

**The Perfect Scapegoat:
How the Human Trafficking Panic in American Christianity
Obfuscates Complicity in Sexual Violence and White Supremacy**

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Aaron is to offer the bull for his own sin offering to make atonement for himself and his household. Then he is to take the two goats and present them before the LORD at the entrance to the tent of meeting. He is to cast lots for the two goats—one lot for the LORD and the other for the scapegoat. Aaron shall bring the goat whose lot falls to the LORD and sacrifice it for a sin offering. But the goat chosen by lot as the scapegoat shall be presented alive before the LORD to be used for making atonement by sending it into the wilderness as a scapegoat.

-Leviticus 16:6-10, NIV

Introduction

The Hebrew word English speakers know as “scapegoat,” *‘ăzā’zēl*, is used only four times in three verses in Leviticus, and nowhere else in the Bible. Recording the ostensible words of God, the writer of Leviticus instructs that two goats should be presented before the Lord and that lots should be cast to determine their fate. One goat shall be sacrificed in a traditional manner, and the other shall be sent or released out into the wilderness “to be used for making atonement” (16:10, NIV), suggesting that in some way the goat symbolizes an absolution. Later, we are told that whoever is responsible for releasing the goat into the wilderness “must wash his clothes and bathe himself with water” (16:26, NIV), suggesting that the goat is in some way unclean, or capable of making someone else unclean. While the precise meaning of the Hebrew word for “scapegoat” has been the subject of much research and speculation, in popular imagination and culture a scapegoat has come over the years to mean, essentially, “someone who gets blamed for things,” usually things for which they are not actually culpable. However, my interest in this metaphor is not in its popular usage but in its more biblical roots. In a biblical sense, a scapegoat is a symbol—a spatial site of ire, anxiety, shame and even sin—a location onto which others’ anger and fear are projected. Once the scapegoat has been sent out into the wilderness, the impurities it represented are also gone, serving as a physical representation of the absolution of the senders.

The panic around the phenomenon of human trafficking has, in many ways in recent years, functioned as just such a scapegoat for American Christians. The current human trafficking panic as it exists in the United States serves as a scapegoat by giving Christians of all varieties an avenue to obfuscate their own responsibility for and complicity in both intra-communal sexual violence and ongoing white supremacy. This is made possible by two primary and integrally related rhetorical moves that frame the conversation around trafficking, both of which I will explore in greater detail: 1) over-representing human trafficking as sex trafficking and 2) over-representing the victims of trafficking as women and young girls. As I will demonstrate, it is extremely difficult to obtain reliable data and statistics about the nature, frequency and scope of the various activities that are lumped together under the umbrella of the word “human trafficking,” and which activities should or should not fall under that umbrella has also been the subject of impassioned debate and disagreement among the professional groups and organizations that work on this issue. For the purposes of this paper when I use the phrase “human trafficking” I am speaking about forced or coerced labor of any kind (including sexual) in a more general sense, and I will use “sex trafficking” or “labor trafficking” when I am referring to more specific subsets of human trafficking.

I would also like to say a bit about the word “panic.” Elizabeth Bernstein in her book *Brokered Subjects: Sex, Trafficking, and the Politics of Freedom* objects to the use of the word “panic” to describe the modern state of affairs with regards to human trafficking. She writes that “the explanatory trope of trafficking as but the latest in a series of recurrent ‘sex panics’ is... inadequate for capturing the sociological and historical specificity of current discursive regimes”¹ due to the way that that both feminists and conservative evangelical Christians have

¹ Elizabeth Bernstein, *Brokered Subjects: Sex, Trafficking, and the Politics of Freedom*, First edition (Chicago ; London: University of Chicago Press, 2019), 13.

rallied together around the cause of ending human trafficking in a historically novel way—and I agree with her that the alliance between these groups (especially on an issue ostensibly related to sexuality, where conservative Christians and feminists often find themselves on either end of an oppositional binary) is both notable and seemingly unlikely, and deserves further scrutiny. After all, as recently as January 2022, the official Instagram page for the Me Too Movement—hardly a bastion of conservative Christian ideology—shared a series of graphics about human trafficking with a referral to the U.S. National Human Trafficking Hotline,² which is operated by the non-profit organization Polaris, whose statistics on human trafficking have been criticized as inaccurate and unreliable and which I will discuss in further detail in the section on statistics. If the issues feminists are concerned about and the issues conservative Christians are concerned about were plotted on a Venn diagram, human trafficking may be one of the only issues to appear in the intersection in the middle. However, I choose nonetheless to engage with the word “panic,” for several reasons.

Crucially, the word “panic” draws upon a history of panics that, sexual or otherwise, often involved either the vast overinflation of an existing phenomenon or the complete fabrication of phenomena that never actually occurred. The Canadian true crime podcast *Uncover: Satanic Panic*³ (season six of the series) illustrates this well. The podcast details a horrifying sexual panic that took place in the 1990s in the small Canadian town of Martensville, Saskatchewan, known as the “Martensville Nightmare.” During this panic, dozens of children connected to a particular in-home daycare reported to parents and law enforcement that they had been taken to a house by adults, been forced to eat and drink the blood of animals and other

² @metoomvmt. “January is human trafficking awareness month.” *Instagram*, January 11, 2022, accessed April 3, 2022. https://www.instagram.com/p/CYnAevbOY4Q/?utm_medium=copy_link

³ Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, “Uncover,” *Satanic Panic*, February 2020, <https://www.cbc.ca/listen/cbc-podcasts/187-uncover>.

children, seen other children dismembered and murdered, and been made to participate in other violent and sexual so-called “Satanic” rituals. Later, after vigorous investigation, it was found that the couple who ran the daycare did have an older son who, in a one-on-one and non-ritual setting, had molested several of the children who came to the daycare. But evidence for the allegations of terrifying “Satanic” rituals and child mutilation was never able to be procured; in fact, it was eventually revealed that parents and police officers had repeatedly coaxed confessions out of children with promises of candy and other rewards.

I find the language of “panic” to be appropriate with regard to human trafficking because, as in Martensville, there is often a real and tragic truth beneath the inflated statistics and rumors. I also find the language of “panic” appropriate both because of the way it calls to mind a sense of emotional reactivity over against reliance on facts, and also because of the way that many claims and statistics about the nature of the problem are unclear, competing, and at times even contradictory. As Michael Hobbes, journalist and former co-host of the *You’re Wrong About* podcast said in the series’ first episode about human trafficking, “A big sign of a moral panic to me is when you hold all of these contradictory ideas at once.”⁴ The problem of human trafficking factually *is* difficult to talk about because the claims about it made by many self-professed experts and activists are so complicated, ambiguous, and in certain instances opposed to each other that it makes the head spin to attempt to begin to separate the threads of reason and logic from the threads of fear, anxiety, and alarmism.

It is to these various claims that I will turn next, but it is important to note before I do so that I approach this conversation not as a politician or a historian but as a *theologian*. It is for this reason that I find the metaphor of the scapegoat in the biblical sense so powerful to describe the

⁴ Sarah Marshall and Michael Hobbes, “Human Trafficking,” *You’re Wrong About*, accessed November 3, 2021, <https://www.buzzsprout.com/1112270/3883928-human-trafficking>.

phenomenon of the panic of human trafficking as it exists in the United States. Human trafficking—rhetorically constructed as it so commonly is, as sexual exploitation of women and young girls—is an attractive container for the fears and anxieties around sex—and race—that have characterized American Christianity. When human trafficking is constructed primarily as sexual exploitation of women and young girls (and often women and young girls of color), then the effort to “end human trafficking” can become a symbol of absolution for the sexual and racial sins of the past and present. In a religion where women and girls are already often presented as gatekeepers for the sexual morality of men and “‘immodestly’ dressed women are sometimes described as being ‘stumbling blocks’ for men, leading them into temptation and a multitude of sins,”⁵ the specific confluence of issues in the human trafficking panic creates an atmosphere where churches, denominations, non-profit organizations and individual activists can feel as though the problem is “out there” somewhere and they are doing everything they can to solve it—even though, as the #MeToo and this very author’s own #ChurchToo⁶ movements have adeptly shown, sexual violence and exploitation are running rampant in American churches and parachurch ministries of all denominations and political persuasions. I am not making a claim that this is what *‘āzā’zēl* means or was meant by the author of Leviticus to be used to represent—but I am, in an intentional and shameless way, appropriating the concept of the scapegoat to illustrate the ways that the current human trafficking panic has been utilized as an atonement-making cover for the sexual violence and white supremacy that many now think of when they think of “the church.” My aim is not necessarily to rehabilitate the church’s reputation, but rather

⁵ David Futrelle, “Opinion | Robert Aaron Long Apparently Thought He Was the Victim of His Own Desire. He’s Not Alone.,” *Washington Post*, accessed April 2, 2022, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2021/03/18/robert-aaron-long-apparently-thought-he-was-victim-his-own-desire-hes-not-alone/>.

⁶ “#ChurchToo Urges Twitter Users to Address Abuse at Church,” *Time*, November 22, 2017, <https://time.com/5034546/me-too-church-too-sexual-abuse/>.

to encourage anyone who reads this to think critically about the way these concepts are operating in our communities—mainly for the sake of actual victims of human trafficking, who are in desperate need of resources and support that the church may be able to offer if it is willing to center those victims in its approach.

Human Trafficking by the Numbers

“Statistics are unstable and unreliable political constructions—sometimes even moral fantasies—that shift the ground beneath our feet before it is possible to gain sure footing. At best, numbers can be generally indicative. But they never constitute a stable foundation, nor should they be treated as such.” -Yvonne Zimmerman, *Other Dreams of Freedom*⁷

As I previously alluded to, human trafficking is a notoriously difficult phenomenon both to define and to track accurately, and attempts to obtain reliable numbers are fraught with practical and ethical concerns. There are many reasons for this, but one of the most significant is that there is not a clear and widely shared definition of what human trafficking even *is*. Consider briefly some of the available claims about the extent and scope of human trafficking, in some cases specifically referred to as sex trafficking and in some cases referred to as “modern slavery,” a designation which will be unpacked at length in a later section of this paper:

- “27 million people are trafficked worldwide each year. Half of these are children.”⁸
- “In 2020, 10,583 situations of human trafficking were reported to the U.S. National Human Trafficking Hotline involving 16,658 individual victims.”⁹
- “There are more people enslaved today than any other time in history.”¹⁰
- “There are hundreds of thousands, and potentially over a million, victims trapped in the world of sex trafficking in the United States.”¹¹
- “More than two million children are exploited in the worldwide commercial sex industry.”¹²

⁷ Yvonne C. Zimmerman, *Other Dreams of Freedom: Religion, Sex, and Human Trafficking*, 1st edition (Oxford ; New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 5.

⁸ Theresa Flores, *The Slave Across the Street* (Boise, ID: Ampelton Publishing, 2010), 149.

⁹ “Myths, Facts, and Statistics | Polaris,” November 7, 2018, <https://polarisproject.org/myths-facts-and-statistics/>.

¹⁰ “Human Trafficking | A21,” accessed February 13, 2022, <https://www.a21.org//content/human-trafficking/gqe0rc>.

¹¹ “The Problem,” *USIAHT - The U.S. Institute Against Human Trafficking* (blog), accessed April 3, 2022, <https://usiaht.org/the-problem/>.

¹² Daniel Walker, *God in a Brothel: An Undercover Journey into Sex Trafficking and Rescue* (Downers Grove, Ill: IVP Books, 2011), 17.

- “At any given time in 2016, an estimated 40.3 million people are in modern slavery,” comprised of “24.9 million in forced labour and 15.4 million in forced marriage.”¹³

One of the things that becomes immediately evident in looking at these statistics is that the distinction between “human trafficking” and “sex trafficking” is imprecise and slippery—and part of my claim is that this is by design. Take, for example, the final statistic in that list, which comes from the International Labour Organization and can be found on many non-profit organizations’ websites with a link back to the ILO. Many websites will say that there are “40.3 million trafficking victims” or “40.3 million modern-day slaves,” and they will pair this claim with pictures of somber-looking women or young girls, often of color, with the clear implication being that these pictures are accurately representative of the people in this 40.3 million-person statistic who are being exploited.

The ILO actually reports that 15.4 million of that 40.3 million are victims of forced marriages (which they do not count as labor or sexual exploitation) and clarifies that “Out of the 24.9 million people trapped in forced labour, 16 million people are exploited in the private sector such as domestic work, construction or agriculture; 4.8 million persons in forced sexual exploitation, and 4 million persons in forced labour imposed by state authorities.”¹⁴ This means that even if the ILO numbers are taken at face value as accurate, the number 40.3 million is far from describing the number of women and girls who are trapped in forced sexual exploitation around the world at any given point in time. In fact, according to these numbers, nearly four times as many people are trapped in forced or exploitative labor conditions on farms and construction sites or in hotels or private residences as are people trapped in forced or exploitative

¹³ “Forced Labour, Modern Slavery and Human Trafficking (Forced Labour, Modern Slavery and Human Trafficking),” accessed February 17, 2022, <https://www.ilo.org/global/topics/forced-labour/lang--en/index.htm>.

¹⁴ “Forced Labour, Modern Slavery and Human Trafficking (Forced Labour, Modern Slavery and Human Trafficking).”

sexual labor in brothels or red light districts. Of course, these boundaries are not discrete—sexual exploitation may occur in any of those “labor trafficking” contexts, and the reality of forced marriage must be considered for its vulnerability to sexual exploitation as well (a consideration that will become crucial in the later portion of my analysis that deals with the trafficking of minors and child marriage laws). My point in this moment is simply to say that in the popular Christian imagination, “victims of human trafficking” are not migrant workers picking produce, nor are they are married to their traffickers or exploiters—and the ubiquity of the 40.3 million number, as well as other higher-end statistics, paints an inaccurate picture of just how widespread forced commercial sexual exploitation of women and girls actually is.

This is often not helped by the way that “sex trafficking” is portrayed in the media. Take, for example, this headline from a local Nashville news station in January of 2022:



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WKRN reported the arrests of ten individuals in connection with human trafficking, leading one to think that if there are ten perpetrators, there must at least be one victim who was being

¹⁵ WKRN News, Twitter post, January 24, 2022, 7:40 AM.
<https://twitter.com/WKRN/status/1485608531143319561>

exploited, and possibly more. However, the news story linked to this tweet reports that the “human trafficking sting” was actually police officers posing as a sixteen-year-old girl offering sexual services, and that no actual trafficking victims were involved.¹⁶ They succeeded in identifying ten people who would theoretically knowingly pay for sexual services from a sixteen-year-old, which is unethical, but the news media reported this event as an instance of human trafficking even though *no such sixteen-year-old ever actually existed*. These kinds of “stings” and the accompanying reporting on “human trafficking” happen with surprising frequency, in spite of the fact that applying the framework of human trafficking to minors involved in sex work has been criticized by social workers and other experts for a variety of reasons (which I will also analyze in my section on trafficking of minors and child marriage laws). For the average person, seeing these headlines week to week may lead them to believe that there are dozens if not hundreds of missing, exploited and abused victims in their community, when in actuality many of those “victims” are simply police officers making fake Facebook profiles.

But it is not just news media outlets. As I mentioned previously, the numbers from Polaris have been criticized, in large part because the National Human Trafficking Hotline’s processes for determining whether someone is a victim or potential victim of sex trafficking are so imprecise and unverifiable. As it turns out, the hotline’s report on the number of sex trafficking victims they deal with annually can be based on verbal reports alone—which means, for example, that if a minor runs away and the parents think they may be being sexually exploited and report that to the hotline, that minor is counted as being a sex trafficking victim or potentially at risk of being sex trafficked. This is true even if the minor returns several hours later unharmed, and if the minor runs away again in the same year and is reported by a parent a

¹⁶ “10 Arrested in TN Human Trafficking Sting Operation,” *WKRN News 2* (blog), January 24, 2022, <https://www.wkrn.com/news/tennessee-news/10-arrested-in-tn-human-trafficking-sting-operation/>.

second time, they could be counted in that final number twice or more.¹⁷ This, among other things, leads to an over-reporting of youth victims of sex trafficking and/or youth at risk of being sex trafficked.

My point in all of this is not to downplay the severity or moral implications of human trafficking—it is an absolutely real phenomenon that does need to be studied, addressed, and eradicated. My point is simply to illustrate that in twenty-first century America, human trafficking as an idea has ballooned in our cultural imagination far beyond human trafficking as a reality. Not only that, but the imagined victims of human trafficking and the type of exploitation to which they are subjected becomes distorted, such that in those two critical rhetorical moves, human trafficking is over-represented as sex trafficking and the victims of human trafficking are over-represented as women and young girls. These overrepresentations are not a consequence of the panic around human trafficking, however—they are the very reason the panic was able to take hold and spread as widely as it has. In *Other Dreams of Freedom*, feminist theorist and theologian Yvonne Zimmerman traces the full historical and political processes that led to this transformation of the idea of human trafficking in the popular imagination—and while its genesis is multivalent in the extreme, crucial to my project here is Zimmerman’s observation that it is the specifically sexual aspect of human trafficking that motivates Christian individuals and organizations in the United States to action. She writes, “...for many religious groups the motivation to take action against human trafficking was not simply the fact of long-standing global inequalities, labor abuse, or economic exploitation. Rather, this impulse kicked in when the exploitation involved sex...”¹⁸ In other words, it does not matter that (assuming the accuracy of the ILO numbers) there are nearly four times as many victims of labor trafficking as sex

¹⁷ Marshall and Hobbes, “Human Trafficking.”

¹⁸ Zimmerman, *Other Dreams of Freedom*, 6.

trafficking at any given point in time, because the idea of an underpaid migrant worker on an agricultural farm does not elicit the same moral outrage as the idea of a young and vulnerable girl being exploited for sex.

Again, there are multiple reasons for this disparity in outrage evoked, but one of the most influential is the way that sex has been conceptualized within modern Christianity, vis-à-vis purity culture,¹⁹ as a fundamental marker of morality and rightness with God, over and above many other metrics that one might think of as “traditional” Christian values such as caring for the poor, community service, and involvement in church. And if sexual purity marks rightness with God, then sexual impurity marks separation from God; Zimmerman writes that if “nonmarital sexual activity that involves the exchange of sex for money produced in and for the women involved a separation from God so profound as to constitute an affront to human dignity,”²⁰ then “the issue of human trafficking elicited theological commentary insofar as human trafficking was perceived to be primarily about sex.”²¹ So although forced sexual servitude makes up only a portion of the total number of instances of human trafficking each year—a number which is, to repeat a final time, hotly contested to begin with—forced sexual servitude dominates our cultural and theological imaginations about human trafficking as reflected in our laws, our policies, our theology, our media and our marketing.

However, what Zimmerman calls “the overdetermination of human trafficking as sex trafficking”²² reveals important truths about the state of Christianity in the context of the United States. When analyzing the rhetorical weight that ideas about sex trafficking are carrying in our

¹⁹ Definitions of purity culture vary, but mine is as follows: purity culture is the culture that is developed from and informed by theologies that teach mandatory and divinely-commanded sexual abstinence until legal, monogamous and lifelong marriage between a cisgender heterosexual man and a cisgender heterosexual woman occurs.

²⁰ Zimmerman, *Other Dreams of Freedom*, 78.

²¹ Zimmerman, 75.

²² Zimmerman, 130.

religious communities, it is important to have a serious discussion about the most prominent and widespread numbers available with regards to trafficking, not because they are necessarily accurate, but because the prevalence of the inaccurate numbers and the ease with which disinformation about them spreads through churches and non-profit organizations says something noteworthy about what Christians are ready to believe about the world, about women and about sex—and why. Many Christians’ minds and imaginations are conditioned to agree with many of the assumptions of the modern human trafficking panic, and are simultaneously conditioned to overlook the realities of how human trafficking actually does occur and what can be done to stop it. This conditioning is precisely what makes the human trafficking panic, constructed as I have heretofore described, an attractive scapegoat for Christians whose sexual theologies and ethics have been formed by purity culture. In various ways, both sexual and racial injustices can be absolved or obfuscated by a vocal commitment to “end sex trafficking” or “end modern day slavery.” In fact, these twin foci of the sex trafficking panic—sex and race—are often so intertwined as to become indistinguishable.

The 2021 Georgia Spa Shootings

On March 16, 2021, twenty-one-year-old Robert Aaron Long walked into three different Asian spas in the state of Georgia and shot and killed eight people, including six Asian women. Long fled the scenes, and police arrested him as he was traveling south to Florida, where he told them he was going “to commit similar violence at a business tied to the ‘porn industry.’”²³ Reports soon emerged that Long himself “had been a customer of at least two of the spas”²⁴ he had terrorized, and that he considered himself to have a sex addiction that he apparently indulged

²³ Nicholas Bogel-Burroughs, et al. “Atlanta Shootings Live Updates: Suspect Had Visited Targeted Spas Before, Police Say,” *The New York Times*, March 18, 2021, sec. U.S., <https://www.nytimes.com/live/2021/03/18/us/atlanta-shootings-massage-spa>.

²⁴ Bogel-Burroughs.

by receiving sexual services at these and other similar spas. In the days and weeks that followed, journalists and news media outlets tied themselves in knots trying to determine if the horrific killing spree was motivated primarily by race, or by sex. On the one hand, Long's former roommate reported that Long's perception of his own sexual "addiction" was so severe that shortly before the shootings, he had sought treatment at a Christian rehabilitation center called HopeQuest, a Focus on the Family-affiliated organization that also offered services such as conversion therapy for LGBTQ persons.²⁵ On the other hand, it had also been reported that Long had shouted, "I'm going to kill all Asians" as he was shooting at one of the spas.²⁶ Complicating matters further by adding a religious element, Long had also been a longtime member of Crabapple First Baptist Church in Milton, Georgia, where he had participated in and volunteered with the youth ministry and regularly attended Bible studies and other events.²⁷ Crabapple First Baptist Church is affiliated with the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC), a denomination first formed in resistance to slavery abolition in the mid-nineteenth century²⁸ and with a long and well-documented history of both racism and sexual violence.²⁹

As for the spas and the victims of Long's violence, news media outlets used words like "prostitution" and "trafficking" with a significant degree of slippage, reflecting a profound

²⁵ "HopeQuest: Atlanta Spa Shooter Got Treatment for Sex Addiction at Rehab That Promotes 'Ex-Gay Therapy,'" accessed April 2, 2022, <https://meaww.com/hope-quest-where-robert-aaron-long-went-for-sex-and-porn-addiction-evangelical-center-ex-gay-therapy>.

²⁶ Regina Kim, "Atlanta Spa Shootings: What Korean-Language Media Told Us That the Mainstream Media Didn't," *Rolling Stone* (blog), March 31, 2021, <https://www.rollingstone.com/culture/culture-news/atlanta-shootings-what-korean-language-media-told-us-that-the-mainstream-media-didnt-1149698/>.

²⁷ Sarah Pulliam Bailey and Teo Armus, "Christian Leaders Wrestle with Atlanta Shooting Suspect's Southern Baptist Ties," *Washington Post*, accessed April 2, 2022, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/religion/2021/03/17/atlanta-shooting-southern-baptist-pastors-wrestle/>.

²⁸ "Racism and the Legacy of Slavery Report," December 12, 2018, <https://sbts-wordpress-uploads.s3.amazonaws.com/sbts/uploads/2018/12/Racism-and-the-Legacy-of-Slavery-Report-v4.pdf#page=6>.

²⁹ Robert Downen, Lisa Olsen, and John Tedesco, "20 Years, 700 Victims: Southern Baptist Sexual Abuse Spreads as Leaders Resist Reforms," *Houston Chronicle*, February 10, 2019, <https://www.houstonchronicle.com/news/investigations/article/Southern-Baptist-sexual-abuse-spreads-as-leaders-13588038.php>.

ambivalence regarding the correct way to speak about the people Long had executed, their work, and their immigration status. It was unclear from the beginning to what extent employees of any of the spas Long shot at were involved in sex work, consensually or otherwise—Atlanta mayor Keisha Lance Bottoms went on record to say that the Atlanta police department had not received any reports about prostitution for either of the two spas that were located within the city of Atlanta proper.³⁰ However, both of those spas turned out to have “dozens” of comments on the online website RubMaps, a massage parlor review site where patrons can rate Asian massage businesses based on the quality and nature of the erotic services they are willing to provide.³¹ And regardless of how many Asian massage businesses in the United States are actually providing sexual services, the perception that they are is widespread; combined with the racist stereotype that Asian women are submissive and always receptive to sex, Asian massage businesses in some contexts are almost synonymous with houses of prostitution.

“Prostitution” itself is a word that is falling out of use in favor of the less morally-loaded “sex work,” but thanks to many Bush-era human trafficking policies, prostitution/sex work and sex trafficking have often been mistaken for one another, both in cultural imagination and in law. In fact, “With broad support from a motley alliance of neo-abolitionist feminists, neoconservatives, and evangelical Christian groups, the Bush administration pressured states worldwide to target prostitution as a key anti-trafficking measure,”³² under the assumption that sex work was a uniquely fraught environment that was especially prone to the kind of exploitation that would qualify an act as human trafficking. Zimmerman calls it “a conceptual collapse between [sex work and human trafficking] such that prostitution and human trafficking

³⁰ Bogel-Burroughs, “Atlanta Shootings Live Updates: Suspect Had Visited Targeted Spas Before, Police Say.”

³¹ Bogel-Burroughs.

³² Janie Chuang, “Exploitation Creep and the Unmaking of Human Trafficking Law,” *American Journal of International Law*, January 1, 2014, 618.

came to be understood as interchangeable terms that referred to more or less one and the same phenomenon,”³³ regardless of whether the individuals involved consented to such work or not. The precarity of many immigrants’ status in the United States and the lack of structural support for those immigrants adds to this assumption, and according to one human trafficking advocate who works specifically with women employed at Asian spas, “Many of the women who work at the salons are lured there with promises of good jobs or travel visas to the United States, and only find out later that the job involves offering sex for tips. They are often so indebted financially by the time they arrive, that they see no way out.”³⁴

To what extent this expert’s statement reflects the lived reality of the women employed at any of the three spas at which Robert Aaron Long murdered people is unclear; four of the victims were Korean-American and their Korean friends and family objected strongly to the idea that the murders were sexually motivated.³⁵ Similar Asian spas in other communities in the United States South have been investigated in high-profile cases as supposed hotbeds of human trafficking, only to find out that the specter of forced sexual exploitation on a mass systemic level was a far cry from what employees of these spas were actually experiencing.³⁶ But regardless of whether any of the Asian women murdered actually provided Long or any other customer with sexual services, whether of their own free will or under duress, what is clear is that Long viewed these women and these spas as sources of temptation to him, bodies and sites that represented his potential moral and sexual “relapse” in the context of his “addiction.” Because they represented a threat to his moral purity, they needed to be eliminated—and their

³³ Zimmerman, *Other Dreams of Freedom*, 143.

³⁴ Bogel-Burroughs, “Atlanta Shootings Live Updates: Suspect Had Visited Targeted Spas Before, Police Say.”

³⁵ Kim, “Atlanta Spa Shootings.”

³⁶ Condé Nast, “‘You Won’t Believe What Happened’: The Wild, Disturbing Saga of Robert Kraft’s Visit to a Strip Mall Sex Spa,” *Vanity Fair*, October 4, 2019, <https://www.vanityfair.com/news/2019/10/the-disturbing-saga-of-robert-kraft>.

elimination could be constructed as representing Long's moral and spiritual absolution. After all, if they were dead, they could not tempt him to break his sexual sobriety.

Therefore, the answer to the question of whether Long's murders were racially motivated or sexually motivated is most likely: *yes*. Long himself talked openly about the sexual motivation for the violence he committed, *and* it is not a coincidence that the women he targeted are racially stereotyped as passive and sexually receptive. And although in reality it seems unlikely that any of the spas Long terrorized were actually home bases for human trafficking, sexual or otherwise, the perception that Asian spas are inherently sexual in nature should be considered when evaluating these murders. Asian spas are seen as places where sex work of dubious consent takes place—and Long's murders reveal that he saw those businesses as places that would indulge his sexual fantasies and so-called “addictions” in exchange for money.

So although it is unclear whether sex trafficking (or any other kind of trafficking) took place at any of these spas, because of the strong imagined association between Asian spas and sex work and the way that sex work and sex trafficking have often been conflated in United States law and policy, these shootings can serve as a very effective prism through which to gaze at the ways that sex and race function in discussions of trafficking. To restate, my assertion is that the current human trafficking panic as it is constructed in the United States serves as a scapegoat by giving Christians of all varieties an avenue to obfuscate their own responsibility for and complicity in both intra-communal sexual violence and white supremacy. On the surface it may seem counterintuitive to assert this, since sex trafficking could rightly be categorized as a kind of sexual violence and is often depicted as effecting primarily women and young girls of color. But this depiction is precisely what makes the rhetorical move towards sex trafficking as the primary kind of human trafficking so misguided at best, and so insidious at worst.

Sex and Race in the Christian Panic Around Sex Trafficking

In the wake of #MeToo and #ChurchToo, the denomination to which Long's church belonged, the SBC, has been beset by an almost uncountable number of allegations of sexual abuse perpetrated and covered up by church leaders,³⁷ even as the denomination vocally and publicly promotes its various ministries intended to serve "victims of human trafficking."³⁸ The SBC is a theologically, politically and socially conservative religious movement, but it is important to note that this hypocrisy with regards to fighting to end trafficking on one hand and perpetuating sexual violence on the other does not only show up in conservative spaces. Christians of all shapes, sizes and denominations have positioned themselves at the forefront of the fight against trafficking—and Christians of all shapes, sizes and denominations have been implicated in the #ChurchToo fray. Take for example the case of progressive Christian theologian and Enneagram guru, Chris Heuertz. According to his website, before he began writing about the Enneagram and contemplative spirituality, Heuertz "served with an international humanitarian organization for nearly 20 years, working for women and children victimized by human traffickers in the commercial sex industry."³⁹ He also spent time in India, ostensibly being mentored by Mother Theresa.⁴⁰ In the summer of 2020, thirty-three individuals came forward to allege various kinds and levels of abuse perpetrated by Heuertz over a period of years, including sexual.⁴¹ In the *Medium* article Heuertz's victims published collectively, they pointed out that his predations had not been a secret and had been known since at least 2012,

³⁷ Downen, Olsen, and Tedesco, "20 Years, 700 Victims."

³⁸ Timothy Cokes, "Southern Baptists Persist in the Fight against Human Trafficking | Baptist Press," <https://www.baptistpress.com/>, July 30, 2021, <https://www.baptistpress.com/resource-library/news/southern-baptists-persist-in-the-fight-against-human-trafficking/>.

³⁹ Chris Heuertz, "About Me," [ChrisHeuertz.com](https://chrisheuertz.com/aboutme/), accessed November 3, 2021, <https://chrisheuertz.com/aboutme/>.

⁴⁰ "Christopher L. Heuertz," Faith and Leadership, accessed March 12, 2022, <https://faithandleadership.com/authors/christopher-l-heuertz>.

⁴¹ Daphne Eck, "Let's Talk About Chris Heuertz," *Medium* (blog), June 10, 2020, <https://medium.com/@daphneeck/open-letter-lets-talk-about-chris-heuertz-3ca661a58437>.

“when the board of directors [of Word Made Flesh, his non-profit organization at the time] finally asked Chris to leave the organization after multiple instances of sexually predatory behavior *toward young women of color* he mentored”⁴² (emphasis mine). In spite of this 2012 dismissal, Heuertz continued to be published and platformed, forming partnerships with giants in the industry such as Richard Rohr and Brené Brown. Brown, for her part, rescinded her endorsement of Heuertz’s most recent book when the allegations came to light⁴³; however, as of the writing of this thesis, Heuertz continues to write and minister unimpeded by the allegations against him, and a third-party investigation undertaken by his most recent non-profit organization, Gravity, a Center for Contemplative Activism, supposedly found no evidence of misconduct⁴⁴ (findings which, although outside of the scope of this thesis, have been widely disputed by Heuertz’s victims and others).

Heuertz is hardly a Southern Baptist conservative, and before his most recent brush with the #ChurchToo movement his work was generally regarded highly in progressive Christian spaces. He is an excellent example of how human trafficking “activists” can actually be some of the most insidious perpetrators themselves, and he is hardly alone. One of the Christian human trafficking books I read while researching for this thesis, titled *God in a Brothel: An Undercover Journey into Sex Trafficking and Rescue*, tells the autobiographical story of Daniel Walker, founder of anti-trafficking organization LIFT International, and his early tales of rescuing—or attempting to rescue—women out of sex trafficking in several anonymized Southeast Asian and Caribbean countries. Over the course of the book, he speaks no fewer than six separate times

⁴² Eck.

⁴³ “Brene Brown, Zondervan Pull Support for Enneagram Expert, Chris Heuertz, after Sexual Harassment Accusations,” *Religion News Service* (blog), June 16, 2020, <https://religionnews.com/2020/06/16/brene-brown-zondervan-pull-support-for-chris-heuertz-after-sexual-harassment-accusations/>.

⁴⁴ Gravity Center, “Gravity Board’s Summary of Third Party Inquiry Findings,” *Gravity* (blog), July 28, 2020, <https://gravitycenter.com/gravity-boards-summary-of-third-party-inquiry-findings/>.

about how sexually attracted he was to the women he was working with and how much the work represented a significant source of sexual temptation to him. “I was afraid of my own sinful nature,”⁴⁵ he writes; “I like women. I like sex. Indeed, I was attracted to many of the women I met in the bars and brothels I was frequenting... Being treated like a king for a few hours was also quite wonderful.”⁴⁶ The tension between Walker’s rescue work and his “sinful nature” builds throughout the book, and in the end he shares the story of how, while on a mission, he had sex with a sex worker—who he goes to great and excruciating pains to clarify was a sex worker of her own volition and not a victim of human trafficking—and failed to tell his wife for a number of years.⁴⁷ Even if Walker’s claim that the woman he had sex with was a consensually-employed sex worker (and not a victim of sex trafficking) is taken at face value, it is incredibly hypocritical given his claims earlier in his book that “The literature about the harms of prostitution is crushingly conclusive—prostitution hurts those used as sexual commodities,”⁴⁸ and that in regards to commercial sex, “I would be doing... a gross disservice to pretend that there are not degrees of freedom and more subtle forms of exploitation involved in every case.”⁴⁹ Furthermore, the choice to do this while on a mission to “save” other sex workers still represents a massive conflict of interest and failure in judgement—and it still says something about the Christian publishing industry that a book like this, which ultimately amounted to a relatively uncritical hagiography of Walker’s early “raid and rescue”⁵⁰ activism career, was greenlit in the first place. Further, it is notable that Walker, like Robert Aaron Long, spoke about these women of color through the framework of moral and/or sexual temptation.

⁴⁵ Walker, *God in a Brothel*, 30.

⁴⁶ Walker, 80.

⁴⁷ Walker, 175–80.

⁴⁸ Walker, 35–36.

⁴⁹ Walker, 35.

⁵⁰ Kaitlyn Tiffany, “The Great (Fake) Child-Sex-Trafficking Epidemic,” *The Atlantic*, December 9, 2021, <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2022/01/children-sex-trafficking-conspiracy-epidemic/620845/>.

Here it is necessary to say a word about the way the perceived or purported race of sex trafficking victims functions in these conversations. At times, the victims of sex trafficking are primarily painted as women and girls of color; at other times, the victims of sex trafficking are primarily painted as white women and girls. For example, the first item that pops up on the official Polaris website as of April 2022 is an advertisement soliciting donations and featuring three Black and brown women, one of whom is wearing a hijab.⁵¹ A smiling Black woman features prominently in the backplash of the homepage for A21, an anti-trafficking organization founded by moderate evangelical worship leader and author Christine Caine, which describes itself as “one of the largest organizations in the world that is solely fighting human trafficking.”⁵² (the “A” in A21 stands for “abolition”). The main page of the National Human Trafficking Hotline website itself depicts another Black woman, this time looking distraught and downcast, as she sits on the bed in a hotel room with a pile of feather dusters behind her, apparently in order to symbolize that perhaps this woman is being trafficked for labor rather than sex.⁵³

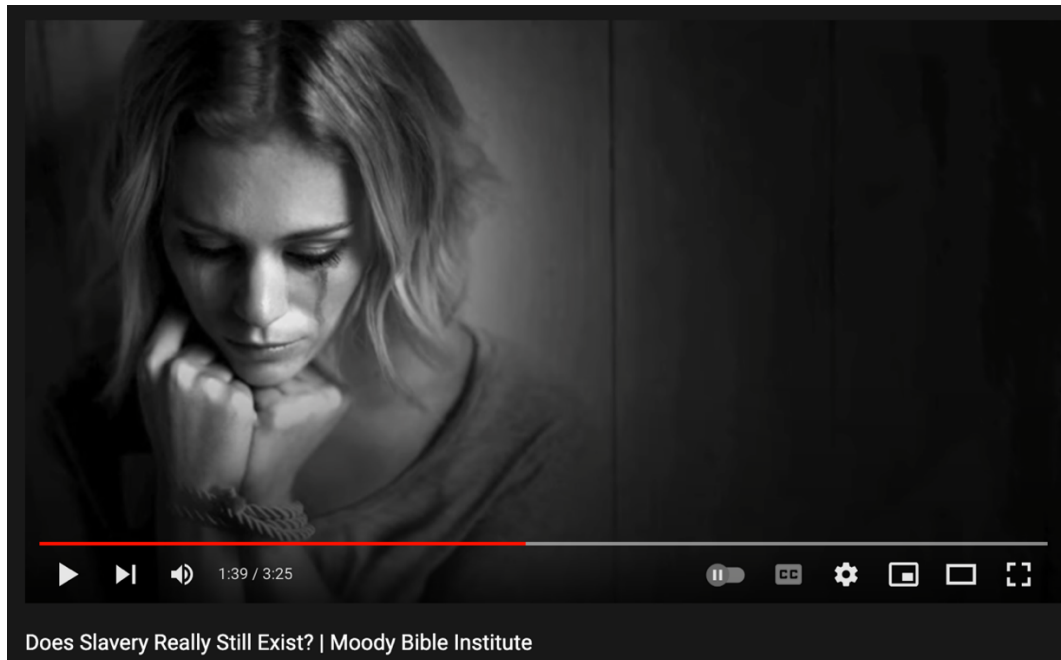
However, in other spaces the victims of sex trafficking are very clearly portrayed as white women and girls, with the traffickers often being portrayed as men of color. In a YouTube video entitled “Does Slavery Really Still Exist?” my own undergraduate alma mater Moody Bible Institute details its motivation and reasoning behind creating a brand-new major for its students in 2013: “Ministry to Victims of Sexual Exploitation.” The video features a young white man sharing his dream of starting a “college for girls in sex trafficking” in Ukraine where “they learn about Christ, they learn job skills, they learn general education” and go on to “have

⁵¹ “Polaris | We Fight to End Human Trafficking,” accessed April 12, 2022, <https://polarisproject.org/>.

⁵² “Get To Know Us | A21,” accessed March 17, 2022, <https://www.a21.org/content/get-to-know-us/grd33s>.

⁵³ “National Human Trafficking Hotline,” National Human Trafficking Hotline, accessed November 3, 2021, <https://humantraffickinghotline.org/node>.

families, have a life outside of trafficking, have Jesus.”⁵⁴ While he is speaking, one of the stock photos the video’s producers chose to represent the young women to whom the man was ostensibly seeking to minister was the following:



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The video ends with the hopeful promise: “Here at Moody, we’re tackling the world’s most difficult issues head-on, making an eternal difference in the name of Jesus Christ”⁵⁶—though it should be noted that despite Moody’s creation and promotion of a major meant to prepare students to “minister to victims of sexual exploitation” out in the world, *Mother Jones* published an award-winning exposé in September of 2021 revealing years of sexual abuse and harassment coverups as well as botched Title IX reports on Moody’s downtown Chicago campus, perpetuated by both faculty and administration alike.⁵⁷

⁵⁴ Moody Bible Institute, *Does Slavery Really Still Exist?* | *Moody Bible Institute*, 2014, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kaxBe_Ck0GM.

⁵⁵ Moody Bible Institute.

⁵⁶ Moody Bible Institute.

⁵⁷ Becca Andrews, “They Went to Bible College to Deepen Their Faith. Then They Were Assaulted—and Blamed for It.” *Mother Jones* (blog), accessed March 17, 2022, <https://www.motherjones.com/politics/2021/09/moody-bible-institute-purity-culture-evangelicalism-sexual-assault-title-ix-mbi-survivors-group/>.

In the same vein as *God in a Brothel*, another Christian sex trafficking memoir I read in the course of researching for this thesis was *The Slave Across the Street*⁵⁸ by Theresa Flores, a white woman who went on to found multiple anti-trafficking advocacy organizations and lobby for changes to human trafficking laws in the state of Michigan,⁵⁹ where she says she was held as a “slave” nightly for years as a teenager in the 1980s without her parents ever knowing. “People think trafficking only happens in India and China,” Flores was quoted as saying in 2014. “Just because you make \$100,000 a year and live in a fancy house doesn’t mean that it won’t happen to your kids.”⁶⁰ Blonde-haired and blue-eyed Theresa is described on the back cover of her book as an “All-American” girl,⁶¹ and the language she chose throughout the book to describe her experience is heavily racialized:

“The kids I went to school with consisted of a ‘significantly high percentage, above the states [sic] average, of foreign born people.’ This fact would change the rest of my life.”⁶²

“In Daniel’s [Muslim] culture, women were a lower status. Young men were taught not to respect women. Or take no for an answer.”⁶³

“I didn’t want to sit and wait in the car and I was interested in seeing the inside of this foreigner’s home. It looked like it could house many families. Again I ignored the red flags.”⁶⁴

“I do not blame my parents for being oblivious. But I do blame the teachers and trained school personnel who never offered to help when they observed a kid clearly being manipulated by an ethnic group.”⁶⁵

⁵⁸ Flores, *The Slave Across the Street*.

⁵⁹ “Michigan’s Human Trafficking Law: The Theresa Flores Story,” Detroit Criminal Defense Attorney - Novi, Michigan Criminal Defense Attorney, August 26, 2016, <https://www.novilaw.com/2016/08/human-trafficking/>.

⁶⁰ “Theresa Flores | Survivor to Abolitionist - End Slavery Now,” accessed April 12, 2022, <http://endslaverynow.org/blog/articles/theresa-flores-soap/>.

⁶¹ Flores, *The Slave Across the Street*, back cover.

⁶² Flores, 29.

⁶³ Flores, 38.

⁶⁴ Flores, 46.

⁶⁵ Flores, 119.

“As with victims, traffickers can not [sic] be identified by specific socio-economic or racial characteristics, though it is more common among cultures that don’t value women.”⁶⁶

In this picture of sex trafficking, it is a naïve young white girl who is seen as the victim, and nefarious men of color (and of a non-Christian religion) who are seen as the villains.

Such a vision of modern sex trafficking calls to mind even older racialized fears and anxieties from the original White Slavery Panic of the late 1800s and early 1900s, the forerunner of the current panic around sex trafficking. At that time, “Concern over ‘white slavery’—the ‘export’ or ‘trafficking of white women from Europe and North America for the purposes of prostitution’ by foreign or immigrant men... gave rise to a series of treaties”⁶⁷ and laws that sought to quell this supposed tide of white women’s purity and virtue being sullied by immigrant men via induction into the sex trade. When historians later studied the era, it was found that concerns over any kind of systemically organized sex slavery cabals, white or otherwise, were vastly overblown, and “the notion of white slavery more accurately expressed cultural fears of immigrant outsiders than it did any verifiable social trends of increased abductions of white girls and young women.”⁶⁸ However, as can be seen from both the Moody video and the racialized language utilized by Flores, this history has not stopped the specter of white slavery from hovering over many discussions of sex trafficking today.

And so, in light of these varying depictions of sex trafficking, the question necessarily arises: why is it that in certain instances victims are painted primarily as white women and girls, and in other instances they are painted primarily as women and girls of color? It is my hypothesis that this disparity is not a result of quality but one of the degree to which activists, organizers and

⁶⁶ Flores, 152.

⁶⁷ Chuang, “Exploitation Creep and the Unmaking of Human Trafficking Law,” 618.

⁶⁸ Zimmerman, *Other Dreams of Freedom*, 123.

thought leaders lean into the racial and sexual aspects of human trafficking, respectively. By this I mean that if racist fears of immigrants and men of color (and people of color more generally) are more heavily present, then the victims may tend to be portrayed more frequently as white women and girls. However, if the emphasis is on the sexual aspects of trafficking to the extent that victims are characterized as sullied or sexually broken, then the victims may tend to be portrayed more frequently as women and girls of color because it is easier for white Christians and those formed theologically by purity culture to imagine women of color as sexually promiscuous or damaged. These boundaries are not discrete; like so many aspects of the modern sex trafficking panic they are porous, and ultimately race and sex are not possible to separate as different fields of inquiry because purity culture is inherently racial in nature due to its moral emphasis on white heterosexual constructions of the family unit, and white supremacy relies on purity culture for its enforcement via that vision of family. But illuminating the function of race and sex in the modern sex trafficking panic can be helpful when it comes to analyzing some of the different ways that the panic serves as a scapegoat for American Christians to obfuscate their responsibility in *both* sexual violence and white supremacy. The final portion of this thesis will be dedicated to exploring specific examples of those two injustices.

Domestic Minor Sex Trafficking and Child Marriage

The Trevor Project recently found that 28% of LGBTQ+ youth (overall, i.e. of all races and orientations) experienced housing instability at some point, and the rate was over 35% when controlled for trans and non-binary youth.⁶⁹ In the case of youth who had been kicked out of their homes, 40% reported that “they were kicked out or abandoned due to their LGBTQ identity.”⁷⁰

⁶⁹ The Trevor Project, “Homelessness and Housing Instability Among LGBTQ Youth,” November 23, 2021, <https://www.thetrevorproject.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/Trevor-Project-Homelessness-Report.pdf>.

⁷⁰ The Trevor Project.

These findings are in step with past findings that “one in four LGBT teens are forced to leave or run away from home, and approximately 20 to 40 percent of young people who are homeless identify as LGBT.”⁷¹ Additionally, and “likely attributable to the reality that homophobic and transphobic living situations at home effectively push LGBTQ youth out of their homes and into the street economy,”⁷² “Young people who identify as lesbian, gay, or bisexual...are more likely to have exchanged sex for some type of payment.”⁷³ In other words, youth involved in sex work are often involved as a survival mechanism (rather than because someone like a pimp or trafficker is forcing them under threat of violence), and for LGBTQ youth that need for survival is in many cases directly linked to the homophobia and/or transphobia which made their home an untenable place to live. However, The Trafficking Victims Protection Act (TVPA) of 2000 “defines any U.S. citizen or lawful permanent resident younger than eighteen who is involved in commercial sex acts as a victim of a severe form of trafficking in persons.”⁷⁴ This applies regardless of whether the minor has been transported, held captive or coerced by a third party.

Certainly in some cases there *are* youth involved in sex work under the coercion of a third party or under other threats of physical or psychological violence, who more closely fit the paradigm of a sex trafficking victim due to the presence of force and who may actually be helped by some of the resources available for trafficking victims. But for the most part this is not how youth begin trading sex and does not address the reasons *why* they begin trading sex in the first place, which are often imminently practical. Alexandra Lutnick writes that “Referring to these young people as ‘domestic minor victims of sex trafficking’ ignores the resiliency and

⁷¹ Alexandra Lutnick, *Domestic Minor Sex Trafficking: Beyond Victims and Villains*, Illustrated edition (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016), 17, <https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/vand/detail.action?docID=4187868>.

⁷² Lutnick, 17.

⁷³ Lutnick, 17.

⁷⁴ Lutnick, 1.

resourcefulness so many of them demonstrate,”⁷⁵ and I agree—but crucially I would also argue that referring to these young people as “domestic minor victims of sex trafficking” also ignores the religious homophobia and transphobia that is at the root of why so many young people find themselves on the street without resources and family support. It blames the problem on “trafficking”—which is quite infrequently the case, from a technical standpoint—rather than systemic theological, familial and social discrimination; and it allows churches and families to “fight to end sex trafficking” without ever fighting to end the systemic theological, political and cultural homophobia and transphobia that causes many young people to be in situations where trading sex becomes their least-bad option for getting their needs met.

Furthermore, lumping all youth involvement in sex work under the umbrella of “sex trafficking” obfuscates the very real ways that many youth are exploited and taken advantage of sexually in ways that have nothing to do with being forced into the commercial sex industry. To return to the ILO numbers briefly, the ILO’s estimate in 2016 was that there were 15.4 million people living in forced marriages globally, including both children and adults. This phenomenon is something they consider separately from sex trafficking (for which they estimate 4.8 million victims). It is legal for adults to marry minors in most states in the United States, and in states where child marriage has been attempted to be outlawed or greater restrictions placed upon it in order to protect minors, conservative Christian groups have repeatedly interfered and lobbied against restrictions, claiming that changing or narrowing child marriage laws might take “decision-making power away from parents.”⁷⁶ Certainly some child marriages that take place are between two minors, but this is not the case for most; “Between 2000 and 2015, 86 percent of

⁷⁵ Lutnick, 26.

⁷⁶ JoAnne Sweeny, “Banning Child Marriage in America: An Uphill Fight against Evangelical Pressure,” Salon, March 11, 2018, <https://www.salon.com/2018/03/11/banning-child-marriage-in-america-an-uphill-fight-against-evangelical-pressure/>.

the reported 207,468 child marriages that took place in the United States were between minors and adults”⁷⁷ (with forty-two out of fifty states providing data for that finding).

In other words: if someone pays for sex with a minor in the United States, that is considered “domestic minor sex trafficking” by law. If someone sexually assaults a minor in the United States or grooms them into a sexual relationship, that is considered statutory rape. But if someone wants to have sex with a minor legally, without fear of prosecution for trafficking or rape, forty-four states allow them to marry a minor in order to do so, with multiple states legislating no age limit or restriction whatsoever, provided that parental consent is obtained.⁷⁸ And while the age of consent varies from state to state, in no state is it younger than sixteen—which means that in many states, minors who cannot legally consent to sexual contact in any other context can be married to adults, even though without a marriage certificate they would be considered a victim of rape—or of trafficking, if payment was involved.

Yet, time and again it has been Christians on the forefront of passing, promoting and protecting these laws governing “domestic minor sex trafficking” and child marriage, not just through individual advocacy but through formal lobbying.⁷⁹ And although many youth trading sex in order to meet their basic needs are LGBTQ and have experienced homophobia and transphobia that shapes their experience, much anti-LGBTQ theology and politics are ironically advanced in the name of “protecting children” from either “inappropriate” sexual knowledge or literal predators (the recent controversy over Florida’s “Don’t Say Gay” bill during which Christian proponents of the bill claimed to be protecting children from LGBTQ “groomers” is an

⁷⁷ Sweeny.

⁷⁸ “Child Brides: Closer Than You Think,” Women’s eNews, October 27, 2021, <https://womensenews.org/2021/10/child-brides-closer-than-you-think/>.

⁷⁹ Sweeny, “Banning Child Marriage in America.”

excellent example of this phenomenon⁸⁰). Crucially, these truths expose some of the hypocrisy behind the current panic about sex trafficking, because they suggest that for those Christians who see no problem with a minor girl marrying an adult man or actively advocate for such a practice as being biblical, the problem with “sex trafficking” of minors is not that children are being sexually exploited but that the sexual activity involved is not taking place within the context of a biblically sanctioned marriage between a husband and a wife. Locating the offense of sex trafficking in non-heterosexual non-marital sexual activity rather than in exploitation or coercion frames sex trafficking as primarily a failure of sexual purity, and it also does not account for exploitative or coercive sexual activity that can take place within the context of marriage. Additionally, framing sex trafficking as a problem of sexual purity runs the risk of implicating *victims* of trafficking as somehow being immoral or in a state of sin because of their history or present reality of being exploited.

The Appropriation of Abolitionism and Anti-Immigration Sentiment

Thus far I have illustrated that in spite of loud protestations and formal organizing against sexual exploitation in the form of sex trafficking, in Christian faith communities #ChurchToo abuses are still very common, marriages between children and adults are still enabled, and LGBTQ youth are often still disowned or kicked out of their families, leading to an increased likelihood that they will trade sex for survival. The panic around sex trafficking provides these Christian communities with an outward “proof” of their commitment to end sexual exploitation, even as their actively enforced policies and theologies demonstrably promote it. This is also the case, albeit in a slightly different way, with the appropriation of abolitionist language and the

⁸⁰ “Fans of Florida’s ‘Don’t Say Gay’ Bill Have a New Favorite Word: ‘Grooming’ - The Washington Post,” accessed April 12, 2022, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/2022/03/12/florida-dont-say-gay-bill/>.

language of “modern day slavery” by Christians who do not want to be seen as racist, even while their actively enforced policies and theologies promote racism.

It is impossible to speak about the modern human trafficking panic in the American Christian context without a detailed analysis of the way race functions in its rhetoric. For it is not simply “human trafficking” or even “sex trafficking” that looms large in the narrative—it is sex *slavery*; it is so called “modern-day” *slavery*. I have heretofore mostly addressed the framework of “slavery” language in the context of the historic White Slavery Panic, but it is important to return to here because it saturates the second major group of examples I will be discussing. In addition to A21, the ministry I mentioned previously whose “A” stands for abolition, there are dozens of other ministries and organizations utilizing primarily slavery-related imagery in their visions of human trafficking. One such organization, Operation Underground Railroad (OUR) is an anti-trafficking organization that focuses specifically on children and, obviously, derives its name from the famous work of Harriet Tubman. Those who donate a minimum of \$5.00 per month to OUR “can earn the designation ‘abolitionist.’”⁸¹ Over the course of researching to write this very thesis, I read books with titles like *The Slave Across the Street*,⁸² which I have already analyzed, as well as the similarly-titled *The Slave Next Door*,⁸³ and poured over dozens of other websites and articles wherein slavery was the guiding framework for understanding trafficking.

Janie Chuang refers to these frameworks as “modern-day-slavery abolitionism,” or MDS abolitionism for short: “Locating the source of trafficking harm in the deviant behavior of individuals (and corporations), MDS abolitionism prioritizes the accountability of individual

⁸¹ Tiffany, “The Great (Fake) Child-Sex-Trafficking Epidemic.”

⁸² Flores, *The Slave Across the Street*.

⁸³ Kevin Bales and Ron Soodalter, *The Slave Next Door: Human Trafficking and Slavery in America Today*, Second Edition, With a New Preface (Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 2010).

perpetrators and the rescue and protection of victims.⁸⁴ MDS abolitionist approaches “draw upon the nation’s legacy of race-based, chattel slavery as well as a resonance with biblical notions of ‘slavery to sin,’ conjuring scenarios of irrefutable moral horror.”⁸⁵ Rhetorically, categorizing something as “slavery” communicates that it is evil, reprehensible, and discriminatory—and calling someone an “abolitionist” can be construed as communicating that they are the opposite of racist, because they are fighting “slavery.” That is why, outside the world of anti-human trafficking activism, “abolitionism” refers primarily to the modern social movement that seeks to defund law enforcement entities and dismantle the prison industrial complex. This use of abolitionist language is more historically sound and stems from the fact that the Thirteenth Amendment to the United States Constitution technically outlawed slavery “except as a punishment for crime,”⁸⁶ a legal loophole which modern-day abolitionists, in this more common sense of the term, are seeking to close.

However, defunding law enforcement and dismantling prisons is not what most anti-human trafficking organizations mean when they call themselves abolitionists or say that they are trying to “end slavery” or “free modern-day slaves.” Chuang notes that MDS abolitionism’s “preferred techniques are aggressive criminal justice responses and reputational harm,”⁸⁷ and that MDS abolitionism is so easily accepted as a framework because it “creates a simple moral imperative with enormous popular appeal, while it depoliticizes and absolves—behind a humanitarian agenda—the state for its role in creating structures that permit, if not encourage, coercive exploitation of workers, particularly migrants,”⁸⁸ who in the context of the United

⁸⁴ Chuang, “Exploitation Creep and the Unmaking of Human Trafficking Law,” 611.

⁸⁵ Bernstein, *Brokered Subjects*, 9.

⁸⁶ “The 13th Amendment of the U.S. Constitution,” National Constitution Center – The 13th Amendment of the U.S. Constitution, accessed April 13, 2022, <https://constitutioncenter.org/interactive-constitution/amendment/amendment-xiii>.

⁸⁷ Chuang, “Exploitation Creep and the Unmaking of Human Trafficking Law,” 611.

⁸⁸ Chuang, 638.

States are mostly people of color. People of color and especially Black men in America are also vastly over-represented in imprisoned populations, and yet their abolition is not in view here. I would add to Chuang's observation that MDS abolitionist approaches absolve not just the state but *the church* for its role in creating and maintaining exploitative structures. The evangelical Christian voting bloc specifically is one of the largest and most powerful in the United States, and evangelical leaders routinely dispense guidance to their followers about what kinds of people should—and should not—be voted into office. This bloc, often known as the “Religious Right,” first materialized via efforts to resist desegregation of public schools in the 1970s⁸⁹ and have continued to play a powerful role in American politics ever since, with evangelical/”born-again” Christians voting for Donald Trump, whose campaign was replete with anti-immigrant rhetoric, in the 2016 election at a rate of eighty-one percent.⁹⁰ Evangelical Christians and specifically white evangelical Christians have also been some of the most outspoken public critics of both women's rights movements as well as movements such as Black Lives Matter and efforts to make immigration easier.

Seen in this light, the framing of sex trafficking as “modern-day slavery” and its attendant activists as “abolitionists” can function as a psychological comfort for anti-civil rights and anti-immigration Christians, reducing cognitive dissonance, offering reassurance that they are not racist, and providing “relief for supporters who may take issue with the Black Lives Matter movement but still yearn to be on the right side of history.”⁹¹ Interestingly enough, “abolitionist” language has also been plucked out of its original context and appropriated by

⁸⁹ Randall Balmer, “The Real Origins of the Religious Right - POLITICO Magazine,” accessed July 15, 2021, <https://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2014/05/religious-right-real-origins-107133>.

⁹⁰ Jessica Martínez and Gregory A. Smith, “How the Faithful Voted: A Preliminary 2016 Analysis,” *Pew Research Center* (blog), accessed March 20, 2022, <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2016/11/09/how-the-faithful-voted-a-preliminary-2016-analysis/>.

⁹¹ Tiffany, “The Great (Fake) Child-Sex-Trafficking Epidemic.”

certain hardline anti-abortion groups to describe their belief that all abortion should be “abolished.”⁹² But in an ironic turn, some of the abortion bans currently being passed throughout the country in anticipation of *Roe v. Wade* likely being gutted by the Supreme Court in the summer of 2022 specifically provide no exceptions for rape, incest, “or human trafficking.”⁹³ Florida’s ban to this effect, which was signed into law on April 14, 2022 and names human trafficking as a circumstance for which no exception will be made, was signed by Gov. DeSantis in a church.⁹⁴

In these and many more ways, the appropriation of abolitionist and slavery-related language and the framing of trafficking by MDS abolitionist approaches allows the human trafficking panic to function as a scapegoat by making it possible for churches and other Christian organizations to “champion the anti-slavery cause through concerted efforts to root out the bad actors and save the victims, while deeming unnecessary any commitment to addressing the structural contributors to exploitation,”⁹⁵ such as unjust immigration laws, anti-worker policies, and broader structural racism. Taken together with the way that #ChurchToo abuses, child marriage and discrimination against LGBTQ youth are often tacitly ignored at best and actively promoted at worst by many churches and Christian organizations who are active in the anti-trafficking world, and a stark disparity emerges between the actual causes and scope of human trafficking and what is ostensibly being done to address it. And while the purpose of this

⁹² “The Anti-Abortion Abolitionist Movement Is Dangerous. Here’s What You Need to Know,” Prism, March 11, 2020, <http://prismreports.org/2020/03/11/the-antiabortion-abolitionist-movement-is-dangerous-heres-what-you-need-to-know/>.

⁹³ Arek Sarkissian, “Florida Lawmakers Approve Strictest Abortion Ban in State’s History,” POLITICO, accessed April 14, 2022, <https://www.politico.com/news/2022/03/03/florida-abortion-ban-desantis-00014102>.

⁹⁴ “Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis Signs 15-Week Abortion Ban Into Law | HuffPost Latest News,” accessed April 14, 2022, https://www.huffpost.com/entry/florida-governor-ron-desantis-abortion-ban_n_6221836fe4b02186be1f1b2e?d_id=3388126&ncid_tag=tweetlnkushpmsg00000054&utm_medium=Social&utm_source=Twitter&utm_campaign=us_queer_voices.

⁹⁵ Chuang, “Exploitation Creep and the Unmaking of Human Trafficking Law,” 638.

thesis project is not to solve the problem of human trafficking or prescribe simple steps towards its eradication, one of my purposes *is* to re-center a more accurate picture of the victims of human trafficking and the true causes of their exploitation. To that end, in the final section I will suggest several possible ways the current popular approaches to human trafficking can be adjusted in order to center victims, prevent further sexual violence, and address Christianity's past and present complicity in white supremacy.

Towards Possible Approaches

If the human trafficking panic functions as a scapegoat by allowing Christian churches, ministries and individuals to obfuscate their responsibility in sexual violence and white supremacy, then historically, culturally and theologically sound approaches will focus on eliminating the ability for those injustices to be obfuscated. In other words, sound approaches to human trafficking make it easier to *see* the victims of trafficking and the true causes of their suffering—not harder—even if those causes have their genesis within the church or Christian theology. Consistent with the dual foci in my analysis of sexual violence and white supremacy, I suggest two main conceptual and practical adjustments: 1) Divesting from purity culture as a solution to sexual violence, and 2) supporting laws, policies and theologies that promote worker power and make the immigration system safer for vulnerable communities.

The assumptions of purity culture undergird many of the current proposed solutions aimed at treating and/or healing victims of sex trafficking. Zimmerman refers to this as a “religious preoccupation with exploitative, immoral sex”⁹⁶ such that “immoral sex” becomes the primary injustice of sex trafficking. She writes, “If immoral, exploitative sex was the particular aspect of human trafficking that motivated most religious groups to action, then the remedies to

⁹⁶ Zimmerman, *Other Dreams of Freedom*, 8.

this problem that they typically proffered reflected these groups' own understandings of sexual morality."⁹⁷ I pointed out previously that in these schemas, if sexual purity marks rightness with God, then sexual impurity marks separation from God; what this means is that if an anti-trafficking group is operating out of the sexual ethic of purity culture—as the vast majority of them in the United States are—then that group's solutions to human trafficking will also be rooted in purity culture. In the video from Moody Bible Institute that I discussed earlier, the young man expressed his desire to help victims of sex trafficking “learn about Christ... have families... have Jesus”⁹⁸ because the idea that a sex trafficked woman might be rehabilitated, get [monogamously] married [to a man] and have children is the ultimate fulfillment of this kind of approach. Zimmerman says that these “anti-trafficking interventions tend to attempt to ‘fix’ the sexual morality of trafficking victims. Freedom from trafficking is in this way intimately connected to correct sexual values.”⁹⁹

However, the sexual ethics of purity culture are fundamentally tied to the promotion and proliferation of sexual violence. “Rescuing” sex trafficking victims into a religious framework where women are gatekeepers of male sexual purity, heterosexuality is the only acceptable sexual orientation and divorce is heavily stigmatized can amount to putting survivors in a different kind of danger than they were previously in—not removing them from danger altogether. LGBTQ youth who find themselves trading sex in order to meet their basic survival needs are often in that position *because* of the homophobic sexual ethics of purity culture, and increasing stigmatization of LGBTQ identities will not improve their prospects. Some of the young girls that are forced to be married to older adult men each year are pregnant due to sexual

⁹⁷ Zimmerman, 6–7.

⁹⁸ Moody Bible Institute, *Does Slavery Really Still Exist?*

⁹⁹ Zimmerman, *Other Dreams of Freedom*, 7.

abuse by those men, and are married to their abusers with the permission of parents who believe that marriage is a better and more biblical alternative than extramarital pregnancy or abortion.¹⁰⁰ More purity culture will not be an effective solution for a situation in which the sexual violence that victims of sex trafficking experience is upheld by the principles of that same purity culture.

Likewise, exploitative and unjust laws and policies around labor and immigration uphold the most common form of human trafficking in the United States, labor trafficking. Making it easier for immigrants whose documentation status is not permanent to, for example, change jobs—something which is currently difficult and with certain visas impossible to do¹⁰¹—would allow immigrants to be able to leave jobs where they are being exploited without risking deportation. Chuang actually notes that despite the pitfalls of the MDS abolitionist approaches to human trafficking, the attendant “infusion” of labor-related concerns that MDS abolitionism brings can actually provide an opportunity for activists and organizations to draw greater attention to labor trafficking and work to change unjust laws and policies. She writes that “expanding the reach of anti-trafficking regimes to include forced labor... made labor policy and the concept of labor itself explicitly relevant to a field that had long been narrowly focused on sexual exploitation.”¹⁰² In other words, approaches to human trafficking that focus on empowering workers to organize and advocate for their rights as well as improving the processes by which all immigrants—not just survivors of human trafficking—are able to navigate the United States immigration system will help to make visible the actual scope and nature of human trafficking and allow survivors of it to be centered in solutions.

¹⁰⁰ Sweeny, “Banning Child Marriage in America.”

¹⁰¹ Candid, “Labor Trafficking — an Immigration Issue,” *Philanthropy News Digest (PND)*, accessed April 15, 2022, <https://philanthropynewsdigest.org/features/commentary-and-opinion/labor-trafficking-an-immigration-issue>.

¹⁰² Chuang, “Exploitation Creep and the Unmaking of Human Trafficking Law,” 611.

Conclusion

Throughout this thesis, I have repeatedly said that the modern human trafficking panic functions as a scapegoat that allows Christian communities to obfuscate their complicity in both sexual violence and white supremacy, in a variety of different ways. I have named those ways specifically—from #ChurchToo abuses that have been actively covered up to the overwhelming support by evangelicals of a presidential campaign grounded in racism and anti-immigrant sentiment—all while these same individuals and communities loudly profess a commitment to ending sexual exploitation and “modern day slavery.” The panic provides an attractive container for the resulting cognitive dissonance and, like the biblical scapegoat, a reassurance that atonement has been made because the problem is “out there.” However, it can be easily forgotten that the scapegoat is not the only goat whose grim fate is spelled out in the pages of Leviticus.

The goat that is not sent out into the wilderness is also to be sacrificed—and like the scapegoat, that sacrifice is also “to make atonement... because of the uncleanness and rebellion of the Israelites, whatever their sins have been” (Leviticus 16:16, NIV). The scapegoat certainly does not survive—how long could a lone goat fend for itself in the wilderness?—but its death is passive and unseen. The goat not chosen by lots is actively slaughtered, its blood spread over a number of different locations, a visible symbol of absolution to the gathered community. If the panic represents the scapegoat, my final concern is that those represented by the other goat are not forgotten—the spa employees murdered by Robert Aaron Long, the women of color preyed upon by Chris Heuertz, the queer homeless youth trading sex for survival who experience both suicide and violence at astronomic rates.¹⁰³ Where there is a scapegoat carrying the sins of the people away from the community, there is always another goat whose life is taken from them in

¹⁰³ The Trevor Project, “Homelessness and Housing Instability Among LGBTQ Youth.”

order to obtain absolution for someone else. Justice for survivors of all violence and exploitation, including human trafficking, hangs on being able to truly see those survivors and acknowledge the root causes of their suffering—and on having the moral courage to change not only laws and policies, but theology as well.

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