

THE ROLE OF RELIGION IN COPING WITH THE TRAUMA OF POLITICAL PERSECUTION: THE CASE OF ESTONIA.

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Introduction¹

Emotional traumas are as old as humanity. History knows many cases of catastrophic events like fires, natural disasters, wars, and violence that have left deep marks on peoples' psyches. For instance, there is a notion that after September 11, 2001, the world can never be the same again because people and interpersonal relations in it have radically changed. Traumas caused by violent political regimes have a prominent place among other kinds of traumas. The current article deals with the victims of Communist persecution in Estonia. About 18 per cent of Estonia's population of slightly more than one million have directly suffered from political persecution during World War II and the post-war period.² This is why the history of violent political repression and persecution is part of many people's identity.³ The current article's target group are people who have been imprisoned or exiled (mostly to Siberia) for political reasons.

Despite the distinctive character of each traumatic event, people survive traumas in much the same way. As a result of traumas, a person can develop deep-seated stress that requires different strategies of coping. An important role in coping with post-traumatic stress is performed by religion, especially in the interpretation of events and in personal relationship with God. The current article will give an overview of the concept of post-traumatic stress

¹ The main statements of this article have been published in the Estonian language in Lehtsaar, T., Noor, H. (2003). *Religiooni osa poliitilise repressiooni järgse traumaga toimetulekul. Usuteaduslik ajakiri*, 1, 87-103.

² P. Varju, *Eesti rahva inimohvrid nõukogude ja saksa okupatsiooni ajal* [Human losses of the Estonian people during the Soviet and Nazi occupations] (1940-1953) (Tartu: ORURK, 1997).

³ H. Noor, "Torture survival, political rituals and suicide. National experience of Estonia," *Annual Report of RCT and IRCT*, (1996), 10-13.

and analyze political repression as a kind of trauma. Different ways of coping with stress will be analyzed, focusing on religion as a coping strategy. Towards the end of the article, the results of a survey of 64 victims of political repressions are discussed, highlighting the role of religion in coping with the trauma of repression. In the discussion section, the role of religion as a coping strategy is analyzed and compared to other ways of dealing with life's problems.

The Concept of Post-traumatic Stress Disorder

Post-traumatic stress disorder is a chronic reaction to extreme stress. A person can participate in stressful events as a victim, the causer of trauma, witness or just someone who knows what happened. Usually, a traumatic event is related to an accident, violence, and/or losing control over one's survival. For example, deep emotional hurts can be caused by car accidents, fires, robberies, rapes, horrors of war, natural disasters, deportations, imprisonments, and tortures. A person experiencing these events will have feelings of intense fear, helplessness, horror, or threat to survival.

Based on *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*⁴ post-traumatic stress disorder can be classified and described by six criteria. According to the presence of these criteria in the emotional life of a politically repressed person, we can speak of the trauma of repression. The following is an outline of the diagnostic criteria.

1. The person has been exposed to a **traumatic life-threatening event** in which the person's response involved intense fear, helplessness, or horror.
2. The traumatic event is persistently **re-experienced**. Re-experiencing may happen in the form of recollections, dreams, illusions, or hallucinations. Re-experiencing means that the person cannot get out of the experience, but is reliving it over and over again.
3. Persistent **avoidance** of stimuli associated with the trauma, and numbing of general responsiveness. Avoidance means ignoring thoughts, feelings, conversations, activities and locations reminiscent of traumatic experiences. The person may have difficulty recalling what happened. The victims may start avoiding knowing other people as well as themselves, denying their own future and possibility of a positive course of life. Everything traumatic in one's own mind and relationships will be kept at a distance.

⁴*Diagnostic and statistical manual of mental disorders*, Fourth edition (Washington: American Psychiatric Association, 1994).

4. Persistent symptoms of **increased arousal** manifested in difficulty falling or staying asleep (insomnia), irritability, difficulty concentrating, hypervigilance, and excessive startle response.

5. The clinical diagnosis is confirmed when symptoms described in points 2 to 4 are present **for more than a month**. In such cases we can speak of chronic reaction, which is one of the keywords in the definition of post-traumatic stress.

6. The disturbance causes **clinically significant distress or impairment** in social, occupational, or other important areas of functioning. It means that people suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder are not able to cope with their everyday lives but get stuck in their inner world.

The criteria described here can occur in different measures depending on different traumas and personalities. The seriousness of a trauma depends on a number of circumstances. The most important of these is the cause of the trauma, the degree of personal involvement in the trauma, and the post-traumatic social recognition/support.⁵

In the discussion of traumatic experiences, it is important to differentiate whether the trauma is perceived as man-made or as an accident (i.e., God-made). It is generally accepted that man-made traumas (especially the deliberate ones) are experienced as more painful and lasting than natural disasters. Trying to explain suffering as a human characteristic, and the simple question 'why' has often proven most difficult to answer. Deliberate evil, violence and injustice are harder to justify and/or explain than "coincidence" or forces of nature.

The degree of personal involvement is related to the individual's emotional and physical affectedness by the trauma. The more and deeper the event affects the person, the greater the probability and seriousness of post-traumatic stress disorder. For example, people who have received physical injuries during the war generally relive the horrors of war more intensively than those who came back without such injuries. The emotional wounds of those injured in a motor accident are deeper than of those who were unharmed. People who returned from prison camps or exile with physical injuries or chronic diseases have more serious stress disorders than those who were not thus affected. Or else the involvement can be emotional. Witnessing the death of someone close to you, seeing children suffer, being

⁵ *Encyclopedia of human behavior*, Vol. 3, (San Diego: Academic Press, 1994), "Post-traumatic stress disorder," by R. Katz, 555-562; Noor, *Torture survival, political rituals and suicide*, 10-13; F. Parkinson, *Post-Trauma Stress*, 2nd ed. (London: Sheldon Press, 1995), 89-115.

powerless to help those we are responsible for – all this can hurt the human psyche deeply. Being forced to witness torturing or execution can have especially dire consequences.

Social recognition and support means continuing presence of supportive and intimate personal relationships. Intimate relationships are important during the post-traumatic period in at least two respects. Firstly, the trauma can last for an extended period of time, as in the case of exile or imprisonment. The victim must adapt to and learn to cope with the new circumstances. On returning to one's family, a lot of time and energy is required to readapt to the changed life and relationships. Secondly, the victim usually has deep emotional wounds, the healing of which takes patience, listening and understanding that only intimate and reliable people can offer. Hence, trauma and coming out of trauma are social phenomena. Survivors of concentration camps as well as war veterans must struggle with adaptation. Survival of trauma depends on what/who is causing the sufferings to the victim, the degree to which they are affected, and the people in whose company they are able to heal.

Political Repression as Trauma

Political repression is an example of the variety of human suffering and violence. This is why the symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder described above are frequently manifest in the lives of people who have suffered deportation, persecution, confinement in concentration camps or prisons. In these cases it is often not possible to clearly differentiate between political, ideological, and human evil. Yet, research on the impact of violent political regimes on human psyche has been done before.⁶

Lifton⁷ has described the emotional life of people who had experienced near-death circumstances in war, Nazi death camps, or the nuclear bombing of Hiroshima. He found that the people had an imprint of death on their psyche: a morbid intrusion of death imagery into their personal psychology. Because of the imminent threat of annihilation in one's everyday thoughts and images, the world and life are perceived as through the prism of death. At the same time, the survivors feel guilty: why did I come back alive while others did not? The survivors feel a subconscious solidarity with the companions who suffered and lost their lives. Psychic numbing as a response to unbearable pain and absurdity is typical of the survivors. As a result, they have often problems with creating and maintaining close

⁶Noor, *Torture survival, political rituals and suicide*, National Experience of Estonia." Annual Report of RCT and IRCT, 10-13.

⁷R.J. Lifton, *The Broken Connection* (New York: Simon and Shuster, 1979).

relationships with others. It is hard to trust anyone having experienced the total collapse of all meaning and reliability in interpersonal relations. Traumatic experiences take much time to settle and find a meaningful and reasonable explanation.⁸ Not all victims are able to do it.

Serious trauma, especially one of human causing, upsets the victim's world. The notions of human relationships, value of life, moral principles, and humanity, are damaged by suffering. Each individual has an implicit subconscious perception of the world around them and their place in it. The trauma destroys the previous perception of the world. Security is replaced by insecurity, hope by hopelessness, order by chaos. As a result of trauma, the victim's self-esteem as a whole can suffer damage. Janoff-Bulman⁹ sees the integration of the traumatic event into one's new world-view as a way to post-traumatic recovery. Hence, trauma can be overcome only if the victim is able to reconstruct a new understanding of life where sufferings have a place. For victims of political repression, the explanation can be of a political nature. That is, traumatic events will be explained to oneself in ideological and political terms. This could take the form of a personal reevaluation of communism or fascism.

One of the distinctive qualities of political repression is that it affects a large number of people, in most cases simultaneously and for an extended period of time. The critical factor in enduring, understanding, and explaining what is going on is whether the hardship is endured alone or with others. In that sense, political repression is self-contradictory. Lasting political mass violence increases the feeling of helplessness and hopelessness.¹⁰ In a specific situation, however, sufferers are able to substantially support and assist one another. For healing to take place, the awareness and supportive attitude of the society are significant facilitators of emotional recovery and rehabilitation. The lack of social recognition, however, can materially inhibit the healing of the wounds of suffering. For example, the lack of attention and consideration by the general public and even the immediate surroundings is lamented by many veterans of the Chernobyl nuclear accident and the victims of the Soviet Gulag, political prisoners, who miraculously survived. The trauma of repression caused to the people of Estonia by the Soviet regime did not consist merely in the loss of liberty or life, like in deportation, imprisonment or execution, but those acts of terrorism instilled general

⁸ R.J. Lifton, R.J. *The Protean Self: Human Resilience in an Age of Fragmentation*. (New York: Basic Book, 1993), 213-232.

⁹ R. Janoff-Bulman, *Shattered Assumptions: Towards a New Psychology of Trauma* (New York: McMillan, 1992).

¹⁰ H. Noor, "Coping and Suicidal Behaviour Among Victims of Political Regimes," P.C. Friday (Chair), *Caring for Victims*, 9th International Symposium on Victimology, Amsterdam, Netherlands (August 1997).

existential fear that significantly impacted the emotional life of people living under the regime. The feelings of fear were experienced by all the people, but were sometimes suppressed into the subconscious. Added to this was forced atheism. In order to make any kind of secular career, one had to employ mechanisms and reactions of defense and adaptation. Rationalizing the reality and the frightening circumstances served as a defense mechanism. People tried to justify what was going on by referring to class struggle, world revolution, etc. Identifying with the aggressor, the hostage syndrome, was a common phenomenon. People thought one thing, said another, and did something still another. On the whole, it can be said that political repressions represent a major kind of psychotrauma.

The Role of Religion in Coping with Trauma

In dealing with traumatic events the question will arise how to cope with them: by what means and resources will someone be able to overcome mental shock? The generally accepted approach is that there are two different types of coping. The first one, which is called problem-oriented coping, aims at solving the problem or removing the stressor. This strategy is used if any constructive ways of behavior are in view. The second one, called emotional coping, aims at coping with the stress. This strategy is used if no real opportunities for avoiding or removing the stressor are available. One is preoccupied with analyzing and organizing one's feelings. Carver, Scheier, and Weintraub¹¹ recognize the relevance of such a division while asserting that it is an obvious oversimplification. In their study, they describe fourteen different coping strategies people use for coping with stress. For example, someone under stress could resort to active coping: taking action, exerting efforts to remove or circumvent the stressor. Another alternative is the opposite behavior: restraint coping, passively holding back one's coping attempts until they can be of use. Passive coping strategies are, for example, mental and/or behavioral denial and disengagement. As one of the coping strategies Carver, et al., describe resorting to religion. Religion can mean emotional support, an opportunity to reinterpret one's life in positive terms, development, or a tactics of dealing actively with the stressor. On the basis of the study by Carver, et al., we can state that religion is one of the potential coping strategies.

¹¹C.S. Carver, M.F. Scheier, J.K. Weintraub, "Assessing coping strategies: a theoretically based approach," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 2 (1989), 267-283.

The role of religion as a coping strategy has been studied in detail by Pargament et al¹² who asked 197 people coming from different churches to describe by specific instances how their faith in God had helped them solve life's problems. The survey indicated that potential styles of problem-solving differ primarily according to who – the individual or God – is felt to be responsible for solving the problem, and whether God or the individual will take an active part in solving the problem. Combining these two characteristics, the authors described three different styles of solving religious problems. These are the self-directing, the deferring, and the collaborative style.

The self-directing style emphasizes the freedom God gives to people to direct their own lives. From this perspective, it is the individual's own responsibility to solve the problems. Faced with this responsibility, the individual will take on an active problem-solving stance. While God is not directly involved in the process, this style is not anti-religious. This approach appears to be an active coping orientation that emphasizes personal agency, involves lower levels of traditional religious involvement, and is part of a generally effective style of functioning.

In the deferring style, the individual waits for a solution from God. It is characteristic of an externally oriented religion providing answers to questions the individual is less able to solve. People defer the responsibility for problem-solving to God. Rather than solve problems actively, they wait for solutions to come from God. From this perspective, God is the source of solutions rather than the individual.

The collaborative style appears to be part of an internalized committed form of religion. In this style, responsibility for the problem-solving process is held jointly by the individual and God. Both sides – the individual and God – are seen as active contributors working together to solve problems.

Pargament suggests that these styles represent relatively stable ways of perceiving and behaving. That is, faced with various hardships, crises and traumas, the individual will predominantly resort to just one of the coping styles mentioned. At the same time, different religious coping activities are employed in different styles.

Pargament¹³ describes six behaviors of this kind. Each behavior expresses the potential application of religion in coping.

¹² K.I. Pargament, J. Kennell, W. Hathaway, N. Grevengoed, J. Newman & W. Jones, "Religion and the problem-solving process: Three styles of coping," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 27 (1988), 90-104.

¹³ K.I. Pargament, *The Psychology of Religion and Coping* (New York: Guilford Press, 1997), 163-198.

1. **Spiritually based activities** are grounded in the personal relationship with God and express finding thoroughly comprehended actions, the development of new religious understanding, trusting God, experiencing God's guidance, following Christ's example.
2. **Good deeds** find expression in an attempt to sin less, help others, admit one's mistakes, and participate actively in church-related projects and events.
3. **Discontent** expresses itself in questioning religious views, blaming God, detachment from God and the religious community.
4. **Seeking religious support** means turning to ministers or other church members for (religious) assistance and support.
5. **Pleading** means praying to God for solutions, hoping for the miracle to happen, praying for protection from God.
6. **Religious avoidance** means escaping from the present reality, dealing with the hereafter rather than the here and now. Avoidance can also manifest in inactivity, the hope that God will take care of difficulties, or in escape to some religious activity (e.g. reading of Scripture), so that one would not have to face the difficulties.

Providing an explanation or interpretation can be seen as an important function of religion in coping with stress and hardship. Coping with trauma depends on how much individuals are able to explain for themselves what has happened. In general terms, religious explication and hence the potential role of religion in coping with traumas depends on personal, situational, and cultural factors. It is possible that the tormenting thoughts and feelings related to the trauma of repression will be transferred to religious beliefs. By this means, religion will provide a new perspective on what is going on, *Meie elu on taevas* (*Our Life Is in Heaven*¹⁴). The most important personal factors are religious commitment and activity, i.e. religious people will solve their life's crises in a religiously oriented manner. Attempts to establish the connection of a certain type of personality with greater religiosity have not yielded positive results. In other words, widely differing types of personality exist among deeply religious people.

Religious explanations for trauma can differ widely. The trauma could be interpreted as God's will or punishment. This kind of explanation is usually accompanied by the individual's own reasoning as to why God may have allowed the accident to happen. The explanation of trauma as punishment by God can be based on the idea of a punishing God

¹⁴H. Haamer, *Meie elu on taevas. Siberi mälestused* [Our Life Is in Heaven. Siberian memoirs] (Tallinn: Logos, 2001).

(God as the Judge) or on the victims' own guilt and transgression. The actions of the evil can be used as a religious explanation as well. In that case, it is not God who allows or causes the trauma, but the opposite of God, the evil that is opposed to God's will. It is also possible to accept a religiously neutral explanation, stating that accidents just happen; we cannot avoid them or find supernatural reasons for them; God, however, is able to help the victims to recover in respect to their emotions and faith. Research has shown that peoples' explanations of their difficulties depend on their view of God. People for whom the foremost attributes of God are forgiveness and love, see hardships as an opportunity for growing in faith. People who have an image of God as a punisher tend to see the quirks of life as a punishment or chastisement from God.¹⁵

In the religious descriptions of experiencing suffering, people refer to various phenomena. Usually they do it in terms of different religious goals that post-traumatic healing can achieve. Direct religious results are related to experiencing the presence of God, acquiring a new purpose and hope. Suffering can also result in personality development. The trauma is seen as an experience of learning and growing, an opportunity to better understand oneself, life, and other people. This results in a more adequate self-concept, a sense of belonging, and recognition of the basic value of life, the finding of inner balance.¹⁶

Research of situational factors has observed the tendency towards more religious interpretations in the case of more dangerous, more damaging and serious traumas. Meanwhile, the influence of the cultural context manifests itself in the different levels of willingness of different groups or social strata to provide a religious explanation for the events of history and society.¹⁷ Inasmuch as political repressions represent life-threatening traumas, we could suppose that their potential for a religious explanation is relatively large.

Religion is one of the available coping strategies. The role of religion in the potential coping with trauma is manifold. Religion can offer general coping strategies as well as specific activities to overcome stress. Religion helps explain and bear serious hardship.

¹⁵ K.U. Petersen, "Gottesvorstellungen: Ergebnisse einer empirischen Untersuchung," *Religiosität, Persönlichkeit und Verhalten*, H. Moosbrugger, C. Zwingmann & D. Frank, Hrsg. (Münster: Waxmann, 1996), 145-153.

¹⁶ R.G. Tedeshi & L.G. Calhoun, *Trauma and Transformation: Growing in the Aftermath of Suffering* (Thousand Oaks: Sage, 1995).

¹⁷ K.I. Pargament, "Religious contributions to the process of coping with stress," *International series in the psychology of religion*, Vol. 4, *Religion, psychopathology and coping*, J.A. van Belzen & J.M. van der Lans, series eds., H. Grzymala-Moszczyńska & B. Beit-Hallahmi, vol. eds. (Amsterdam-Atlanta: Rodopi, 1996), 177-192.

The Survey of the Victims of Political Repression

The above was a theoretical overview of the trauma of repression and the potential role of religion in coping with it. Every human experience, however, is unique due to the characteristic traits of the individual and the specific period of history.

To find out what has been the role of religion for people in Estonia in coping with the trauma of political repression, we conducted a survey of 64 people who had suffered political repression. There were 31 women (48.4%) and 33 men (51.6%) who answered the questionnaire; there were those who had been imprisoned, deported or persecuted for political reasons. By the start of the repressions, the youngest was one year old, and the oldest was 43. By the time of the survey, the youngest was 42, and the oldest was 91.

The questions concerned the trauma of repression and different ways and aspects of coping with it. Here we confine ourselves to a brief summary of the role of religion in the healing and recuperation of the victims' emotional condition. We will give an overview of the respondents' attitude to religion, the role of religion in coping with life and self as well as in coping with the trauma of repression.

The respondents' attitude to religion was reflected in their church affiliation and the significance they attributed to the role of religion in coping with the trauma of repression. According to church affiliation, the respondents divided into the following groups:

- 1) 41 Lutherans (64%), which is not surprising as Estonia is a traditionally Lutheran country.
- 2) 12 people (18.8%) were members of smaller churches (Methodists, Baptists, Orthodox).
- 3) 11 people (7.2%) were not members of any Christian church.

The respondents were asked to estimate on a 4-point scale the relevance of religion in coping with the trauma of repression. The lowest value on the scale was 1 – totally irrelevant, and the highest value was 4 – most relevant. Four people (6%) thought religion was totally irrelevant, 14 (21.9%) found religion was not very relevant, 15 (23.4%) considered religion quite relevant, and for 30 (46.9%), religion was most relevant. Judging by the relevance of religion, the respondents formed a relatively religious group as more than two thirds of them thought religion was quite or most relevant.

The questionnaire included a section enquiring on a 4-point scale (did not practice at all, practiced little, practiced a lot, practiced very much) about the different activities that helped respondents cope with life and their own self behind the barbed wire fence. All in all, the respondents had to grade 36 different activities. By comparing the means, the answers

were divided into significant, insignificant, and intermediate.¹⁸ Four faith-related activities proved to be significant: unconditional trust in God, prayer, faith that justice will prevail, and faith in one's own good fortune.

Among the intermediate statements, were two faith-related ones: religious faith that had developed before the political repression, and religious faith that developed during the repression. There were no faith-related activities in the group of insignificant statements. Three coping factors with the largest means were: holding together with one's compatriots among the victims of political repressions, holding together with one's fellow-sufferers, and patriotic feelings. The three coping factors with the lowest means were self-mutilation, justifying punitive measures ("they could be right, after all"), and suicide attempts.

In the closing section of the questionnaire, the respondents were asked to prioritize the ways in which faith in God had helped them cope with the trauma of repression. All in all, 85 different aspects were mentioned. According to their content, the answers can be grouped into four different categories. First, the answers given indicate that, during the repressions, faith had influenced and shaped the respondents' image of God, their relationship with God, and their religious behavior (32 responses). Second, the answers indicate that religion had influenced and shaped their emotional life, feelings, thoughts and attitudes (27 responses). Third, it appears that religion has influenced and shaped their interpersonal relations (15 responses). Fourth, the survey yielded problem-centered results expressing the positive influence of religion in solving problems and in the development of life-situations (11 responses). So influence on the image of God and behavior was mentioned frequently while influence on solving specific problems and life-situations was mentioned infrequently. If we take the frequency of answers as an indicator of their significance, it appears that the categories related to God were more significant than categories related to specific circumstances.

Discussion

This article attempts to present an overview of psychotrauma as a concept, strategies of coping with it, and of the special role that religion has for victims of political repression in coping with themselves and their lives. In coping with the psychotrauma of political

¹⁸ General mean in this scale was $X=1.8$; standard deviation was $SD=0.3$. The significant statements were arbitrarily chosen from the statements with the mean of greater than or equal to 2.1. Insignificant statements were considered to be the statements with the mean of less than or equal to 1.5. Statements where the mean differed from the general mean by one standard deviation ($1.5 < X < 2.1$) were considered to be intermediate statements.

repression, the same kind of mechanisms operate as in other psychotraumas. One of the findings of research in post-traumatic stress disorder is that coping with a trauma depends on the characteristics of the specific trauma while being subject to certain general regularities as well.

The relationship between religious and non-religious coping strategies emerges here as an issue. Comparing the coping strategies listed by Carver and the religious coping activities mentioned by Pargament, three things stand out. First, religion is a possible coping strategy. Second, a number of universal coping strategies (like looking for support, interpreting events) acquire a religious content due to the religious attitude of the sufferer. So, for instance, support is sought especially from God, religion, and religious fellow-sufferers. Support is sought from church ministers, traumatic events are interpreted and explained in religious terms, and, in traumatic avoidance, the sufferer prays and seeks protection from God. In addition to that, there are purely religious coping strategies, which are related to personal relationship with God and the following of religious norms.

Third, the results of the survey highlight the interrelation of the religious and the universal in coping with trauma. It appears that in crisis situations, like political repression, certain experiences and values are of primary importance. The thinking of St James to the effect that faith is futile if it does not take notice of the needs of a fellow human being (Js 2:14–17) is relevant here. Even in coping with political repressions the primary needs are related to humane qualities and ideals, which can derive from the individual's religious beliefs and experiences.

The respondents of the survey were survivors of political repressions, successful copers who have made it to the ripe old age. Their opinions have the backing of great experience. The surveyed group can be considered relatively religious as nearly half of them thought religion was most relevant, and only four per cent thought religion was irrelevant. This fact alone, however, is not reason enough to claim that only religion would ensure coping with trauma. It is possible that outside the studied contingent there are many politically repressed people who have coped without religion. Nevertheless, one cannot ignore the fact that among the survivors there are many deeply religious people who highly regard and value their religion as an important aid in coping with sufferings and their consequences.

Obviously, the small number of respondents does not allow us to draw conclusions regarding all the politically repressed people. In fact, the survey was even belated as many survivors of political repressions had already died. The respondents could be considered as a sample of survivors exemplifying a certain strategy of coping. Despite its small size, the surveyed group is a telling example, drawing attention to the fact that religion has a significant role in coping, especially in extraordinary, life-threatening circumstances, and in face of physical/moral death.

It is a known fact that many people died as a result of political repressions. However, a case in point is that, in Soviet prisons and prison camps, suicide was very rare, while in the 'free Soviet society,' it was relatively frequent, amounting to 30–35 cases per 100,000 people annually. The number of suicides, suicide attempts (parasuicides) and other self-destructive behavior decreased significantly during the years 1988 to 1992. The number of suicides decreased as much as 20 per cent, the number of parasuicides more than 30 per cent. The positive changes in the mental health of the people can be explained by the increasing national self-consciousness, the establishment of religious freedom, and increased participation in religious activities.¹⁹ Unfortunately, further development of the independent Republic of Estonia has witnessed a relapse in the sad statistics of suicides.

If we compare estimates of the relevance of religion with the religious coping strategies listed in Pargament, religious activities can be considered as of primary relevance. It means looking for protective factors that are based on a personal relationship with God. Finding religious support is important as it is directly linked to interpersonal relations. Pargament has no category directly linked to feelings and attitudes.

Explaining and interpreting has been held to be one of religion's major functions. It is worth mentioning that no separate group of explanation-oriented people emerged from our study. There were statements to this effect in the data-set describing thoughts, feelings and attitudes, but not enough material to form a subgroup. So it could be said that, for the respondents, the explanatory function of religion was relatively moderate compared to religion's role in the personal relationship with God, emotional life, interpersonal relations, and problem-solving.

¹⁹ H. Noor, "Parasuicide incidence in the changing society of Estonia. Political aspects of mental health," *New Societies – New Models in Medicine*, B. Strauss, C.B. Bahnson & H. Speidel, eds. (Stuttgart: Schattauer, 1993), 38-43.

The aim of the current article was to give an overview of the ways in which people survive trauma and cope with themselves. Among the ways of coping with oneself and one's life, faith was a very significant factor for religious people enabling them to bear suffering. The experience of the small group of respondents, who have suffered from political repression and violence, could be of instructional and supportive value to both the survivors and their families. It remains to believe and hope that God would keep us from further sufferings that put humanity and survival of the nation to the test.