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Spirituality and psycho-organic regulation*

Abstract

Traumatic experiences are very important for the psycho-organic regulation of an individual. These experiences can very profoundly mark an individual, especially if they happened in childhood. They can be very disruptive and they scream for healing. In this process of healing spirituality plays a crucial role. Religiousness and sacramental life can be an essential regulatory system in the establishment of a functional psycho-organic response and spiritual life.

Keywords

psycho-organic spiritual structure, trauma, relational trauma, grace, sacramental life.

* Acknowledgement: »The authors acknowledge the partial financial support from the Slovenian Research Agency (project No. J5-9349).«

1. Introduction

In this article, we will explicitly focus on recent neurobiological studies and how they relate to contemporary therapy, especially in the field of psycho-organic regulation of traumatic experiences and their treatment, in which spirituality plays a crucial role. Research in this area, in many ways, complements modern psychoanalytic thought, which also includes religiousness. One can say that these studies have finally consolidated a new analytical paradigm which presupposes that the fundamental motivational force of human development is the relationship to another, and by all means also to the Transcendental. In particular, these studies of the therapeutic process show extraordinary collaboration among various parts of human brain and their complex relations with the whole body and spirituality, which in this case, enables functional development and heals even the most difficult complications. Both in the functional as well as in the non-functional psycho-organic spiritual structure we always speak of internal regulation or the ability to create an inner balance – spirituality being its central and essential component. The rudiments of this complex interaction are supposed to be, in many ways, established at birth; later, however, it is built on the basis of experiences that the body absorbs and internally builds on, since these experiences are the fundamental constitutive material which the individual's psychic and spiritual structure is made of. At the same time, these experiences also represent the basis of functional (or non-functional) integration between the brain, mind, spirituality, and physical and organic sensations.

2. Traumatic experience

When we speak of traumatic experience, we must pay particular attention not only to the traumatic event itself, which can be very shocking and frightening and often related to crime, but also to memories, sensations, affect, images, experiences, and especially to the meaning of these experiences for the victim; how the victim perceives these experiences colored by traumatic feelings, which are imprinted in brain structure, in the limbic system, especially in the amygdala, where sensory, organic and somatic memories are stored.¹ The body

¹ J. Briere, C. Scott. *Principles of trauma therapy: A guide to symptoms, evaluation, and treatment, 2nd ed*; Thousand Oaks 2014, Sage Publications, p. 9–25; P. Frewen, R. Lanius, *Healing*

remembers: even the most deeply frozen affects, along with body sensations that are dissociated, remain somehow in the body, and it is usually only a question of time when, and in what situation or with whom, they will be re-awakened. The individual really has no or little control of this process, s/he only knows when flashbacks and phobias, sometimes panic attacks appear, usually when the individual does not even expect it.²

2.1. Mysterious body language

Lately, research on traumas and brain responses has been extensively expanded in the field of brain functioning. A number of research studies which have been done or are underway,³ focus on the processing of information about traumatic experiences both in the left and the right brain hemisphere, as well as their connections to the limbic system. Research shows⁴ that the right hemisphere –

the traumatized self: Consciousness, neuroscience, and treatment, New York 2015, W. W. Norton & Company, p. 101–49; B. Rothschild, *The body remembers volume 2: Revolutionizing trauma treatment*, New York 2017, W. W. Norton & Company, p. 53–71; A. Schore, *Affect regulation and the origin of the self: The neurobiology of emotional development*, New York 2016, Taylor & Francis/Routledge, p. 34–56; G. L. Schmelzer, *Journey through trauma: A trail guide to the 5-phase cycle of healing repeated trauma*, New York 2018, Avery Publishing Group, p. 181–225.

² B. Rothschild, *The body remembers volume 2: Revolutionizing trauma treatment*, New York 2017, W. W. Norton & Company, p. 74–96; G. L. Schmelzer, *Journey through trauma: A trail guide to the 5-phase cycle of healing repeated trauma*, New York 2018, Avery Publishing Group, p. 211–25.

³ P. Fonagy, E. G. Gergely, E. L. Jurist, M. Target, *Affect regulation, mentalization, and the development of the self*, New York 2007, Other Press, p. 137–42; J. B. Kaplow, C. S. Widom, *Age of onset of child maltreatment predicts long-term mental health outcomes*, »Journal of Abnormal Psychology« 116 (2007), p. 176–87; B. Rothschild, *The body remembers volume 2: Revolutionizing trauma treatment*, New York 2017, W. W. Norton & Company, p. 74–83; A. Schore, *Affect regulation and the origin of the self: The neurobiology of emotional development*, New York 2016, Taylor & Francis/Routledge, p. 167–76; D. J. Siegel, T. P. Bryson, *The whole-brain child: Revolutionary strategies to nurture your child's developing mind*, New York 2011, Delacorte Press, p. 217–34; B. van der Kolk, *The body keeps the score: Mind, brain and body in the transformation of trauma*, New York 2014, Penguin Books, p. 65–73.

⁴ P. Fonagy, G. Gergely, E. L. Jurist, M. Target, *Affect regulation, mentalization, and the development of the self*, New York 2007, Other Press, p. 79–84; B. Rothschild, *The body remembers volume 2: Revolutionizing trauma treatment*, New York 2017, W. W. Norton & Company, p. 74–86; D. J. Siegel, T. P. Bryson, *The whole-brain child: Revolutionary strategies to nurture your child's developing mind*, New York 2011, Delacorte Press, p. 189–99; B. van der Kolk, *The body keeps the score: Mind, brain and body in the transformation of trauma*, New York 2014, Penguin Books, p. 59–67.

especially the right half of the cortex – plays a significant role in the storage of sensory, affective information, as well as the spiritual dimensions. Sensory information and affects travel from the limbic system (the amygdala) to the right hemisphere, where the images of mental contents are created together with the accompanying affects. The left hemisphere, on the other hand, is more connected to the hippocampus. Usually it depends on speech skills or language when processing information. Various authors⁵ found that in the case of trauma, the ability of speech can be highly inhibited, but terror remains, deeply implanted in the individual's psycho-organic system. In other words, it could be said that when traumatic experiences remain unspoken and unprocessed in the amygdala, they can always become engrained in sensory, organic (somatic) memory.⁶ These feelings or experiences, which the victim associates with the original trauma, continue to flow into the right hemisphere. These irrepressible physical, organic feelings can appear in entirely different situations and with completely different people, but their intensity remains the same (or almost the same) as in the original situation. The victim of these feelings can thus feel completely helpless with similar sensory sensations which suddenly emerge, or may freeze like in the original trauma, experiencing an utter lack of control in the situation, even though s/he is now adult, and the trauma happened in their youth.⁷ From then on, the body speaks silently, it speaks its own language, largely unknown, particularly when it falls ill because it simply cannot cope anymore; then all its various symptoms speak of pain, of distress, of hidden trauma; but this language

⁵ See: A. Schore, *Affect regulation and the origin of the self: The neurobiology of emotional development*, New York 2016, Taylor & Frances/Routledge, p. 79-113; D. J. Siegel, *The mindful brain: Reflection and attunement in the cultivation of well-being*, 2007 New York, W. W. Norton & Company, p. 63-82; B. van der Kolk, *The body keeps the score: Mind, brain and body in the transformation of trauma*, New York 2014, Penguin Books, p. 53-72.

⁶ B. Rothschild, *The body remembers volume 2: Revolutionizing trauma treatment*, New York 2017, W. W. Norton & Company, p. 79-92.

⁷ T. Repič Slavič, C. Gostečnik, *Relational family therapy as an aid toward resolving the trauma of sexual abuse in childhood in the process of separation in the couple relationship*, »Journal of marital and family therapy« 43 (2017) 3, p. 422-34.; R. Cvetek, *Bolečina preteklosti: Travma, medosebni odnosi, družina, terapija: Pain of the past: Trauma, interpersonal relationships, family, therapy*, Celje 2009, Društvo Mohorjeva družba, Celjska Mohorjeva družba, p. 19-22; A. Schore, *Affect regulation and the origin of the self: The neurobiology of emotional development*, New York 2016, Taylor & Frances/Routledge, p. 97-112; B. Rothschild, *The body remembers volume 2: Revolutionizing trauma treatment*, New York 2017, W. W. Norton & Company, p. 123-42.

is sometimes so incomprehensible that an individual, and especially people around him, need a lot of time to translate the body language into their own.⁸

The feelings of trauma or abuse and related emotional atmosphere, as has already been said, can merely be reminiscent of the original trauma, but nevertheless they can wake up a whole spectrum of reactions for which even the victim of the trauma can initially not find the meaning. The path to the left hemisphere is also often blocked. The victim is not able to articulate a traumatic feeling or affect, since there is no appropriate language. We can say that the body speaks over and over again, because it always speaks the truth and only the truth since it feels the sensations which have become the central part of the individual's psychic structure; it speaks with full force, unstoppable and sincere, until the psyche has processed and integrated these sensations, but this can only happen after it has allowed the body to stabilize by means of affect regulation. Inner peace, which is provided by spirituality, faith, and sacramental life, plays a vital role in affect regulation. And when this is not the case, the individual will try to calm his body, which from time to time screams out of pain, in every way possible: he will try to silence it with self-medication, alcohol, drugs, starvation, binge eating, etc.⁹ The focus of our article will therefore be the dynamics of healing and the element of spirituality, which can greatly contribute to the process of healing. Firstly, let us see how the brain works, what its key functions are and how they are carried out.

2.2. Parents' body language

The relationship with persons who cares for the child (usually mother) has the most important impact on the development of a child's brain. Here we are primarily talking about the mother's, as well as the father's presence, and especially their compassion for children.¹⁰ If the parents, these two icons in the child's life, fail or are, for any reason, not present, the child can over and over again experience a deep feeling of inadequacy, that he does not deserve parental attention and care, which can leave, in him, a disastrous sense of shame

⁸ G. Schmelzer, *Journey through trauma: A trail guide to the 5-phase cycle of healing repeated trauma*, New York 2018, Avery Publishing Group, p. 227–35.

⁹ B. Rothschild, *The body remembers volume 2: Revolutionizing trauma treatment*, New York 2017, W. W. Norton & Company, p. 29–49.

¹⁰ D. Stern, *Forms of vitality: Exploring dynamic experience in psychology, arts, psychotherapy and development*, New York 2010, Oxford University Press, p. 123–34.

and inferiority, even unworthiness.¹¹ Therefore, in this sense, the comforting words of the prophet Isaiah are so important, saying that even if the mother forgets the son she has born and has no compassion for him, God will never forget him (Is 49:15).¹² And according to this, the child, regardless of the situation in which he is born or growing up, can always turn to God, who does not forget, who does not leave, who does not discard anyone, but even takes care of us, and this is absolutely unconditional. This is not only an exceptionally profound thought or idea, but an indisputable promise that He is our constant companion.¹³ In this, our most primal yearning for security and protection, as well as for love and for the satisfaction of the deepest, also spiritual psycho-organic contents, is realized.

In other words, we can, again and again, realize how deeply we can be touched by Divine benevolence, and how spirituality or religiousness in the widest sense of the word could be involved as the most healing power.¹⁴ In this way, religious experiences could also be consolidated, and thus stored, in the child's

¹¹ *Recovering intimacy in love relationships: A clinician's guide*, J. Carlson, L. Sperry (eds.), New York 2010, Routledge; D. J. Siegel, T. P. Bryson, *The whole-brain child: Revolutionary strategies to nurture your child's developing mind*, New York 2011, Delacorte Press, p. 83.

¹² Scripture quotations from the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible are copyright© 1999 by Oxford University Press, Inc.

¹³ M. Cvetek, B. Simonič, R. Cvetek, *Stvaranje odnosa prema Bogu i Mariji iz perspektive teorije privrženosti*, »Bogoslovska smotra« 78 (2008) 3, p. 621–49.

¹⁴ A. Rizzuto, *Why did Freud reject God?: A psychodynamic interpretation*, New Haven 1998, Yale University Press, p. 33–42; A. Rizzuto, *Commentary: Discussion of Granqvist's article 'On the relation between secular and divine relationships: An emerging attachment perspective and a critique of the 'depth' approaches'*. »International Journal for the Psychology of Religion« 16 (2006) 1, p. 19–28; A. Rizzuto, *Freud and the spoken word: Speech as a key to the unconscious*, New York 2015, Routledge, p. 127–39; B. Simonic, T. Rahne Mandelj, R. Novsak, *Religious-related abuse in the family*, »Journal of Family Violence« 28 (2013) 4, p. 347; B. Simonič, N. Rijavec Klobučar, *Experiencing positive religious coping in the process of divorce: A qualitative study*, »Journal of Religion and Health« 56 (2017) 5, p. 1651; D. Jerebic, *The role of Catholic communities in forming the image of the merciful God: arriving at the image of the merciful God through the previous experience of mercy in interpersonal relationships*, in: *Challenges to religious education in contemporary society*, J. Garmaz, A. Čondić (eds.), Split 2017, Crkva u svijetu, p. 324; R. Petkovšek, *Nasilje in etika križa v luči eksistencialne analitike in mimetične teorije: Violence and ethics of the cross in the light of existential analytics and mimetic theory*, »Bogoslovni vestnik« 74 (2014) 4, p. 589–90; D. Jerebic, S. Jerebic, *Različni modeli zdravljenja odvisnosti in relacijska družinska terapija: Various models of addiction treatment and relational family therapy*, »Bogoslovni vestnik« 72 (2012) 2, p. 308.

psyche.¹⁵ For healthy development, as we have already said, a healthy mother-child interaction is necessary. Feldman and colleagues¹⁶ discovered that the heartbeats of the mother and the child are very similar during their interaction. Mother and child show also significant mutual neural coupling during their interactions, the contingent exchange of social signals brings their brains into temporal alignment.¹⁷ It is therefore the exceptionally strong language of two bodies, two organisms that together create the language of integration between the psyche and the body, and allow the development of synaptic, neural connections between the brain and other parts of the body.¹⁸

This is why it is so important for parents to first develop a mechanism by means of which they regulate their own inner world, in particular their difficult affections, before they can fully devote themselves to a child who may be emotionally very demanding. In doing so, spirituality and faith can greatly help them, since they allow them to calm themselves. The participation in religious rituals can help a lot, but sacramental life is even more important; for example, in Communion, when God himself enters the human body, sanctifying, calming and internally reorganizing it, so that the individual is able to bring peace also to others. Above all, this is a constant challenge for parents who, as we have said, are especially called to be able not only to bring peace into the child's internal psycho-organic structure but also to help him develop an internal self-regulatory system, in the construction of which spirituality can be of a great help.

¹⁵ A. Schore, *Affect regulation and the origin of the self: The neurobiology of emotional development*, New York 2016, Taylor & Frances/Routledge, p. 146–59; D. J. Siegel, T. P. Bryson, *The whole-brain child: Revolutionary strategies to nurture your child's developing mind*, New York 2011, Delacorte Press, p. 79–83; J. Briere, C. Scott, *Principles of trauma therapy: A guide to symptoms, evaluation, and treatment, 2nd ed*; Thousand Oaks 2014, Sage Publications, p. 151–52.

¹⁶ R. Feldman, R. Magori-Cohen, G. Galili, M. Singer, Y. Louzoun, *Mother and infant coordinate heart rhythms through episodes of interaction synchrony*, »Infant Behavior & Development« 34 (2011) 4, p. 571–76.

¹⁷ V. Leong, E. Byrne, K. Clackson, S. Georgieva, S. Lam, S. Wass, *Speaker gaze increases information coupling between infant and adult brains*, »PNAS Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America« 114 (2017) 50, p. 13294.

¹⁸ D. J. Siegel, *Brainstorm: The power and purpose of the teenage brain*, New York 2013, Penguin Group, p. 173–89; S. P. Robins, *Exploring intimacy: Cultivating healthy relationships through insight and intuition*, Lanham 2010, Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, p. 53–81; J. Briere, C. Scott, *Principles of trauma therapy: A guide to symptoms, evaluation, and treatment, 2nd ed*; Thousand Oaks 2014, Sage Publications, p. 136–42.

For example, biblical stories which are the source of inner calm, reassure the child and create models worth emulating and feelings of security and protection.

2.3. The cradle of body language

At this point we can clearly state that in order to develop healthily children definitely need the mechanism that can regulate all the affects which could be overwhelming in any case.¹⁹ Even at the most tender age, regulation is extremely important and can always be transmitted through the calm, regulated body language of parents, through their body sensations that are transmitted to the child; this language is never quite forgotten. This is why the family and the home which the child is born into are so extremely important: the kind of spirituality they cultivate, what is the environment like, whether it is safe enough, whether there is an emotional atmosphere of being accepted and loved, whether the child can functionally develop in this environment, whether parents encourage and confirm him, or whether it is an environment in which fear, distress, tension and, sometimes, sheer terror prevail.²⁰

Here we explicitly think of, the pure and simple mother's posture when she leans over her baby: what is this posture like? is the mother tense, sad, full of worry and anxiety, or does she pay full attention to the child? Does the mother try to first regulate her internal psycho-organic state, her restlessness and frustration, as well as the anger that may have been caused by the environment, or are all her states awakened by the child? As long as the mother does not deal with these organic states, she cannot truly feel the child, let alone pacify him; and it is almost impossible for her to plant in the child at least the basic seeds of internal organic regulation of his non-transferable psycho-organic states that he is not yet able to handle. Let us emphasize once again that this is not only

¹⁹ S. P. Robins, *Exploring intimacy: Cultivating healthy relationships through insight and intuition*, Lanham 2010, Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, p. 213–23.

²⁰ B. Simonič, N. Rijavec Klobučar, *Attachment perspective on marital dissolution and relational family therapy*, »Journal of divorce & remarriage« 58 (2017) 3, p. 166; C. Gostečnik, T. Repič, M. Cvetek, R. Cvetek, *The salvational process in relationships: A view from projective-introjective identification and repetition compulsion*, »Journal of Religion and Health« 48 (2009) 4, p. 497–500; C. Gostečnik, T. Repič Slavič, S. Poljak Lukek, R. Cvetek, *Trauma and religiousness*, »Journal of Religion and Health« 53 (2014) 3, p. 694; D. Jerebic, *The role of Catholic communities in forming the image of the merciful God: arriving at the image of the merciful God through the previous experience of mercy in interpersonal relationships*, in: *Challenges to religious education in contemporary society*, J. Garmaz, A. Čondić (eds.), Split 2017, Crkva u svijetu, p. 328.

about the mother's ability to calm the child: it is about an even more important function – the construction of the child's self-regulatory mechanisms, by means of which he will be able, later in life, to regulate himself, especially in difficult emotional/psycho-organic states that he will inevitably encounter.²¹

3. The regulation of the organic–affective system

For a better understanding, we must especially emphasize the importance of spirituality in the establishment of the affect–regulation system, but, first of all, we need to get acquainted with the structure and function of the sympathetic and parasympathetic nervous systems, on the basis of which it is possible to understand how neglect and abuse in childhood can jeopardize and change affect regulation, as well as the style of attachment. In face of danger, the amygdala triggers an alarm system that alerts the psycho-organic system to a threat; and immediately, the excretion of the stress hormone cortisol begins, which enables the individual to counteract the danger. Following this, the fight-or-flight response is triggered, one of the basic defensive mechanisms that protect individuals against threatening danger.²² Here it is of utmost importance to emphasize that when the victim – especially in the case of a child – is exposed to chronic stress, violence or abuse, certain defense mechanisms are established, which can be re-triggered with full force in similar situations later in life. This is why it is so critical that the victim of, for example, a traumatic experience is confronted with trauma, in order to associate the traumatic experience with the symptoms that occur in the present, and to begin solving the

²¹ *The healing power of emotion: Affective neuroscience, development, and clinical practice*, D. Fosha, D. J. Siegel, M. F. Solomon (eds.), New York 2009, W. W. Norton & Company; D. J. Siegel, T. P. Bryson, *The whole-brain child: Revolutionary strategies to nurture your child's developing mind*, New York 2011, Delacorte Press, p. 79-82; C. Gostečnik, T. Repič Slavič, S. Poljak Lukek, R. Cvetek, *Trauma and religiousness*, »Journal of Religion and Health« 53 (2014) 3, p. 694; B. Rothschild, *The body remembers volume 2: Revolutionizing trauma treatment*, New York 2017, W. W. Norton & Company, p. 53-57; J. Briere, C. Scott. *Principles of trauma therapy: A guide to symptoms, evaluation, and treatment, 2nd ed*; Thousand Oaks 2014, Sage Publications, p. 165-79.

²² *The healing power of emotion: Affective neuroscience, development, and clinical practice*, D. Fosha, D. J. Siegel, M. F. Solomon (eds.), New York 2009, W. W. Norton & Company; A. Schore, *Affect regulation and the origin of the self: The neurobiology of emotional development*, New York 2016, Taylor & Frances/Routledge, p. 388-95; C. Gostečnik, T. Repič Slavič, S. Poljak Lukek, R. Cvetek, *Trauma and religiousness*, »Journal of Religion and Health« 53 (2014) 3, p. 694.

old defense mechanisms that were established at the time of the trauma. Here we should mention freezing, panic attacks, flashbacks, anxiety, and a whole spectrum of bodily vibrations and sensations. In all these cases, the body will speak even louder, from time to time screaming with pain; or other persons might experience it as if it were revenge on their bodies for the cruel sensations it once experienced.²³

3.1. Defense mechanisms – physical responses to trauma

If we summarize recent research,²⁴ we can see that the child's psychobiological response to trauma is equipped with two separate response patterns: high arousal and dissociation. In the initial stage of a threat, an alarm reaction is triggered in an infant, in which the sympathetic part of the autonomic nervous system is extraordinarily quickly activated; heart rate, blood pressure, and alertness are increased, and breathing is accelerated. The child expresses his distress with crying and then screaming. In the state of fear and terror, the sympathetic part of the nervous system is aroused, which is reflected in an increased level of the main stress hormone, corticotrophin, which regulates the activity of noradrenaline and adrenaline. If the child even in this state of painful screaming does not get an appropriate response, then s/he literally freezes in his intrapsychic world, which leads to the establishment of an avoidant attachment style. This causes deep distrust in the environment, even the religious, spiritual experiences, because the child feels that he cannot rely on anyone. There is no God or any other authority whom the child can trust. Therefore, in adulthood, he will also be suspicious about others and will freeze whenever he will experience distress and disappointment, sadness and yearning, anger and rage, but he will over and over again suppress all these feelings, since he will be afraid of even

²³ P. Ogden, J. Fisher, *Sensorimotor psychotherapy: Interventions for trauma and attachment*, New York 2015, W. W. Norton & Company, p. 357–62.

²⁴ P. Fonagy, E. Gyorgy Gergely, Elliot L. Jurist and Mary Target, *Affect regulation, mentalization, and the development of the self*, New York 2007, Other Press, p. 139–51; *The healing power of emotion: Affective neuroscience, development, and clinical practice*, D. Fosh, D. J. Siegel, M. F. Solomon (eds.), New York 2009, W. W. Norton & Company; P. Ogden, J. Fisher, *Sensorimotor psychotherapy: Interventions for trauma and attachment*, New York 2015, W. W. Norton & Company, p. 74–95; A. Schore, *Affect regulation and the origin of the self: The neurobiology of emotional development*, New York 2016, Taylor & Frances/Routledge, p. 9–45.

greater disappointment, and hence new vulnerability.²⁵ In this way, even the spiritual experiences and religious rituals could present a threat that the individual should avoid.

3.2. Dissociative mechanisms

Dissociation is, in this sense, one of the most effective reactions that occurs due to an inadequate response of one's environment.²⁶ A child who has not received an appropriate response, withdraws to get rid of the stimuli of the outside world. He simply escapes to his inner world. In helpless and hopeless stressful situations, he and his initiative have been stopped. When his attempts to improve the interaction fail, he often loses control of the situation, so he tries to avoid attention by withdrawing and becoming invisible. He withdraws and self-soothes. This solution causes a deep gap in the mutual regulatory process, which should be represented by the interaction between the mother and the child, the interaction that is supposed to be the basis of intersubjectivity. Dissociation thus represents separation from an unbearable situation: an exit where there is no exit, and the last refuge and shelter.²⁷ This primary regulatory process of maintaining the homeostasis of the organism is accompanied by metabolic exclusion, and the low level of activity is indicated by numbness, avoidance, withdrawal, and decreased affect. In these cases, the child stares in space with the so-called glazed eyes.²⁸

²⁵ T. Repič Slavič, Christian Gostečnik, *Relational family therapy as an aid toward resolving the trauma of sexual abuse in childhood in the process of separation in the couple relationship*, »Journal of marital and family therapy« 43 (2017) 3, p. 425–31; B. Simonič, *Nežnost in njen pomen v medosebnih odnosih in v pastoralni: Tenderness and its meaning in interpersonal relationships and pastoral care* »Bogoslovni vestnik« 78 (2018) 1, p. 214–15. G. L. Schmelzer, *Journey through trauma: A trail guide to the 5-phase cycle of healing repeated trauma*, New York 2018, Avery Publishing Group, p. 197–212; P. Ogden, J. Fisher, *Sensorimotor psychotherapy: Interventions for trauma and attachment*, New York 2015, W. W. Norton & Company, p. 74–95.

²⁶ B. Rothschild, *The body remembers volume 2: Revolutionizing trauma treatment*, New York 2017, W. W. Norton & Company, p. 29–47.

²⁷ P. Fonagy, E. Gyorgy Gergely, Elliot L. Jurist and Mary Target, *Affect regulation, mentalization, and the development of the self*, New York 2007, Other Press, p. 161–292; A. Schore, *Affect regulation and the origin of the self: The neurobiology of emotional development*, New York 2016, Taylor & Frances/Routledge, p. 99–126.

²⁸ P. Frewen, R. Lanius, *Healing the traumatized self: Consciousness, neuroscience, and treatment*, New York 2015, W. W. Norton & Company, p. 101–39.

The neurobiology of the dissociative reaction is therefore entirely different from the rapid arousal reaction. In this passive state, the level of endogenous opiates in the child's developing body increases, reducing and dissolving the pain, and similarly, the behavior-inhibiting stress hormones such as cortisol, dopamine, serotonin and others. Intense parasympathetic agitation and arousal enable the child to maintain homeostasis from the inner state of sympathetic agitation.²⁹ In the traumatic state, both the sympathetic part of a developing autonomic nervous system that spends energy, and the parasympathetic part that conserves energy are too active, causing the state of freeze, which, in later life, can always be awakened in a variety of traumatic experiences, although there is no real reason for doing so. In these situations, the child is helpless, his body is far from equipped with regulatory mechanisms that would enable him to respond healthily and functionally to such complex situations. The individual can forever carry these unresolved dynamics and in adulthood he tries to heal these old wounds. And here comes the mercy of redemption, the grace of sacramental life that heals a memory that can be repeated with full force in the cruelest form and awakens old wounds and complications in most unpredictable moments. Some people, in this sense, stop attending religious events or church liturgy, not even knowing exactly why, but they just cannot bear it, or more precisely, cannot stand the smell of the church, a big crowd, having a sensations of being captivated.

3.3. Spirituality and relational trauma

Trauma that is caused in relationships, especially in the early childhood, is particularly painful. Even as a child, one can experience whole episodes of relational traumas and process information from the external and internal environment in his own way, although he has no real possibility to regulate his difficult affections, which then remain dysregulated.³⁰ He is left at the mercy of this chaotic state. And as long as the chaotic situation is not controlled and regulated, he has to direct all his not-yet-developed resources – that are supposed to help regula-

²⁹ B. Rothschild, *The body remembers volume 2: Revolutionizing trauma treatment*, New York 2017, W. W. Norton & Company, p. 76–85; A. Schore, *Affect regulation and the origin of the self: The neurobiology of emotional development*, New York 2016, Taylor & Frances/Routledge, p. 39–51.

³⁰ B. Rothschild, *The body remembers volume 2: Revolutionizing trauma treatment*, New York 2017, W. W. Norton & Company, p. 9–24.

tion – to its reorganization. On his own, he connects the rhythmic structures of these states and tries to achieve harmony. And so, he cannot do anything else; he cannot give his attention to social and emotional learning; his play or his initiative and creativity can be suppressed and limited, while spontaneity, taking risks and trying new things can completely disappear from his repertoire. In addition, his synchronization or his attempts at it are embedded in his right corticolimbic brain areas. Not only trauma but also the child's defense response to it are engrained in his right brain implicit–working memory system.³¹

In infants, we can observe the disastrous impact of the long–standing and cumulative states of being overwhelmed: the arousal and dissociation on the growth of their psycho–organic structure. The conservation–withdrawal mode of survival triggers and brings an extreme change of bioenergy into the developing brain. In critical periods, it inhibits synaptic integration. The integration process, which is instrumental in expanding synaptic links in the postnatal development of the brain, requires an extra amount of essential nutrients and an enormous amount of energy. A child's brain which is chronically forced into a hypometabolic state to survive, therefore has little energy to grow.³² This is why such children cannot develop or establish active and functional connections among various parts of the brain, and even, to a lesser extent, among the brain and other parts of the body that are essential not only for the regulation of psycho–organic states but also for healthy functioning, such as perception and processing of external and internal stimuli, etc. All these patterns can be passed on to one's adulthood, when difficult, painful, sometimes shockingly gruesome memories unpredictably arise, which can greatly undermine one's everyday life. It takes a lot of time and internal battles which require a lot of confrontation with difficult memories; and prayer and sacramental life is a very effective regulatory mechanism in this regard, since it can always not only purify memory, but also create new experiences which are the best healers.

³¹ *The healing power of emotion: Affective neuroscience, development, and clinical practice*, D. Fosha, D. J. Siegel, M. F. Solomon (eds.), New York 2009, W. W. Norton & Company; A. Schore, *Affect regulation and the origin of the self: The neurobiology of emotional development*, New York 2016, Taylor & Francis/Routledge, p. 348–53.

³² G. L. Schmelzer, *Journey through trauma: A trail guide to the 5-phase cycle of healing repeated trauma*, New York 2018, Avery Publishing Group, p. 225–34.

4.1. The language of an abused body and spirituality

A child who has been physically or mentally neglected or even abused can suffer very serious damage in his psychological as well as organic development. Since the brain is a distinctly social organ, his brain will not follow the normal developmental path: the right hemisphere will noticeably surpass the left, which may also mean that this child will find it more difficult to develop abstract thinking, and in this connection, also the sense of religiousness. Paradoxically, however, the very religiousness can help him to quickly learn how to regulate difficult and abusive affects, which would otherwise be much too difficult for him, so that he could not, by any means, satisfactorily and functionally regulate them.³³ As a rule, these children can be quite lost, but in the church, in sacred places and in religious rituals that are adapted to them, they can discover the graceful Authority that can protect them.

This child often has no words, he cannot find them, nor can he develop them in order to describe his distress, and therefore often responds to it by acting out. Particularly tragic is the fact that in adulthood, a traumatized person searches for or attracts individuals who will abuse them again. The body of a traumatized individual can thus again become the victim of similar, already known abuses, and until this individual begins to deeply appreciate his body, until he hears it, and begins to perceive it as something holy and sacred, thereby restoring dignity, it is very difficult to overcome this truly vicious circle of constant complications which, as has already been said, can be very tragic. Here we can say that prayer, and above all sacramental life, especially when Christ enters our body with His body, re-creating it over and over again, is the core of the treatment that the traumatized person definitely needs.

4.2. Self-regulation, body language and spirituality

As has already been said, one of the most important functions that a child needs to develop is the regulation of emotions or affect.³⁴ And if the child is not able, i.e. is not given the opportunity to develop this extremely important mechanism, he becomes gravely deprived, particularly in the sense that

³³ B. van der Kolk, *The body keeps the score: Mind, brain and body in the transformation of trauma*, New York 2014, Penguin Books, p. 51-74.

³⁴ A. Schore, *Affect regulation and the origin of the self: The neurobiology of emotional development*, New York 2016, Taylor & Frances/Routledge, p. 285-289.

he cannot recognize the past and create the meaning of certain events in the present which remind him of the past. In this way, he can experience people in the present as threatening and dangerous, even in the case of only the remotest resemblance to a past situation. A child who has been emotionally or physically injured will remain in his own world even when he is an adult; even then he will not have appropriate words that would enable him to establish self-regulation. It is precisely in this sense that the words of the evangelist John (John 1: 1-4) are so very comforting: they speak of the Word that has become the source of redemption, the Word that illuminated our darkness; Christ came to the world and gave us inner peace, peace in our broken hearts, with his arrival; this light and this peace have established the basic regulatory system. He gave us the ability that through grace, when we become part of His salvation process, through this graceful word of compassion and comfort, we develop this indispensable internal mechanism of regulation. In this way, we are again able to establish relations with others, regardless of how dark our past was.

One should not neglect the fact, however, that it is extremely difficult to regulate, in particular, the harsh feelings of anger, rage, terror, as well as sadness, that can be completely overwhelming. People with these raw emotions did not have parents who would help them regulate these affects and, above all, teach them how to feel their own psycho-organic states and in particular, how to regulate them. In this respect, Jesus promises the Holy Spirit, the Comforter, who will always remain with us (Jn 14: 15-18); he will not abandon us to be orphans, at the mercy of the fate in a cruel world. This is definitely one of the most hopeful truths. The Holy Spirit enables us to experience the fullness of relationships. He is present in every relationship, since he is the one who creates relationships and maintains them, and we are the stakeholders of his grace, the individuals involved in his work and continuing it. And the most important in these comforting words is the fact that the Holy Spirit is healing our painful relationships, relationships that, due to fear and injuries, are fragile and often frightening. The Holy Spirit helps us to emotionally calm down in order to psychologically reorganize and, above all, to grow inwardly. In other words, with the help of the Holy Spirit, we are creating a regulatory system so that we can organize and process our psycho-organic states and complications.

So, for example, a little girl who was abused will not be able to enjoy full-fledged relationships in her adult life.³⁵ Her choice of boyfriends, without knowing it or being fully aware of this, will be totally permeated with old experiences of abuse and she will therefore look for a boyfriend who will repeat it; she will find someone whom she will passionately feel and fall in love with, but she will not know that this man carries the seeds of abuse within himself, which will only flourish later, when the relationship begins to fully develop. It is a re-awakening of old wounds on both sides, the victim's as well as abuser's.; Of course, it should be emphasized that the abuser is entirely responsible for his actions. Both are unable to regulate the most difficult affects of shame, sometimes even abomination, and especially anger and rage. In short, it is an awakening of the deepest psycho-organic content that has been suppressed or dissociated for a long time and now emerges in a new relationship. Both the abuser and the victim can feel completely helpless, as if everything is simply being repeated, and in detail. Such persons live in extremely traumatic relationships, which are sometimes an exact reactivation of very old memories or relations between the child and the primary caregiver.³⁶ Therefore, in the process of resolving these terrible mental states – or more precisely, of their regulation – they urgently need grace, the help of the Holy Spirit who creates new relations, which from the cruelest, most impossible and brutal contents, based on their regulation, re-creates old relationships in new ways of feeling, thinking, and acting.

4.3. Intersubjectivity and spirituality

Considering that the human brain is a distinct social organ, which means that in many respects it is very dependent on the relationships in which it develops, we can, on the other hand, argue that where the basic family relations in which the child was born are not regulated, they can very roughly interfere with the child's development. Instead of getting not only physical but primarily psychological food for his development, the food he needs urgently, the child can suffer deep psycho-organic wounds by parents who are dysfunctional or even

³⁵ T. Repič Slavič, *Sexual abuse in childhood and the unconscious repetition of pain in couple relationships*, in *Strengthening families*, J. Stala, J. Garmaz (eds), Kraków 2016, The Pontifical University of John Paul II., p. 137–51.

³⁶ M. Cvetek, *Children's comprehension of the religious story affected by their emotional capacities*, in *Challenges to religious education in contemporary society*, J. Garmaz, A. Čondić (eds.), Split 2017, Crkva u svijetu, p. 253-55.

abusive, which has a significant impact on deficit in interpersonal relationships. As a result, these children suffer from poorly developed abilities to understand social situations, as they often have poorly developed social skills.³⁷ In other words, there is the basic biological or psycho-organic rhythm, which must be established between mother and child, and later with the father, which is the basis for all further social as well as psycho-organic development. In this respect, the biblical text of John's letter (1 John 4:7-14) in an exceptional way shows God's love for us as the primary source of all relations, both with God and among people. This love of God to man is the foundation of everything and even promises that if we love each other, then He will live in us. This, above all, means that even at a later age, regardless of how our parents were or were not available, we can, through love, again feel each other and God, who heals even the deepest wounds of the past. This relationship with God can thus become most efficient in affect regulation with the help of the sacramental grace, later also through the sacrament of marriage, and thus their marriage will become the most powerful regulatory system.

To summarize, we can assert with certainty that childhood traumas from the early ages often manifest as an extraordinary fear of closeness and intimacy in adult life. Such a partner is, for example, unpredictably overwhelmed by deep anxiety and fear that s/he is devoid of control and totally subordinate, and must simply escape from this relationship because s/he will otherwise suffocate, even though their partner obviously shows no tendencies of control and dominance. Those early states are therefore still present in the individual's psychic structure, and they are awakening again,³⁸ urgently needing treatment, and the grace of internal purification.³⁹ And again our thought is reflected in biblical texts that say that although in childhood, youth, and later we were deeply wounded, in the light of Christ's redemptive process even the most traumatic complications do not

³⁷ A. Schore, *Affect regulation and the origin of the self: The neurobiology of emotional development*, New York 2016, Taylor & Frances/Routledge, p. 283-79.

³⁸ T. Repič Slavič, C. Gostečnik, *The experience of pregnancy, childbirth and motherhood in women with a history of sexual abuse*, in *Sexology in midwifery*, A. P. Mivšek, Rijeka 2015, InTech, p. 120-32; R. Cvetek, *Bolečina preteklosti: Travma, medosebni odnosi, družina, terapija: Pain of the past: Trauma, interpersonal relationships, family, therapy*, Celje 2009, Društvo Mohorjeva družba, Celjska Mohorjeva družba, p. 111-19.

³⁹ B. Simonič, *Ranljivost sodobnih družin in spodbuda k materinski rahločutnosti v pastoralni skrbi za družine: Vulnerability of modern families and an encouragement of maternal sensibility in pastoral care of families*, »Bogoslovni vestnik« 75 (2015) 3, p. 489-90.

determine us: by acknowledging our wounds and helplessness we can always be open for the salvation process of Christ's grace, which begins in sincere prayer. Prayer brings the healing power to the family, when its members open up the space for the Sacred and shows willingness to be helped. Christ took up our sins and made a conciliation offering, and promised the coming of the Holy Spirit, who can finally heal our memory and bring the healing power of salvation to the long periods of hopeless suffering. Christ is the Servant of God, foretold by the prophet Isaiah. He came to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor, to bring peace, to proclaim good news to the poor, to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, and set the oppressed free (cf. Luke 4:18-19).

He came to cure our painful and conflicting relationships with ourselves, among us, and above all our relationship with God, which brings disunion and alienation. Stepping into Christ's merciful process of salvation fully enables the final reconciliation and resolution of conflicting, unresolved and sinful contents that require reconciliation. From the point of view of the biblical sense of salvation, the phenomenon of transgenerational transfer of traumatic contents is therefore only one of the attempts to resolve, which, despite severe pain and sacrifice, does not bring about true salvation. This is only possible when the individual is encountered and confronted with his trauma – which results in painful and split relations – on a deeper level, and with the help of grace, consciously decides to break with the past, since God promises reconciliation and forgiveness through our concrete relationships, if we only enter Christ's merciful salvation process. The involvement of the individual in the therapeutic process, together with grace, hope, and hard work in this process, bring about the salvation of even the most severe traumas. This redemptive process first evaluates the individual's pain and enables him to relieve his past, which has been constantly pursuing him. At the same time, this redemptive process brings new hope for all further relations. Functional and living relationships are also the precondition that creates an atmosphere in which the redemption process can be realized.

5. Conclusion

We presented modern research, in more detail, to show how traumatic experiences have a negative effect on, both early and later, brain organization and prevent the development of functions that are responsible for emotional understanding and subsequent action, and that presented phenomena urgently

call for treatment. In modern neurobiology, the body is the basic instrument, not only of perception, but primarily of the processing of very important information, for which it inevitably needs motivation it gets from relations, both to itself and to the other, and by all means to the Transcendental. In addition, we have seen the impact of traumas in responding to internal physical stimuli and stimuli from the environment, in recognizing the physical aspect of the self and its connection with the environment, as well as in distinguishing itself from others, i.e. self-awareness. This negative impact of trauma manifests mainly as deficit in self-regulation – the ability to regulate the intensity and duration of affects, like shame, disgust, anger, enthusiasm, despair and hopelessness. It is therefore necessary to establish a healing relationship, to establish a new regulatory mechanism on a different basis, not on the old defense mechanisms. And precisely in this regard, religiousness, faith, and especially sacramental life can be very instrumental in the creation of new experiences that purify memory and create a new life. They also promote the personal spiritual relationship with Christ that is so helpful for establishing more functional psycho-organic regulation and redemptive processes of even the most traumatic memories.

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