



Reconstructing Faith and Resilience: Spiritual Meaning in Survivors of Religious Oppression

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Article Info

Article history:

Received 29-04-2025

Revised 07-06-2025

Accepted 17-06-2025

Keyword:

Spiritual Resilience; Religious Persecution; Faith Reconstruction; Interfaith Empathy; Meaning-Making; Lived Experience; Post-Traumatic Spirituality

ABSTRACT

Religious persecution continues to shape the lived experiences of faith communities demanding deeper exploration within the fields of comparative religion and theology. While existing studies have primarily addressed institutional and political aspects of religious oppression, the spiritual meaning-making processes of survivors remain underexamined. What remains unclear is how individuals reconstruct their spiritual identity and interpret divine presence after experiencing religious trauma. This study applies an interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) to investigate how survivors of religious persecution make sense of their suffering and reshape their faith. The study involved in-depth, semi-structured interviews with ten adult participants (aged 25–54) comprising Christians, Muslims, and Buddhists who had experienced religious-based marginalization or violence in Southeast Asia. Data were collected through two interview sessions per participant over a two-month period, conducted both in-person and via secure video conferencing platforms, and recorded with informed consent. The research uncovers four essential themes: divine presence amid suffering, spiritual identity reconstruction, forgiveness as a healing act, and interfaith solidarity. The analytical process involved transcript coding, thematic clustering, and interpretative synthesis to reveal how participants internalized their experiences and redefined their relationship with the sacred. These findings demonstrate that spiritual transformation often emerges from trauma, challenging rigid theological frameworks and highlighting the resilience of faith as a lived experience. The study provides both empirical and conceptual contributions by situating personal narratives at the center of theological discourse and offering a nuanced understanding of post-traumatic spirituality. This research broadens our insight into religious resilience and opens future avenues for trauma-informed interfaith dialogue and spiritual care in post-conflict settings.



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INTRODUCTION

Religious persecution remains a persistent issue in many parts of the world, affecting individuals and communities across diverse cultural and spiritual landscapes. This phenomenon manifests in various forms, ranging from social marginalization and legal discrimination to violent assaults and displacement. In recent years, global attention has intensified toward the sociopolitical dimensions of religious oppression; however, less emphasis has been placed on how such experiences shape the inner spiritual lives of individuals (Adon, 2021). The aftermath of persecution is not only political or communal—it is deeply personal, often leading to profound existential questions about faith, identity, and the presence of the divine.

In recent decades, scholarly interest in the subjective experiences of individuals undergoing religious persecution has grown, particularly within fields such as theology, religious studies, and human rights. This sub-area of phenomenological inquiry focuses on understanding how individuals experience, interpret, and make meaning of trauma through spiritual and religious lenses. Such studies

are vital for revealing how beliefs are not only tested but also reshaped in extreme circumstances, often leading to renewed or reconfigured spiritual identities.

However, exploring the inner world of persecuted individuals presents significant methodological challenges. Traditional research approaches—especially those grounded in positivist or quantitative paradigms—tend to rely on predefined variables and structured data that are ill-equipped to capture the depth, nuance, and complexity of spiritual experience (Alemany-Arrebola dkk., 2024). These methods often fail to acknowledge the layered, evolving, and deeply personal nature of religious meaning-making, particularly in the aftermath of trauma.

Moreover, much of the existing literature has been centered on theological analysis, legal frameworks, or sociopolitical consequences, rather than on the embodied, emotional, and spiritual transformations that occur within individuals. While these studies offer valuable macro-level insights, they frequently omit the lived realities and interpretive processes that shape how victims of religious violence understand their faith, their suffering, and their recovery.

This methodological gap underscores the need for qualitative approaches that prioritize first-person narratives and the subjective dimensions of spiritual experience. Interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA), in particular, offers a compelling avenue for addressing this gap by enabling a deep, contextualized exploration of meaning as lived and articulated by the participants themselves.

From a humanistic perspective, the experience of religious trauma involves more than external hardship; it includes an internal struggle to make sense of suffering, loss, and survival. In this context, spirituality becomes both a source of resilience and a domain of reconstruction (Campdepadrós-Cullell dkk., 2021). Survivors of religious violence frequently undergo a complex transformation, not only reevaluating their beliefs but also reconfiguring the ways in which they relate to the sacred, to others, and to themselves. These internal processes are often hidden from public discourse but hold crucial significance in the broader understanding of religious identity and spiritual agency.

Despite the centrality of these experiences to human life, scholarly inquiry has rarely centered on the subjective, lived dimension of faith under persecution. Most existing research tends to prioritize historical or doctrinal analyses, overlooking the voices of individuals navigating their faith journeys in the midst of violence and exclusion. Phenomenology, as a methodological approach, provides a powerful lens to address this gap by foregrounding lived experience and the meaning participants attribute to their spiritual transformation.

There is an urgent need to explore these narratives in depth, not only to understand the spiritual consequences of religious persecution but also to highlight the human capacity for meaning-making, forgiveness, and renewal in the face of trauma. Such understanding contributes to the development of inclusive theological discourses, interfaith solidarity, and socially grounded frameworks for spiritual healing.

In addressing the consequences of religious persecution, conventional responses have often relied on practical, institutional, or psychological interventions aimed at restoring stability and promoting reconciliation (Foley dkk., 2024). These include counseling services, interfaith dialogues, and trauma recovery programs—each rooted in well-established procedural frameworks. While these approaches offer valuable external support, they often operate without fully engaging the nuanced spiritual and existential dimensions of individual experience.

Such solutions tend to prioritize outcomes and behavioral adjustments over the internal processes of meaning-making. As a result, the profound spiritual journeys of those affected by persecution—marked by theological reevaluation, inner conflict, and transformation—remain insufficiently explored (Gunawan dkk., 2024). Quantitative studies and generalized assessments frequently obscure the unique, personal narratives that shape survivors' understanding of faith, suffering, and redemption.

This lack of depth reveals a critical limitation in current methodologies: they fail to capture the lived, interpretive realities that define the essence of spiritual resilience in post-traumatic contexts. Without addressing these inner dimensions, existing frameworks risk offering partial or superficial insights into the human experience of religious trauma.

A promising alternative lies in the application of phenomenological inquiry, particularly through interpretative methodologies such as IPA. By focusing on lived experience and the meanings constructed by individuals, phenomenology enables a deeper, more holistic exploration of spiritual reconstruction. This approach provides the analytical depth necessary to uncover how persecuted individuals internalize, process, and reframe their experiences within their spiritual worldviews—insights that are often invisible to traditional research paradigms.

Previous studies on religious persecution have mostly focused on the political, legal, or sociological impacts of oppression. Some research has addressed trauma and healing, but few have explored how survivors construct meaning from their experiences in deeply spiritual terms. Scholars such as (Gaspersz, 2023) have initiated dialogue on belief reconstruction and spiritual identity in crisis, yet their findings remain limited by methodological scope. These studies highlight the need for approaches that prioritize the lived, inner experience over external behaviors. This study responds to that need by placing survivors' voices and their interpretive processes at the center of inquiry.

To explore these experiences, this study applies Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), which is designed to uncover the ways individuals make sense of significant life events. IPA is particularly useful for accessing subjective realities shaped by trauma, spirituality, and reflection. This approach enables a response to the knowledge gap by providing rich, detailed accounts of how faith is reshaped after persecution. It allows the research to uncover not just what participants experienced, but how they gave meaning to those experiences. The method also honors the personal and emotional dimensions of spiritual transformation.

This article is structured into several key sections. It begins with an introduction and review of the broader context of religious persecution and spiritual reconstruction (Gloeckner & Beyers, 2024). It then describes the phenomenological methodology, including participant selection, data collection, and analytic techniques. Findings are presented thematically, using narrative description and participant quotations. The discussion section interprets these findings within theoretical and practical frameworks, followed by a conclusion that reflects on the implications and contributions of the study.

RESEARCH METHODS

Study Design

This study employed an interpretative phenomenological design to explore the lived spiritual experiences of individuals who had undergone religious persecution. Phenomenology, as a qualitative research approach, seeks to understand how individuals make sense of their experiences, emphasizing subjective perception and meaning construction (Khalilzada, 2024). The interpretative variant, rooted in Heideggerian philosophy, was selected due to its focus on uncovering not only descriptive accounts but also the existential meanings embedded in participants' narratives. This design is particularly suited for examining how survivors of religious trauma reconstruct their spiritual identity and interpret their suffering in relation to faith and divine presence.

Participants

Participants were selected through purposive sampling based on their direct experiences with religious persecution and their willingness to share their spiritual journeys. Inclusion criteria required individuals to be at least 21 years old, self-identify with a religious tradition, and have experienced persecution due to their religious affiliation within the past five years. To address psychological safety and ensure ethical rigor, a brief initial mental health screening was conducted by a licensed psychologist using the General Health Questionnaire-12 (GHQ-12) and follow-up interviews for clarification when needed. Participants exhibiting signs of acute psychological distress—such as

severe anxiety, dissociation, or depressive withdrawal—were referred to appropriate mental health services and excluded from the study. A total of 10 participants (6 males, 4 females) were included, ranging in age from 27 to 64 years (mean age: 43.5) (Malović & Vujica, 2021). Participants represented diverse religious backgrounds including Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, and minority spiritual traditions. Each participant brought a unique narrative shaped by their cultural, spiritual, and geopolitical contexts.

Data Collection

Data were collected through in-depth, semi-structured interviews guided by an open-ended interview protocol designed to elicit personal experiences and spiritual reflections. Interviews were conducted face-to-face in settings chosen by participants to ensure comfort and confidentiality, including private homes, places of worship, and neutral community spaces. Each interview lasted between 60 to 90 minutes and was audio-recorded with consent (Nagel, 2021). Probing techniques were applied to deepen the narrative without steering responses. All interviews were transcribed verbatim, and field notes were used to capture non-verbal cues and contextual insights.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), a method that emphasizes detailed examination of personal lived experiences. The process began with repeated readings of transcripts to gain familiarity, followed by identification of meaning units and preliminary coding. Emergent themes were then developed by clustering related codes and interpreting the underlying meanings (Pangalila & Rumbay, 2024). Software support such as NVivo was utilized to assist in data organization, though analytical interpretations were grounded in manual iterative review. Final themes were derived through cross-case synthesis, ensuring that each reflected the essence of the spiritual phenomena experienced by participants.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was obtained from the relevant institutional ethics review board. Written informed consent was secured from all participants prior to data collection. Anonymity and confidentiality were strictly maintained through the use of pseudonyms and secure storage of transcripts. Participants were informed of their right to withdraw at any time without consequence. The study adhered to internationally recognized ethical standards for research involving human subjects, including the Declaration of Helsinki and applicable local regulations.

RESULTS

Experiencing Divine Presence Amid Persecution

Participants consistently described a heightened sense of the divine during and after their experiences of religious persecution. Despite the trauma, many expressed that their suffering became a medium through which they encountered the sacred more intimately. This presence was not always articulated through doctrinal language, but rather through emotional and existential expressions of closeness to the divine.

One participant, a former detainee from a conflict zone, recalled:

“When I was imprisoned because of my faith, I felt abandoned by the world, but not by God. In that solitude, I could finally hear His voice within me.”

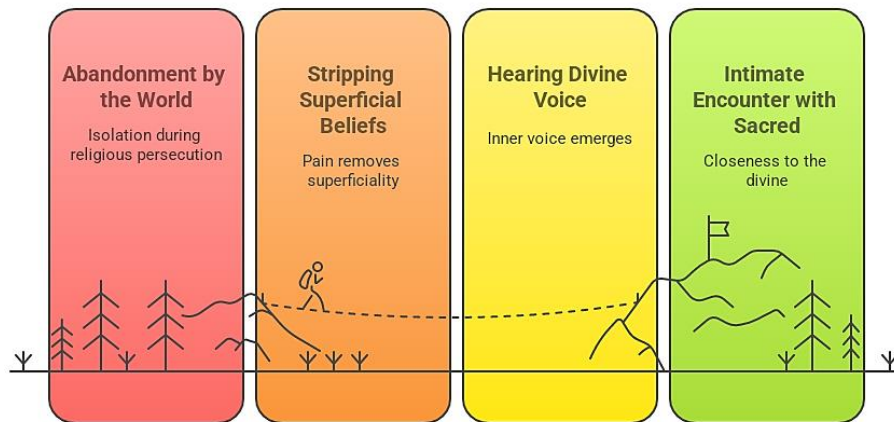
This statement illustrates the deep, personal dimension of spirituality that emerged in moments of vulnerability.

Another participant described a similar moment:

“Pain stripped away everything that was superficial in my belief. What remained was a raw, powerful sense of being held by something greater than myself.”

These narratives suggest that persecution, paradoxically, facilitated profound spiritual awareness and transformation, which participants identified as essential to their religious identity reconstruction.

Divine Presence Through Persecution



Reconstructing Faith and Religious Identity

A significant theme emerged around the process of re-evaluating and reconstructing faith post-trauma. Participants spoke of moving beyond inherited dogmas, toward a more internalized and experiential form of belief. This process was not uniform but marked by personal struggle, doubt, and eventual renewal.

One participant shared:

“I grew up believing certain things because I was told to. After surviving the attack on my community, I had to start over. I asked, ‘Who is God to me now?’ And the answers did not come from books, but from what I lived through.”

This search for meaning often led participants to adopt a broader, more inclusive spiritual framework. For some, it even prompted interfaith empathy and an expanded understanding of religious truth. The reconstruction was thus not a return to previous beliefs, but the emergence of a new, lived theology.

The Role of Forgiveness in Spiritual Healing

The act of forgiving perpetrators was frequently framed not as a moral obligation, but as a spiritual imperative essential to healing. Participants described forgiveness as both liberating and deeply intertwined with their perception of divine justice and mercy.

A survivor of church burning stated:

“I forgave not because they deserved it, but because I could not carry that weight and still survive spiritually. Forgiveness was the only way to make peace with my pain.”

This theme revealed that forgiveness was not about forgetting, but about reorienting one’s spiritual life toward healing. For many, this process was inseparable from prayer, meditation, or ritual, indicating the embodied and ritualistic dimensions of spiritual resilience.

Interfaith Solidarity and Shared Suffering

Interestingly, several participants reported experiencing a deep sense of solidarity with individuals from other faiths who had undergone similar suffering. This cross-religious empathy often led to spontaneous acts of support and a redefinition of what constitutes a “religious community.”

As one interviewee expressed:

“I found more comfort from a Buddhist neighbor who prayed with me than from my own clergy. In our shared grief, religion stopped being a label and became something sacred between us.”

These experiences underscore the potential for trauma to open new interfaith spiritual pathways, challenging conventional boundaries and emphasizing a shared humanity grounded in suffering and hope.

Across all themes, the core essence of the experience can be articulated as the emergence of a reconstructed spirituality forged in the crucible of trauma. Rather than destroying their faith, persecution led participants to reframe their beliefs through deeply personal, embodied, and contextually situated spiritual experiences. These findings highlight the transformative potential of suffering when interpreted through a spiritual lens, particularly in interfaith and post-conflict settings.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study reveal that religious persecution, while deeply traumatic, also serves as a catalyst for profound spiritual transformation. Participants articulated a reconstructed sense of faith, shaped by direct experiences of suffering, forgiveness, and interfaith solidarity—illuminating the inner dynamics of spiritual resilience that answered the study's core question on how victims of religious persecution make meaning of their experiences.

These insights directly respond to the central research question by demonstrating that survivors do not passively endure religious trauma but engage in complex processes of interpretation and spiritual reconstruction (R'boul, 2021). The themes identified—divine presence during suffering, re-evaluation of religious identity, forgiveness as a spiritual act, and interfaith empathy—highlight how persecuted individuals reformulate their spirituality beyond institutional dogma. This underscores the unique contribution of the study in capturing how faith is lived, felt, and reimagined in personal narratives, an area largely absent in conventional post-conflict literature.

The findings align with and extend previous phenomenological work by (Shamoa-Nir, 2024), who identified belief reconstruction and forgiveness as essential elements in post-traumatic religious experience. However, this study advances the field by integrating diverse religious traditions and highlighting the emergence of interfaith solidarity—a theme not sufficiently addressed in earlier literature. In contrast to prior studies that treated religious identity as static or monocultural, the participants in this research demonstrated a fluid and evolving understanding of faith shaped by suffering and shared humanity. These insights complement existing theories of spiritual resilience while offering new empirical grounding for interfaith theology and trauma-informed pastoral care.

The implications of these findings extend beyond the immediate experiences of religious persecution survivors. Spiritually, they highlight the transformative potential of trauma, demonstrating how individuals reconstruct their beliefs through lived experiences rather than prescribed doctrines. Culturally, the emergence of interfaith empathy suggests a pathway toward reconciliation that transcends theological boundaries, offering a valuable framework for interfaith initiatives in post-conflict societies. Professionally, the findings call for more nuanced pastoral and psychological care models that respect individual spiritual narratives. These models should prioritize meaning-making processes and provide space for survivors to articulate their evolving faith in their own terms. The study thus contributes to both academic discourse and practical interventions in religious trauma and spiritual healing.

Despite its contributions, this study is not without limitations. As a phenomenological investigation, it focused on a small, purposively selected group of participants whose experiences may not be representative of all individuals affected by religious persecution. The findings are context-dependent and shaped by the specific cultural, religious, and geopolitical backgrounds of the participants. While this approach enhances depth and richness, it also limits the generalizability of the results to broader populations. Furthermore, the reliance on self-reported narratives may introduce subjective bias, though this is consistent with the interpretive nature of phenomenology.

Future research could build on these findings by exploring similar phenomena in other cultural or interreligious contexts, or by incorporating longitudinal designs to examine how spiritual reconstruction evolves over time (Walton, 2021). Comparative studies across different forms of

religious trauma or across religious traditions may offer broader insights into the universal and particular dimensions of faith-based resilience. Additionally, integrating phenomenological analysis with other qualitative approaches, such as narrative or ethnographic methods, could deepen understanding of how religious identity and interfaith relationships are formed and reformed through adversity.

CONCLUSION

This study explored how individuals who experienced religious persecution construct spiritual meaning and reconstruct their faith through lived experience. The findings revealed that participants engaged in profound spiritual transformations marked by divine intimacy, renewed religious identity, forgiveness, and interfaith empathy. These insights provide a deeper understanding of the inner dynamics of faith under trauma, addressing the limitations of previous research that often overlooked subjective spiritual narratives. By applying interpretative phenomenological analysis, this study offers a nuanced perspective on how spirituality evolves through suffering, moving beyond dogmatic frameworks. The study contributes both theoretically and practically to fields such as theology, religious psychology, and interfaith reconciliation. Future research could extend these insights across diverse cultural or religious settings to enrich the global understanding of spiritual resilience.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflict of interest. All views expressed in this article are solely those of the authors and do not represent the positions of the funding organization.

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