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## The lived religion of polish sex-trafficked survivors: a targeted investigation for practical theological analysis

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### ABSTRACT

Sex trafficking is a crime that not only impacts victims physically or psychologically but also spiritually. This article surveys the Polish Catholic context for sex trafficking alongside Christian responses to it with background interviews from those in anti-trafficking work. Analysis from a lived religion perspective is offered on how three Polish female survivors of sex trafficking talk about God in testimony. Their religious and cultural context also is considered when analyzing their narratives. Taken together the survivors and their supporters words reveal the vital themes of love and forgiveness. First forgiveness brings about love, which then stimulates the possibility of a new narrative identity construction. The freedom that a new narrative ushers in is transformative.

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Poland; sex trafficking; lived religion; forgiveness; praxis of love

## Introduction

The reality of sex trafficking is an experience where a victim is exposed to deception and humiliation. Such an experience takes away the dignity of a human being and begs existential issues relating to the trauma in which a victim has become accustomed (Herman 2001, 51). Traffickers use psychological manipulation to intentionally break victims down spiritually (Hopper and Hidalgo 2006, 200). Over the past 20 years, there has been much research relating to the topics of sex trafficking and sexual trauma. There also has been a significant amount of research relating to the relationship between trauma and lived religion (cf. Ganzevoort and Sremac 2018). However, the hybrid of sex trafficking-trauma, and religion relating one's trauma is a niche largely untouched. The field of lived religion has a fair amount of literature to offer. There also is a large lack of practical theological analysis in the field of human trafficking. Moreover, the hybrid of lived religion and trafficking-trauma within the Polish context is non-existent. Due to this fact, such research is indeed groundbreaking and necessary. How one speaks about God when experiencing a trauma is provocative, but what is more provocative is what applies to a specific context such as Poland. This is a country with a strong Catholic population and a current conservative political party in government. Poland also legalizes prostitution, prohibits sex trafficking, and culturally reproaches the sex worker. Using a lived religion hermeneutical approach,

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this research embarks on the journey of answering: How do Polish victims of sex trafficking talk in their testimonies about lived religious realities and how does this assist them in coping with their traumatic trafficking experience?

## Methodology

The study explores testimonial talk as a mode of theological discourse and a unique source for theological reflection (cf. Cartledge 2010). That is to say, testimonial talks are stories subjects tell and retell through speech acts and behaviors that express a religious role they are performing. In the context of our study, testimonies function as dynamic, discursive devices in which informants stress the real presence and active involvement of God in everyday life or what Orsi (2016, 216) calls 'intimacy with God really present'.

The first part of this article contains background literature about human trafficking, Poland and lived religion. Secondly, the article touches on the empirical research project, which was derived from the main research question, containing a curiosity about how one's beliefs determine the aftercare process for survivors of sex trafficking. The empirical research which was carried out through a total of twelve interviews in the Netherlands and Poland with anti-trafficking experts and used for a master thesis. In this article, four of twelve interviews are quoted. Additionally, two of the testimonies used when assessing the role of lived religion were archival materials provided from a Polish Catholic shelter in Katowice, Poland. The third testimony was a face-to-face interview conducted with a Polish trafficking survivor in Amsterdam, the Netherlands. These three Polish Catholic testimonies were used as a basis for a targeted investigation. These particular testimonies were sought out and selected because of the religious language used. The analysis of these interviews is considered as *mapping territory* and is analyzed through the lenses of the authors. It should be noted that this research is restricted to a targeted group: female Polish survivors of sex trafficking.

## Human trafficking: a brief introduction

Human trafficking is a form of modern day slavery (Polaris Project, 2017). For numerous reasons, the topic of human trafficking is complex. Part of the complexity is derived from various cases differing in opinion with regards to how trafficking is defined and the various terms that get used. Not all sex workers or prostitutes are trafficked. Yet, did one's life circumstances leave her (or him) little or no other option but to work in the sex industry? To what extent was the decision voluntary? This is a hot debate in the anti-trafficking field that was encountered when conducting this research, especially when the role of religion/ethics come into the conversation. Therefore, sticking with factual definition is vital. According to United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime,

[T]he recruitment, transportation, transfer, harboring or receipt of persons, by means of the threat or use of force or other forms of coercion, of abduction, of fraud, of deception, of the abuse of power or of a position of vulnerability or of the giving or receiving of payments or benefits to achieve the consent of a person having control over another person, for the purpose of exploitation. Exploitation shall include, at a minimum, the exploitation of the prostitution of others or other forms of sexual exploitation, forced labor or services, slavery or practices like slavery, servitude or the removal of organs. (United Nations 2000)

Force, fraud, and coercion are the three words that tend to frame the justification for an individual to be defined as having been trafficked (Trafficking in Persons Report 2016, 2016). The definition above refers to the physical methods of force, fraud, and coercion; however, there are psychological manipulation methods used by traffickers as well (Hopper and Hidalgo 2006, 193). First, traffickers recruit vulnerable target groups, such as women, especially those who lack access to education, are chronically unemployed, and lack economic opportunities in their land of origin (2006, 194). The traffickers lure the woman in by promising false circumstances and separating her from her family and support system. Second, the traffickers initiate her into a distorted sense of reality that she must accept (2006, 195). What this phase looks like varies per individual victim narrative; some sex trafficking survivors are gang raped as a method to break down the will to resist (2006, 196). Other methods include isolation from any support system or the outside world, an increased debt burden, and an introduction to a new culture of prostitution (2006, 195). Third, traffickers indoctrinate their authoritarian status upon the victims. Depriving victims of basic needs, such as food or shelter and forcing them to work over-time hours, creates a deeper relationship of dependency and humiliation for the victim.

Through terror, the perpetrator seeks to destroy the victims' sense of autonomy (2006, 197). Traffickers often force victims of trafficking to 'violate their basic moral values and betray their connection to other human beings' (2006, 200). In one study, the women mentioned a strong hatred of being broken down physically and spiritually through sexual and abusive circumstances. The perpetrator has 'succeeded' in bringing her to the lowest point possible when she loathes herself. Traffickers possess the techniques to bring her to such a point (2006, 200).

### Polish context

To understand the significance of one's trafficking experience and how their national context affects their narrative of a supreme being, one must comprehend the greater historical, religious and cultural setting. Walsh claims that 'human beings also exist within a larger social and cultural context shaped by experiences of power and privilege or oppression over time' (2017, 110). Poland is a country with a large 95% Catholic majority (Sydney Sadowski 2014). Yet in an interview, Laura Bara declares 'Technically, yes, I live in a Christian country, but it feels like I live in a secular society. Talking about God is a taboo' (2017). Politically speaking Poland has been seen as a post-communist success because of its strong economy and a Christian democratic-liberal political party that was in power (Kubik 2017). However, things took an unexpected turn in October 2015 when the PiS, the Law and Justice Party began to rule (A.C. 2017). This party is very right wing regarding culture, religion, sexual morality, xenophobia, and nationalism (Timothy Garton Ash 2015). Because this party is so closely tied to the Catholic church it leaves citizens with mixed feelings regarding politics and religion ('religious nationalism') (Bartkowski 2017).

The high percentage of Catholics in Poland, combined with the current conservative government within the historical post-soviet framework, creates a society where certain stigmatization about sex worker arises. Catholic morals are projected onto the status quo of society, which can muster up feelings of shame for citizens who do not uphold to the moral Catholic standard (Bartkowski 2017). In three of the four quoted interviews,

the conceptual representation of 'Mary-Martha' (Lk 10.38-42) versus 'whore' was a striking cultural theme relating to stigma and shame. Polish women in society are typically categorized into 'acceptable' or 'unacceptable'. The 'accepted' women represent the Biblical characters of Mary and Martha who listened to Jesus and served Jesus while he was visiting their household (Baka 2017). Women who have ventured off in another direction, such as having an occupation as prostitute, are seen as 'unacceptable' or, as one interviewee said, the 'unacceptable whore' (Baka 2017).

A Polish shelter manager shared her observations regarding the 'Martha-Mary' concept for survivors of sex trafficking in stating:

These women were forced into occupational circumstances and did not have a choice. Therefore, one mindset is 'but someone did something to me and I cannot change that. Therefore, I would rather be a sinner.' While other women do not care about that label, and I think that is their way of protecting themselves. Our country, Poland, can only relate to Christianity. (Bartkowski 2017)

One Polish anti-trafficking expert explained that the respect for prostitutes in Poland is virtually non-existent.

Some women don't even want to share their story with the police because the police view them as sluts. People who work in anti-trafficking understand the situation. Empathy is lacking in Poland. People complain, but don't have empathy towards one another. If one is in trouble, that is their fault and there is not an expectation for the government to do something about it. (Bartkowski 2017)

The cultural barriers of stigma and shame that Polish sex workers must overcome are comprehensive.

## Lived religion

Lived religion is a concept that is difficult to define. The studies on lived religion have been the subject of intensive research for a couple of decades now, and the studies that have come out have become somewhat classics in religious studies scholarship. New case studies on religiously performative dimensions of the everyday are continuously appearing on the market, but few have attempted to bring together the various disciplinary and theoretical/methodological approaches. There is a growing acceptance of the utility of mixed methods (a well-established status of 'insider knowledge') in the study of lived religion, but there is no widely accepted set of epistemological premises in regard to use of a conceptual or theoretical framework to guide inquiry. Others, however, hold that the flexibility of the term is one of its strengths. In recent years, a framework for studying religion from the perspective of ordinary people covered a broad field of scientific discourses and mostly gained popularity within religious studies, (practical) theology and the social sciences in general. The very fact that the discussion of lived religion calls for both empirical reflection, as well as conceptual/theoretical clarification, makes it an interesting area for multi- and interdisciplinary research. The perspective of lived religion has emerged to remedy the shortcomings of earlier perspectives that approached religion as stable systems focusing mostly on dogmas, tradition or church hierarchy (Orsi 1985, 2016; Hall 1997; Tweed 1997; Failing and Heimbrock 1998; Ammerman 2007, 2013, 2014, 2016; Koepfing 2008; McGuire 2008;

Streib, Dinter, and Söderblom 2008; Maynard, Hummel, and Moschella 2010; Ganzevoort and Roeland 2014; Ganzevoort and Sremac 2017, 2018). A lived religion approach takes its starting point in religious *practices* (or what Morgan, 2014 aptly calls ‘religion-at-work’) and its exquisitely varied expressions: in ‘what people actually do, experience, desire, hope, think, imagine, and touch’ in everyday contexts and settings (Ganzevoort and Roeland 2014). In other words, lived religion as an empirical cultural hermeneutics aims to understand the everyday habitus of religious actors (‘religion from below’) and forms of appropriations and negotiations of the repertoire people encounter in religious and cultural tradition (Sremac and Ganzevoort 2017). The lived religious world-making informs the post-traumatic coping mechanisms of sex-trafficked survivors in Poland and significantly contributes to the re-envisioning of the traumatic experience of sex trafficking and lived religious realm.

## Empirical research

### *Testimonies*

The following are personal testimonies from Polish sex-trafficked women. Each story is paraphrased in English and highlights the part of the story where victims dialogue about God. Two of the following interviews were previously written out by survivors and are held on file at a Polish women’s shelter; one interview was a personal conversation; and in the concluding section are findings based on interviews with Polish anti-trafficking professionals. Here we are looking at the speech act of testimony. The act of testifying is an appropriate place to introduce our empirical proposal of the testimonies of sex-trafficked survivors in Poland. Testimony is understood as the expression of one’s own narrative identity. Through a testimony a sex-trafficked survivor discloses and inspects herself; the testimony uncovers, reveals, and asserts. According to Sremac (2014, 65–66) testimony is ‘a desire to attract a different formation of the self, as means of persuasion, through a statement of the need for empathy, exoneration from the secret that hurts, and a desire to transform.’ Testimony in the broad sense includes the central case of one person telling something to another in face-to-face communication. In the context of our study, it is a story where a survivor is an active, interpretive human agent, with herself and with the audience.

To protect participants’ privacy, pseudonyms replaced the interviewee’s and testifier’s actual names.

### *Testimony one: Malgaorzata*

This story consists of a woman who started drinking from a young age and was involved with violence. When this woman was caught in a fight and sentenced to two years of imprisonment, she fled abroad to France. However, in no time she needed a job and, through picking up her old habits of bar fights and drinking, she got involved with human trafficking. She herself was trafficked and led a life with the traffickers. However, her breaking point was when they put her into a position to traffic someone. At that point, she escaped to the police and returned back to Poland and was sentenced to prison for the crimes she committed. Malgaorzata ends her testimony with

Thank you that I could confess that I can go to the chapel to pray that I have whom to talk to. I also thank you for allowing me to talk to people who want to hear about it. Today I know I was doing bad and I do not want to go back to life like this – never!

Malgaorzata expresses a strong sense of gratitude in being able to confess something verbally and to speak with others who listened. She also strongly states that the life she had is now behind her and that she will embrace this new life that is not considered 'bad'.

### **Testimony two: Dorota**

This female survivor in her late thirties shares how her father killed himself when she was a child and in her teenage years, she started to take drugs. The drugs did not completely satisfy her and she wanted to be important, which led to finding a boyfriend and hanging out in the casino. After about a year she experienced a financial crisis and her boyfriend helped her get a job abroad in western Europe where she would earn significantly more money. She took the job abroad and after two weeks all her personal documents and belongings were taken away from her. She had been deceived and was now trapped in slavery. After six months she escaped, but was caught and on multiple occasions experienced brutal beatings. Finally, she escaped to a Catholic women's shelter in Poland and is grateful that her life has drastically changed.

I have invited the Lord Jesus into my life and am slowly becoming a happy woman. I rebuilt my relationship with loved ones. This is just the beginning and there is a lot ahead of me. Please remember me in your prayers to God, for God to protect me.

She concludes with stating that she will be forever grateful for what the staff at the shelter has done for her because it has shown her what is of value in life.

This testimony proclaims a joy that comes with the start of something new. Dorota clearly expresses how the transformation of inviting the Lord Jesus into her life has a positive impact and how the staff at this Catholic Polish shelter were there for her in a time of change.

### **Testimony three: Zofia**

After struggling to earn enough income in Poland for herself and her daughter, this female survivor, now in her thirties, decided to take a job abroad. After arriving in western Europe, the job circumstances were tremendously different than she expected. She worked in prostitution and had to sell her body to men in order to make enough money to survive. Not being highly educated limited her job opportunities, especially abroad. Repeatedly selling her body took its toll on her emotionally, and eventually, she was able to attend college courses, which allowed her to begin another occupation. She speaks about her stance on God and how people in Poland today view God.

Yes, I strongly believe in God. I mean, I do not attend mass every Sunday, but I kneel in my room when I am alone at home. You know, the young generation in Poland believes less in God than the older generation which is really too bad.

Zofia expresses the importance of communicating with God in private and that her reliance on God is of value.

Second hand testimonial dialogue was encountered mostly in an interview with a Christian anti-trafficking organization in Poland. This organization runs an aftercare home for Polish survivors of trafficking. The interviewee of this program expressed how each individual has their own set of life experiences, thus, as a whole, generalizations about Polish women cannot be made (Bara 2017). During this same interview, the interviewee shared her experiences working closely with survivors of trafficking. One woman, she had worked with mentioned:

I believed in God, but I left him there when they were breaking me.

The director shared that there is a brokenness in that comment. I asked if she had witnessed women embittered or disappointed with God, she replied:

We never have that conversation. I've never seen anger, but I've seen resistance. Most women do not get to the point of wondering where God was when a catastrophe occurred, but maybe being angry at someone is a part of relationship. How can you be angry at someone you do not believe in or have a relationship with? (Bara 2017)

This organization also shared encounters with women who did not believe in God.

### Testimony reflections

When analyzing these testimonies there are clear correlations between the survivor and God. Each testimony acknowledged God as important and valuable in some shape or form. For example, testimony number one mentioned praying to God as meaningful and testimony number three mentioned a habitual personal prayer life at home, a regular conversation or communion with God as a form of coping. Testimony number two asks her readers to pray for her because she believes God will hear their prayers of protection. This religious coping emphasizes dependence on the supernatural power of God, which relies on the prayers/pleas of others to the ultimate authority. Testimony one valued confession, thus the act of verbally admitting what one has done wrong and reconciling with the fact that the divine God considers one forgiven or made new. The priest to whom she confesses has a divine connection, which releases her from an old life or shameful act. This religious coping mechanism of sharing, confessing, and/or releasing to God was of high value for all of these Polish women. Esteeming God to this level reveals a trust in something beyond themselves, something redeemable. It also reveals a desire for change or a longing for connection.

Secondly, two of the testimonies express a gratitude for the kindness of those who assisted them when they were in need. What others did for them, and the love that was extended, touched the victims deeply and was an integral part in their process of change. The fact that someone else began to love or help them while they were in such a state proclaimed their life as valuable. Employees at the shelter believed in the victim.

Thirdly, all three testimonies mention a new life after their trafficking situation. There is a direct correlation with trauma coping and a new life. With all three testimonies, their new life helped them to cope with the trauma. Testimony one desires to stay in this 'new life' and not go back to their old life. Testimony two mentions being changed by a new life in Jesus Christ, which is gradually making her happier. Now is the time when she can begin to

'build up' her new life, cope with her past, and reconcile past relationships. Testimony three speaks about the change of occupation and how that was positive, especially emotionally. The ability to cope in a new career has been meaningful.

These concepts of one's new identity, the love that was bestowed upon a victim, and the power of amnesty regarding one's narrative are thematic in Polish female survivors of sex trafficking testimonies.

## Theological analysis

### *Praxis of forgiveness*

Forgiveness has become a popular topic in contemporary psychology, the psychology of religion, and practical/empirical theology. Clinicians and pastoral counselors have given much attention to the potential therapeutic benefits of forgiveness, but it only recently has been recognized as an important coping mechanism in dealing with sex trafficking. Nevertheless, the religious and psychological dimensions of forgiveness are viewed as vital to personal, interpersonal, and social well-being (Shults and Sandage 2003, 97). Survivors of sex trafficking have been victims of their pimp's process to 'break them' psychologically, emotionally, mentally and spiritually. We learned that pimps completely 'succeed' when a victim crosses her own moral values and begins to loathe herself (Hopper and Hidalgo 2006, 200). Most Polish prostitutes hold a negative self-perspective toward their occupation (Bianchi, Popper, and Luksík 2007, 75), and Polish society projects a *spoiled* 'perceived' identity onto these women. Therefore, we can presume, that first redefining their personal self-image is of importance. Finding peace with oneself must begin with loving oneself. Jeanron (2010, 253) rightly claims: '[L]ove is praxis, not an object of belief or a principle of reason. Love requires engagement and self-investment. Peace requires the acts of forgiveness demanded by love.' However, the barriers that Polish survivors of sex trafficking need to overcome to reach this love are insurmountable because it is rooted in their contextual upbringing. When asking a Polish psychotherapist who works exclusively with Polish survivors of sex trafficking if women forgive themselves, she replied:

It is possible, but the body and mind are in the process of regenerating and they cannot verbalize everything. They have their 'inner world' and we cannot always go there with them. But sometimes we see that change in a person. It's a long-term process to get on your feet again. Trust is an important part. (Jankiewicz 2017)

At the Catholic Polish shelter, forgiveness seminars are organized by local nuns and this has proven to have an enormous effect on the women. It allows them to find their inner strength because their self-esteem has been shattered (Jankiewicz 2017). This is vital for trauma victims because inner strength is a central part of their restoration process which reclaims personal life value. For a large percentage of Polish women, God plays a role in their life and in determining one's self-esteem. How God views her and if God loves her could be paramount to her identity. One shelter manager stated: 'If she cares about God, then there will be shame' (Bara 2017). At the Catholic Polish shelter, the nuns are always available to speak about religious matters, and a priest drops by at least once a week for anyone who desires to confess (Orsi 2017). Because sex survivors of trafficking have been broken down spiritually, restoring trust in God

and recovering from shame can be a fundamental part of one's coping process. The forgiveness of oneself and forgiveness toward God is a cry for renewal. The absorption of the injury, the pain, and the trauma is a personal sacrifice that 'implies the desire for a new and creative relationship for transcendence and transformation of the other – and of my own self' (Jeanrond 2010, 253). The one who chooses to forgive takes a risk yet does it for transformation's sake.

## Praxis of love

After conducting the qualitative research, it was noticeable to observe within this research context, that the correlation between forgiveness and love is mutual. These concepts are relational. Forgiveness transforms the individual as well as others, which happens in love. Once an individual has reached a personal capacity to love themselves, by forgiving themselves and perhaps God, they are then open to the continuation of love's praxis.

Taking love as our starting point frees our horizon for the transformation. It allows us to live more fully in the larger network of interconnected relations. The praxis of love will provide us with appropriate criteria for assessing our failures and those of our ancestors, while it will, at the same time, relocate us in the presence of God's forgiveness, reconciliation, transformation and new creation in the Body of Christ. (Jeanrond 2010, 245)

Living in those 'interconnected relations' is a goal that interviewees in Poland strive to attain – creating an environment of healing that breeds love and which gently reveals one's personal shortcomings. At one shelter that where interviews were conducted, this was a core value:

We strive to show God's love through us. Also showing tough love and setting boundaries with the women is essential. That way, you also teach them that love forgives. We try to create that environment. It is us working together, whether it is at dance class or speaking with a therapist, all factors help her to deal with her emotions. Thus, creating that environment awakens something healing. (Bara 2017)

This kind of community that loves and forgives is comforting. In such a loving community, one gains the power to forgive. Out of a desire to learn, respect and understand each other's truth subjectively, we allow love the best opportunity to assess one another's shortcomings. Forgiveness looks beyond one's pain and at the same time does not condone the evil that was conducted (Jeanrond 2010, 253). In what may appear as a paradox: forgiveness empowers the individual personally (du Bois and du Bois-Pedain 2009, 228). Forgiveness is a choice that empowers and it must remain a personal decision. For survivors of trafficking to fully thrive, they must be given full freedom. Freedom to choose when, where, and how to testify. This is critical because of the oppression they experienced. Freedom to choose to speak, or not speak about God, or decisions regarding forgiveness must be motivated by love – the freedom to love one's self, even when they make a decision that is contrary. This is the kind of freedom survivors of trafficking need. The freedom to be honest and raw with where one is at regardless of one's beliefs is where love covers the decisions one has in freedom.

Yet in Jeanrond's book *Theology of Love*, he states that such a love is not built upon the genuine love for one another, moreover, it is 'rallying around our condition that binds believers together' (2010, 61). This common condition is the foundation of the community.

Two of three testimonies emphasize deep gratitude for those who listened to their stories and for those who showed them love, for those who allowed them to confess. This form of vulnerable love occurs when love longs for community with one another, to join together in a relationship – a common body. Joining in community is a coping mechanism for trauma, and sharing one's burdens with one they can trust, transforms (Schuster 2001). Love transforms in a vulnerable space of understanding and lightens up one another's strains. The practices of 'recognizing God's image in the other and re-inviting the other into the network of loving relationships are dramatic and transformative actions notwithstanding the other's factual response to these actions' (Jeanrond 2010, 253). This occurs when one decides to believe one's testimony based on their character, a character desiring healing and transformation that has been traumatized by such an undignified sexual act (s). This desperation for healing reveals her 'plea for desired exemption' (Ricoeur 1979, 146) because her traumatic experience was a matter of life and death. The faith one entrusts in her 'plea for desired exemption' changes her narrative to a renewed narrative.

### New narrative

A narrative shared in the context of love, trust, and a *shared understanding of reality* transforms one into new life. This is a vital part of the lived experience. Through the recognition of one's testimony by choosing love, something somatic occurs and trauma victims regain a sense of safety and control (Walsh 2017, 91). A new story is told, a new identity is embraced. The knowledge of one's identity gives the confidence needed to face the world outside that projects its culture upon the woman who has been sex trafficked. The central element to this new identity is peace, and it is through forgiveness and love that peace is made possible. The confirmation of that testifier's *true identity* is on display for others to witness and this reigns in peace. As we have learned, the peace with oneself occurs in some of these Polish aftercare shelters for sex trafficking survivors. A few of the Polish aftercare shelters intentionally create the atmosphere of 'forgiving love' so that survivors can grow into this renewed identity.

For as long as Polish culture projects a negative identity onto sex workers and lacks awareness for the sex trafficking that occurs, survivors of sex trafficking on a societal level will struggle with shame management. This new narrative is accepted in the realm of love where there is the *shared understanding of reality*. However, the *place in society* that sex workers receive is regarded as little to no respect (Bartkowski 2017). Therefore, we can take Goffman's shame management recommendation by isolating the sex-trafficked female from Polish society and migrate her to another culture where sex work is respected with little to no stigmatization (Goffman 1974, 19). Or, by leaving the sex industry and reconstructing an entirely new identity (in Poland) with a new occupation, the sex-trafficked female also could create another route to remove herself from the stigmatization. For the latter option, this may present continuous challenges as there is now a 'former' *spoiled identity* that was *stigmatized* and members of society may still lack respect for her, even though she upholds a new occupation and new identity. In this latter scenario, which based on the research conducted we predict would be the case in Polish society, a deviation from the norm is a potential coping mechanism. In Polish society, the values of the Christ are culturally welcomed and the current political party in power values Catholicism (A.C. 2017). Therefore, one could presume that culturally

the story of Christ's redemption in a former sex-trafficked female's life could be a testimony that the Polish society may accept as not 'stigmatized' but redeemed. Goffman's (1974, 130) deviation theory in practice explains:

The deviator can afford to remain attached to the norm because others are careful to respect his secret, pass lightly over its disclosure ... these others, in turn, can afford to extend this tactfulness because the *stigmatized* will voluntarily refrain from pushing claims for acceptance much past the point *normal* find comfortable.

However, that is not case due to the 'whore' to the 'Martha-Mary' image that society projects on women. Moreover, in an interview with a Polish anti-trafficking expert, the conversation arose surrounding how people would respond if a survivor were to share her testimony publicly for the sake of raising awareness. The interviewee strongly believed that Polish women sharing their identity as a former prostitute could even be dangerous for them (Bartkowski 2017). This reveals that the adversity and disgrace that society feels towards sex workers is deeply rooted. Is there a way to gain the respect of society and reclaim psychological integrity? It may or may not be possible to gain society's respect but understanding how to cope in the Polish context with battered psychological integrity and living fully into one's renewed narrative are truths to be claimed.

I have invited the Lord Jesus into my life and am slowly becoming a happy woman. I rebuilt my relationship with loved ones. This is just the beginning and there is a lot ahead of me. (Dorota)

This is the lived religion experience of the Polish sex-trafficked women: the rebuilding of a new life, living fully into the new narrative through the love that was received, and restoring what the trafficker broke down. This restoration comes from love: '... the praxis of love is the most intimate way to respect and to get to know the beloved other and the radical other, God' (Jeanrond 2010, 241). Love declares a renewed narrative to one that has been deceived.

### Suggested further research

Even though this article is a limited programmatic proposal for the empirical analysis of female victims of sex trafficking, some suggestions can be made for further research:

- (1) The findings of this study may be tested and elaborated in different samples with a larger population;
- (2) This study could be replicated in terms of methodology: other samples could be studied in a similar qualitative manner, paying attention to the cultural differences among the victims of sex trafficking.
- (3) Sex trafficking could be studied in other faith traditions as well;
- (4) Insights from this study by more fully examining the notion of testimony as a legitimate theological mode;
- (5) Male victims of sex trafficking;
- (6) The role of spiritual caregivers and the church in this post trauma setting.

Our proposals for further study, therefore, are suggestive and not definite. While this study contributes to the field by suggesting some possible links between lived religion,

narrative reconstruction, religious coping, and sex trafficking, much future work needs to be pursued in order to understand the mechanism more clearly.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

## Notes on contributors

**Farah Deventer-Noordeloos** received her M.A. degree in Theology and Religious Studies: Peace, Trauma and Religion from the Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam and works for an international anti-human trafficking organization.

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