

Review

Why Are Suicides So Widespread in Catholic Lithuania?

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Abstract: Religion as a protective factor against suicide was introduced in Durkheim's theory of suicide and analysed from various perspectives in multiple studies. The Lithuanian case is intriguing because before WWII, along with Catholic Poland, it showed much lower suicide rates than its Protestant neighbours Latvia and Estonia. However, today Lithuania is among the leading countries in terms of the prevalence of suicide. Interestingly, not much has changed in Lithuania in terms of religious denomination—about 80% of population call themselves Catholic. The aim of this article was to explore which factors might have affected religions' protective function against suicide during radical historical processes. The method of study consists of an analysis of historical sources, and of recent studies in suicidology and sociology of religion about suicide and religion in Lithuania. The results of this analysis show that two factors seem to be most important—heroicizing resistance suicides and experiencing long-term politics of atheisation.

Keywords: religion; suicide rates; Lithuania

1. Introduction

Religion as a protective factor against suicide was first introduced in Durkheim's ([Durkheim 1979](#)) theory of suicide. He observed that the Protestant countries in Western Europe have higher suicide rates than the Catholic ones and related it to the stronger social cohesion and social integration among Catholics. Since then the association between religion and suicide has been analysed from various perspectives in multiple studies. A systematic review of research studies on religion and suicide over the last 10 years revealed that religion is a protective factor against suicidality, especially against suicide attempts and suicide ([Lawrence et al. 2016](#)). Research indicates that religion may inhibit a person from acting on suicidal ideas and reduce suicide risk by shaping a person's beliefs about suicide, creating access to a supportive community and providing hope and meaning to suffering ([Dervic et al. 2006](#); [Knizek et al. 2010–2011](#); [Stack and Kposowa 2011](#); [Lawrence et al. 2016](#)).

Lithuania is traditionally a Catholic European country, and Christianity is a very important part of the cultural foundation of the country. Before World War II, the Lithuanian society was highly religious, and faith was integral to a major part of daily life ([Streikus 2002](#); [Putinaitė 2015](#)). The part that the Roman Catholic Church played in debates regarding the acceptability and morality of suicidal behaviour was therefore very important ([Gailienė and Ružytė 1997](#)). During the interwar period (1918–1940), the independent state of Lithuania had a low suicide rate (the average rate in 1924–1939 was 8.1/100,000). Lithuanian suicide rates were similar to those of its Catholic neighbour Poland and much lower than those of Protestant Latvia and Estonia on the same Baltic coast (e.g., in 1930 the suicide rate of Lithuania was 9.0/100,000, of Estonia—30/100,000) ([Gailienė 2004, 2015](#)).

However, nowadays suicides are more widespread in Lithuania than in all of those countries. Even though today 94% of Lithuanian residents still identify with a religious community and 77% with the Roman Catholic Church in particular (2011 Lithuanian census data, ([Lietuvos statistikos metraštis 2013](#))),

suicide rates in Lithuania are the highest in the European Union. It appears that religious affiliation is no longer a protective factor against suicide. What has changed? The aim of this study was to explore which factors affect the importance of religion as a protective power against suicide during radical historical processes. The method of study consists of an analysis of historical sources, and of recent studies in suicidology and sociology of religion in Lithuania.

Since the beginning of the 20th century, Lithuania has seen radical historical shifts that have been essential in changing the attitudes of the society. As two totalitarian regimes—the Nazi and the communist regimes—took over Europe, Lithuania experienced a succession of occupations: the first Soviet occupation in 1940–1941; the Nazi occupation in 1941–1944; and the second Soviet occupation in 1944–1991. During the second Soviet occupation, religion as a protective factor against suicide was possibly weakened by the suicides of the guerilla fighters and the systematic atheisation politics carried out by the Soviet government. These factors most likely changed core beliefs about suicide and destroyed pre-existing religious communities.

2. Results

As the second Soviet occupation came in 1944, a well-organised armed resistance emerged in Lithuania. The guerilla war lasted for more than a decade. It was essentially over in 1953, when the Soviets captured and shot the most senior guerilla leader, Jonas Žemaitis. After that, sporadic acts of resistance continued, and the remaining guerillas were gradually destroyed. The last Lithuanian guerilla fighter shot himself in 1965, surrounded by the Soviet army forces and unwilling to surrender alive. The guerilla war undermined the Soviet propaganda statements that Lithuania joined the Soviet Union willingly ([Gaškaitė et al. 1996](#); [Gaškaitė 1997](#); [Daumantas 2005](#)) and that a civil war was going on in Lithuania ([Gailius 2006](#)).

2.1. The Suicides of the Guerilla Fighters: Breaking the Taboo

Suicide became an integral part of the guerilla fighters' lives. They gave oaths to not surrender themselves alive in order to avoid betraying others. Besides, they attempted to maim themselves in death so that they could not be identified and their families would not be persecuted by the MGB¹—typically by exploding a grenade next to their face ([Gaškaitė 1997](#); [Baliukevičius 2002](#); [Daumantas 2005](#)). A study of surviving members of the armed resistance confirmed that extreme situations were very frequent for them: they report suicide attempts twice as often as those who suffered Soviet deportations and the control group who experienced no repressions (9.7%, 5.0%, and 4.2%, respectively) ([Gailienė and Kazlauskas 2005](#)).

However, suicide attempts were not always immediately fatal. Upon capture, resistance fighters were interrogated with torture and some continued to look for ways to kill themselves.

For instance, in 1951 a Dzūkija guerilla operator Monika Plytnikaitė-Turskiene was surrounded and tried to shoot herself. However, the shot was not lethal. With the wound in her head, she was taken to the hospital in Alytus. The Chekas² wanted to restore her health just enough for interrogation. As Monika Plytnikaitė came to consciousness, when the guard was not watching, she ate a thermometer and thus finished her heroic life ([Gaškaitė 1997](#), p.73).

The suicides of the guerilla fighters occurred as religious people encountered the unavoidability of suicide. The guerillas clearly perceived the moral dilemmas related to suicide. They were very much aware of the Christian attitude denouncing suicide. Most of them had joined the guerilla movement after being members of Catholic youth organisations.

¹ MGB(rus.)-Ministry of State Security. Renamed KGB (Committee of State Security) after Stalin's death (1953).

² Members of ChK (rus.), Soviet secret police.

Catholic underground activities organised during the Nazi occupation later transformed into the armed resistance movement against Soviet rule that began in 1944 . . . networks of Catholic youth organisations were important tools for mobilising guerrilla fighters in Lithuania. Among the leaders of guerrilla fighters were people active in the Ateitis movement. The surviving structures of Catholic youth organisations offered useful mechanisms for recruiting members into the guerrilla opposition (Streikus 2016, pp. 23–24).

Besides, as the chaplain of the guerilla fighters attests, their constant confrontation with death served much to strengthen their faith:

... as far as I am aware, the guerrilla fighters have maintained their faith in appropriate heights. Even piety itself is more lively among them than it will be in their peaceful life. The reason for that is the fact that every place, every hour is in mortal danger. Facing this fact, the guerrilla fighters themselves walk into priories and look for priests for confessions and the Blessed Sacrament (Lelešius-Grafas 2006, p. 44).

Thus, the resistance fighters had a rough time combining their Christian attitudes with the guerilla fighter's oath.

Many Lithuanian priests supported the resistance fighters and provided them with spiritual aid. Father Justinas Lelešius (code name Grafas) was exceptional in that he was the only actively fighting guerilla chaplain. He graduated from the seminary in 1943, served in parishes, and collaborated with members of the resistance against the Soviet occupation regime. In 1946 he became the chaplain of the Tauras district. On the 24 September 1947, along with some other guerillas, he died of suicide by grenade explosion in a betrayed bunker (Kasparas 2006).

During his fighting years, Lelešius-Grafas kept a diary. Even though before the explosion the guerilla fighters destroyed the files and documents in the bunker, part of the diary remains. It was found in the KGB³ archives after independence was restored in Lithuania (Lelešius-Grafas 2006).

The diary entries confirm that suicide was a difficult moral dilemma for the religious fighters. Reflecting on the suicides of the guerilla fighters, the priest admits that it seems un-Christian and detestable:

It is sad that many men, when badly wounded, must take their own lives by a pistol shot: our men do not surrender alive. Even though that is cruel and heathen at first sight, but they, like the ancient Pilėnai prince Margiris and all of his men, only leave corpses to the enemy, protecting the secret of our organisation, and lives, freedom and security of other people. Maybe many will detest this fight of ours and call it self-destruction as they browse the sheets of history. But once one remembers that our fight is against barbarians who in their beastly instincts desecrate even corpses... Of course, it [suicide—D. G.] goes against Christian doctrine, and we should bow our heads in front of all kinds of statutes, but we will leave this to the judgment of the kind God, and They set us an example of loving their Homeland and defending it (Lelešius-Grafas 2006, p. 159).

It is interesting that in his excuses for suicide the priest employs the example of the medieval resistance fights against the Teutonic Knights—the fall of the legendary Pilėnai castle and its defence. This is the most prominent example of suicide in a losing battle in Lithuanian history, described in the Prussian Chronicle of Wigand von Marburg in 1393–1394 (1394/1996) (Vygandas 1996).

Did Margiris the prince of Pilėnai give up when the enemy surrounded him on all sides? No. He and his soldiers died, but remained true to the love of their Homeland. Today we honour him. Today we are proud of him. Isn't our own struggle today similar to that? Even if the whole

³ KGB is an abbreviation for Komitet gosudarstvennoj bezopasnosti (Committee for State Security)—the odious Soviet intelligence and counterintelligence service.

nation falls, in dying we will leave to the whole world a monument to the love of our Homeland ([Lelešius-Grafas 2006](#), p. 95).

In the history of Lithuanian struggles, the fall of the Pilénai defence is an exceptional event. Actually, it is probably the only description of mass suicide in Lithuanian military history.

Cultural historians have doubts whether it really was a suicide. Apparently, only two people took their own lives in Pilénai—an unnamed old woman and Margiris himself. These two killed the others with their consent:

...the impression is that they are avoiding suicide [...] they prefer to be killed, that is, they do not want to be suicides. Such preference could be religiously motivated... ([Beresnevičius 1993](#), p. 254).

Moreover, authors of extensive historical studies even suggest that the death of the Pilénai defence is not a suicide out of resistance, but simply a massacre brought about by turmoil and chaos ([Baronas and Mačiulis 2010](#)).

However, since the end of the 19th century, images of Pilénai and Margiris in Lithuania have acquired a special meaning. In the work of Lithuanian historians and artists of Romanticism, the story of Pilénai is treated with special sensationalism and glorification ([Beresnevičius 1993](#)). The death of the Pilénai defence and their ruler Margiris is rooted in the collective imagination as a symbol of the sacrificial struggle for the freedom of the Homeland and the nation, and of the heroic resistance against invaders, which has sometimes also been employed in the propaganda of various governments ([Baronas and Mačiulis 2010](#)). The imagery of Pilénai is at the basis of the tradition of romantic admiration of suicide that grows stronger in Lithuania during critical historic periods.⁴

The altruistic suicides of Lithuanian guerilla fighters, connected with the heroic legend of Pilénai, had a huge impact on the public consciousness. It may be speculated that this was the break from the prevalent Christian attitudes that in a way legalised suicide by pointing to it as an unavoidable option, a possibility to reconcile Christianity and suicide, thus creating certain permissive and even heroicizing attitudes. The suicides of the guerilla fighters to this day come up almost without fail every time a discussion of the morality of suicide takes place (e.g., [Eimontas and Gailienė 2014](#)). A study of suicide letters revealed prominent cultural differences in the suicide process. The suicide letters of the South Korean participants of a political protest in the form of self-immolation were compared to suicide letters from Lithuania and the USA. It appeared that the characteristics of the Lithuanian and South Korean letters were very similar and that they differed from the American letters (the authors of suicide notes from South Korea and Lithuania were more emotionally confused, suffered from greater psychological pain and helplessness, and attached more blame for their state to external objects ([Leenaars et al. 2014](#))).

Therefore, it may be assumed that the perception of the suicides of the guerilla fighters as heroic weakened taboo attitudes towards suicide. Another important factor in diminishing the protective powers of religion was the systematic policy of atheisation, which reduced the religious practices and activities of religious communities.

2.2. Systematic Atheisation: Establishing Cultural Religiousness

The society of the independent Lithuanian state before World War II, that is, ...*before it encountered the Soviet regime, was hardly secularised at all and almost homogeneous in terms of denomination* ([Streikus 2002](#), p. 8). In fact, 85% of the residents identified as Catholic. Lithuania was the most Catholic country among all the territories occupied by the Soviet Union in 1940–1941 ([Streikus 2002](#)).

⁴ During the Movement for Independence years, Lithuanian newspapers often boasted headlines such as “The Defence of Pilénai. 655 Years Ago Lithuanians Chose to Burn to Death Rather than Surrender” (*Lietuvos aidas*), “The Living Torch in the Lenin Square” (*Lietuvos rytas*), and “The Living Torch in the Krasnoyarsk Taiga” (*Lietuvos aidas*). Lithuanian and Hungarian newspapers of the time indicated a stronger tendency to heroicize and romanticise suicides than the German, Austrian, and Greek newspapers ([Fekete et al. 1998](#)).

Catholic social teaching was an impediment to the sovietisation of society and the establishment of the new totalitarian order in the newly occupied territories ([Streikus 2016](#)). The Catholic Church in Lithuania was the only legal societal institution to openly resist the persecution of religion and the communist ideology throughout the period of the Soviet occupation ([Streikus 2002; Laumenskaitė 2015b](#)). After World War II, as the Soviet occupation returned, Lithuanian bishops refused to establish a national Catholic Church separate from the universal one. The church remained independent, resisted the regime, founded underground Roman Catholic seminaries and secret monastic communities, and was the most important center of the resistance media.

Therefore, the Soviet government made a great effort to diminish the moral influence of the church. The persecution of religious practices and church activities was much greater in Lithuania than in other Soviet-occupied Central and Eastern European countries ([Laumenskaitė 2015a](#)).

First came the repression: bishops and active priests were arrested, imprisoned, and killed. Between 1944 and 1953, approximately one third of Lithuanian priests fell victim to the Stalinist repressions. The repressions and the flight of the cultural elite also were detrimental to the Christian intellectual culture. In order to diminish the influence of the church, the government attempted to undermine its position and history by falsifying it and attempting to erase from the collective memory the Christian dimension within the Lithuanian national identity ([Streikus 2016](#)). The aim was to isolate the Catholic Church from its spiritual and administrative center in the Vatican, which meant squeezing it into the narrow framework of a religious cult. Participating in the life of the universal church and its important discussions was deliberately made very difficult for Lithuanian Catholics and their leaders.

Moreover, repressions were not the only means used to fight against the Roman Catholic Church as the main political opponent. Throughout the occupation, a systematic policy of the atheisation of the society was also carried out. The much-used concept of militant atheism has become almost cliché, but it does not reflect the much more complicated historical reality. The latest studies about the process of atheisation in Lithuania have revealed that the Soviet atheisation was a flexible, long-term policy which had various periods of development, each with different goals ([Putinaitė 2015, 2016](#)). Interestingly, the ultimate goal of this policy was not the introduction of the Marxist atheist worldview. The ultimate goal was the education of citizens that would be loyal to the regime and as far away from the church as possible. Therefore, after a rather brief militant period, once it became clear that atheist propaganda was no longer effective as people became indifferent to it, the quest for other forms of atheisation began.

The local government constantly tried to figure out what “exactly” keeps people religious, and attempted to provide secular substitutes for it. In this search of effective political means it moved from one understanding of religion to another. One of the pillars of religion turned out to be personal biographic self-awareness going back to childhood, therefore stories of atheist emancipation that liberate from it were being popularised. Once sentiment turned out to be a pillar of religion, new traditions and rituals were being created. And as religion was perceived to be an important basis for moral and spiritual growth, the powers that be came together to create a nonreligious morality ([Putinaitė 2015](#), p. 346).

So-called substitute practices were created—nonreligious civil traditions that imitated religious rituals. For example, in order to diminish the connections with religious practices, the political authorities offered attractive nonreligious substitutes. Thus, Easter became the Spring Feast with coloured egg games, Christmas became the “family celebration”, All Saints was The Day of Honouring the Dead, and a civil equivalent for christening—a nonreligious celebration for the occasion of naming a newborn—was invented, etc. A worldview replacement was also invented. By the 80s, any sort of spirituality seemed less threatening than Christianity, therefore spiritualism, parapsychology, Eastern spirituality, and even Lithuanian neo-paganism became more and more welcome. Thus, the Soviet fight against the church turned into a propaganda of pseudo-religion ([Putinaitė 2015](#)).

On the one hand, *the church came victorious out of the half-century long conflict with the Soviet regime* (Streikus 2002, p. 320). The regime failed to mobilise a general intolerance towards the church and religion. It was perceived as the institution that was resisting persecutions and defending the national and religious identity. After the country became again independent in 1991, a lot of people turned back to religious practices that they had abandoned or were avoiding during the period of Soviet persecution. Among Lithuanian residents, the percentage of Catholics increased from 57% in 1990 to 77% in 1997, and the percentage of those identifying with no religion decreased almost by half: from 37% to 19% (Laumenskaitė 2015b). In Lithuania, as in other post-communist European countries, trust in church is higher than in other social institutions (Tomka 2006).

On the other hand, the politics of atheisation achieved a certain degree of success. First of all, it reduced religious practices and effectively destroyed religious communities by prohibiting any kind of communal religious activities or even socialising based on religion; by undermining the authority of religious leaders and the congregations' trust in them; and by making religious practices an object of shame, secrecy, and mockery. The repressions prevented people from openly demonstrating their religious identity, practicing a religion, and participating in the life of a religious community. Sociologists of religion observe that at the time throughout the territories occupied by the Soviets, and especially in Lithuania, the process that was taking place was not so much that of secularisation, but rather, of forced long-term laicization, which had a definitive influence on the reduction of the role religion played in everyday social life. The renaissance of religion did not reduce the social anomie (Laumenskaitė 2015a).

At the moment, Lithuania stands out among other traditionally Catholic European countries in that ever since the earliest years of restored independence, it firmly maintains the highest proportion of "occasional" or "formal" Catholics, who only engage in religious practices on major feasts or on important life events in the family and among friends (baptisms, weddings, funerals).

... the power of Sovietisation was overwhelming and it created a generation of young people effectively ignorant of religious education and values. The situation of highly educated people without sound knowledge of religion or of the country's religious heritage damaged Lithuanian culture. At the same time, the sparse religious education that had been available during Soviet times was presented as unquestioned tradition and was based on a very primitive, unexamined knowledge of the old Catholic catechism (Streikus 2016, pp. 26–27).

The Catholicism prevalent in Lithuania is of the cultural heritage variety—the majority of Catholics accept their faith as a cultural norm; they call themselves Catholic because that was what their parents and grandparents were. Such formal belonging and satisfaction with merely a collective form of Catholic identity is more expressed in rituals and traditions as opposed to spirituality and moral and social attitudes (Laumenskaitė 2015b).

It may be surmised that such cultural, formal religiosity also fails to perform the integrative function which is a factor in protection from suicide.

3. Conclusions

In some cultures, the protective role of religion is confirmed, while it is absent in others (Sisask et al. 2010). In some countries the connection between religious affiliation and suicide rates remains constant, even for very long periods of time. For instance, in Switzerland Durkheim compared suicide rates between the Catholic and the Protestant cantons and found that the Protestant rates were higher than the Catholic ones. More than 100 years later, the nation-wide study of individual religious affiliation and suicide risk was repeated in Switzerland and the results confirmed the same trend: religious affiliation as a protective factor against suicide is stronger in the Catholic cantons than in the Protestant ones (Spoerri et al. 2010). Meanwhile in Lithuania, the rates of suicides vary greatly in connection to the historical breakthroughs of the country. During the time of the Soviet occupation, Lithuanian suicide rates increased almost tenfold since the interwar time, then suddenly fell (from

36 to 25 per 100,000) as the movement to independence began, and then again sky-rocketed once the independent state was re-established. In the early 1990s, Lithuania became a world leader in suicide rates. At the same time, the number of people who identified as Catholic greatly increased. Thus, one may assume that Catholicism is no longer performing the protective function against suicide as it could have historically.

The taboo of suicide was most likely reduced by the suicides of the resistance fighters and the connection that was established between them and the legend of ancient struggle, as was indicated by the romanticised representations of suicide in the media (including a particular case when a politician publicly threatened to immolate himself if his political demands were not met). The long-term politics of atheisation shaped the so-called cultural religiosity, and it seems that exactly the aspects that perform the protective function against suicide have been weakened in it—the knowledge and practice of one's religion, and especially the belonging to a religious community. Thus, even though the formal rates of religion are as high in Lithuania as they were during the interwar period, it seems that its quality is very much changed and it no longer performs a protective function against suicide.

This overview clearly demonstrates that the relationship between religion and suicide seems to follow a different pattern in Lithuania in this particular moment in history than the previous research suggests. Therefore, further study of this issue would be both interesting from the scientific point of view and helpful in terms of creating effective suicide prevention and intervention policies.

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