Gubi & Jacobs, 2009; Oakley et al., 2024). Although the concept of spiritual abuse has become more familiar in contemporary culture following a string of publicized abuse scandals by well-known religious leaders (e.g., Ravi Zacharias, Jean Vanier) and high-profile media about sexual abuse within the Catholic church (e.g., "Spotlight"), it is important for education on spiritual abuse to extend beyond popular media (e.g., blogs and podcasts) and to be incorporated into formal clinical training programs.

Participants also typically reported wanted mental health professionals to understand how crucial it is to provide a safe and client-centered space when working with survivors of spiritual abuse. Providers need to validate clients' emotions and the traumatic nature of their experiences, and also help clients feel safe rather than feeling "poked and prodded." Oakley et al. (2024) similarly found that features of a "good response" to disclosures of spiritual abuse emphasize safety, acceptance of the disclosure, and awareness of spiritual abuse. Furthermore,

providing client-centered care also related to the ways in which therapists incorporate religion/spirituality into the work. On one hand, therapists who share the client's faith background should be mindful of the potential impact of integrating religion/spirituality into therapy with clients who have been spiritually abused. On the other hand, therapists who do *not* share client's beliefs should be careful to monitor their own biases and respect clients' worldviews. One participant recognized that mental health professionals may often be less religious or even hold biases against religion, and that this could pose challenges for spiritual abuse survivors, particularly those who still maintain a religious/spiritual identity. Oakley et al. (2024) well-captured the dilemma this can pose for survivors of spiritual abuse who are often "faced with the dilemma of talking to someone who may have no understanding of their core values and beliefs or talking to someone who represents the abusive power that has hurt them" (p. 191-192). These findings echo the importance of cultural humility, or an attitude of openness and curiosity toward differing cultural perspectives (Hook et al., 2013), as well as calls for greater training on spiritual abuse within the mental health profession (Oakley et al., 2024).

Fit of Findings with Original Research Questions

Overall, our results map on well to our original questions. Below we outline our four original research questions with a brief summary of how they aligned with our research findings.

What kinds of spiritual abuse do East Asian American Christians experience?

This research question was answered by results from Domain 1, which identified the types of spiritual abuse experienced by our participants: marginalization and "othering," pressure to participate in the church/religious organization, moral/spiritual evaluation, and

interference/control in personal life.

How does spiritual abuse impact their mental and spiritual health?

This research question was answered by Domain 2, which described the impact of spiritual abuse on participants' mental and spiritual health. Regarding mental health, participants described how the abuse resulted in interpersonal challenges, psychological symptomology/negative affect, and career/academic disruption. Regarding spiritual health, participants described how the abuse led to greater closeness/dependency on God, questioning God, disengagement from God and the church, and negative beliefs about God and/or the self. Domain 2 also discussed the impact of spiritual abuse on participants' physical health, which was not part of our original research question. Findings also included somatic symptoms related to mental health and physical health injuries not related to mental health.

How do cultural factors influence the experiences and consequences of spiritual abuse for East Asian American Christians?

This research question was partially answered by Domain 4, which identified cultural values (including religious values) participants believed to be associated with their abuse experiences. Our results highlight *what* specific values participants believed to be associated with their abuse, but not necessarily *how* these values influenced their experiences and the consequences of abuse. However, based on participants' responses, we suggest that the cultural values identified by participants rendered them vulnerable to abuse because (a) certain values (e.g., patriarchal values, respect for hierarchy) made it more difficult for participants to resist abuse, because they augmented already inherent power differentials between church leaders and female church members, and (b) certain values (e.g., maintaining harmony, endurance through suffering) made it more difficult for them to take action to

disclose abuse and leave abusive environments, because they emphasized the good of the collective group and the benefits of persevering through suffering.

What factors facilitate healing from spiritual abuse?

This research question was answered by Domain 3, which identified factors that promoted healing/coping: positive interpersonal experiences, developing new perspectives on the abuse, focusing on meaningful activities, engaging with religion/spirituality, gaining distance/space from the abuse, and mental health treatment. Although not part of the original research question, we also identified factors that hindered healing/coping: harmful interpersonal experiences, feeling isolated/alone, experiencing self-doubt/blame, and experiencing reminders/triggers of the abuse.

Additional Findings

Domains 5 and 6 presented findings that were beyond the scope of our original research questions. In Domain 5, we found empirical support for longer-term identity changes resulting from the spiritual abuse. While these findings relate to our second research question, the kinds of changes captured in this domain extend beyond immediate consequences of the abuse to longer- term, lasting impact from the abuse. In Domain 6, we obtained participants' perspectives on what mental health professionals should know in working with survivors of spiritual abuse. These domains do not map exactly onto our original research questions but present supplementary findings that enhance our understanding of the impact and treatment of spiritual abuse.

Limitations

The findings from this study were derived from a relatively small sample of nine East Asian American Christian women. Although these women all endorsed certain shared

identities and experiences, there was heterogeneity in their ethnicities, ages, and duration, type, and severity of abuse. Given this, there existed subgroups that emerged within the sample, such as those who experienced the spiritual abuse as significantly negatively impacting them and those who did not, and those who experienced ongoing abuse for years and those who experienced abuse for shorter durations. These various factors undoubtedly influenced our findings; however, given the small size, we were not able to conduct cross-subsample analyses.

In addition, although we tried to only recruit participants who met our eligibility and ineligibility criteria, there was some ambiguity in determining eligibility. For instance, one participant in our study did experience sexual spiritual abuse prior to the spiritual abuse experience she discussed for our interview. Although we tried to only analyze data related to the non-sexual spiritual abuse experience, per our eligibility criteria, it is impossible to isolate the experiences of cumulative traumas.

Relatedly, there are limitations related to the sampling methods used. Participants self-selected into the study, and thus it is possible that the individuals who volunteered to participate are not representative of the target population. Additionally, we used purposive sampling strategy, intentionally selecting participants from the pool of volunteers who completed our eligibility and background survey who met our specific eligibility criteria, seemed to have experienced spiritual abuse that aligned with our study definition, and who we hoped would be able to discuss their experience in detail and depth (based on the summary of their experience provided in the eligibility and background survey). We also tried to avoid interviewing multiple women from the same church or religious organization (although we were unsuccessful in the case of two participants who had attended the same church), in order

to gather data on a range of experiences and to avoid creating unnecessary subsamples within our study.

Furthermore, there may have been some researcher bias. The first author of this study, as well as the project auditor and research team members, all possess identities, backgrounds, and experiences that shaped the lens through which we approached each step of the research process, from question development to data analysis. Although we tried to acknowledge and bracket our biases, it is not possible, and probably not even desirable to completely set aside one's biases. Rather, we describe these as thoroughly as possible so that readers can situate the results.

Implications for Practice and Training

Recognition of spiritual abuse has been growing (Oakley et al., 2024) with estimates that the prevalence of spiritual abuse is relatively high (Ellis et al., 2022). However, training on working with spiritual abuse is lacking within the mental health profession (Oakley et al., 2024). Indeed, religion/spirituality generally is already an underemphasized area within psychological training (Kellems et al., 2010; Mrdjenovich et al., 2012; Oakley et al., 2024), a bias that likely reflects the identities and worldviews of the profession, given that psychologists endorse lower levels of religious affiliation compared to the general population (Kellems et al., 2010). Thus, it is crucial that graduate mental health programs and continuing education incorporate training on working with spiritual abuse (and religion/spirituality broadly) into their curriculums. Mental health professionals need to be prepared to meet the needs of survivors of spiritual abuse and equipped with the tools to work with such a complex phenomenon.

Furthermore, and on a related note, mental health professionals must practice cultural

humility and strive for cultural competence in working with Asian American Christians who have experienced spiritual abuse. Therapists should be attentive to how clients' intersecting identities, particularly around gender and age, can render Asian American women particularly vulnerable to abuse within the Asian American church. Therapists should also explore the impact of collectivistic values on Asian American clients' feelings about disclosing abuse and seeking social support. Therapists need to cultivate awareness of their own biases, respect the beliefs and worldviews of their clients, and learn how to work within the framework and values their clients hold. As one participant emphasized, clinicians should listen to understand how their clients are viewing their experiences and not to convince them to understand it in a certain way. It is also important for mental health professionals to practice cultural humility in regard to potential differences from clients in their religious identities and worldviews. It is equally important for conservative Christians to feel safe and respected in the therapy room with more progressive or liberal therapists as it is for progressive Christians to feel safe and respected in the therapy room with potentially more conservative therapists. Relatedly, it is also necessary that mental health professionals who identify as Christian and who incorporate Christianity into their clinical work be aware of how elements of their work (e.g., reading scripture, prayer) might unintentionally trigger or negatively impact clients. Although therapists can never be expected to be perfect, they must aspire to do no harm. Continued self-reflection, supervision and consultation, and education are lifelong tools for ensuring mental health professionals uphold this mandate.

Therapists should also be sensitive to participants' agency in their responses to spiritual abuse, their path moving forward, and within the therapy room. Highlighting individuals' agency and empowering clients to make choices are core elements of providing

trauma-informed care (Butler et al., 2011). As our findings highlight, spiritual abuse often strips individuals of their autonomy and self-trust, and therapists can meaningfully aid clients by helping them recognize both the agency they displayed through their past choices and the agency they possess for making future choices toward healing and recovery.

It is also important that mental health professionals recognize that when working with survivors of spiritual abuse, grief may be as relevant a concern as trauma. Participants conveyed in striking language their strong feelings of grief about the spiritual abuse. Trauma and grief are intrinsically linked (Green, 2000), as early foundational theories on trauma highlighted the ways in which traumatic experiences can shatter individuals' assumptions of themselves and the world (Janoff-Bulman, 1992; 2010) and therapists should thus be sensitive to clients' multiple losses and create space for clients to grieve these losses. It is also important for therapists not to assume how clients experience the changes that might result from abuse; for instance, not to assume that a client who has deconstructed their faith or who no longer identifies as Christian holds either positive or negative feelings about this change. Therapists should validate clients' potentially mixed and changing emotions toward their experiences as they learn how to move forward in an altered world.

Finally, our study presents clear implications not only for within the therapy space, but also the community. Outreach and prevention are core values within psychology and our findings highlight the need for preventative work within Asian American churches. Education within the community could involve the definition and signs of spiritual abuse. Preventative work could also focus on discussing power and privilege within the church, particularly as these concepts relate to cultural and religious gender norms. Intentional discussion on power dynamics within churches could also contribute to greater sensitivity on the part of religious

leaders to recognize the privilege of their positions and help them learn what it means to use (rather than misuse) their power in their roles. Finally, the findings that survivors of spiritual abuse experienced heightened distress and even secondary traumatization due to negative responses of invalidation and blame from the church community highlight the need to educate church communities on how to respond to potential disclosures of spiritual abuse and the ways in which one's response can positively or negatively impact survivors of spiritual abuse.

Implications for Research

Future researchers could identify factors (related to personality, behavior, etc.) that render certain individuals more vulnerable to experiencing spiritual abuse than others, even within the same cultural group. Future researchers could also identify what factors (e.g., attachment to God) contribute to different outcomes of the abuse. Another direction is to examine how meaning- making unfolds for survivors of spiritual abuse and how this process differs across cultures.

It is important for future researchers to continue to understand how spiritual abuse is experienced by and impacts different communities. It is, for example, important to understand how men might experience spiritual abuse. Furthermore, given the experiences of religious trauma among the LGBTQ+ community (see Crocker, 2021) and the pervasiveness of conservative sexual norms within Asian American cultures more generally (Okazaki, 2002), research that examines the spiritual abuse experiences of Asian American sexual and gender minorities is highly warranted. Finally, more research on the similarities and differences of spiritual abuse across diverse racial and religious groups is critical.

Future research should also examine the cultural factors that facilitate resilience and healing for survivors of spiritual abuse. For example, Mao et al. (2018) proposed potential

pathways through with cultural context may influence experiences of ostracism, including the hypothesis that individuals from more collectivistic cultures may be more protected against the effects of single episodes of ostracism, given their access to a large network of social relationships. In support of this hypothesis, Mao et al. (2018) discussed research findings that suggest that those from collectivistic cultures may recover more easily from experiences of ostracism through social support. Applied to our study, these findings highlight how collectivistic culture norms can also be a source of strength for Asian American survivors of spiritual abuse. Future research should build upon this work to deepen our understanding of cultural factors that may contribute to resiliency among Asian American Christians.

It is also important to better understand those who perpetuate spiritual abuse, in order to facilitate preventative interventions. Future researchers might qualitatively examine the perspectives of pastors and other church leaders who have been accused of spiritual abuse. Investigating the past experiences of these leaders, the messages they have received around power and leadership, the meaning of their role and identity as church leaders, and the interpersonal patterns they developed from childhood, to name a few examples, can help shed light on what might place certain individuals more at risk for perpetuating spiritual abuse.

Finally, better understanding of how individuals heal from spiritual abuse and the role mental health professionals can play in that process is warranted. Future researchers could interview survivors of spiritual abuse who received mental health treatment to understand what interventions they found to be most helpful. Research could also examine the perspectives of clinicians who have worked with survivors of spiritual abuse to gain their perspectives on what interventions most effectively facilitate recovery and healing from spiritual abuse.

Table 1

Participant Demographics and Background Information on Spiritual Abuse Experience

Pseudonym	Age	Ethnicity	Religious Affiliation	Sexual Orientation	Setting of Abuse	Duration of Abuse*	Actions to Resolve the Abuse
Grace	26	Korean	Christian (formerly Baptist)	Heterosexual	Church	3 months	Left church due to abuse
Tiffany	30	Chinese American	Christian	Straight/heterosexual	Church	1 year	Left church after graduating
Jenny	19	Chinese American	Christian	Heterosexual	College church	5 months	Left church due to abuse
Stacey	29	Chinese American	--	--	College organization	2.5 years	Left religious group due to abuse
Jane	33	Korean	Presbyterian	Heterosexual	Church	3 years	Left church after getting married and moving
Mina	33	Korean American	Christian	--	Church	1 year	Left church due to abuse
Christine	41	Korean	Christian	Heterosexual	College church	19 years	Left church due to abuse
Erin	32	Korean American	Christian	Heterosexual	Church	1.5 years	Left church due to abuse
Anna	30	Korean	Christian?	Straight	College church	5 years	Left church due to abuse

*Duration of abuse was inferred by the first author from participant interviews

Categories and Subcategories within Domains for Spiritual Abuse Experiences of East Asian American Christian Women

Domains/Category/Subcategory	Frequency
Types of spiritual abuse experiences	
Marginalization and "othering"	T (7)
Pressure to participate in church/religious organization	T (6)
Moral/spiritual evaluation	T (5)
Interference/control in personal life	V (4)
Impact of spiritual abuse on health	
Impact on Mental Health	
Psychological symptomology/negative affect	G (9)
Interpersonal challenges	G (8)
Career/academic disruption	V (3)
Impact on physical health	
Somatic symptoms related to mental health	T (7)
Physical health problems not related to mental health	V (2)
Impact on spiritual health	
Disengagement from God or church	V (4)
Greater closeness/dependency on God	V (3)
Questioning God	V (2)
Negative beliefs about God and/or self	V (2)
Factors that impacted coping or healing	
Actions/experiences that promoted coping/healing	
Positive interpersonal experiences	G (9)
Developing new perspectives on the abuse	T (5)
Focusing on meaningful activities	T (5)
Engaging with religion/spirituality	V (4)
Gaining distance/space from abuse	V (4)
Mental health treatment	V (3)
Actions/experiences that hindered coping or healing	
Harmful interpersonal experiences	T (6)
Feeling isolated/alone	T (5)
Experiencing self-doubt/blame	V (4)
Experiencing reminders/triggers of the abuse	V (3)
Cultural values associated with the abuse	
Respecting hierarchy	T (6)
Patriarchal values	T (5)
Maintaining harmony	V (3)
Enduring through suffering	V (2)
Long-term changes as a result of the abuse experience	
Personal growth	G (9)
Religious/spiritual changes	T (7)
Continued struggle or moving away from Christianity	T (5)
Strengthening of faith	V (3)

Loss of health, wholeness, and identity	T (5)
Using experience to help others	V (4)
What mental health professionals should know	
Definition, signs, and impact of spiritual abuse	T (6)
Importance of providing a safe, client-centered space	T (6)

Note. N= 9. G= General (8-9 participants), T = Typical (5-7 participants), V = Variant (2–4).

Appendix A: Eligibility and Background Survey

[Eligibility Screener Items]

Please answer the following questions to determine if you are eligible for this study.

Are you 18 years or older?
- Yes
- No

Do you personally identify as East Asian American (have at least one parent of East Asian descent)?
- Yes
- No

For this study, we use Oakley & Kimmond's (2013) definition of spiritual abuse as *"coercion and control of one individual by another in a spiritual context…This abuse may include: manipulation and exploitation, enforced accountability, censorship of decision making, requirements for secrecy and silence, pressure to conform, misuse of scripture or the pulpit to control behaviour, requirement of obedience to the abuser, the suggestion that the abuser has a 'divine' position, isolation from others, especially those external to the abusive context."*

Have you previously experienced spiritual abuse at the age of 18 or older in a predominantly Asian American, Protestant Christian church or ministry?
- Yes
- No

Are you currently still experiencing spiritual abuse?
- Yes
- No

Was this experience of spiritual abuse accompanied by any physical or sexual abuse?
- Yes
- No

Based on your responses, you are eligible for this study. If you would like to proceed with participating in this study, please read the following consent form carefully. Please note that completion of this online survey does not guarantee that you will be interviewed. We will make decisions about interviews based on multiple factors (e.g., study enrollment numbers) and will contact you within two weeks of completing this survey to let you know if we would like to proceed with scheduling an interview.

[Consent Blurb]

Project Title: The Experiences and Consequences of Spiritual Abuse Among East Asian American Christians (IRB #2048608-1).

Purpose: The purpose of this study is to examine the experiences and mental/spiritual health consequences of spiritual abuse among East Asian American Christians. I would really appreciate your help in studying this important topic.

Procedure: The study involves two parts: (1) a brief online survey and (2) a recorded Zoom interview. The online survey will take approximately 10-15 minutes and the interview will take approximately 60-90 minutes. Agreement to be video recorded is a requirement for participation in the interview; you will be allowed to choose whether to keep your video camera on during the interview. During the interview, you will be asked questions regarding your religious/spiritual and ethnic background, your experience of spiritual abuse and its impact on your spiritual and mental health, and your perspectives on spiritual abuse. Completion of this survey does not guarantee that you will be interviewed. We will contact you within two weeks of your completion of the survey to let you know if we would like to proceed with scheduling an interview.

In order to be eligible for participation, you must
- be 18 years or older
- identify as East Asian American (have at least one parent of East Asian descent)
- have previously experienced spiritual abuse within a predominantly Asian American, Protestant Christian church or ministry in the United States at the age of 18 or older

In addition, you are not eligible to participate if:
- the spiritual abuse is currently ongoing and/or
- the spiritual abuse was accompanied by physical or sexual abuse

Potential Risks and Benefits: You may experience emotional discomfort, such as anxiety or sadness, as you reflect on previous experiences of spiritual abuse. You may skip any question you prefer not to answer and you may stop the interview at any point. You will be provided with a list of emotional and spiritual support resources after the interview. In addition, there is a potential for loss/breach of confidentiality. Steps to mitigate this risk are described below under "Confidentiality".

There are no direct benefits for participation. However, it is our hope that findings from this study would contribute to a greater understanding of spiritual abuse among East Asian American Christians and the development of clinical interventions for victims of spiritual abuse.

Confidentiality: Reasonable steps will be taken to protect the privacy and the confidentiality of your study data; however, in some circumstances we cannot guarantee absolute privacy and/or confidentiality. Your name and contact information will be collected during the survey

to facilitate scheduling and completing the interview. It will be stored within a secure computer system, only the primary investigator will have access to it, and it will be destroyed after data collection ends. Your de-identified survey data may be kept for analysis even if you do not complete the interview. After the interview has been scheduled, you will be assigned a code number and only the code number will be used from this point forward. Only the primary investigator will have access to the assigned code numbers to be able to link data with participants and this information will be password protected. The linking key will be destroyed within two years of data analysis. Zoom recordings generate both a video and audio recording. Your video recording will be deleted immediately after the interview; your audio recording will be uploaded to a secure computer storage system and only research personnel will have access to it. All audio recordings will be destroyed at the end of data analysis. Information from this study may be published in scientific journals or presented at scientific meetings, but participant identity will be kept strictly confidential. De-identified data will be made available to other researchers upon request.

Compensation: Eligible participants who complete the survey and interview will be compensated with a $25 electronic Amazon gift card. Please note that compensation will not be provided if you do not complete both the survey and interview. Payment will be provided to all qualifying participants within two weeks of a completed interview.

Right to Withdraw and Ask Questions: Your participation in this study is completely voluntary. This means that you may choose not to take part at all. Additionally, even if you decide to participate in the study, you may stop participating at any time and may skip any question you prefer not to answer. If you decide not to participate in this study or if you stop participating at any time, you will not be penalized or lose any benefits to which you would otherwise qualify.

Consent: You are voluntarily making a decision whether or not to participate in this research study. By clicking on the "Yes, I agree to participate in this study" button below, your consent to participate is implied. You should print a copy of this page for your records.

Name and Contact Information of Principal Investigator: This research has been reviewed according to the University of Maryland, College Park IRB procedures for research involving human subject (#2048608-1). If you have questions, concerns, or complaints, please contact Katie Rim (katierim@umd.edu or 224-234-6042) or the University of Maryland's Institutional Review Board (irb@umd.edu; 301-405-0678)Clicking the button below indicates your consent to completing the eligibility and background survey.

Please check the box below to proceed to the survey.

[Survey]

Please provide your name and email address so we can contact you about the

interview. Name: _____

Email: _____

Please fill out the following demographic items.

Gender: _____

Age: _____

Ethnicity (e.g., Chinese American, bi-racial Korean and White): _____

Religious affiliation: _____

Sexual orientation: _____

Next, please complete this 17-item questionnaire on spiritual abuse.

Please reflect on the Asian American, Protestant Christian church or ministry in which you experienced spiritual abuse. Respond by checking the box that most closely matches your experiences in that church or ministry.

Strongly disagree Disagree Agree Strongly agree

1. It was acceptable to express my true emotions in my church/group ®
   - Strong disagree
   - Disagree
   - Agree
   - Strongly agree
2. Leaders in my group acknowledged harm they caused to others ®
   - Strong disagree
   - Disagree
   - Agree
   - Strongly agree
3. I know some religious leaders shared information about other people (through prayer requests or otherwise) that should have been kept private
   - Strong disagree
   - Disagree
   - Agree
   - Strongly agree

4. I believed that God's love and acceptance of me was dependent upon my performance in the church/group
   - Strong disagree
   - Disagree
   - Agree

- Strongly agree

5. I currently have no trouble trusting religious leaders/churches/groups ®
   - Strong disagree
   - Disagree
   - Agree
   - Strongly agree
6. I no longer trust myself to find a good spiritual community
   - Strong disagree
   - Disagree
   - Agree
   - Strongly agree
7. I was harshly criticized by religious leaders or church/group member
   - Strong disagree
   - Disagree
   - Agree
   - Strongly agree
8. I felt like a spiritual failure and I depended on my leader/church group to "get it right"
   - Strong disagree
   - Disagree
   - Agree
   - Strongly agree
9. I believed God would punish me if I didn't do what my church/group encouraged me to do
   - Strong disagree
   - Disagree
   - Agree
   - Strongly agree
10. I now feel cynical about church/religious groups
    - Strong disagree
    - Disagree
    - Agree
    - Strongly agree
11. I felt freedom to ask questions or express concerns in my church/group ®
    - Strong disagree
    - Disagree
    - Agree
    - Strongly agree
12. I felt dependent on the church/group
    - Strong disagree
    - Disagree
    - Agree
    - Strongly agree
13. My religious leaders used fear to control people
    - Strong disagree

- Disagree
- Agree
- Strongly agree

14. I know that I or others were asked to serve as the "eyes and ears" for our leader to get information about our members
    - Strong disagree
    - Disagree
    - Agree
    - Strongly agree
15. At times, I was scolded by my leader and made to feel ashamed and helpless
    - Strong disagree
    - Disagree
    - Agree
    - Strongly agree
16. I believed I could be totally surrendered to God if I did everything perfectly according to the church/group's instructions
    - Strong disagree
    - Disagree
    - Agree
    - Strongly agree
17. I now feel lonely and misunderstood because of my church/group experiences
    - Strong disagree
    - Disagree
    - Agree
    - Strongly agree

Please briefly describe (in 1-2 sentences) your experience of spiritual abuse.

_____

_____

_____

_____

_

Thank you for taking the time to complete this survey. We will contact you within two weeks to let you know if we would like to proceed with scheduling an interview. If you are in need of support, please see this list of mental health and spiritual support resources. If you have any questions, you can email Katie Rim at katierim@umd.edu.

Appendix B: Interview Protocol

[Personal Introduction script will first be read by the interviewer]

I'd like to start by asking you to share a little about yourself.

1. Tell me about your religious/spiritual background growing up.
2. Tell me about your ethnic background.

Now I'd like to ask you to reflect on your experience(s) of spiritual abuse.

3. Describe the church or Christian organization in which you experienced the spiritual abuse.
4. Please share about your experience(s) of spiritual abuse within that church or organization.
    a. What occurred?
    b. When did it happen and how long did it occur for?
    c. How did you react or respond?
    d. Was anything done within the church to address the abuse?
5. How did this experience of spiritual abuse impact you at the time?
    a. Impact on religion/spirituality (e.g., relationship with God, religious community, religious practices, etc.)
    b. Impact on mental health
    c. Impact on physical health
6. Thinking about yourself now, how would you say this experience of spiritual abuse has impacted the person you are today?
7. What has helped you in your journey of coping or moving on from the spiritual abuse?
8. What has hindered you in your journey of coping or moving on from the spiritual abuse?
9. What other aspects of your cultural background, if any, do you feel are relevant to your experience(s) of spiritual abuse?

I'd like to end by asking you a couple questions about your perspectives on spiritual abuse more broadly.

10. How would you define spiritual abuse?
11. What would you most want someone in the mental health field to know about working with individuals who have experienced spiritual abuse?
12. Is there anything else you would like to tell me about your experience?

Appendix C: Personal Introduction

Personal Introduction [will be read at the start of the interview and not included in the written protocol]:

Since I know that sharing your story with someone can be a really personal and vulnerable experience, I'd like to start by sharing a little bit about myself with you. I am a Korean American, Christian, heterosexual, cisgender woman studying counseling psychology. I grew up in a Christian family attending mostly Korean American churches until college, and both my parents have worked in part-time or full-time ministry at Asian American churches throughout my life. I became interested in the topic of spiritual abuse after it was uncovered in multiple Asian American churches that I was very familiar with and that many of my close friends attended. I have not personally experienced spiritual abuse but it has impacted many people that I care about. I believe that a deeper understanding of spiritual abuse, particularly within the Asian American church, is important in helping us learn how to better support victims of abuse.

I hope this helps you understand a little more where I'm coming from as we start this interview. Do you have any questions I can answer before we get started?

Appendix D: Recruitment and Follow-Up Messages

Recruitment Email:

Hello,

My name is Katie Rim and I am a PhD candidate in Counseling Psychology at the University of Maryland College Park. I am looking for individuals who would be willing to be interviewed for a study examining spiritual abuse among East Asian American Christians. For our study, we use the following definition of spiritual abuse:

"Spiritual abuse is coercion and control of one individual by another in a spiritual context…This abuse may include: manipulation and exploitation, enforced accountability, censorship of decision making, requirements for secrecy and silence, pressure to conform, misuse of scripture or the pulpit to control behaviour, requirement of obedience to the abuser, the suggestion that the abuser has a 'divine' position, isolation from others, especially those external to the abusive context" (Oakley & Kimmond, 2013).

In order to participate in this study, you must a) be 18 years or older, b) identify as East Asian American (have at least one parent of East Asian descent), and c) have previously experienced spiritual abuse at the age of 18 or older within a predominantly Asian American, Protestant Christian church or ministry in the United States. You would not be eligible for the study if the spiritual abuse is currently ongoing and/or if it was accompanied by physical or sexual abuse.

Participating in this study involves two parts: (1) a brief online survey and (2) a recorded Zoom interview. It will take approximately 10-15 minutes to complete the survey and approximately 60-90 minutes to complete the interview. Verbal consent will be obtained before the start of the interview and you may choose to skip any question you prefer not to answer. You will receive a
$25 electronic Amazon gift card for completion of both the survey and the interview.

The interview protocol is attached for your consideration. If you would like to participate in this study, please clink **here** to be directed to the survey. You will first be asked questions to determine your eligibility for the study before you can begin the survey. Please also note that we will make decisions regarding who to interview based on multiple factors (e.g., study enrollment numbers). Therefore, completion of the survey does not guarantee that you will be interviewed. You will receive an email within two weeks of completing the survey letting you know whether we would like to proceed with scheduling an interview.

If you have any questions about this study, please feel free to email me. I would also appreciate if you would consider forwarding this email to anyone you know who might be interested in participating.

Thank you for your consideration,
Katie

Recruitment Post [for social media pages or other forums]:

Hello,

My name is Katie Rim and I am a PhD candidate in Counseling Psychology at the University of Maryland College Park. I am conducting a paid research study examining experiences of spiritual abuse among East Asian American Christians. It would involve a 10-15 minute survey and 60-90 minute recorded Zoom interview. Please see this flyer for more information. Thank you!

Follow-Up Email to Eligible

Participants: Dear __,

Thank you for your interest in participating in this study and for completing the online survey. I am reaching out to schedule an approximately 60-90 minute recorded Zoom interview with you. Please let me know any day/times (including your time zone) over the next two weeks that you are available. I have also attached a copy of the interview protocol. If you have any questions, please feel free to let me know.

I greatly appreciate your willingness to contribute to this study.

Sincerely,
Katie

Follow-Up Email to Ineligible

Participants: Dear __,

Thank you for your interest in participating in this study and for completing the online survey. At this time, we cannot offer you an interview. However, I greatly appreciate your willingness to contribute to this study. If you feel in need of any support, please see the attached list of mental health and spiritual support resources. And if you have any questions, please let me know.

Sincere
ly,
Katie

Appendix E: Recruitment Brochure

Have you felt hurt, fearful, or controlled by a church?
Do you identify as East Asian American?

We are conducting a research study on spiritual abuse among East Asian American Christians. It involves a 10-15 min survey & 60-90 min Zoom interview.

You may be eligible to participate if

- You are 18 years or older
- You identify as East Asian American (have at least one parent of East Asian descent)
- You experienced spiritual abuse within a predominantly Asian American church or ministry

https://tinyurl.com/spiritualabusestudy

You will be compensated with a $25 Amazon gift card.

No names or identifying data will be attached to interview transcripts to

UNIVERSITY OF MARYLAND

Study led by Katie Rim, M.S.
katierim@umd.edu | IRB

Appendix F: Mental Health and Spiritual Support Resources

Spiritual abuse, like any other form of abuse, can be a deeply painful, traumatic, and isolating experience. If you feel in need of support, please consider the following resources:

Information on Spiritual Abuse:

Readings, Videos, and Book List from Spiritual Abuse Resources (SAR) website

- List of educational resources on spiritual abuse

Family and Youth Institute (FYI) Spiritual Abuse

Toolkit

- List of educational resources on spiritual abuse, sexual violence, and victim blaming

Crisis Resources:

Crisis Text Line

- Offers free, 24/7 mental health support from trained volunteers; Text HOME to 741741 or chat online

National Suicide & Crisis Lifeline

- Offers free, 24/7 emotional support to those in suicide crisis or emotional distress; Call 988 or chat online

National Domestic Violence Hotline

- Offers free, 24/7 support to survivors of domestic violence; Call 1-800-799-7233, text "START" to 88788, or chat online

Focus on the Family Counseling and Consultation Line

- Offers free phone consultation with a licensed or pastoral counselor; Call 1-855-771- HELP (4357)

Professional Help Resources:

Psychology Today

- Search for a therapist across the United States; allows you to filter by specific criteria (e.g., insurance network) and preferences (e.g., gender)

Christian Counselor Directory

- Directory of professional and pastoral counselors across the United States

Spiritual Director Directory

- Directory of spiritual directors and companions

Appendix G: Extended Literature Review

Spiritual abuse can have detrimental effects on individuals' spiritual and mental health, but only recently has it become a focus in the psychological literature. In addition, existing research on spiritual abuse has almost exclusively examined predominantly White, female samples, neglecting the ways that cultural factors might render certain groups particularly vulnerable to abuse. In this literature review, I (a) summarize the research on religion/spirituality and mental health (b) review the definition, prevalence, and measurement of spiritual abuse, (c) summarize existing research on spiritual abuse within the context of intimate partner violence and within religious communities, (d) briefly present the sociological context of Asian American Christianity, and (e) discuss cultural factors that may be relevant to examining spiritual abuse specifically among East Asian American Christian women.

Religion/Spirituality and Mental Health

Although related and typically considered together, religion and spirituality (R/S) have been distinguished in the literature. Spirituality can be understood as a "search for the sacred" (Exline et al., 2014, p. 208), with the "sacred" referring to anything that transcends the self (Hill et al., 2000). Religion refers more specifically to institutions, social groups, and structures that facilitate spirituality (Exline et al., 2014) through "ascribing particular meaning and value to life and creation" (Elkonin et al., 2014, p. 119). Historically, there has existed tension between the fields of psychiatry and religion, as medical practicioners such as Sigmund Freud dismissed religion as a form of pathology and religious leaders perceived psychiatry as a threat to faith; this resulted in neglect of religious considerations within the mental health field (Weber & Pargament, 2014). However, this began to shift in the late twentieth century and there has been

considerably greater attention to the relationship between R/S and mental health in recent years (Weber & Pargament, 2014).

R/S has generally been associated with well-being (Weber & Pargament, 2014), including greater meaning in life, self-actualization, self-esteem, happiness, and optimism (Green & Elliott, 2010; Ivtzan et al., 2013; Steger & Frazier, 2005; Sternthal et al., 2010). In addition, R/S has been associated with lower levels of psychopathology, including depression symptoms, post-traumatic stress, disordered eating, and risk of suicide (Weber & Pargament, 2014).

There may be multiple mechanisms through which R/S can promote mental health. First, the positive effects of R/S may be due to the benefits of having religious/spiritual community and social support (Weber & Pargament, 2014); some research has indicated that social support may be one mediator of the relationship between R/S and well-being and mental health (Pirutinsky et al., 2011; Salsman et al., 2005). Secondly, R/S may be linked to better health through providing a positive means of coping (Weber & Pargament, 2014). Positive religious coping includes coping strategies that are founded upon a secure relationship to whatever one holds sacred and includes strategies such as seeking spiritual support, engaging in benevolent religious reappraisal (e.g., believing stressors are intended by God for good), and religious surrender (Pargament et al., 2011). Studies have found positive religious coping to predict lower depression and anxiety, stronger interpersonal relationships, post-traumatic growth, and quality of life (Weber & Pargament, 2014). Relatedly, research also suggests that religious beliefs in of themselves (e.g., believe in a loving God) are associated with better mental health outcomes (Weber & Pargament, 2014).

However, recent research has also highlighted potential negative mental health outcomes related to R/S. For instance, individuals can experience religious/spiritual struggle, which occurs when "some aspect of R/S belief, practice, or experience becomes a focus of negative thoughts or emotions, concern, or conflict" (Exline et al., 2014, p. 208). Struggles can be about negative emotions and beliefs about the divine, concerns around attacks from the devil or demonic, and moral struggles, religious doubts, and struggles around meaning (Exline et al., 2014). Substantial research has linked spiritual struggle with negative physical and mental health outcomes (Exline et al., 2014). For instance, a recent systematic review of the literature on R/S and depression found that in 49% of studies, religiosity predicted decreases in depression over time, but that in 59% of studies, religious struggle predicted increases in depression over time (Braam & Koenig, 2019). Relatedly, negative religious coping, or coping strategies founded on conflict and tension with the sacred (Pargament et al., 2011), has also been associated with poor functioning and lower well-being (Pargament et al., 2011).

Research has also highlighted potential negative costs of religiosity. Individuals who endorsed high levels of religiosity without accompanying high levels of spirituality reported lower levels of meaning in life compared to individuals who reported being highly spiritual (with or without religiosity); in addition, religiosity was found to be protective against depression in individuals with psychiatric symptomology, but less protective in individuals with physical illnesses (Ivtzan et al., 2013). Furthermore, negative aspects of religious community (e.g., congregational criticism) was associated with negative mental health outcomes (Sternthal et al., 2010). Finally, religiosity may create opportunities for more misunderstanding and internal

conflicts regarding medical and mental health treatment (Weber & Pargament, 2014). Thus, research has highlighted the complex relationship between R/S and mental health.

Spiritual Abuse

Research on religious/spiritual abuse has only recently begun to emerge. I focus here on the definition and prevalence of spiritual abuse, the measurement of spiritual abuse, and experiences and consequences of spiritual abuse within intimate partner violence and religious communities.

Definition of Spiritual Abuse

No one definition exists for spiritual abuse (also referred to as "religious abuse," "religious/spiritual harm," or "religious/spiritual trauma"). In one of the earliest definitions, spiritual abuse was conceptualized as "the mistreatment of a person who is in need of help, support or greater spiritual empowerment, with the result of weakening, undermining or decreasing that person's spiritual empowerment" (Johnson & VanVonderen, 2005, p. 20). Oakley and Kinmond (2013) defined it as:

> coercion and control of one individual by another in a spiritual context. The target experiences spiritual abuse as a deeply emotional personal attack. This abuse may include: manipulation and exploitation, enforced accountability, censorship of decision making, requirements for secrecy and silence, pressure to conform, misuse of scripture or the pulpit to control behaviour, requirement of obedience to the abuser, the suggestion that the abuser has a 'divine' position, isolation from others, especially those external to the abusive context. (p. 25)

Recently, Oakley & Kimmond (2024) provided an updated definition of spiritual abuse as a "form of emotional and psychological abuse characterised by a systematic pattern of coercive and controlling behaviour in a religious context or with a religious rationale" (p.190).

In addition, Ellis et al. (2022) identified three core components of spiritual abuse that emerged from a systematic review of the literature: misuse of power (i.e., coercion, control, or exploitation of another), psychological harm (e.g., depression, negative view of self) and negative spiritual health consequences (e.g., distance from God).

Prevalence of Spiritual Abuse

Ellis et al. (2022) found six studies that addressed the prevalence of spiritual abuse. Findings suggested that spiritual abuse may be highly prevalent; in a survey study of churchgoers (across a wide range of denominations) in the United Kingdom, 70% of participants endorsed feeling manipulated at their current church, 84% endorsed feeling manipulated at a prior church, and 45% endorsed that scripture was used to control behavior (Oakley & Kinmond, 2013). Within specific groups, spiritual abuse may be even more prevalent; 95% of LGBTQ-identifying individuals who were current or former members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints (LDS) reported at least one experience of spiritual abuse and 86% potentially met the criteria for post-traumatic stress disorder related to their experience (Simmons, 2017). In addition, studies have found high rates of spiritual abuse experienced by children within foster care systems, ranging from 65-82% reported by social workers (Kvarfordt & Herba, 2018; Kvarfordt, 2010; Kvarfordt & Sheridan, 2007) and 49.5% by Native American children within foster care (Landers et al., 2021).

Measurement of Spiritual Abuse

Previous studies have varied in how they have measured spiritual abuse. To date, there are five measures that have been developed specifically to measure religious/spiritual abuse. The Religious/Spiritual Abuse and Neglect of Children (RSANC; Kvarfordt & Sheridan, 2010) scale was developed to assess practitioners' assessment of religious/spiritual abuse and neglect of children. The original version of the scale consisted of 10 types of abuse (e.g., misuse of religious teachings, use of religion to justify harsh punishment) and demonstrated good internal consistency ($\alpha = 0.83$); 12 more items were later added and demonstrated good face and content validity and internal consistency ($\alpha = 0.94$) (Kvarfordt & Herba, 2018).

A 21-item measure of spiritual trauma was developed specifically to assess spiritual trauma experienced by LGBTQ+ individuals within the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints (Simmons, 2017). Items assessed both abusive experiences with leadership (e.g., being counseled not to speak about one's gender or sexual identity) and abusive teachings (e.g., teaching homosexuality as a sin). The measure demonstrated good internal consistency ($\alpha = .95$), although the sample size was small ($n = 61$).

The Spiritual Abuse Questionnaire (Lawson, 2016) was developed to help individuals reflect on whether they have experienced spiritual abuse. It consists of 57 items that reflect possible experiences of spiritual abuse; respondents answer dichotomously with "yes" or "no" as to whether they experienced a particular type of abuse. The items are categorized into questions about church or group leaders (e.g., "Are you in any way fearful of your leaders?"), questions about church or group teachings (e.g., "Do your leaders claim to receive 'new revelations,' a special 'anointing,' and so-called 'words' or messages from God?"), questions about church or group policies (e.g., Would you say that your church or group has an extreme policy or guidelines for 'disciplinary actions'?), questions about church or group literature and multimedia

(e.g., “Are you only allowed to use study aids, books, etc. that are from your group or organization?”), questions about morals and ethics, health, and conscience (e.g., “Do you feel as though your life (or ministry) is being ‘micromanaged’ by others?”), and questions about making personal choices (e.g., “Are choices ever made by any of your leaders that go against your own conscience?”). The psychometric properties of this measure have not been assessed.

The Spiritual Abuse Questionnaire (SAQ; Keller, 2016) consists of 17 items that assess two dimensions of spiritual abuse. The first subscale, Power-based Affective Wounding (PBAF), captures misuse of power and resulting emotional injury (e.g., “I now feel cynical about church/religious groups”). The second subscale, Conditionality, reflects the belief that one’s status with God and/or the church/religious group is dependent on behavior (e.g., “I believed God would punish me if I didn’t do what my church/group encouraged me to do”). Keller (2016) demonstrated that the SAQ had convergent validity through positive associations with measures of religious and spiritual struggles, PTSD symptoms, and institutional betrayal, and good internal consistency ($\alpha = .98$).

Finally, the Spiritual Harm and Abuse Scale (SHAS; Koch & Edstrom, 2022) consists of 27 items that reflect six factors of abuse: maintaining the system (e.g., “Seeing the leadership or group protecting or elevating abusive individuals”), internal distress (e.g., “Feeling isolated as a result of negative religious experiences”), embracing violence (e.g., “Seeing scripture used to justify physical violence”), controlling leadership (e.g., “My pastor/leader explicitly claiming to speak on God’s behalf”), harmful God-image (e.g., “Feeling betrayed by God”), and gender discrimination (e.g., “Being treated as ‘less than’ because of my gender”). The measure had good internal consistency ($\alpha = .95$) but validity has not been assessed.

Although these five measures provide an important foundation for assessing spiritual abuse, there are several limitations. Most of the measures have not been widely used, only two (the RSANC; Kvarfordt & Sheridan, 2010 and the SHAS; Koch & Edstrom, 2022) have been published in peer-reviewed journals, and minimal validity has been provided for all five measures. In addition, the RSANC (Kvarfordt & Sheridan, 2010) and Simmons' (2017) spiritual trauma measure were both developed for use with specific populations and not for measuring spiritual abuse in the general population. Furthermore, the RSANC (Kvarfordt & Sheridan, 2010), Simmon's (2017) spiritual trauma measure, the SAQ (Keller, 2016), and the SHAS (Koch & Edstrom, 2022) measures were developed and tested on predominately White samples. Thus, measurement of spiritual abuse is in its infancy.

Spiritual Abuse and Intimate Partner Violence

Spiritual abuse has been examined within the context of intimate partner violence (IPV). Bagwell-Gray et al. (2021) examined experiences of reproductive coercion and pregnancy avoidance in 660 women recruited from domestic violence shelters. They found that 21% of women reported experiencing spiritual abuse (assessed by the question, "Has your partner used religious teachings or traditions as a reason to control your daily activities?"), and that the likelihood of experiencing reproductive coercion was significantly higher for women who experienced such partner-based spiritual abuse. Similarly, Hassouneh-Phillips (2003) found that while R/S was often a source of strength for Muslim women experiencing IPV, it was also sometimes a point of vulnerability. Specifically, some women believed that this life did not matter, which rendered them vulnerable to staying in abusive situations, and that perpetrators of IPV sometimes misused religious texts to exert control. Finally, spiritual abuse has also been examined as a specific dimension of "wife abuse" among Haredi (Ultraorthodox) Jewish women

(Dehan & Levi, 2009). The authors argued that spiritual abuse was distinct from other forms of abuse and conceptualized it within the context of wife abuse as "any attempt to impair the woman's spiritual life, spiritual self, or spiritual well-being" (p. 1300).

Researchers have also examined the perspectives of clergy about spiritual abuse. In their interview study of 13 Black clergy about spiritual abuse within intimate partner violence and abuse (IPV/A), Davis and Johnson (2021) found that clergy viewed spiritual abuse as a spiritual problem/demonic, as a misinterpretation of God's word, and as sometimes perpetrated by religious leaders. They emphasized the importance of victims of spiritual abuse knowing the word of God as a tool for themselves and also utilized scripture to address IPV-related spiritual abuse. Furthermore, Bent-Goodley and Fowler (2006) conducted focus groups with 19 African American church members and leaders on the topic of domestic violence within faith-based communities. They found that the topic of spiritual abuse arose as participants discussed the ways that spirituality interacted with domestic violence. Although participants hesitated to define spiritual abuse, (preferring to conceptualize it broadly), they recognized how R/S could be used to perpetuate abuse. They also acknowledged that clergy missed opportunities to confront IPV and were sometimes complicit in perpetuating it, and that spiritual abuse could not be separated from the ways in which the church functions in regards to gender. Finally, participants agreed that it was important to understand spiritual abuse more clearly to understand its impact on survivors of IPV and the responsibility of faith communities in addressing it.

In sum, research suggests that R/S can be used a tool for control and coercion in the context of intimate partner relationships. Furthermore, studies examining the perspectives of religious leaders highlight how spiritual abuse can be used to perpetuate IPV and the ways that the church can be complicit in this.

Spiritual Abuse Within Religious Communities

A growing body of research has also examined experiences of spiritual abuse within religious/spiritual communities. Bilsky (2013) used grounded theory to investigate abuse of religious authority (ARA) experienced by individuals from Christian faith traditions. Through their findings, Bilsky defined ARA as "a) the misuse of excessive authority and power (derived from a divine source) that b) exploits, harms, controls, or shames an individual with less power" (p. 137). Bilsky found that for many participants, experiences of the religious community were initially positive but became negative over time. Relatedly, the most positive factor – community and social support – became a means through with spiritual abuse was reinforced (e.g., through peer pressure). Bilsky also found that spiritual abuse impacted participants' spirituality primarily through questioning one's beliefs, experiencing a disruption in one's relationship with God, and developing a sense of mistrust toward religion/religious individuals. However, for some individuals, experiences of spiritual abuse impacted participants' spirituality in ways that they perceived as positive (e.g., through spiritual growth, change in beliefs, and/or spiritual perspectives that no longer included God).

Krueger (2018) used a mixed-methods approach to examine experiences of clergy nonsexual misconduct among 148 individuals. Using a phenomenological approach, Krueger (2018) found that victims of clergy misconduct experienced intense negative emotions and a changed sense of identity. In addition, many participants experienced both primary and secondary victimization as church members protected clergy after the misconduct and engaged in ostracization and shaming of the victims. These experiences severely impacted victims' spiritual (e.g., altered church involvement) and mental (e.g., social hypervigilance, chronic rumination) health.

Researchers have also explored the relationships between spiritual abuse, mental health, and meaning-making. Johnston (2021) studied 67 people who reported experiencing a traumatic or abusive experience within a religious setting and found that spiritual abuse was positively correlated with presence of meaning in one's life. Johnston interpreted this finding as suggesting that distress from spiritual abuse directly related to efforts to make meaning. However, we note that Johnson used the Meaning in Life Questionnaire (MLQ; Steger et al., 2006) to operationalize meaning-making, which assesses the presence and search of meaning in life rather than meaning-making specifically. In addition, Johnston found that religious trauma and spiritual abuse both positively correlated with depression. However, while Johnston (2021) found positive correlations between spiritual abuse and both presence of meaning and depression, spiritual abuse did not significantly predict presence of meaning or depression in multiple regression analyses. We also note that Johnston assessed spiritual abuse through the Religious and Spiritual Struggles Scale (RSS; Exline et al., 2014), which was not specifically designed to measure spiritual abuse. Thus, it is important for future research to continue to explore the relationships between spiritual abuse and meaning-making, but we hesitate to draw conclusions from this study given its limitations.

Glasscock (2019) examined the experiences of seven former cult members who reported experiencing spiritual abuse. They found that many participants had pre-cult vulnerabilities (e.g., prior trauma history, seeking answers) that were exploited by the cult leader. In addition, cult leaders conflated the idea of following themselves with following God. Participants were also required to make extreme sacrifices in their personal lives for the sake of the group, felt extreme pressure to conform to group norms, felt threatened by use of labels (e.g., "enemy of the church") to conform, and overall experienced "totalitarian" levels of control within the cult. As a

result, participants experienced a range of negative emotions toward themselves (e.g., shame, self-condemnation) and the group leader (e.g., disillusionment), experienced estrangement from social relationships because of their affiliation with the cult, and suffered through painful emotional consequences from their experience (e.g., PTSD symptoms).

Gomez (2005) interviewed seven individuals who had experienced interpersonal trauma that was denied by their Christian community. They found that participants experienced denial from their churches as marginalization and re-traumatization, involving feelings of betrayal and loss, and that the spiritual abuse affected participants' experiences of communal worship and understanding of God.

Finally, Kamminga (2018) found that spiritual abuse and problems with prescribed opioid use were positively correlated. In open-ended questions, some participants reported that they used opioids to cope with emotions related to their spiritual abuse. It should be noted that the sample size was too small (n = 33) to examine higher-level, predictive relationships, and that spiritual abuse was assessed through the Spiritual Abuse Questionnaire (SAQ; Lawson, 2016), which has not been examined for reliability or validity and lacks psychometric data.

In summary, the existing research on spiritual abuse within religious communities has found that spiritual abuse significantly harms victims' mental and spiritual health. In addition, studies have highlighted the particularly harmful impact of ostracization and denial from individuals' religious/spiritual communities as a secondary "re-traumatization."

Religious Trauma

In the popular (non-academic) literature (e.g., Hake, 2021; Taylor, n.d.; Willowcounseling, 2022), religious trauma has been distinguished from spiritual abuse, with religious trauma referring more broadly to the psychological and spiritual consequences that can

result from experiences of spiritual abuse. Empirical literature has been more mixed in distinguishing between religious trauma and spiritual abuse. While some studies (e.g., Johnston, 2021) distinguish between religious trauma and spiritual abuse, others have combined the concepts. In their systematic review of religious/spiritual abuse and trauma, Ellis (2022) included any study that examined "religious abuse," "religious trauma," "spiritual abuse," and "spiritual trauma." Furthermore, recently developed measures of spiritual abuse (e.g., Spiritual Abuse Questionnaire; Keller, 2016) include items relating to both specific events/experiences (e.g., "I was harshly criticized by religious leaders or church/group members" and internal states (e.g., "Sometimes I feel guilty for having stayed too long in my church/group"). Similarly, the Spiritual Harm and Abuse Scale (Koch & Edstrom, 2022) consists of two parts, one assessing "external events" (e.g., "feeling unable to raise questions and issues") and the other assessing "internal events" (e.g., "anxiety attacks triggered by religious stimuli"). Thus, while popular literature has tended to distinguish between religious trauma and spiritual abuse, empirical work sometimes conflates the two.

Psychologist Marlene Winell was the first to describe "religious trauma syndrome" based on her own experiences and clinical work. She categorized symptoms into four clusters: cognitive (e.g., identity confusion, difficulty making decisions), affective (e.g., anxiety, guilt, lack of meaning), functional (e.g., disturbed sleep, substance abuse), and social/cultural (e.g., interpersonal dysfunction, employment issues). Whereas Winell applied the concept of religious trauma primarily to individuals leaving fundamentalist Christian backgrounds, Stone (2013) offered a broader definition of religious trauma as "pervasive psychological damage resulting from religious messages, beliefs, and experiences" (p. 324). Unlike acute trauma, religious trauma can develop through long-term exposure to harmful beliefs and messages (Stone, 2013).

Crocker (2021) interviewed ten sexual minority Christians on their experiences of religious trauma and spiritual resilience. They found that religious trauma was associated with mental and physical health challenges, including symptoms of depression, anxiety, and trauma and negative coping behaviors. They also found that religious trauma resulted in changes in participants' religious beliefs and practices. Finally, Crocker (2021) found that several factors were associated with maintenance of participants' faith despite experiencing religious trauma, including education and social support.

Rationale for Examining Spiritual Abuse Among East Asian American Christian Women

Although (to our knowledge) spiritual abuse has not been empirically examined among East Asian American Christian women, we believe there is compelling reason to address this gap in the research. Specifically, there may be cultural factors that render East Asian American women vulnerable to spiritual abuse. In the following section, we begin by summarizing the prevalence and sociological context of Christianity among Asian Americans before discussing specific cultural factors that may be relevant to experiences of spiritual abuse.

Sociological Context of Christianity Among Asian Americans

In this section, we discuss the context of Asian American Christianity. This discussion draws heavily upon the work of sociologist Jerry Park (2009); it also focuses primarily on the experiences of East Asian American Protestants, reflecting the bias within the existing literature on Asian American Christianity toward East Asian Americans and the comparable gap in examining South and South-East Asians and non-Protestant Christians (Hong, 2019; Park, 2009).

Prevalence of Christianity Among Asian Americans. Although often portrayed as a single, homogenous group, the racial category of Asian Americans includes individuals from more than fifty groups who speak over thirty languages (S. Sue, Nakamura, Chung, & Yee-

Bradbury, 1994, cited in Tan & Dong, 2014). Furthermore, there is significant heterogeneity in religious traditions and affiliations within Asian Americans; one recent survey found that 42% of Asian adults identify as Christian (22% specifically as Protestant, 19% as Catholic, 1% other), 26% identify as unaffiliated, 14% identify as Buddhist, 10% as Hindus, 4% as Muslims, 2% as other religions, and 1% as Sikh (Asian Americans, 2012). Moreover, Asian Americans vary widely in their levels of religious commitment, with religiously unaffiliated Asian Americans reporting lower levels of commitment than unaffiliated individuals in the general public and Asian American Evangelical Protestants composing one of the most devoted religious groups within the United States (Asian Americans, 2012). The diversity of religious affiliations within Asian Americans also varies widely by ethnicity; for instance, Protestant Christians make up 61% of Korean Americans, 33% of Japanese Americans, 22% of Chinese Americans, and 4% of Vietnamese Americans (Asian Americans, 2012). Thus the religious landscape of Asian Americans is diverse, although survey data indicate that the largest religious plurality are Asian American Christians (Park & Chang, 2023).

The Role of Christianity for Asian Immigrants. Scholars have argued that the prevalence of Christianity among Asian Americans may reflect two processes: first, there may be a self-selection bias among religious immigrants (Park, 2009). In other words, the individuals who choose to immigrate may be more likely to be already affiliated with the primary religion (i.e., Christianity) of the United States. For example, in the case of both Korean Americans and Filipino Americans, the proportion of Christians in the United States are significantly higher than in their countries of origin (Park, 2009).

However, the prevalence of Asian American Christians may also reflect a new embrace of Christianity within America stemming from the hardships of immigration (Park, 2009). For

instance, some scholars have referred to immigration as a "theologizing" experience (Min, 1992, cited in Kim, 2011; Smith, 1978, cited in Park, 2009); in other words, the challenges of immigration (such as navigating cultural uprootedness, language barriers, and economic difficulty) created a need for meaning that religion was able to fulfill (Park, 2009). In addition, the church also provided a critical resource for meeting immigrants' social needs. Within ethnic churches, Asian immigrants were welcomed into a group of others who shared their language, culture, and the difficulties of adjusting to a new home country. In this way, the ethnic church has been a site of cultural expression and preservation (Park, 2009). Accordingly, mono-ethnic churches (e.g., Korean American churches, Chinese American churches) developed and pan-Asian churches were rare (Park, 2009).

It is also important to acknowledge the varied historical context for Christianity across Asia. Due to the influence of Christian missionaries, Christianity can be traced as far back as the 4th century A.D. in certain parts of India and to the 14th and 15th centuries in Korea and China (Park, 2009). However, the extent to which Christianity was integrated into mainstream culture varied across countries (Park, 2009). For instance, Christianity was embraced by Koreans and became a significant part of the culture in that country, whereas its reception in China was much less widespread (Park, 2009). This meant that for immigrants in the United States, encountering Christianity was a distinct experience depending on one's ethnic identity. For Korean immigrants, the practice of Christianity upon arriving in America was a familiar experience, whereas conversion to Christianity for Chinese immigrants was a distinctly "American experience" (Park, 2009, p. 64).

Furthermore, for some Asian ethnic groups, such as Chinese Americans, the church served to reinforce one's ethnic identity. Because Chinese American Christian converts newly

found themselves in a country in which their religion was the dominant religion, their ethnic identity – rather than religious identity – became most salient (Park, 2009). As a result, churches emphasized ethnic identity and became places where immigrants explored the intersections between their ethnic, American, and religious identities (Park, 2009). This "foregrounding of ethnicity" within churches may help explain why many Asian immigrants were more receptive to Christianity in America than in their home countries (Park, 2009, p. 66).

Christianity and Second-Generation Asian Americans. Second-generation Asian Americans – a label that typically refers to individuals who were born in the United States or immigrated at a very young age – navigated a distinct cultural experience from their parents (Park, 2009). They often did not possess the same economic difficulties as their immigrant parents and possessed more familiarity with the English language and American culture than did the first generation; these factors "[made] ethnic group participation less an issue of survival and more a matter of identity construction" (Park, 2009, p. 69). In other words, second-generation Asian Americans did not need to depend on the ethnic church as a resource for survival within the United States. Instead, their relationship to the ethnic church was often centered on issues around identity.

As the Christian church was a site of cultural expression and preservation for displaced Asian immigrants, it also became a site of cultural transmission to the next generation of Asian Americans (Park, 2009). However, the success of this transmission has been questioned, as some data have indicated that second-generation Asian Americans often left their ethnic churches of origin (Park, 2009). The dominance of the ethnic church among first generation immigrants thus gave way to other church types. Some second-generation Asian Americans broke off from the immigrant church to form their own mono-ethnic, English-speaking churches (Park, 2009).

However, the degree to which these churches served as a site of cultural preservation is questionable; in one study of English-speaking Korean American churches, many pastors reported that (with the exception of food) their churches do not retain the cultural elements (e.g., language, specific worship customs) of their parents' immigrant churches (Min & Kim, 2005). Other second-generation Christians joined predominantly White church congregations, though Park (2009) noted that this phenomenon has received little attention in the literature. Still others formed pan-ethnic Asian American churches. And finally, Asian Americans today are increasingly joining (and pastoring) multiethnic churches (Edwards & Kim, 2019; Sohn, 2017)

Asian American Evangelicalism. The meaning of Evangelicalism has evolved over time, but historian David Bebbington suggested the most commonly accepted definition of Evangelicalism as a movement within Protestant Christianity characterized by high regard for the Bible as ultimate authority, emphasis of Jesus' crucifixion and saving power, a belief in conversion, and a belief that one's faith should influence one's public life (Merritt, 2015; What Is an Evangelical?, n.d.). Within America, Evangelicalism is increasingly represented by people of color, among whom Asian Americans are one of the fastest growing minorities (Hong, 2019).

Evangelicalism has had considerable influence among Asian American Christians, especially among Korean Americans; for instance, Asian American Evangelical Protestants are among the most religious groups in the United States (Asian Americans, 2012). The strength of this cultural identity can be seen perhaps most easily through college campus parachurches (i.e., religious organizations that operate independently of specific denominations; Scheitle & McCarthy, 2018), such as Campus Crusade for Christ and Intervarsity Christian Fellowship, which were formerly predominantly White in composition and which now are heavily represented by Asian Americans (Park, 2009). For instance, 80% of the more than 50

Evangelical campus organizations at UC Berkley and UCLA are Asian Americans (Kim, 2006). Some of these parachurches have formed specific chapters targeted toward Asian Americans, which provide "culturally similar community… and protection from marginalization" (Kim, 2006, cited in Hong, 2019, p. 5).

Although the connection between Asian American Christianity and Evangelicalism can be seen most obviously through the college campus parachurch, it can also be detected amidst Korean American Protestantism more broadly (Alumkal, 1999). As Alumkal notes, although Korean American Protestant churches are often affiliated with the Presbyterian Church (USA), a mainline denomination, they generally eschew many of the liberal values of mainline churches and remain comparatively conservative.

Cultural Factors Relevant to Spiritual Abuse

In this section, we discuss cultural factors that may be relevant to examining spiritual abuse among East Asian American women. We begin by summarizing theoretical links between minority stress and trauma. We then explore specific cultural values that might increase vulnerability of East Asian American women to spiritual abuse.

Minority Stress and Trauma

Trauma has been typically defined according to the criteria for Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) in the DSM-5 (Roberson & Carter, 2021), which specifies that a Criterion A trauma must involve "exposure to actual or threatened death, serious injury, or sexual violence," either through direct or indirect experience (e.g., witnessing, learning about, or experiencing extreme exposure to the event) (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). Symptoms of PTSD include intrusion symptoms (e.g., flashbacks), hyperarousal symptoms (e.g., hypervigilance), alterations in cognition and mood (e.g., negative beliefs about oneself or the world) and

avoidance (e.g., avoidance of reminders of the traumatic event) (American Psychiatric Association, 2013).

However, recent scholars (e.g., Holmes et al., 2016) have argued for a re-examination of traditional conceptualizations of trauma that would better reflect the experiences of minority group members. Specifically, they argue that discrimination is itself a form of trauma, even in the absence of an acute event that qualifies as a Criterion A trauma. In support of this argument, studies have found that experiences of discrimination are associated with trauma-related symptomology (Chou et al., 2012; Holmes et al., 2016). This idea aligns with the concept of "insidious trauma" first coined by Root (1992; cited in Szymanski & Balsam, 2011), which refers to the ongoing discrimination experienced by individuals with marginalized identities.

Furthermore, trauma is recognized to be cumulative and trauma history is one predictor of the development of PTSD after trauma exposure (see Hamby et al., 2021). In the literature on adverse childhood experiences (ACEs), this has been referred to as the "dose-response effect;" namely, individuals who reported experiencing more traumatic adversities as a child are at greater risk of negative health consequences as an adult, particularly if they experienced four or more adversities. This finding highlights the critical need to examine how repeated discrimination shapes the way marginalized groups experience trauma (Bryant-Davis et al., 2009; Hamby et al., 2021). This research also suggests that in considering spiritual abuse, it is critical to examine the experiences of individuals from marginalized groups, who may be particularly at risk for developing trauma symptomology.

Minority Stress. According to Minority Stress Theory (MST; Meyer, 2003), individuals with stigmatized identities experience unique stressors due to structural oppression that put them at higher risk for mental health problems. Although MST was originally developed to explain the

experiences of sexual minorities, it has been applied to other marginalized groups, such as racial/ethnic minorities (e.g., Arbona & Jimenez, 2014; Wei et al., 2005), religious minorities (e.g., Bassioni & Langrehr, 2021; Every & Perry, 2014), and individuals with disabilities (e.g., Lund, 2021). MST has been especially used to examine the experiences of individuals with multiple minority identities, such as LGBTQ people of color (e.g., Cyrus, 2017; Ramirez & Paz Galupo, 2019).

This body of work has implications for the topic of examining spiritual abuse among Asian Americans. Although their experiences of racism are often denied through stereotypes of the "Model Minority" myth and underreporting, Asian Americans have a long history of experiencing oppression and xenophobia in the United States (Lee, 2021; Lei et al., 2022; Litam, 2020). In addition, the surge of reported hate crimes against Asian Americans in the wake of Covid-19 has brought greater recognition of anti-Asian racism (Jin, 2021; Lee, 2021). Recent research (e.g., Lei et al., 2022; Wei et al., 2011) has applied MST to explain how race-related stress contributes to negative mental health outcomes for Asian Americans. Thus, simply belonging to an oppressed group may render Asian Americans particularly vulnerable to the effects of trauma and abuse, including spiritual abuse.

Cultural Betrayal. Cultural betrayal may constitute another mechanism by which Asian Americans might be particularly vulnerable to the effects of spiritual abuse. According to cultural betrayal trauma theory (CBTT; Gomez, 2017a), societal oppression, such as racism and discrimination, leaves marginalized groups feeling unsafe; as a result, some group members turn to each other for support and safety, developing "intracultural trust" (i.e., "attachment, dependence, loyalty, and responsibility with other ingroup members;" Gómez, 2017b, p. 432). In this context, within-group interpersonal trauma is experienced by members as "a violation of this

(intra)cultural trust and is conceptualized as cultural betrayal" (Gómez, 2017b, p. 432). This echoes aspects of Janoff-Bulman's (1992, 2010) "shattered assumptions" theory of trauma, which suggests that traumatic experiences "shatter" our core, fundamental (sometimes unconscious) assumptions of other people and the world (e.g., "The world is a good place"), leaving trauma victims upended in a dangerous, meaningless world. CBTT extends the "shattered assumptions" theory of trauma by highlighting the unique distress minority group members may experience when core assumptions of intracultural trust (as a response to societal oppression) are violated.

Cultural betrayal has been associated with psychological distress, such as internalized prejudice and anxiety. Gómez (2017b) found that among Asian American and Pacific Islander (AAPI) college students, cultural betrayal predicted disassociation, hallucinations, posttraumatic stress symptoms, and hypervigilance. Cultural betrayal may also pose implications for help-seeking, as it may be harder for marginalized individuals who experienced trauma by someone within their cultural group to disclose their trauma, given their knowledge that the perpetrator also experiences oppression within the majority culture (Delker et al., 2019). Together, these findings suggest that Asian Americans who experience spiritual abuse by other Asian Americans (e.g., at an Asian American church) may also experience cultural betrayal and thus be at heightened risk for mental health problems.

Cultural Values

In addition to risk factors associated with being an oppressed group, certain cultural values might also render East Asian American Christian women vulnerable to spiritual abuse. Although it is important to acknowledge inter-ethnic cultural differences (Kim et al., 2001), East Asian Americans generally share certain cultural values stemming from the strong influence of

Confucianism in East Asia (Chuang, 2012; Ozaki & Otis, 2017). These cultural values provide relevant context for the importance of examining spiritual abuse among East Asian American women.

Patriarchalism. East Asian cultures are generally considered patriarchal, referring to a societal structure that places men in positions of privilege and domination over women (Gao et al., 2012; Ozaki & Otis, 2017). Within patriarchal cultures, men are generally seen as dominant both in the family and workplace while women are expected to occupy positions of obedience (Ma et al., 2021; Ozaki & Otis, 2017). These patriarchal values are embedded into the cultural socialization process of Asian Americans (Koo et al., 2012), and research has found that greater adherence to Asian values was associated with higher endorsement of patriarchal beliefs among Asian American young adults (Yoon et al., 2019).

The influence of patriarchalism can still be seen within Asian American churches, in which women are often excluded from serving as pastors or elders (Park, 2009; Tan & Dong, 2014). According to Park (2009), two perspectives have been used to explain the pervasiveness of patriarchalism within Asian American Christianity. The first perspective suggests that the Asian American ethnic church sought to preserve the cultural values of the home country by continuing to enforce traditional gender norms (Park, 2009). The second perspective suggests that for some ethnic groups, gender inequality within the Asian American church was a response to cultural dynamics of the immigration process. Using the example of Indian Christian immigrants, Park (2009) described how for some Asian families, wives were able to secure better-paying employment (e.g., as nurses) than their husbands. This inequity threatened the dominance that men were accustomed to holding in their home countries, and the church thus served as a place to compensate for this status reversal. As support for this perspective, Park

(2009) cited examples of churches creating new leadership positions, such as Christmas carol leader, for the sole purpose of giving men more leadership. In both perspectives, the Asian American church served to directly and indirectly reinforce patriarchalism (Park, 2009).

Collectivism. Although portrayals of Asian cultures as uniformly collectivistic are oversimplified (Cohen et al., 2016; Wang & Chen, 2010), it would be remiss not to consider the influence of collectivism on Asian cultural norms. Within collectivistic cultures, people are viewed as interdependent, and the needs of others tend to take priority over the needs on the individual (Cohen et al., 2016). Specific collectivistic values within East Asian cultures include respect for hierarchy and authority, familism (e.g., importance of the family) and filial piety (i.e., honoring one's family and elders), and avoidance of direct confrontation (Chang, 2015; Tan & Dong, 2014; Zhang et al., 2005). These collectivistic norms are important to consider in examining spiritual abuse within Asian American communities.

Collectivistic cultural norms may have important implications regarding social support seeking, including mental health utilization; Chang (2015) found that despite believing that familial support was generally available, Asian American undergraduates reported concerns that self-disclosing one's problems to family and friends would result in criticism, which presented a barrier to seeking social support. Additionally, findings from the broader trauma literature have similarly suggested that for those who upheld Asian values of interdependence, individuals who were relationally very close to perpetrators of emotional and sexual abuse were less likely to disclose the abuse compared to individuals who were not close to perpetuators (Foynes et al., 2014). These findings can be conceptualized as concerns of "face loss," or the loss of one's social image due to one's performance in interpersonal contexts (Liu et al., 2017). Previous research has found that Asians reported greater face loss concerns compared to White

individuals, and that face loss concerns are associated with greater psychopathology and less help-seeking behaviors (Liu et al., 2017). The saliency of face loss in Asian cultures has led some to characterize Asian cultures as "shame-based" (Zane & Ku, 2014).

In addition, Asian American undergraduates reported learning the importance of forbearance from their parents, which refers to one's ability to endure difficulties with emotional restraint (Chang, 2015). As Chang discussed, forbearance and self-reliance may be adaptive for Asian Americans when facing minor challenges, but may become hurtful when dealing with significant stressors. In comparison to Latino students, who similarly reported cultural barriers to seeking social support, Asian students reported greater concerns over other peoples' opinions and fear of disgrace, perhaps because Asian cultures are generally considered "tight" (i.e., there is strict adherence to social norms) (Chang, 2015). These findings potentially explain why Asian Americans are the least-likely to utilize mental health treatment among all racial/ethnic minority groups (M. Lee et al., 2021). In summary, these cultural values might hinder Asian American victims of spiritual abuse from reporting their experiences and/or seeking help.

Implications of Patriarchal and Collectivistic Values for Power Dynamics within Asian American Churches. Considering East Asian cultural norms of patriarchalism and collectivism presents compelling reason for examining spiritual abuse within Asian American churches. Cha et al. (2006) noted the "authoritarian" leadership culture within many Asian American churches, particularly the Korean American church, which is a result of the "intersection between Confucianism and church life" (Cha et al., 2006, p. 61). In churches with this leadership style, the spiritual authority of church leaders is rarely questioned (Oh, 2003, cited in Cha et al., 2006) and church members may not feel free to voice differing opinions. Cha et al., (2006) noted that male pastors, in particular, can be elevated to an "unhealthy role of father

figure" (Cha et al., p. 62). Additionally, the patriarchal norms within many Asian American churches may serve to augment the power held by male leaders within Asian American churches, furthering the power differential between church leaders and female church members in particular.

Emerging research within industrial and organizational psychology present findings that are intriguing to consider in light of Cha et al's observations. One type of leadership that is more commonly found and accepted in collectivistic cultures is paternalistic leadership (Chen et al., 2014; Ho, 2021; Soylu, 2011), which is characterized by "fatherly benevolence" in employee's work and personal lives in exchange for deference and obedience. Farh and Cheng (2000) proposed that paternalistic leadership is composed of three facets: benevolence (i.e., holistic concern for employee's well-being), authoritarianism (i.e., absolute control and expectation of obedience), and morality (i.e., modeling of ethical behavior and virtues). Aycan (2006) built off this model by proposing five dimensions paternalistic leadership: creating a family atmosphere at work, establishing close and individualized relationships with subordinates, getting in involved in non-work domain, loyalty expectation, and maintaining authority status.

Paternalistic leadership styles have been found to be most highly endorsed in collectivistic, high-power distant cultures, such as China, Turkey, and Pakistan (Mansur et al., 2017; Soylu, 2011). Although it often critiqued by Western perspectives emphasizing autonomy and individuality, it has been found to be associated with positive responses from employees (Cheng et al., 2004). However, it has also been proposed that paternalistic leadership could be exploitative (Aycan, 2006), and research has examined potential associations between paternalistic leadership and workplace bullying (Soylu, 2011). Findings suggested that different dimensions of paternalistic leadership positively and negatively predictive workplace bullying

(specifically, creating a familial environment at work negatively predicted bullying, while loyalty-seeking paternalism positively predicted bullying). Given the intersection between religion/spirituality and morality, it is intriguing to consider how paternalistic leadership styles might be relevant to Asian American churches and how this might create an environment in which spiritual abuse could occur.

Summary

In conclusion, a growing body of research suggests that spiritual abuse may be prevalent in religious communities and is associated with significant negative spiritual and mental health consequences. However, studies have predominantly examined White samples, despite research that suggests minority groups are at increased risk for trauma. In addition, certain cultural values influenced by Confucianism might render East Asian American women particularly vulnerable to experiences of spiritual abuse; specifically, patriarchal norms might exacerbate power differentials between religious leaders and their followers, while collectivistic values might present a barrier to help-seeking. This warrants an important area for further investigation.

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