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# Religious and Cultural Meaning-Making in Grief: A Systematic Review of Antecedents, Mechanisms, and Outcomes across Religious Traditions

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## *ABSTRACT*

This study aims to synthesize the antecedents, mechanisms, and outcomes of religious and cultural meaning-making in grief across religious traditions. This systematic review followed PRISMA 2020 and the SPIDER framework, with searches conducted in Scopus, PubMed, and OpenAlex (2016–2026). A total of 39 studies (20 qualitative, 14 quantitative, and 5 mixed-methods) were analyzed through thematic synthesis. The results showed that violent death, suicide stigma, shame culture, migration, and the absence of established rituals emerged as antecedents of faith crises. Four mechanisms were identified: theodicy negotiation, trauma hermeneutics, externalization of grief through communal and digital rituals, and personal and secular meaning-making. Outcomes ranged from spiritual distress and complicated spiritual grief to continuing bonds, advocacy, and posttraumatic growth, with the resolution of theodicy struggles serving as a critical turning point. These findings affirm grief as a religious and cultural practice and highlight the role of interfaith literacy in strengthening religious moderation.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Death, particularly when traumatic or sudden, as in homicide, suicide, or political violence, shatters what Janoff-Bulman (1992) termed the assumptive world, that is, the belief that the world is just, predictable, and meaningful, and forces survivors to oscillate between confronting the loss and restoring daily life (Stroebe & Schut, 1999). Grief thus becomes a crisis of meaning as survivors ask why the death occurred and how life can go on (Neimeyer et al., 2010). This crisis is far from rare: prolonged grief disorder affects 9.8% of survivors of non-violent loss (Lundorff et al., 2017) and 49% of survivors of violent death (Djelantik et al., 2020), and it is now formally recognized in the DSM-5-TR and ICD-11 (Prigerson et al., 2021; World Health Organization, 2022).

Frankl (1963) asserted that what destroys human beings is not suffering itself but suffering without meaning, and bereaved individuals actively construct meaning from their loss (Neimeyer, 2001, 2016). Religion has long served as a primary framework for this endeavor, as belief in an afterlife remains widespread even in secular societies (Pew Research Center, 2025). Religion functions as an orienting system in times of crisis (Pargament, 1997), and positive religious coping is associated with better adjustment, whereas negative religious coping predicts the opposite (Ano & Vasconcelles, 2005).

For religious survivors, the collapse of the assumptive world may become a crisis of theodicy: if God is All-Merciful and All-Just, why was the tragedy allowed to happen? This conflict may give rise to negative religious coping, such as feeling betrayed by, punished by, or estranged from God (Pargament et al., 2000), which is better understood as an existential response than as pathology (Pargament et al., 2005; Wortmann & Park, 2008; Burke & Neimeyer, 2014). This tension intensifies in unresolved violent deaths, when survivors are caught between demanding worldly justice and accepting divine decree, between *ikhtiar* (human effort) and *tawakal* (reliance on God) (Lichtenthal & Sweeney, 2015), leading them to turn to eschatological resolution or to continuing bonds through rituals, prayer, and digital platforms (Walsh, 2020; Nasution & Frasetya, 2025). In Park's model (2005, 2010), this process represents an effort to resolve the discrepancy between global meaning, including religious orientation, and the situational meaning of the death; meaning-making thus becomes a central mediator of adaptation to loss (Park & Folkman, 1997; Neimeyer, 2019; Sian et al., 2024).

Meaning-making after loss is not merely a psychological process but also a religious and cultural one. Mourning is enacted through culturally patterned rituals, sacred narratives, and community structures, so that grief is always experienced within a particular religious culture. This is especially salient in Indonesia, a religiously plural, Muslim-majority society in which grief is mediated by Islamic concepts such as *tawakal* (reliance on God), *sabar* (patience), and *Qada* and *Qadar* (divine decree), by local customary traditions such as the death rituals of the Nias people (Gulo et al., 2022), and increasingly by digital preaching on social media (Nasution & Frasetya, 2025). The *tahlilan* tradition, for example, not only functions as a religious ritual commemorating

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the dead but also reflects the social dynamics of Indonesian Muslim communities (Anisa, 2025), while for Muslim families in South Sumatra, post-death rituals such as *Yasinan* form part of the effort to make sense of a "good death" (Seise, 2021). Collective losses, ranging from the political violence of the Semanggi I Tragedy (Valentia & Mansoer, 2019) to mass-casualty events such as the 2022 Kanjuruhan Stadium tragedy (Wiyono et al., 2023), have repeatedly placed religious meaning-making at the center of public mourning. Understanding how different traditions help survivors make sense of loss is therefore directly linked to the broader project of interfaith understanding and religious moderation.

Although evidence on the relevance of religion in grief continues to accumulate, the existing literature reveals three interrelated gaps. First, an epistemological gap arises from the dominance of the Western medical-psychiatric paradigm, which tends to treat grief solely as a pathological entity, thereby risking the medicalization of grief and neglecting the human need to reconstruct meaning holistically (Neimeyer, 2019). This dominance is also evident in grief intervention research, most of which has been developed in Western countries, while other cultural and religious groups remain underrepresented (Aeschlimann et al., 2024). Second, a practical-theological gap persists in delineating the boundary between religion as a source of resilience and religion as a source of secondary trauma, particularly for groups experiencing disenfranchised grief (Doka, 2002). A meta-analysis of longitudinal studies showed that religious and spiritual struggles predict worsening psychological adjustment over time (Bockrath et al., 2022); hence, the role of religion in grief cannot be assumed to be invariably protective.

Third, and most pressing methodologically, earlier systematic and integrative reviews of religion and spirituality in grief (Becker et al., 2007; Wortmann & Park, 2008) predate the post-2016 expansion of cross-cultural and digital grief research, relied largely on Western and predominantly Christian samples, and did not distinguish traumatic from non-traumatic loss; more recent syntheses address only a single loss context, such as community recovery from mass violence (Bleoaja, 2025). These reviews have also not reached two rapidly growing areas. Meaning-making in grief among Muslim populations remains under-researched (Frei-Landau et al., 2023), even though in Indonesia religious practices surrounding death and burial are a vital part of the grieving experience, as reflected in the diverse views of religious leaders on the handling of corpses during the COVID-19 pandemic (Nurhayati & Purnama, 2021). Similarly, studies of digital grief spaces have only shown that continuing bonds with the deceased can be maintained through social media, without a model explaining how this process unfolds (Akinyemi & Hassett, 2023). To the best of our knowledge, no review has integrated findings across religious traditions and types of death; consequently, no integrative framework is yet available to map the antecedents, mechanisms, and outcomes of religious meaning-making in grief as a religious and cultural practice rather than merely an individual psychological process.

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This systematic literature review addresses these gaps by synthesizing the antecedents, mechanisms, and outcomes of religious and cultural meaning-making in grief across religious traditions. Proceeding from the premise that religion is not a static set of rules but lived religion, that is, a psychological and cognitive resource that survivors actively deconstruct and reconstruct to render the seemingly meaningless meaningful, this study examines how theology, the hermeneutics of sacred texts, and physical and digital rituals are used, modified, or abandoned by survivors as they rationalize tragedy and maintain transcendent bonds. This review also identifies the sociocultural factors and death characteristics that serve as antecedents of either faith crises or religious resilience, and maps the spectrum of psychological and spiritual outcomes of this meaning-making process, ranging from the risk of complicated spiritual grief to the attainment of posttraumatic growth (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004). Accordingly, this review addresses three research questions: (1) What death characteristics and sociocultural factors serve as antecedents of faith crises or religious resilience in grief? (2) Through what mechanisms do survivors use, modify, or abandon religious and cultural resources to make meaning of loss? (3) What psychological and spiritual outcomes are associated with these meaning-making processes?

This review makes three contributions to the study of religion and culture. First, it integrates religious meaning-making across Islam, Christianity, Judaism, Buddhism, Hinduism, and secular worldviews, thereby offering a comparative and interfaith perspective aligned with the values of tolerance and religious moderation. Second, it examines digital mourning spaces (networked grief) as a contemporary arena of religious meaning-making. Third, it treats ritual as a cultural system rather than merely a clinical coping behavior, thereby situating grief within Koentjaraningrat's (2009) framework of the universal elements of culture, including religious systems, knowledge systems, social organization, technology, and the arts.

## 2. METHODS

This review followed the PRISMA 2020 guidelines (Page et al., 2021) using an a priori protocol; the protocol was not registered in a public registry (e.g., PROSPERO or OSF). The review proceeded from the establishment of SPIDER-based eligibility criteria through database searching, two-stage study selection, and data extraction to thematic synthesis.

### Eligibility Criteria: The SPIDER Framework and Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

The SPIDER framework (Sample, Phenomenon of Interest, Design, Evaluation, Research type; Cooke et al., 2012) was used to structure the eligibility logic because it is better suited than PICO, which presupposes intervention and comparator designs, to a grief literature dominated by qualitative and mixed-methods studies (Table 1).

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**Table 1.** Operationalization of the SPIDER Framework in This Review

| SPIDER Component | Operationalization in This Review |
|---|---|
| S (Sample) | Bereaved individuals (primarily adults) following the physical death of a loved one, from diverse religious, spiritual, secular, and cultural backgrounds; child participants in primary studies were also included. Professional grief (e.g., NICU nurses, mortuary workers) was excluded. |
| PI (Phenomenon of Interest) | Religious or spiritual meaning-making processes following traumatic, perinatal, or terminal loss, including theodicy coping, continuing bonds, physical and digital rituals, and spiritual distress. |
| D (Design) | Primary empirical studies that were qualitative (phenomenology, grounded theory, ethnography, narrative, netnography), quantitative (cross-sectional surveys, path analysis, correlational), or mixed-methods; reviews and meta-analyses served only as supporting literature. |
| E (Evaluation) | Complicated grief, prolonged grief disorder symptoms, post-loss depression, spiritual distress, quality of continuing bonds, and posttraumatic growth, according to each study's instruments or thematic categories. |
| R (Research Type) | Peer-reviewed empirical articles published between 2016 and 2026 in English or Indonesian, retrieved from Scopus, PubMed/MEDLINE, and OpenAlex. |

*Note.* The SPIDER components were applied as inclusion logic operating in conjunction with the substantive criteria detailed in Table 2. This framework guided screening decisions, particularly when a study's design or evaluation strategy was ambiguous.

Eligibility criteria were established a priori (Table 2). Studies were required to address grief following physical death (perinatal loss, terminal illness, or traumatic death such as violence, homicide, suicide, and political repression) and to engage substantively with religious meaning-making, theodicy, spiritual distress, ritual, continuing bonds, or faith-based growth. Occupational grief, ecological grief, non-death-related grief, and non-spiritual interventions were excluded.

**Table 2.** Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

| Dimension | Inclusion Criteria | Exclusion Criteria |
|---|---|---|
| Loss Context | Grief due to physical death: perinatal, terminal illness, or traumatic (violence, homicide, suicide, political violence). | Chronic illness without death, infertility, job loss, ecological grief (eco-anxiety), and occupational grief among medical staff, social workers, or mortuary workers. |
| Thematic Focus | Substantive analysis of religious/spiritual meaning-making, theodicy coping, spiritual distress, ritual (physical or digital), continuing bonds, or faith-based posttraumatic growth. | Measurement of general religiosity only (e.g., frequency of worship, denominational affiliation) without linkage to post-loss meaning construction. |
| Study Design | Primary empirical qualitative, quantitative, or mixed-methods studies; reviews and meta-analyses served only as supporting literature. | Editorials, opinion pieces, commentaries, case reports without systematic methods (qualitative case studies with systematic analysis were included), and grey literature. |
| Intervention | Spirituality- or religion-based interventions: spiritual accompaniment, chaplaincy, communal rituals, or spiritually integrated psychotherapy. | Pharmacological interventions (psilocybin, psychedelics), purely somatic/breathwork therapies, and technical medical SOPs without a meaning-making dimension. |
| Language & Access | English or Indonesian, full text available, published in peer-reviewed journals. | Abstracts only, unpublished theses/dissertations, paywalled articles without institutional access, poster abstracts, and editorial introductions. |
| Time Frame | Published 2016–2026 (the era of digital grief and disenfranchised grief). | Published before 2016. |

*Note. Criteria were established a priori and were not modified during the selection process. The exclusion of occupational grief was a methodological boundary to maintain sample homogeneity on primary grief experienced by directly bereaved survivors.*

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## Data Sources and Search Strategy

Searches were conducted in Scopus, PubMed/MEDLINE, and OpenAlex for publications from January 2016 to May 22, 2026, with publication-year limits applied in all three databases and document-type (journal articles) and language (English and Indonesian) limits applied in OpenAlex. A single identical query was used across all databases (Table 3): ("meaning making" OR "meaning-making" OR "meaning reconstruction") AND (religio* OR spiritual* OR faith* OR islam*) AND (bereave* OR grief OR grieving OR mourn* OR widow*). The term "islam*" was added to increase the visibility of Islamic studies (see Subsection 4.7). Scopus was accessed through Publish or Perish (PoP), with record counts cross-checked against the original Scopus counts, because the absence of an institutional subscription precluded bulk metadata export directly from the Scopus website; PoP thus served as a legitimate free intermediary. PubMed and OpenAlex were searched through their respective web interfaces. Year limits were applied in all databases; document-type and language filters (journal articles; English or Indonesian) were applied during data retrieval in OpenAlex and manually during screening for Scopus and PubMed. Records were merged in Rayyan for deduplication and screening. The query was deliberately restricted to meaning-making terms (meaning making and meaning reconstruction) so that the corpus would focus on the process of meaning reconstruction as the central construct of this review rather than on religious coping in general. The three databases were selected to cover the psychology and health literature (Scopus and PubMed/MEDLINE) as well as openly indexed interdisciplinary literature (OpenAlex).

**Table 3.** Search Strategy, Access Method, and Pre-screening by Database

| Database | Access Method | Pre-screening |
|---|---|---|
| Scopus | Publish or Perish (PoP) | Publication years 2016–2026 |
| PubMed/MEDLINE | Web interface | Publication years 2016–2026 |
| OpenAlex | Web interface | Years 2016–2026; journal articles; English and Indonesian |
| Query (identical across all three databases): ("meaning making" OR "meaning-making" OR "meaning reconstruction") AND (religio* OR spiritual* OR faith* OR islam*) AND (bereave* OR grief OR grieving OR mourn* OR widow*) | | |

*Note. The identical query string was run across all databases. Differences in access methods reflect adjustments to the technical infrastructure of each platform. The inclusion of "islam*" was a deliberate methodological choice to reduce algorithmic bias toward Judeo-Christian literature in Western databases.*

## Study Selection and PRISMA Flow

The initial search yielded a total of 264 records (Scopus n = 104; OpenAlex n = 115; PubMed n = 45). All metadata were exported to the collaborative screening software Rayyan. The selection process followed the PRISMA 2020 flow of identification, screening, and inclusion, with full-text eligibility assessment reported separately for transparency.

Rayyan removed 166 duplicates, leaving 98 records. Two researchers independently screened titles and abstracts, and disagreements were resolved through

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consensus or by a third reviewer. A total of 37 records were excluded for not matching the thematic focus (substantive analysis of religious/spiritual meaning-making, theodicy coping, spiritual distress, ritual [physical or digital], continuing bonds, or faith-based posttraumatic growth). Of the 61 full texts assessed, 22 were excluded (six for occupational grief, three for non-death-related loss, two for ecological grief, two for medical SOPs, two for non-spiritual interventions, six for failing to meet acceptable empirical reporting standards, and one review reclassified as supporting literature), leaving 39 included studies (Figure 1).

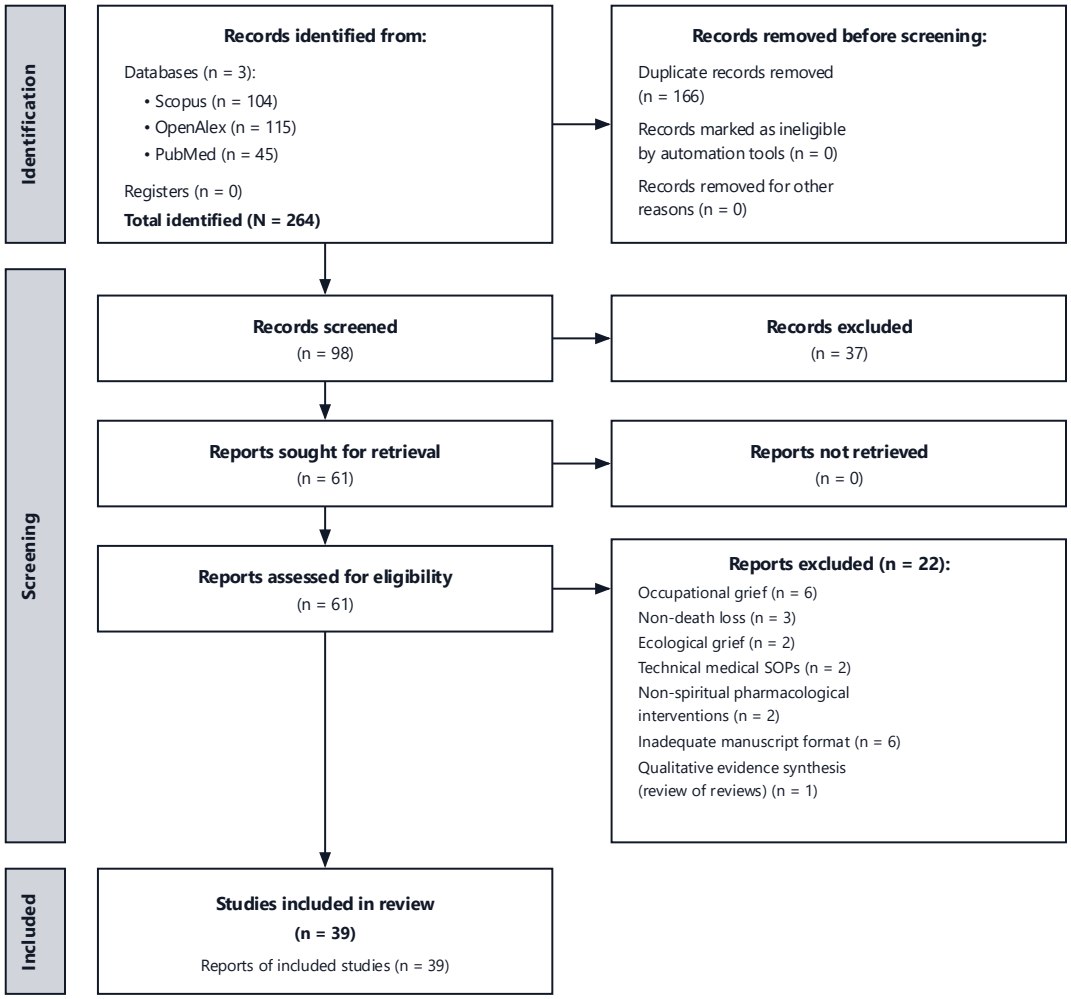



**Figure 1.** PRISMA 2020 Flow Diagram of the Study Selection Process. The diagram depicts the selection flow from 264 initial records across three databases to the 39 studies that met all eligibility criteria and were retained for the synthesis matrix.

*Note. Total included studies n = 39. The largest full-text exclusion categories were occupational grief (n = 6) and inadequate manuscript format (n = 6).*

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### Data Extraction

Data were extracted using a standardized form piloted on ten articles, covering bibliographic details, sample, design, operationalization of religious meaning-making, antecedents, outcomes and instruments, and direction of effects.

### Data Synthesis

Synthesis was conducted using thematic synthesis (Thomas & Harden, 2008) in three stages: line-by-line coding of study findings, development of descriptive themes, and generation of analytical themes. This process moved from descriptive tabulation to subgroup comparisons by tradition, type of death, and cultural context, culminating in integrative findings for each research question.

### Reflexivity Statement

The authors were trained in Western psychological science; consequently, the analytical categories used here (meaning-making, coping, posttraumatic growth) are not neutral with respect to non-Western theological phenomena. To limit this bias, the original theological terminology of each study (e.g., *Qada*, *Qadar*, *Qayama*, *sabr*, karma, *Kaddish*, *Bhakti*) was retained rather than translated into Western equivalents. Nevertheless, the overarching framework of this review remains rooted in Western psychology; genuine epistemic decentering would require collaborative theorizing led by scholars from within the traditions concerned.

## 3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

## RESULTS

### Search Results and Study Selection

As detailed in Subsection 2.3 and Figure 1, the search yielded 264 records (Scopus via PoP: n = 104; OpenAlex: n = 115; PubMed: n = 45); after deduplication, 98 unique articles were screened, 61 were assessed in full text, and 39 studies met all inclusion criteria and were retained for extraction and thematic synthesis.

### Study Characteristics

Descriptive analysis of the 39 included articles revealed systematic variation in methodological design, grief context, and theological-cultural background.

#### Methodological Design

Qualitative studies dominated the corpus (n = 20), most of them phenomenological, grounded theory, or ethnographic studies, followed by cross-sectional or path-analytic quantitative studies (n = 14) and mixed-methods studies (n = 5).

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### Loss Context

Eighteen studies addressed violent or sudden death (homicide, suicide, political violence, mass disasters), 11 addressed natural death due to terminal illness or old age, and 11 addressed disenfranchised grief, such as perinatal loss.

### Theological and Cultural Background

Fourteen studies examined Judeo-Christian traditions in Western settings, 14 examined Muslim populations in the Middle East and Southeast Asia, eight examined Eastern traditions and local wisdom (Buddhism, Hinduism, animism), and four examined secular or atheist populations. The keyword "islam*" may have increased the visibility of Muslim studies, although this effect cannot be quantified without a comparison search. Because a single study may cover more than one loss context or tradition (e.g., the Muslim and Christian samples in Valentia & Mansoer, 2019), the number of studies per loss-context and theological-cultural category may exceed the total of 39. Representative studies are summarized in Table 4.

Table 4. Synthesis Matrix of Representative Studies by Meaning-Making Theme (n = 16 of 39)

| Study (Country) | Loss Context; Tradition | Design | Mechanisms and Key Findings |
|---|---|---|---|
| ***Theme 1. Theodicy Negotiation and the Crisis of the Assumptive World*** | | | |
| Johnson & Zitzmann (2018) USA | Homicide; Christianity | Qualitative *grounded theory* | Spiritual connectedness fostered the reconstruction of self-identity; meaningful advocacy emerged as a transformative outcome. |
| Frei-Landau et al. (2023) Israel | Child homicide; Islam | Qualitative phenomenology | The dissonance between God's will and human violence was resolved through anticipation of justice on *Qayama*. |
| Kristiansen et al. (2016) Denmark | Spousal loss, migrant widows; Islam | Qualitative narrative | Grief was framed through *Qadar* and commemorative rituals; migration removed the support of communal rituals. |
| Valentia & Mansoer (2019) Indonesia | Political violence (Semanggi I); Islam/Christianity | Qualitative phenomenology | Complicated grief was transformed into human rights advocacy and demands for public accountability (tragic optimism). |
| Neimeyer & Burke (2017) USA | Traumatic death; Christianity | Quantitative | Anger at God and feeling punished correlated with post-loss depression. |
| Hussin & Aho (2024, 2025) Finland | Traumatic death of a child; secular/interfaith | Qualitative interviews | Polarized faith trajectories: some abandoned institutional religion, while others built personal spiritual bonds. |
| ***Theme 2. Trauma Hermeneutics through Transcendent Narratives*** | | | |
| Abo-Mokh et al. (2025) Israel | Child homicide in blood feuds; Islam | Qualitative narrative | Shame culture hindered initial meaning-making; belief in divine justice on *Qayama* became a path to reconstruction. |
| Eisenbruch (2020) Cambodia | Mass tragedy; Buddhism/animism | Qualitative ethnography | The tragedy was interpreted through cosmic karma and Buddhist prophecy linking it to historical trauma. |
| ***Theme 3. Externalization of Grief through Communal and Digital Rituals*** | | | |
| Gulo et al. (2022) Indonesia | Death of a family member; Protestant | Qualitative ethnography | Nias death rituals "edited" the life narrative and contained grief within a communal structure. |

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| Study (Country) | Loss Context; Tradition | Design | Mechanisms and Key Findings |
|---|---|---|---|
| | Christianity/Nias custom | | |
| Silverman (2020) USA | Mourning; Judaism | Qualitative ethnography | *Kaddish* and *Shiva* framed communal emotions and reshaped memories of the deceased. |
| Joshi (2026) India | Young widows; Hinduism (*Bhakti*) | Qualitative interviews | *Kirtan* and *satsang* provided emotional catharsis and social support amid the marginalization of widows. |
| Jahn & Spencer-Thomas (2018) Global/online | Suicide; interfaith | Qualitative thematic analysis | Experiences of sensing the presence of the deceased were interpreted as comforting continuing bonds. |
| Nasution & Frasetya (2025) Indonesia | Death of a public figure on TikTok; Islam | Qualitative netnography | Grief became collective; the death was rationalized (medical vs. sorcery [*santet*]) as *memento mori* preaching (*dakwah*). |
| ***Theme 4. Disenfranchised Grief and Secular Coping*** | | | |
| Vescovi et al. (2022) Brazil | Miscarriage/perinatal; Christianity | Qualitative thematic analysis | Spirituality and social media support became key strategies for making sense of infant death. |
| Vivekananda et al. (2024) Australia | Perinatal; interfaith | Mixed | Grief photography validated the infant's existence and facilitated posttraumatic growth. |
| Sawyer (2020) USA | Death of a close other; atheist/secular | Quantitative survey | Meaning was constructed through existential peace; anti-atheist discrimination predicted complicated grief. |

## Thematic Mapping of Meaning-Making Mechanisms

Data extracted from the 39 included articles mapped survivors' meaning-making processes into four interrelated thematic clusters. These clusters are not mutually exclusive: a single study may contribute substantively to more than one theme depending on the construct analyzed; therefore, the number of studies reported for each theme refers to the studies cited as primary evidence in the text.

### Theme 1. Theodicy Negotiation and the Crisis of the Assumptive World

Theme 1 was supported by nine studies, mostly in the context of traumatic death. Survivors' global meaning was severely shaken, often giving rise to negative religious coping, such as feeling punished by God or angry at the Divine (Neimeyer & Burke, 2017). In some studies, spiritual struggle preceded growth and the renewal of spiritual bonds (Johnson & Zitzmann, 2018; Hussin & Aho, 2025), whereas in others it co-occurred with high distress (Neimeyer & Burke, 2017), apparently depending on whether the struggle was resolved. Muslim survivors of homicide, blood feuds, or loss in the context of migration negotiated the dissonance between *Qada* and *Qadar* and human violence by reframing suffering as a divine test and awaiting justice on the Day of Judgment (*Qayama*) (Kristiansen et al., 2016; Frei-Landau et al., 2023; Abo-Mokh et al., 2025). A similar reorientation toward divine providence was reported among Black mothers of homicide victims in Trinidad (Huggins et al., 2020) and among suicide survivors in Ghana and Uganda (Knizek

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et al., 2021), whereas beliefs in ancestral malevolence or witchcraft predicted complicated spiritual grief in sub-Saharan Africa (Makgahlela, 2020).

**Theme 2. Trauma Hermeneutics through Transcendent Narratives**

Five studies reported the use of sacred texts and eschatological doctrines for cognitive restructuring, that is, a trauma hermeneutics in which scripture is reread to narrate God's presence amid suffering and to shift the frame from divine punishment to divine accompaniment (Hussein, 2017). Justice was relocated to the afterlife when worldly justice was absent (Frei-Landau et al., 2023; Abo-Mokh et al., 2025). Analogously, communities in Cambodia interpreted mass tragedy through karmic causality and Buddhist prophecy (Eisenbruch, 2020), and bereaved Christian parents narrated the death of a child as both a test and a confirmation of faith (Popaj, 2021).

**Theme 3. Externalization of Grief through Communal and Digital Rituals**

Eight studies showed that meaning-making was externalized through ritual: Nias death rituals blending Christian faith and custom (Gulo et al., 2022), *Kaddish* and *Shiva* in the Jewish tradition (Silverman, 2020), and *Bhakti* devotion in India (Joshi, 2026) sustained continuing bonds and validated experiences of sensing the presence of the deceased (sense of presence). Although continuing bonds are often associated with reduced prolonged grief (Jueckstock, 2018; Testoni et al., 2021), they may be adaptive or maladaptive depending on whether they are integrated into post-loss meaning or instead perpetuate unresolved yearning (Hewson et al., 2023). Clergy may also act as cultural translators of communal loss, as among the Marshallese community in Okinawa (Matsumoto, 2022). Ritual has expanded significantly into digital spaces: on TikTok, private grief becomes public discourse intersecting with debates about sorcery (*santet*), sin, and ongoing charity (*amal jariyah*) (Nasution & Frasetya, 2025), a shift accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic (Walsh, 2020; López-Acevo et al., 2026).

**Theme 4. Disenfranchised Grief and Secular Coping**

Data from six studies on marginalized grief and non-religious populations indicated a shift in the navigation of meaning. Following miscarriage and perinatal loss, the absence of established rituals prompted parents to create personal rituals, such as grief photography, to validate the infant's existence and their identity as parents (Vescovi et al., 2022; Vivekananda et al., 2024; Uncu et al., 2025), a disenfranchisement that became further compounded during the COVID-19 pandemic (De Vincenzo et al., 2024). In a U.S. atheist sample, spirituality was not associated with reduced complicated grief, whereas anti-atheist discrimination predicted poorer outcomes (Sawyer, 2020). Narrative photo-elicitation among bereaved caregivers of persons with dementia likewise showed that secular

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meaning-making can be cultivated through structured aesthetic practices (Yang et al., 2025), suggesting that growth can occur without religious dogma (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004), namely through tragic optimism (Frankl, 1984).

### Synthesis by Research Question

Antecedents. Death characteristics and sociocultural settings determined whether loss triggered a crisis of faith or religious resilience. Violent and sudden deaths were most consistently associated with theodicy ruptures (Neimeyer & Burke, 2017; Frei-Landau et al., 2023); suicide added stigma associated with the doctrine of unforgivable sin (Castelli Dransart, 2018); shame culture and silencing hindered early meaning-making after blood-feud homicides (Abo-Mokh et al., 2025); beliefs in ancestral malevolence or witchcraft were associated with complicated spiritual grief (Makgahlela, 2020); migration removed community-based ritual support (Kristiansen et al., 2016); the absence of recognized rituals after perinatal loss and during the COVID-19 pandemic deepened the disenfranchisement of grief (Uncu et al., 2025; De Vincenzo et al., 2024); and anti-atheist discrimination aggravated grief among non-religious survivors (Sawyer, 2020).

Meaning-making mechanisms. Across traditions, survivors used theology, sacred texts, and ritual in four ways, as illustrated in Themes 1–4: negotiating theodicy by reframing loss as divine decree or test (Kristiansen et al., 2016; Frei-Landau et al., 2023); rereading sacred and eschatological narratives to relocate justice to the afterlife or to karmic causality (Abo-Mokh et al., 2025; Eisenbruch, 2020); externalizing grief through communal and digital rituals (Silverman, 2020; Gulo et al., 2022; Nasution & Frasetya, 2025); and, when religious frameworks were absent or contested, constructing personal or secular rituals of meaning (Vivekananda et al., 2024; Sawyer, 2020). Some survivors modified or abandoned institutional religion while developing new personal spiritual bonds (Hussin & Aho, 2025).

Outcomes. The outcomes identified spanned a spectrum. At the harmful end, spiritual distress was associated with post-loss depression (Neimeyer & Burke, 2017) and complicated spiritual grief (Makgahlela, 2020), and parents who lost children to political violence exhibited complicated grief (Valentia & Mansoer, 2019). At the adaptive end, studies reported continuing bonds and comforting experiences of sensing the deceased's presence (Jahn & Spencer-Thomas, 2018), meaning-driven advocacy (Johnson & Zitzmann, 2018; Valentia & Mansoer, 2019), and posttraumatic growth (Vivekananda et al., 2024). Because the corpus was cross-sectional or captured only a single time point, these outcomes describe co-occurring patterns rather than causal effects.

## DISCUSSION

### An Integrative Model: Antecedents, Mechanisms, and Outcomes of Religious and Cultural Meaning-Making

Taken together, the findings of this review can be summarized in an integrative model linking the antecedents, mechanisms, and outcomes of religious and cultural

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meaning-making in grief. At the level of antecedents, death characteristics (violence, suicide, or perinatal loss) and sociocultural contexts (shame culture, migration, ritual availability, and community attitudes toward non-religious groups) determine how profoundly survivors' assumptive world is shaken. This disruption triggers four mechanisms that may operate simultaneously: theodicy negotiation, trauma hermeneutics, externalization of grief through communal and digital rituals, and personal or secular meaning-making when religious frameworks are unavailable. Outcomes then range along a spectrum, from spiritual distress and complicated spiritual grief to comforting continuing bonds, meaningful advocacy, and posttraumatic growth. The critical point lies in whether theodicy struggles can be resolved with the support of available theological and communal resources. Because the corpus is cross-sectional, this model constitutes a conceptual framework for further testing rather than evidence of causal relationships. The model is visualized in Figure 2. Subsections 4.2 to 4.5 discuss each mechanism in greater detail.

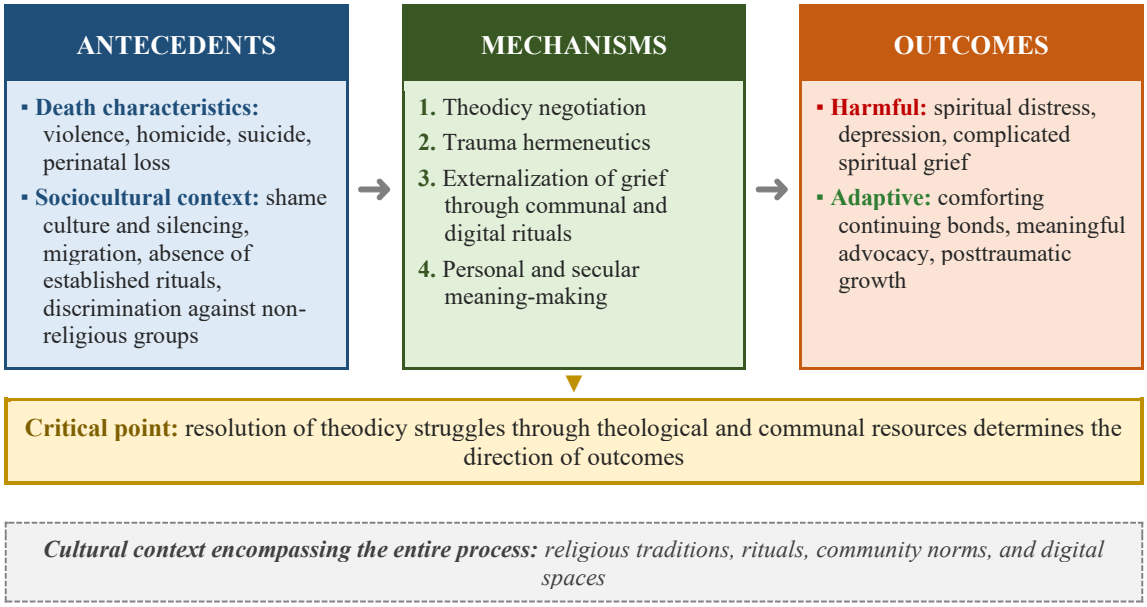



**Figure 2. I**ntegrative Model of Religious and Cultural Meaning-Making in Grief: Antecedents, Mechanisms, and Outcomes

## The Collapse of the Assumptive World and the Critical Point of Theodicy

Traumatic death due to violence, suicide, or mass tragedy profoundly shatters survivors' existential order, which for religious survivors turns into a crisis of theodicy that may trigger complicated spiritual grief (Burke & Neimeyer, 2014; Neimeyer & Burke, 2017). Suicide adds stigma associated with the doctrine of unforgivable sin (Castelli Dransart, 2018); yet across traditions, survivors often transform rigid beliefs into an adaptive personal spirituality: Muslim survivors reframed death as divine decree (*Qadar*) (Kristiansen et al., 2016; Frei-Landau et al., 2023), and survivors of political

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repression drew on faith to accept their loss while pursuing social justice (Valentia & Mansoer, 2019).

These findings both confirm and extend earlier syntheses. Becker et al. (2007) reported that most studies showed positive effects of religious or spiritual beliefs on grief but cautioned that methodological weaknesses precluded definitive conclusions, while Wortmann and Park (2008) identified meaning-making as a possible pathway linking religion to adjustment. The present synthesis suggests why this evidence appears inconsistent: religion does not function as a uniform protective factor but rather as an interpretive resource whose effects depend on whether theodicy struggles can be resolved. Unlike the predominantly White and Protestant samples of earlier reviews (Becker et al., 2007), this corpus includes Muslim, Buddhist, Hindu, Jewish, and secular survivors, showing that theodicy negotiation recurs across traditions in different theological forms, such as *Qadar* in Islam and karmic causality in Cambodian Buddhism. From the perspective of religious and cultural studies, theodicy crises unfold not only within the individual psyche but are also shaped by the theological vocabularies and communal norms available within a tradition: the concepts of *Qada* and *Qadar*, shame culture and silencing in Arab Muslim society (Abo-Mokh et al., 2025), and beliefs about ancestors and witchcraft in sub-Saharan Africa (Makgahlela, 2020) determine which questions may be posed to God and which answers are socially acceptable.

**Trauma Hermeneutics: Reconstructing Meaning through Transcendent Narratives**

The trauma hermeneutics identified in Theme 2 can be read as a strategy that preserves global meaning by reinterpreting rather than abandoning it (Park, 2010): survivors reread doctrines and sacred texts so that the loss can be accommodated within, rather than set against, their religious worldview. Eschatological frameworks become especially important when legal institutions fail. Following blood-feud homicides in Arab Muslim communities, projecting justice onto *Qayama* eased the tension between the urge for revenge and *sabr* (patience) and may help break cycles of violence (Abo-Mokh et al., 2025; Frei-Landau et al., 2023), whereas karmic interpretations in Cambodia (Eisenbruch, 2020) and poetic lament in Ethiopian churches (Hussein, 2017) offered theologically distinct paths toward acceptance. Trauma hermeneutics is thus both a cultural and a theological practice: sacred texts, laments, and prophecies are reinterpreted within particular interpretive communities, so that the resulting meanings depend on religious authority, local expressive genres such as poetic lament, and collective memory of historical trauma (Hussein, 2017; Eisenbruch, 2020).

**Externalization of Grief through Communal and Digital Rituals**

From the perspective of religious and cultural studies, ritual functions not merely as coping behavior but also as a cultural system through which communities collectively legitimize particular meanings of death. Nias pastoral-customary practices (Gulo et al., 2022), *Kaddish* and *Shiva* (Silverman, 2020), and *Bhakti* devotion (Joshi, 2026) sustain

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continuing bonds and validate experiences of sensing the presence of the deceased (Jahn & Spencer-Thomas, 2018; Steffen & Coyle, 2017; Testoni et al., 2021). Digital platforms extend this function: mourning on TikTok blends digital prayer, moral evaluation of the deceased, and *memento mori* preaching (Nasution & Frasetya, 2025), and the pandemic accelerated online communal mourning (Walsh, 2020; López-Acevo et al., 2026). Such spaces offer collective support for isolated survivors but may also expose them to contested and not always constructive theological debates.

**Disenfranchised Grief and Secular Coping**

Disenfranchised grief, such as that following perinatal loss, prompts survivors to create personal symbolism when no recognized rituals exist (Vescovi et al., 2022; Vivekananda et al., 2024; Uncu et al., 2025), and bereaved parents often reinterpret a child's brief life as a bearer of transcendent meaning (Popaj, 2021). Conversely, secular survivors confront the collapse of the assumptive world without an eschatological framework; Sawyer's (2020) findings suggest that the social context of religion, experienced as discrimination, may be more consequential than personal spirituality. Secular strategies such as reflection on the natural life cycle (Ahmadi & Zandi, 2021), tragic optimism (Frankl, 1984), and advocacy (Johnson & Zitzmann, 2018; Valentia & Mansoer, 2019; see also the supporting review by Bleoaja, 2025) indicate that growth can occur without religious dogma. Culturally, these findings show that the legitimacy of grief is determined by community norms about who may grieve and how: the absence of established rituals for perinatal loss (Uncu et al., 2025) and the stigma against non-religious survivors (Sawyer, 2020) reveal that disenfranchised grief is fundamentally a matter of socio-religious recognition rather than solely an individual psychological problem.

**Theoretical and Practical Implications**

Theoretically, this synthesis suggests extending Park's (2005) Meaning-Making Model to treat interfaith theological struggle as a core component rather than a peripheral variable, since theodicy appears to be a central process in negotiating global and situational meaning. Such a model should engage with the construct of prolonged grief disorder in the DSM-5-TR and ICD-11 (Prigerson et al., 2021; World Health Organization, 2022) without reducing theodicy struggles to symptomatology, although none of the included studies applied these diagnostic criteria.

Practically, these findings support Spiritually Integrated Psychotherapy. Clinicians should avoid pathologizing anger at God or a sense of the deceased's presence, make therapeutic use of clients' religious metaphors, co-create culturally sensitive rituals (Daniel, 2021), and mobilize faith communities as sources of social support (Vis & Boynton, 2024); structured aesthetic interventions offer one route into routine care (Yang et al., 2025). For religious leaders, including those in Indonesia, mosques, churches, and

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customary institutions can serve as culturally legitimate venues for grief support, and interfaith literacy about death can strengthen religious moderation in plural societies.

## Limitations

This review has several limitations. First, despite the use of the "islam*" anchor, English-language literature still predominated, introducing language and publication bias toward WEIRD (Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich, and Democratic) populations. Second, heterogeneous designs and non-comparable instruments (e.g., the Brief RCOPE [Pargament et al., 2011], researcher-developed scales, and general spirituality indices) precluded meta-analysis; this synthesis therefore maps conceptual mechanisms rather than verifying causality. Third, the corpus was cross-sectional, so claims about posttraumatic growth are conceptual and cannot distinguish genuine from defensive growth. Fourth, Indonesian databases (Garuda, SINTA) were not searched and paywalled articles were excluded; local studies and studies available only through subscription may therefore be underrepresented. In addition, a query requiring meaning-making terms (meaning making or meaning reconstruction) may have missed studies on religious coping or spiritual struggle in grief that do not use these terms, and specialized databases for religious studies and psychology, such as the ATLA Religion Database and APA PsycINFO, were not searched; future research should broaden the query and data sources accordingly. This review also did not conduct a formal methodological quality appraisal of the included studies, so findings were not weighted by the strength of evidence of each study; moreover, the protocol was not registered, and inter-rater agreement at the screening stage was not statistically calculated (e.g., using Cohen's kappa). Finally, the "islam*" anchor was not balanced by anchors for other traditions (e.g., christian*, jew*, buddh*, hindu*), resulting in search asymmetry.

## Future Research Agenda

Four directions for future research emerge. First, longitudinal studies spanning 5 to 10 years are needed to test whether faith-based posttraumatic growth is stable or merely a temporary defensive adaptation. Second, ecological momentary assessment and algorithmic content analysis could examine whether repeated exposure to digital grief content exacerbates complicated spiritual grief. Third, indigenous measures are needed for constructs such as *tawakal*, *sabar*, and karma, developed collaboratively by psychologists, theologians, and communities, moving beyond translated Western scales such as the Brief RCOPE. Fourth, emerging digital afterlife technologies, including AI-based "griefbots," raise theological and ethical questions for continuing bonds; comparative studies of how Muslim and other religious authorities, including those in Indonesia, evaluate such technologies would extend this review's findings on digital ritual.

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## CONCLUSION

This review of 39 studies demonstrates that grief, whether following traumatic, natural, or perinatal death, is not merely a clinical entity but a crisis of meaning negotiated through religious and cultural resources. At the level of antecedents, violent and sudden death, suicide stigma, shame culture, migration, the absence of established rituals, and anti-atheist discrimination emerged as conditions associated with crises of faith. At the level of mechanisms, survivors across religious traditions reconstructed meaning through (1) theodicy negotiation, that is, reframing tragedy as divine decree or test and awaiting eschatological justice (*Qayama*, karma, the afterlife); (2) trauma hermeneutics of sacred texts; (3) externalization of grief through communal and digital rituals that sustain continuing bonds; and (4) personal and secular meaning-making in contexts of disenfranchised and non-religious grief. These mechanisms yield a spectrum of outcomes, ranging from spiritual distress, depression, and complicated spiritual grief to comforting continuing bonds, meaningful advocacy, and posttraumatic growth. As summarized in the integrative model (Figure 2), whether theodicy struggles are resolved with the support of theological and communal resources appears to be the critical point between these trajectories.

Theoretically, these findings call for positioning theological struggle and culturally rooted ritual as central components of the Meaning-Making Model and for understanding grief as a religious and cultural practice rather than merely an individual psychological process. Practically, they caution against the reductive medicalization of grief and support approaches such as Spiritually Integrated Psychotherapy and community-based religious support, which enable survivors to question, grieve, and mobilize religion as a dynamic resource for rebuilding meaningful lives. For religious and cultural studies, mosques, churches, and customary institutions can serve as culturally legitimate spaces for grief support, and interfaith literacy about death and mourning can strengthen tolerance and religious moderation in plural societies such as Indonesia. Because the corpus was dominated by cross-sectional and English-language studies, these patterns should be read as associations rather than causal relationships; culturally grounded longitudinal studies, including in Indonesia, are needed to test the proposed model.

## DECLARATIONS

**Author Contributions:** The first author contributed to the conceptualization, methodology, writing of the original draft, and project administration. The second author conducted the literature search and screening, data curation, and formal analysis. The third author contributed to the screening and to reviewing and editing the manuscript. The fourth and fifth authors provided supervision, validated the screening process through third-reviewer adjudication, and reviewed and edited the manuscript. The sixth author

reviewed and edited the manuscript. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

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**Conflict of Interest**: The author(s) of this article declare no conflict of interest.

**Generative Artificial Intelligence Use Statement**: During the preparation of this work, the authors used Claude and Gemini to improve readability, assist with figure preparation, and support translation. After using these tools/services, the authors reviewed and edited the content as needed and take full responsibility for the content of the publication.

**Ethics Approval and Informed Consent**: Not applicable. This study is a systematic review of previously published, peer-reviewed literature and did not involve the recruitment of human participants, direct interaction with individuals, or the collection of new personal or identifiable data. Accordingly, ethical approval from an institutional review board and informed consent were not required. All included studies were accessed through publicly available databases and were cited and reported in accordance with academic integrity and ethical standards for research synthesis.

**Data Availability:** No new primary data were generated in this study. All data analyzed were derived from the published studies cited in this article; the data extraction form and screening records are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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