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## VIOLENT UPBRINGING IN THE NAME OF FAITH

Parents are the first catechists who communicate faith to their children. Their educational mission is to create a positive family atmosphere where, by showing unconditional love, respect and sympathetic attitude, they help their child establish a positive relationship with God. When parents, due to their inability to regulate their aggressive impulses, use religion as a tool of educational manipulation, they can create a wrong image of God, simultaneously with their violent behaviour create feelings of unworthiness in a child, which s/he later manifests in various ways of harming his/her body. A multitude of harmful effects for the body and relationships often leads the survivor to seek help through therapy in adulthood. They are usually drawn to therapy due to their feelings of incompetence, unworthiness, shame, guilt, purposelessness and utter despair. Based on the clinical practice, this article will present the consequences of manipulative, violent upbringing, manifested in psychological and physical experience of survivors, intertwined with a desire for salvation. We want to broaden the understanding of these consequences in the light of the physical structure that is a precondition of the psychological structure, and show how an individual can construct a new attitude towards his/her own body with the help of his/her spirituality.

*Key words: childhood violence, body, psyche, image of God, spirituality, relational family therapy.*

### Introduction

Corporal punishment of children is the most visible form of violence against children. It is defined as any punishment in which physical force is used with the intent to cause pain and discomfort to the child and a violation of children's rights to dignity and physical integrity.<sup>1</sup> For quite some time, the Council of Europe has been committed to a complete legal ban on corporal punishment of children in all member states. In Slovenia, it was not until 2008 that the organic Law on Prevention of Domes-

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. Council of Europe <http://www.coe.int/en/web/children/corporal-punishment>

tic Violence was adopted; however, it did not explicitly prohibit corporal punishment of children, the latter being – on the basis of warnings – prohibited by the Law novel only eight years later, in 2016.<sup>2</sup> With this amending act, domestic violence was more precisely defined; and it prohibited any use of physical, sexual, psychological and economic violence by one family member against another, as well as corporal punishment of children, which ranks every physical, cruel or degrading punishment of children, or any action taken to punish a child with the elements of physical, psychological or sexual violence or neglect as educational methods. By enacting the ban on corporal punishment of children, various web forums witnessed heated debate, which was also covered by the media. Quite a few parents were upset, saying that no one will tell them how to raise their children and that they had also got a slap from their parents from time to time, which had caused no harm. This indicates that in Slovenia we are still far from attaining zero tolerance towards violence, which was previously demonstrated by an empirically supported research in which it was found that 40% of secondary school students were exposed to high levels of violence in their own families.<sup>3</sup> Violent upbringing also echoes in individuals who consider themselves to be religious, justifying their violence by faith.<sup>4</sup> These cases resonate strongly in the USA, where the ban on corporal punishment of children is not enacted. Moreover, in some states the law even allows parents to physically punish their children, while the provisions of the laws for the prevention of abuse and violence are not understood as the prohibition of all corporal punishment in child-rearing.<sup>5</sup> Some parents believe that certain passages from the Bible can be taken literally and use them to subordinate their child by means of violence.<sup>6</sup> They present violence to their children as God's will, by which they justify their educational methods, i.e. inability to control their own aggressive impulses. In addition to physical violence, they express emotional violence, because their religious beliefs instill the feel-

<sup>2</sup> Cf. ZPND-A, Official Gazette of RS, No. 68/16

<sup>3</sup> Cf. K. Domiter Protner, *Sociološki vidiki izpostavljenosti slovenskih srednješolcev nasilju v družini in možnosti ukrepanja [Sociological aspects of Slovenian secondary school students exposure to domestic violence and possibilities for action]*, University of Maribor, Faculty of Arts, 2012, doctoral dissertation.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. J. Price Wolf and N. Jo Kepple, *Individual-and County-Level Religious Participation, Corporal Punishment, and Physical Abuse of Children An Exploratory study*, Journal of Interpersonal Violence (2016) p. 1-12.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. Council of Europe; Global Initiative to End All Corporal Punishment of Children in dissertation Andrej Del Fabro, *Normativno urejanje preprečevanja nasilja v družini v Sloveniji in primerjava z ureditvijo v ZDA [Normative regulation of prevention of family violence in Slovenia and comparison with the United States]*, University of Ljubljana, Faculty of Social Sciences, 2016.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. C. G. Ellison and M. Bradshaw, *Religious beliefs, sociopolitical ideology, and attitudes toward corporal punishment*, Journal of Family Issues 30, (2009) 3, p. 320-322.

ings of fear, guilt and inadequacy in children, so that the child feels as if there is something wrong with him, he feels lonely, inadequate, and even cursed.<sup>7</sup> As an example, a passage from the Book of Sirach says, 'Whoever loves a son will chastise him often, that he may be his joy when he grows up'.<sup>8</sup> This is not only about child abuse but also about the abuse of God's word and faith per se. Media paid much attention to three children beaten to death by their parents<sup>9</sup> who supposedly have been 'influenced' by the book *To Train up a Child*<sup>10</sup> in which the authors publicly advocate the physical abuse of children and give detailed instructions on how and in what way to punish a child and train him/her to obedience and submission. For example, for a child under one year old, a willowy branch or a 30cm ruler is recommended; for older children, a larger branch or a belt. It is frightening that their book has been reprinted several times in twenty years and, according to the author, in 2015<sup>11</sup> more than 1.2 million copies were sold, and it has been translated into several languages. The Pearls find their excuse for physical violence, inter alia, in Proverbs (13, 24):<sup>12</sup> 'Whoever spares the rod hates the child, but whoever loves will apply discipline.' Individual passages from the Old Testament (OT) are thus taken from the context of the New Testament and interpreted literally, without counterbalance. Such "educational" approaches present God to the children as a sentencing judge who is cruel, but ignore God's mercy which has no limits. Unfortunately, the mentioned book is not an isolated case; however, at this point it is not our intention to present this type of literature, but rather the effects which such education has on the body, experiencing oneself and, of course, God.

## 1. Family relationships and violent punishing

The family is supposed to provide the child with a feeling of safety and acceptance, of belonging and of being loved. If the child is surrounded instead by abuse, trauma, violence, horror and intimidation, he will not feel safe, accepted and loved<sup>13</sup> and he will form insecure attachment

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<sup>7</sup> Cf. D. Capps, *The child's song: The religious abuse of children*, Westminster John Knox Press, 1995, p. 51-53.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. Društvo Svetopisemska družba Slovenije. *Sveto pismo Stare in Nove zaveze*. [Slovenski standardni prevod iz izvirnih jezikov]. Ljubljana: Svetopisemska družba Slovenije, 1997.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. <http://www.bbc.com/news/magazine-25268343>

<sup>10</sup> Cf. M. and D. Pearl, *To train up a child*. No Greater Joy Ministries, Incorporated, 2013, p. 9.

<sup>11</sup> Cf. M. and D. Pearl, *To train up a child*. No Greater Joy Ministries, Incorporated, 2015.

<sup>12</sup> Cf. Društvo Svetopisemska družba Slovenije.

<sup>13</sup> Cf. C. Gostečnik, *Relacijska paradigma in travma [Relational Paradigm and Trauma]*, Ljubljana: Brat Frančišek in Frančiškanski družinski inštitut, 2008, p. 26-31.

to his parents.<sup>14</sup> A child's brain and his psychological structure develop through interpersonal relationships. Especially child's early relational experiences with parents or guardians primarily develop child's brains.<sup>15</sup> Violent parents instill long-lasting traumatic states with a negative effect. The right hemisphere is strongly activated, which points at the exaggerated perception and expression of unpleasant feelings.<sup>16</sup> A lot of the stress hormone cortisol is released, which reduces the volume of the corpus callosum and inhibits the integration between the left and right cerebral hemisphere.<sup>17</sup> In addition, the child's brain cells, as a result of the violence, will form different neural connections than they would have otherwise<sup>18</sup> with possible emotional, behavioural and dissociative consequences.<sup>19</sup> This affects child's future development and these consequences will follow him to adulthood. Later in life, he will unconsciously seek situations that will invoke and reproduce the primary atmosphere and the basic effects, as in his intrapsychic world, these indicate a sense of belonging and familiarity.<sup>20</sup>

## 2. Understanding the consequences of abuse to the body: self-harm

Childhood violence takes various forms – emotional, physical or sexual – and its consequences are devastating. Sexual abuse is the worst as it hurts the individual in his complex entirety and can have a particularly destructive effect on his whole emotional, bodily and cognitive dimension of experiencing and understanding.<sup>21</sup> Spanked children learn that their bodies are not their personal property and that their sexual areas are subject to the will of adults. Being struck on the buttocks can stimulate also sexual feelings. Some children who have been punished by spanking could form a connection between pain, humiliation and sexual arousal that endures for the rest of their lives.<sup>22</sup> Heymann reported in 1991

<sup>14</sup> Cf. K. Lyons Ruth and D. Jacobvitz, Attachment disorganization: Unresolved loss, relational violence, and lapses in behavioral and attentional strategies, 1999 in: Jude Cassidy and Phillip R. Shaver (Eds.), *Handbook of attachment: Theory, research, and clinical applications*, Guilford, New York, p. 520-554.

<sup>15</sup> Cf. D. J. Siegel and T. Payne Bryson. *The whole-brain child: 12 revolutionary strategies to nurture your child's developing mind*, Družinski in terapevtski center Pogled, 2013, p. 19-24.

<sup>16</sup> Cf. C. Gostečnik, *Relacijska paradigma in travma*, p. 29.

<sup>17</sup> Cf. M. D. DeBellis, *Abuse and ACTH response to corticotropin releasing factor*, American Journal of Psychiatry, 159 (2002) 1, p. 157.

<sup>18</sup> Cf. J. A. Cohen, A. P. Mannarino and E. Deblinger, *Treating trauma and traumatic grief in children and adolescents*, Guilford Press, 2006, p. 14.

<sup>19</sup> Cf. M. D. DeBellis, *Abuse and ACTH response to corticotropin releasing factor*, p. 157-158.

<sup>20</sup> Cf. T. Repič, *Nemi kriki spolne zlorabe in novo upanje [Silent cries of sexual abuse and new hope]*, Celje: Društvo Mohorjeva družba in Celjska Mohorjeva družba, 2008, p. 74.

<sup>21</sup> Cf. T. Repič, *Nemi kriki spolne zlorabe in novo upanje*, p. 34-35.

<sup>22</sup> Cf. D. Bakan, *Slaughter of the Innocents*. San Francisco, Jossey Bass, 1971, p. 113

that more than 1 million American children are spanked each year; nearly 20,000 of them are seriously injured as a result of the punishment.<sup>23</sup> A research about the corporal punishment of children shows that it is related to poorer mental health, the lack of trust and assertiveness, an increase in the feeling of helplessness, humiliation<sup>24</sup> and anxiety.<sup>25</sup> It is often linked with various behavioural problems, including higher levels of immediate compliance and aggression and lower levels of moral internalization and mental health.<sup>26</sup> Furthermore, corporal punishment fails to teach pro-social behaviors, and teaches that the use of aggression is an acceptable option in social problem-solving.<sup>27</sup> Experiences of corporal punishment are also statistically significantly connected with depressive states in adulthood.<sup>28</sup> A child who was abused even by his parents cannot turn to them in his distress and has no one to protect him. He has to face his ongoing trauma alone. The consequences of such trying period in his life often come in the form of inappropriate behaviour, alcohol and drug abuse, aggression to others and himself, coupled with a desire for someone to recognise his distress and provide him with the love for which he yearns.<sup>29</sup> However, the parents often see only the child's inappropriate behaviour and respond by punishing, criticising and blaming him. Gradually, abused children begin to believe they are bad and worthless and as such deserve to be mistreated. This opinion persists into adulthood. Later, such individuals will often pick a strategy for dealing with their early trauma, which then leads to additional problems. A typical example is 'drowning' the trauma in alcohol, which in turn leads to addiction, health issues, financial difficulties, conflicts with people close to them, etc. Similar issues can be experienced by individuals who turn to eating chocolate, or working too much and consequently neglecting their families and themselves.<sup>30</sup> The most common psychological behavioural disorder

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<sup>23</sup> Cf. T. Heymann, *The unofficial US census*, 1991.

<sup>24</sup> Cf. M. R. Larsky, *Family genesis of aggression*, *Psychiatric Annals*, 23 (1993) p. 494-499.

<sup>25</sup> Cf. J. R. Cryan, *The banning of corporal punishment*, *Dimensions of Early Childhood*, 23 (1995) 3, p. 36-37.

<sup>26</sup> Cf. E. Thompson Gershoff, *Corporal punishment by parents and associated child behaviors and experiences: A meta-analytic and theoretical review*, *Psychological Bulletin*, 128 (2002) 4, p. 539-579.

<sup>27</sup> Cf. S. R. Shaw and J. P. Braden, *Race and gender bias in the administration of corporal punishment*, *School Psychology Review*, 19 (1990) 3, p. 378-383.

<sup>28</sup> Cf. S. Poljak, *Ali lahko izkušnja kaznovanja v vzgoji iz otroštva povezujemo z depresivnimi ali s tesnobnimi stanji v odraslosti? [Can an experience of a punishment episode in childhood period be connected with depressive or anxiety conditions in adulthood?]*, *Psihološka obzorja*, 21 (2012) 3 and 4, p. 29-36.

<sup>29</sup> Cf. C. Gostečnik, *Neustavljivo Hrepenenje [Irresistible desire]*, *Brat Francišek in Franciškanski družinski inštitut*, 2006, p. 418-453.

<sup>30</sup> Cf. C. Ainscough and K. Toon, *Surviving Childhood Sexual Abuse Workbook: Practical Exercises For Working On Problems Resulting From Childhood Abuse*, Tuscon, Da Capo Press, 2000, p. 50-53.

stemming from childhood sexual abuse is self-harm – cutting the skin with knives, razor blades, scissors or any number of sharp objects from bottle caps to broken glass. It may also include burning the skin with cigarettes, matches, lighters, or even chemicals such as lye or acid, bruising by hitting limbs against hard surfaces, and eating disorders – anorexia and bulimia nervosa, which include starvation, self-induced vomiting, laxative abuse or burning calories by overexertion with no target weight in mind. They turn to these methods in an attempt to regain control and to stop being unconditionally available to someone”.<sup>31</sup> In order to understand this, one should know that these individuals experienced intense feelings of powerlessness as children. These feelings only grew stronger if they turned to someone and were not believed. Thus they experienced fear and a sense of not being able to control the situation. The feeling of being victimised and unable to attain control can lead to panic attacks, anxiety, phobias and nightmares. The survivors can run from their fears and feelings of powerlessness by skipping classes, running away from home, or withdrawing emotionally. Emotional withdrawal can manifest itself in the form of feelings of utter emptiness, various forms of depression, blocks or retreating into fantasy worlds.<sup>32</sup> “If the response or impulse to self-harm becomes habitual, it can become an addiction. The behaviour escalates in the same way as other addictive behaviours such as drinking, gambling, and binge eating worsen and intensify. This self-imposed mental and emotional preoccupation takes the place of unsolvable emotional problems both past and present”.<sup>33</sup>

### 3. Images of God

Experiencing God or the image of God reflects personal experience, in particular concrete experiences in the primary family. Particular experience with the father and mother contribute a major share to the creation of early childhood image of God.<sup>34</sup> Individuals’ perception of God is associated with how they perceived their parents, but also how they perceive themselves and their self-esteem.<sup>35</sup> Punishing parents directly affected punishing / judging God images in their children.<sup>36</sup> They haven’t felt their parents’ acceptance and thus couldn’t conceive a God who would accept

<sup>31</sup> S. Levenkron, *Stolen tomorrows: Understanding and treating women’s childhood sexual abuse*, New York – London, W. W. Norton & Company, 2008, p. 31.

<sup>32</sup> Cf. C. Ainscough and K. Toon, *Surviving Childhood Sexual Abuse Workbook*, p. 39-40.

<sup>33</sup> S. Levenkron, *Stolen tomorrows*, p. 31-32.

<sup>34</sup> Cf. K. Frielingsdorf, *Podobe o Bogu: Kako povzročijo bolezni kako ozdravljajo [Images of God: how they cause illness - how they heal.]*, Ognjišče, Slomškova založba, 2016, p. 17.

<sup>35</sup> Cf. J. R. Buri and R. A. Mueller, *Psychoanalytic theory and loving God concepts: Parent referencing versus self-referencing*, *The Journal of psychology*, 127 (1993) 1, p. 17-27.

<sup>36</sup> Cf. J. R. Dickie et al., *Mother, father, and self: Sources of young adults’ God concepts*, *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 45 (2006) 1, p. 57-71.



them<sup>37</sup>. Based on the research of life and religious stories, Frielingsdorf (2016) derived four most common negative images of God: God as a punishing judge who punishes, the God of death, God the bookkeeper, and the God of productivity who overwhelms.<sup>38</sup> Individuals who have been abused and rejected by their own families are particularly susceptible to the notion of God who is constantly judging, and thus the belief that they are disgusting, reprehensible and unworthy of love and attention grows stronger. Their religious truths are tailored accordingly (themes of punishment, deadly sin, doom) and then serve to further deepen the conviction they are unworthy of any form of forgiveness and deserve damnation. They always question the idea of forgiveness and love, in the sense that they do not apply to them, that they do not deserve them.<sup>39</sup> If they imagine a punishing God the Father, they can develop a problematic relationship with him. They can be imbued with fear and distrust, which later manifests as obedience, which can lead to a blind trust in authority and lack of personal responsibility. They can relate to the unrelenting God the Judge with self-deprecation, in order to escape punishment, suppressing the rage which they direct to themselves. They perceive God as violent parents in their childhood – as if they are not worthy of life and love and are not accepted by God. They may try to avoid the dangerous judging God by suppressing their fears and experience God as loving, but it does not take long until fears surface again.<sup>40</sup> The worst of all, however, is the betrayal of trust, since the latter is necessary for survival, the same as breathing and worship<sup>41</sup> which is strongly reflected in interpersonal relationships. But since the wounds were caused in a relationship, they can only be healed in one.<sup>42</sup>

#### 4. A therapeutic relationship

These individuals usually seek therapy because of the consequences that are manifested in the present and which they do not attribute to childhood violence. “Many individuals in their late teens or older have forgotten their childhood abuse”<sup>43</sup>. The psyche suppresses the events but the feelings remain; impropriety, inferiority, shame, disgust, and guilt. These individuals have low self-esteem and see themselves as someone who is bad, incompetent and unworthy. They perceive their bodies as ugly

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<sup>37</sup> Cf. C. Gostečnik, *Neustavljivo hrepenenje*, p. 391-392.

<sup>38</sup> Cf. K. Frielingsdorf, *Podobe o Bogu*, p. 6.

<sup>39</sup> Cf. C. Gostečnik, *Neustavljivo Hrepenenje*, p. 410-411.

<sup>40</sup> Cf. K. Frielingsdorf, *Podobe o Bogu*, p. 48-50.

<sup>41</sup> Cf. D. Allender, *The wounded heart: Hope for adult victims of childhood sexual abuse*. Tyndale House, 2016, p. 27.

<sup>42</sup> J. Lewis Herman, *Trauma and recovery*, Basic books, 1997, p. 133.

<sup>43</sup> C. Ainscough and K. Toon, *Surviving Childhood Sexual Abuse Workbook*, p. 39-53.

and unclean; a powerful feeling of guilt joins in, triggered by self-harming behaviour, which they do not realise once served as a survival strategy that helps them to move the focus from the past trauma and to deal with certain feelings they had internalised as children in dysfunctional family relationships. These feelings demand resolution. This is manifested through a self-harming behaviour towards the body which is repeated again and again, with an unconscious hope that one day they will form a relationship in which they will be heard and understood. The therapist is well aware that the therapeutic relationship is extremely important, particularly in relational trauma, in order to bring back to life the complete traumatic image. The individual is given an opportunity to resolve, with the therapist being present, the essential elements of the trauma that stand in the way of healthy functioning. It is crucial that the individual in his relationship with the therapist first experiences a sense of respect towards his own body and realises that his body is still beautiful, clean and sacred, and that all disgust and shame are exclusively the result of abuse. The relational therapist keeps revisiting issues such as self-respect and dignity and repeatedly evaluates the body that has memorised everything and stored the most important information in its somatic, implicit memory. This information will enable the process of healing through its resounding power. For the relational therapist, body language is the most essential aspect in healing traumatic memories, which is why the body's dignity and respect must be restored<sup>44</sup>. When a client in therapy feels safe and respected, he can confront the images of God that he developed in childhood or that were communicated by his parents.

## 5. Spiritual aspects

“One of the fundamental values of a man is his religiousness, his relationship with God, which is primarily grace. Yet it is also a relationship, which could be seen through past relationships. The way of establishing and maintaining the relationship with God and the characteristics of this relationship will be at least partly based on the past relationships where the individual experienced some depth and contact with others, which was important for his survival. The quality of the attachment (either secure or insecure) parenting in childhood is often the basis for later relationships, where certain patterns of the past relationships will be repeated. The individual is included in these relationships, within them he looks for his identity and for the contact with important others including God.”<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> Cf. C. Gostečnik, *Relacijska paradigma in travma*, p. 362-369.

<sup>45</sup> B. Simonič, *Antropološko-psihološke in teološke osnove prenašanja vrednot: zgodnja navezanost na starše in temelji religioznosti [Anthropological-psychological and theological basis of transmission of values: Early attachment to parents and foundations of religiosity]*, Bogoslovni vestnik, 66 (2006) 1, p. 123.



“Besides the sensory relationship of experiencing one’s self and the other, there is the equally powerful experience of the sacred, the transcendent or the holy and the in-depth experience of the self and the other, the unstoppable longing represented by the I–You relationship and, of course, also the relationship towards God. The image of God that is felt in the longing of a religious, devout individual, the feeling of safety, protection and tender safe-guarding can be completely distorted if based purely on organic touch, and on the lack of early acceptance, or relationships that are not loving and safe. This is why, in later development, this individual could experience God as cruel, even evil, or as an abusive ‘figure’ playing with human destiny. He/she will take no interest in God or will develop an exceptionally careless and even hostile relationship towards him”.<sup>46</sup> The Individuals who have been abused, neglected or rejected by their own families are particularly susceptible to the notion of God who is constantly judging, and thus the belief that they are disgusting, reprehensible and unworthy of love and attention grows stronger. Their religious truths are tailored accordingly (themes of punishment, deadly sin, doom) and then serve to further deepen the conviction they are unworthy of any form of forgiveness and deserve damnation. They always question the idea of forgiveness and love, in the sense that they do not apply to them, that they do not deserve them.<sup>47</sup> Example: A boy who was abused in childhood was constantly confessing the same sin, that of him attempting to take his own life with pills and alcohol. He felt guilty and he attributed these feelings to the suicide attempt. However, his guilt stemmed from a past trauma and consequently he saw God as condemning and himself as guilty and inadequate. Despite regularly attending mass, his own feeling of worthlessness and his self-contempt keep affirming his belief that others can’t forgive him when it is in fact him who can’t forgive himself. He sees himself as revolting and wicked until he chooses to accept the embrace of God, open himself to his mercy and let God resolve him from his sins.<sup>48</sup> Understanding the latter is important for all who encounter victims of abuse as religion plays an important part in dealing with distress. The religious coping is one of the ways in which people encounter and also resolve stressful or traumatic experiences. Theorists and researchers have discovered that the impact of faith in dealing with distress is often positive, which means that it helps people to accept the event in question, seek suitable solutions to improve the situation, and also to recover and grow from the consequences of stressful and traumatic events.<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> C. Gostečnik, *Sexuality and the Longing for Salvation*, *Journal of Religion and Health*, 46 (2007) 4, p. 581.

<sup>47</sup> C. Gostečnik, *Neustavljivo hrepenenje*, p. 410-411.

<sup>48</sup> Cf. C. Gostečnik, *Neustavljivo hrepenenje*, p. 412.

<sup>49</sup> Cf. B. Simonič et. al, *Religija kot vir pomoči pri soočanju s stresnimi in travmatičnimi dogodki (Religion as a source of help in coping with stressful and traumatic experiences)*, *Bogoslovni vestnik*, 66 (2007) 2, p. 275-276.

## Conclusion

From the moment of conception, the child's development is influenced by what is going on around him. Upon birth, he enters a certain emotional atmosphere where specific relationship patterns play out between him and his parents. Parents' attitude can influence the development of a child's brain, thus providing the best foundation for a healthy and happy life.<sup>50</sup> When parents, however, treat their children with violence, they leave indelible traces on their bodies, which are significantly related to adolescent and adult self-harm, including cutting, eating disorders and suicide attempts. These harmful behaviours turn into addiction. Often, children who have been abused report having lost faith in themselves, other people and even their religious belief. They tend to lean towards an image of God who is disapproving and judgmental. They have not felt their parents' acceptance and thus could not conceive a God who would accept them. This is why harmful behaviour towards one's body should be viewed as a call for help, a desire for salvation. It must be understood how a relationship can influence the way such individual sees himself and accepts his body, and last but not least, how he accepts God. In relational family therapy an individual is always treated within a context of the family in which he grew up. We are trying to find out and to understand the power of previous experiences in the present life. With the help of therapeutic programmes we reformulate inner emotional relational patterns of an individual, a couple or a family. We stress out the importance of respect and compassion in all intimate relationships. Parents are the ones who communicate faith through their behaviour, not using their words, and insofar as it is communicated through violence, the individual needs to confront the faith which was adopted through and communicated by his parents; the objective of this confrontation being a personal relationship with God, which includes making a decision and taking the responsibility of one's own life.<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> Cf. D. J. Siegel and T. Payne Bryson. *The whole-brain child: 12 revolutionary strategies to nurture your child's developing mind*, Družinski in terapevtski center Pogled, 2013, p. 19.

<sup>51</sup> K. Frielingsdorf, *Podoba o Bogu*, p. 23.