

UDK 615.851:2

27-584.5:159.923

159.97

<https://doi.org/10.53745/bs.94.5.12>

Received: 22. 10. 2024

Accepted: 24. 1. 2025

Review article

A THERAPEUTIC EXPLORATION INTO CONVERSATION ABOUT GOD FOR INDIVIDUALS WITH COMPLEX TRAUMA IN THE FIELD OF PSYCHOLOGY OF RELIGION

Sara JEREBIC

Faculty of Theology, University of Ljubljana
Poljanska cesta 4, SI – 1000 Ljubljana
sara.jerebic@teof.uni-lj.si

Abstract

Individuals with complex trauma develop highly individualized images of God, reflecting their internal conflicts, fears and the need for security. Some see God as insensitive or unjust, while others seek Him as a source of comfort, love and security not experienced in human relationships. Traumatic experiences are linked to forming internal beliefs about oneself, others and the world. Discussing God with individuals who have complex trauma requires a sensitive approach that takes into consideration their emotional state and experiences. Establishing a connection between God's love and the healing process is crucial. Providing individuals with space to express emotions while respecting boundaries and encouraging trust-building is essential. When talking about God, language emphasizing warmth, tenderness and security should be employed to highlight God's love and compassion. An adapted approach to spiritual growth that addresses individual needs and helps overcome traumatic experiences can foster positive coping. A psychologically sensitive approach supports the healing and spiritual growth of individuals with complex trauma.

Keywords: complex trauma, images of God, religious psychology, psychotherapy, relationships

Introduction

Research into complex trauma and the psychology of religion highlights the challenges faced when discussing God with trauma survivors. Severe child-

hood trauma often leads to negative self-belief and distorted perceptions of God, requiring careful therapeutic strategies.¹

Trauma can shatter assumptions about self, others and God, impacting one's sense of safety and belonging.² For Christians with complex trauma, childhood relational trauma can have long-term psycho-spiritual effects, adversely affecting their sense of self, their relationship with God and their relationship with their religious community.³ Childhood trauma and difficulties in adult relationships are associated with less positive images of God. Individuals who experienced childhood trauma are less likely to view God as loving, present and forgiving.⁴ Trauma survivors frequently grapple with existential questions about life, death and morality, often involving complex religious and spiritual dimensions.⁵ Addressing these issues in therapy can help individuals work through trauma-related spiritual difficulties and improve their relationship with God.⁶ When client and therapist share their religious faith this may contribute to building trust.⁷ These insights suggest that addressing God with trauma survivors requires sensitivity to their unique beliefs, experiences and cognitive structures. At the same time, the therapist or pastoral worker must maintain their integrity of theology and beliefs. These findings highlight the profound impact of complex trauma on spiritual development and the importance of understanding these associations for both religious and therapeutic contexts. In the postmodern context, pastoral theology is looking for new ways of proclaiming the Good News by opening up to other disci-

¹ Cf. Colin A. ROSS, Talking about God with Trauma Survivors, in: *American Journal of Psychotherapy*, 7 (2016) 4, 429-437.

² Cf. Jodie Kathleen GARDNER, Attachment, Trauma, and Intimacy with God, in: *Conversations: A Graduate Student Journal of the Humanities, Social Sciences, and Theology*, 1 (2014) 2, 1-21.

³ Cf. Marie-Thérèse PROCTOR – Michelle CLEARY – Rachel Anne KORNHABER – Loyola Mary MCLEAN, Christians with chronic complex trauma and relationally focused spiritual difficulties. A conversational model perspective, in: *Journal of Spirituality in Mental Health*, 21 (2019) 2, 1-34.

⁴ Cf. Alice KOSARKOVA – Klara MALINAKOVA – Jitse P. van DIJK, Childhood Trauma and Experience in Close Relationships Are Associated with the God Image. Does Religiosity Make a Difference?, in: *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, 17 (2020) 23, 8841.

⁵ Cf. James K. BOEHNLEIN, Religion and Spirituality After Trauma, in: Laurence J. KIRMAYER – Robert LEMELSON – Mark BARAD (eds.), *Understanding trauma: Integrating biological, clinical, and cultural perspectives*, Cambridge – New York – Melbourne, 2007.

⁶ Cf. Lauren E. MALTBY – Todd W. HALL, Trauma, attachment, and spirituality: A case study, in: *Journal of Psychology and Theology* 40 (2012) 4, 302-312.

⁷ Cf. John R. PETEET, Struggles with God: transference and religious countertransference in the treatment of a trauma survivor, in: *Journal of American Academy of Psychoanalysis and Dynamic Psychiatry*, 37 (2009) 1, 165-174.

plines, such as psychotherapy. Thanks to its methods, which emphasise individuality, personal experience, autonomy and emotional regulation, psychotherapy is an important interlocutor. It fosters a secure relationship between the pastoral worker and the believer, allowing for deeper dialogue and more profound spiritual accompaniment.⁸ Pastoral work can be inspired by psychotherapy, which understands the individual in the context of the patterns in which they grew up or the complex trauma they experienced. Integrating religious or spiritual frameworks of healing can be a key part of recovery from trauma, helping individuals to rebuild trust in God and find meaning.

By drawing parallels with psychotherapy, we aim to deepen our understanding of how complex trauma affects individuals, highlighting the importance of relational dynamics and attachment patterns in both family systems and faith communities. In the first part of the paper we will present the dimension of complex trauma and its consequences on the experience of God, as well as shedding light on the importance of attitudes and ways of talking about God.

1. Complex trauma

Complex trauma refers to exposure to multiple traumatic events over an extended period, often beginning in childhood, and within specific relationships and contexts that affect development. These types of abuse frequently take place over long periods, during which the victim becomes trapped and is manipulated in various ways. In cases of child abuse where the victim is psychologically and physically underdeveloped, they often suffer significant harm to their growth and development due to repeated mistreatment and inadequate care from family members or other individuals responsible for their protection and well-being. This broader understanding also applies to other forms of severe, damaging and entrapping trauma experienced in childhood or adulthood. These may include armed conflict, combat situations, prisoner of war (POW) experiences, the forced displacement of populations due to ethnic cleansing, refugee status and relocation, as well as human trafficking and prostitution.⁹ Unlike single-incident trauma, complex trauma typically

⁸ Cf. Damijan GANC – Drago JEREBIC, The Application of Psychotherapeutic Interventions into Pastoral Practice: Possibilities and Reflections, in: *Bogoslovni vestnik: glasilo Teološke fakultete v Ljubljani* 84 (2024) 1, 177-188.

⁹ Cf. Christine A. COURTOUIS, Complex Trauma, Complex Reactions: Assessment and Treatment, in: *Psychological Trauma: Theory, Research, Practice, and Policy*, S (2008) 1, 86-100, here 86.

involves interpersonal violence, neglect or betrayal. Betrayal is most relevant when the abuse occurs within the family or is perpetrated by a person of trust, such as a caregiver.

1.1. Consequences

The cumulative impact of complex trauma can disrupt fundamental aspects of development, leading to profound psychological and emotional consequences. When parents or caregivers are unable, for various reasons, to provide emotional availability and connect with the child, there is a risk of adverse development. As a victim, the child experiences helplessness, unresolved feelings of anger, sadness, guilt and shame, as well as strong feelings of betrayal and inferiority, which can permanently affect their relationships in adulthood. Symptoms of complex trauma may include disturbances in self-regulation, interpersonal difficulties and feelings of worthlessness.¹⁰

1.2. Religious coping

Religious coping plays a significant role in trauma recovery, particularly for survivors of interpersonal trauma. Theorists and researchers have found that religion often has a positive impact on coping with adversity. It can help individuals accept what has happened, find appropriate solutions to improve their situation and foster growth and recovery from the effects of traumatic events. However, religious coping with adversity can also have a negative impact, often manifesting in dysfunctional behaviours and complications in dealing with distress.¹¹ Positive religious coping and spirituality are associated with decreased psychological distress and increased posttraumatic growth.¹² However, negative religious coping can exacerbate trauma symptoms, especially in older survivors.¹³ Research has identified two key dimensions of religious functioning: Seeking Spiritual Support, which positively relates to posttraumatic growth, and Religious Strain, which correlates with posttraumatic

¹⁰ Cf. Christian GOSTEČNIK, *Relacijska paradigma in travma*, Ljubljana, 2008.

¹¹ Cf. Barbara SIMONIČ – Gabrijela GOJZNIKAR – Robert CVETEK, Religion as a source of help in coping with stressful and traumatic experiences, in: *Bogoslovni vestnik*, 67 (2007) 2, 261-280.

¹² Cf. Thema BRYANT-DAVIS – Eunice C. WONG, Faith to move mountains. Religious coping, spirituality, and interpersonal trauma recovery, in: *American Psychologist*, 68 (2013) 8, 675-684.

¹³ Cf. Sharon BOWLAND – Tonya EDMOND – Roger D. FALLOT, Negative Religious Coping as a Mediator of Trauma Symptoms in Older Survivors, in: *Journal of Religion Spirituality & Aging*, 25 (2013) 4, 326-343.

symptoms.¹⁴ Addressing spiritual struggles and enhancing spiritual coping through interventions can be beneficial for trauma survivors. These findings underscore the importance of considering religious and spiritual aspects in trauma recovery and treatment.^{15 16}

2. Spiritual aspects

It is important to understand the influence of the family environment on a child's development and how they perceive God in adulthood when considering how to talk about God. In a healthy and supportive family, a child receives unconditional love, security and emotional support. Such an environment fosters a child's sense of self-worth, confidence in themselves and the world around them. Growing up in a loving home, a child learns that they are worthy of love and respect and that relationships with people are safe and secure.¹⁷ These positive relationships and experiences during childhood can also influence their perception of God in adulthood. In this case, God is often considered to be loving, caring and reliable. Adults who have grown up in a safe environment see faith as a continuation of this unconditional love and sense of security. For them, God is someone they can rely on, someone who protects them and offers them comfort in difficult moments. In contrast, children who grow up in families with chronic and complex trauma, such as sexual, physical and emotional abuse, neglect, domestic violence, chaos or the loss of key caregivers develop a very different relationship with themselves, with others and often with God. Trauma deeply affects the basic human needs for safety, security and belonging. Traumatized individuals experience events that put them in danger or take away their sense that the world around them is stable and predictable. This leads to a breakdown of basic beliefs about one's own identity, trust in others and the nature of relationships with loved ones. In addition, trauma can lead to doubts about the existence and benevolence of God, as it changes the view of the world as a just and orderly environment.¹⁸ Thus,

¹⁴ Cf. J. Irene HARRIS – Cristopher R. ERBES – Brian E. ENGDAHL, Christian religious functioning and trauma outcomes, in: *Journal of Clinical Psychology*, 64 (2008) 1, 17-29.

¹⁵ Cf. Cit. 13.

¹⁶ Cf. L. Everett Jr WORTINGTON – Diane LANGBERG, Religious considerations and self-forgiveness in treating complex trauma and moral injury in present and former soldiers, in: *Journal of Psychology and Theology*, 40 (2012) 4, 274-288.

¹⁷ Cf. Tomaž ERZAR, Spremembe v pojmovanju psihičnih obramb v psihoanalizi, odnosi izključevanja in empatičnega usklajevanja, in: *Bogoslovni vestnik*, 82 (2002) 3, 667-676, here 672.

¹⁸ Cf. Cit. 2.

trauma leaves the individual in a state of crisis, where they may feel lost, isolated and uncertain about themselves and their role in the world.

Such children may come to believe that they are not worthy of love, that they are to blame for the abuse and that they cannot trust people. This sense of guilt, shame and helplessness often carries over into their relationship with God in adulthood. When a child living in a traumatic environment begins to believe that they are responsible for the abuse, they often form the belief that they must be perfect or »good« in order to be worthy of love. This can lead to the perception that God is a harsh judge who demands perfection and punishes every mistake. Such adults may perceive God as distant, critical and unforgiving. Instead of the unconditional love that characterises healthy relationships, they may feel that they must continually earn God's favour and forgiveness.¹⁹ The illusion of control that children in traumatic environments develop – the belief that they can prevent abuse by being »good« – can also be reflected in their religious life. Adults who have experienced trauma often believe that they must obtain God's grace through perfect behaviour and faithfulness, which leads to a sense of constant pressure and fear of punishment. In addition, people raised in chaotic and abusive family environments often tend to perceive God as unpredictable and unreachable, mirroring their experiences with their parents or caregivers. As a result, religion can be a source of anxiety rather than comfort as such people fear they will never be good enough to deserve God's love.²⁰ Understanding these links between childhood, the family environment and perception of God is important for therapeutic work with people who have experienced trauma. It helps us recognise to what extent traumatic experiences are embedded in their self-image and relationships – not only with people, but also in spirituality. By healing trauma and transforming these negative beliefs, people can begin to develop healthier relationships both with themselves and with the God they may want to believe is a loving and merciful being.

3. Communication strategy

Discussing how to talk about God in the context of the therapeutic relationship raises profound questions about how people perceive themselves, others and God. When working with people who have experienced complex trauma,

¹⁹ Cf. Karl FREILINGSDORF, *Podobe o Bogu. Kako povzročijo bolezni – kako ozdravljajo*, Maribor, 2016.

²⁰ Cf. Christian GOSTEČNIK – Tanja REPIČ SLAVIČ – Saša POLJAK LUKEK, Trauma and Religiousness, in: *Journal of Religion and Health*, 53 (2014), 690-701, here 700.

it is crucial to understand that talking about God is not just a matter of religious instruction or altering people's convictions, but a way of enabling the person to re-establish a healthy relationship with self, others and God. The key purpose of the therapeutic approach is not for the therapist or pastoral worker to impose their own religious views or to change the individual's beliefs. The goal is to shed light on negative convictions about self, which often manifest themselves in the form of negative beliefs about God. People who have experienced complex trauma often carry a sense of unworthiness or a conviction that they are not good enough – both in the eyes of other people and in the eyes of God.²¹ The therapeutic process must enable the individual to realise that these convictions do not stem from their own intrinsic worth, but are the result of painful experiences. This is achieved through an interpersonal relationship that is respectful, understanding and compassionate. Words – simply talking about God – are not enough. Actions are also essential. The key to understanding God and faith is not in what we say, but in how we act when engaging with people who have experienced complex trauma. Such individuals often believe that they are not good enough or that God and religion are something they cannot reach. The Bible teaches us to love others as ourselves (Mr 12:31),²² but how can someone develop a healthy relationship with God if they do not feel love for themselves? People who have experienced complex trauma often require tangible experiences to confirm that they are worthy of love and respect. It is important for the therapist or pastoral worker to create a relationship in which the person can begin to feel safe and accepted. As the individual begins to experience respect and care in a human relationship, the perception of God as someone who is caring and accepting can develop over time.

3.1. *The importance of the relationship*

The nature of the therapeutic relationship is crucial in how an individual forms their perception of self and God. If the therapist or pastoral worker shows empathy, respect and acceptance, the person may begin to experience a sense of being worthy of love, and this may also influence their spiritual beliefs. When an individual experiences emotional safety in the therapeutic relationship, they may begin to see God as someone who is loving and caring, rather than someone who judges or rejects.²³

²¹ Cf. Cit. 20.

²² Holy Bible KJV.

²³ Cf. Christian GOSTEČNIK, *Govorica telesa v psihoanalizi*, Ljubljana, 2012.

Understanding how the brains of people who have experienced trauma function is also key to communicating about God. A person who has never experienced true love or acceptance may not be able to understand the expression »God is love«. Such statements, even if they sound positive, can increase feelings of inadequacy, as the individual feels that they cannot experience this. It is important that the therapist or pastoral worker does not just talk about God, but acts in a way that expresses God's love through an accepting and caring attitude. People relate to God primarily through experiences with other people. If someone has not had positive experiences they cannot understand the concepts of love, grace or mercy.

When working with individuals who have experienced complex trauma, it is extremely important to re-establish respect for the body. Trauma often leads to feelings of self-disgust and shame. It is crucial that the individual in the therapeutic process realises that their body is still beautiful and sacred, and that the disgust they feel is not due to a lack of self-worth, but the abuse. Therapists or pastoral workers need to remind the person of their dignity and worth, and help them develop a healthy self-esteem.²⁴ The best way to do this is by example, with a respectful attitude.

Psychotherapeutic interventions are effective tools that help therapists create meaningful relationships with clients, increase emotional awareness and processing, and build secure interpersonal bonds. These interventions also help to develop compassion for oneself and others, to deepen contact with oneself and to find personal meaning. While recognising the benefits of integrating psychotherapeutic approaches into pastoral practice, it is important that this transfer is carried out under supervision and that pastoral workers receive appropriate education and training.²⁵

Future directions: Research at the intersection of complex trauma and the psychology of religion should prioritise developing more holistic therapeutic approaches that take into account both the psychological and spiritual needs of individuals. Therapists and pastoral workers will need to continue developing tools and methods that incorporate a psychological understanding of complex trauma while supporting individuals in rebuilding their spiritual journeys. Finally, it is crucial that we do not just talk about God, but that our actions and relationships reflect what it means to love, care for and respect others.

²⁴ Cf. Cit. 10.

²⁵ Cf. Cit. 8.

Conclusion

When talking about God to people who have experienced complex trauma, it is essential to focus on practice and not just on theory. What matters for the healing process is not so much what God means to the therapist or pastoral worker, but what God means to the client. We work with the client's beliefs, so it is crucial to understand their context and experience. However, understanding alone is not enough, a person with complex trauma needs personal experience. God is described in the Bible not only in words but also in terms of His actions: understanding, compassion and unconditional love. It is not enough for people who have experienced abuse to hear about God – they need to experience this relationship, which can be expressed by our behaviour. It is only when we show unconditional acceptance and love in the relationship that the person can begin to have an experience of God. It is crucial that we are accepting and compassionate in our relationships with people who have experienced trauma. It is not what we know about God that is important, but how we express that knowledge through our actions. People who have not experienced love or grace cannot understand these concepts if we just explain them. It is the experience of God that heals, and this experience is transmitted through our actions and witness. The trauma that has occurred in relationships can only be healed in new, healthy relationships.

An important connection can be drawn with the catechetical process, where a dialogical form of faith rooted in resonant pedagogy is also essential. This approach encourages students to explore and experience personal faith. The catechist establishes a reciprocal relationship in which both parties are active participants, not passive recipients. The kerygma goes beyond mere doctrine, presenting a resurrection experience which, through resonance, integrates the believer's life experience.²⁶

Therefore, we must be willing to step into the shoes of another person without assuming that we know who God is for them. It is important to create a space for dialogue in which the person can find their way to inner freedom and change their negative self-perception, which they often project onto God. Ultimately, it is not about convincing people about God, but about enabling them to experience God through our actions, attitude and compassion. Only a free God can bring freedom and this freedom can be discovered by the individual in a new experience of relationships.

²⁶ Cf. Tadej STEGU, Kerygmatic Catechesis and Resonance, in: *Bogoslovni vestnik*, 82 (2022) 3, 705-714, here 713.

Sažetak

TERAPIJSKO ISTRAŽIVANJE RAZGOVORA O BOGU ZA OSOBE S KOMPLEKSNOM TRAUMOM NA PODRUČJU PSIHOLOGIJE RELIGIJE

Sara JEREBIC

Teološki fakultet, Sveučilište u Ljubljani
Poljanska cesta 4, SI – 1000 Ljubljana
sara.jerebic@teof.uni-lj.si

Pojedinci s kompleksnom traumom razvijaju visoko individualizirane slike Boga, odražavajući njihove unutarnje sukobe, strahove i potrebu za sigurnošću. Neki vide Boga kao bezosjećajnog ili nepravednog, dok ga drugi traže kao izvor utjehe, ljubavi i sigurnosti koji se ne doživljavaju u ljudskim odnosima. Traumatska iskustva povezana su s formiranjem unutarnjih uvjerenja o sebi, drugima i svijetu. Razgovor o Bogu s osobama koje imaju kompleksnu traumu zahtijeva osjetljiv pristup s obzirom na njihovo emocionalno stanje i iskustva. Uspostavljanje veze između Božje ljubavi i procesa ozdravljenja je ključno. Ključno je osigurati pojedincima prostor za izražavanje emocija, poštivanje granica i poticanje izgradnje povjerenja. Kada se govori o Bogu, koristi se jezik koji naglašava toplinu, nježnost i sigurnost, ističući Božju ljubav i suosjećanje. Prilagođen pristup duhovnom rastu, uvažavajući individualne potrebe i prevladavajući traumatska iskustva, može pomoći u formiranju pozitivnom suočavanju. Psihološki osjetljiv pristup pridonosi iscjeljenju i duhovnom rastu osoba sa kompleksnom traumom.

Ključne riječi: kompleksna trauma, slike Boga, religijska psihologija, psihoterapija, odnosi