

Christian Perspectives on Suicide

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Religious views on Suicide:

Before we go into various perspectives on suicide let us establish a definition and discuss moral questions on the subject. I have chosen the following as a good satisfaction of both goals.

This article will treat the subject under the following three heads:

- The notions and divisions of suicide
- The principles according to which its morality must be judged
- Statistics and explanations of its frequency

The notions and divisions of suicide

Suicide is the act of one who causes his own death, either by positively destroying his own life, as by inflicting on himself a mortal wound or injury, or by omitting to do what is necessary to escape death, as by refusing to leave a burning house. From a moral standpoint we must treat therefore not only the prohibition of positive suicide, but also the obligation incumbent on man to preserve his life.

Suicide is *direct* when a man has the intention of causing his own death, whether as an end to be attained, or as a means to another end, as when a man kills himself to escape condemnation, disgrace, ruin etc. It is *indirect*, and not usually called by this name when a man does not desire it, either as an end or as a means, but when he nevertheless commits an act which in effect involves death, as when he devotes himself to the care of the plague-stricken knowing that he will succumb under the task.

The morality of suicide

Positive and direct suicide

Positive and direct suicide perpetrated without God's consent always constitutes a grave injustice towards Him. To destroy a thing is to dispose of it as an absolute master and to act as one having full and independent dominion over it; but man does not possess this full and independent dominion over his life, since to be an owner one must be superior to his property. God has reserved to himself direct dominion over life; He is the owner of its substance and He has given man only the serviceable dominion, the right of use, with the charge of protecting and preserving the substance, that is, life itself. Consequently suicide is an attempt against the dominion and right of ownership of the Creator. To this injustice is added a serious offence against the charity which man owes to himself, since by his act he deprives himself of the greatest good in his possession and the possibility of attaining his final end. Moreover, the sin may be aggravated by circumstances, such as failure in conjugal, paternal, or filial piety, failure in justice or charity, if by taking his life one eludes existing obligations of justice or acts of charity, which he could and should perform. That suicide is unlawful is the teaching of Holy Scripture and of the Church, which condemns the act as a most atrocious crime and, in hatred of the sin and to arouse the horror of its children, denies the suicide Christian burial. Moreover, suicide is directly opposed to the most powerful and invincible tendency of every creature and especially of man, the preservation of life. Finally, for a sane man deliberately to take his own life, he must, as a general rule, first have annihilated in himself all that he possessed of spiritual life, since suicide is in absolute contradiction to everything that the Christian religion teaches us as to the end and object of life and, except in cases of insanity, is usually the natural termination of a life of disorder, weakness, and cowardice.

The reason we have advanced to prove the malice of a suicide, namely, God's right and dominion, likewise justifies the modification of the general principle: God being the master of our life He may with His own consent remove from suicide whatever constitutes its disorder. Thus do some authorities justify the conduct of certain saints, who, impelled by the desire of martyrdom and especially to protect their chastity did not wait for their executioners to put them to death, but sought it in one manner or other themselves; nevertheless, the Divine will should be certain and clearly manifested in each particular case.

The question is asked: Can one who is condemned to death kill himself if ordered to do so by the judge? Some authors answer this question in the affirmative, basing their argument on the right which society possesses to punish certain malefactors with death and to commission any executioner, hence also the malefactor himself, to carry out the sentence. We share the most widely accepted opinion, that this practice, prevalent in certain countries of the East, is not lawful. Vindictive justice — and for that matter all justice — requires a distinction between the subject of a right and that of a duty, hence in the present case between the one who punishes and the one who is punished. Finally, the same principle which forbids anyone to personally compass his own death also forbids him to advise, direct, or command, with the direct intention of suicide, that another should slay him.

Positive and indirect suicide

Positive but indirect suicide committed without Divine consent is also unlawful unless, everything considered, there is sufficient reason for doing what will cause death to follow. Thus, it is not a sin, but an act of exalted virtue, to go into savage lands to preach the Gospel, or to the bedside of the plague stricken, to minister to them, although they who do so have before them the prospect of inevitable and speedy death; nor is it a sin for workmen in the discharge of duties to climb on roofs and buildings, thus exposing themselves to danger of death, etc. All this is lawful precisely because the act itself is good and upright, for in theory the persons in question have not in view either as end or means the evil result, that is, death, that will follow, and, moreover, if there be an evil result it is largely compensated for by the good and useful result which they seek. On the other hand there is sin in exposing oneself to danger of death to display courage, to win a wager, etc., because in all these cases the end does not in any way compensate for the danger of death that is run. To judge whether or not there is sufficient reason for an act which will apparently be followed by death, all the circumstances must be weighed, namely, the importance of the good result, the greater or less certainty of its being attained, the greater or less danger of death, etc., all questions which may in a specific case be very difficult to solve.

Negative and direct suicide

Negative and direct suicide without the consent of God constitutes the same sin as positive suicide. In fact man has over his life only the right of use with corresponding obligations to preserve the object of God's dominion, the substance of his life. Hence, it follows obviously that he fails in this obligation of usufructuary who neglects the necessary means for the preservation of life, and this with the intention of destroying the latter, and consequently violates the rights of God.

Negative and indirect suicide

Negative and indirect suicide without the consent of God is also an attempt against the rights of the Creator and an injustice towards Him whenever without sufficient cause a man neglects all the means of preservation of which he should make use. If a man as usufructuary is obliged in justice to preserve his life, it follows that he is equally bound to make use of all the ordinary means which are indicated in the usual course of things, namely:

- he should employ all the ordinary means which nature itself provides, such as to eat, drink, sleep, and so on;
- moreover, he should avoid all dangers which he may easily avoid, e.g. to flee from a burning house, to escape from an infuriated animal when it may be done without difficulty.

In fact to neglect the ordinary means for preserving life is equivalent to killing one's self, but the same is not true with regard to extraordinary means. Thus theologians teach that one is not bound in order to preserve life to employ remedies which, considering one's condition, are regarded as extraordinary and involving extraordinary expenditure; one is not obliged to undergo a very painful surgical operation, nor a considerable amputation, nor to go into exile in order to seek a more beneficial climate, etc. To use a comparison, the lessee of a house is bound to take care of it as becomes a good father of a family, to make use of the ordinary means for the preservation of the property, for instance, to extinguish a fire which he may easily extinguish, etc., but he is not bound to employ means considered extraordinary, such as to procure the latest novelties invented by science to prevent or extinguish fire.

Application of principles

The principles which have been outlined in the four propositions or divisions above given should serve for the solution of particular cases; however, the application may not always be equally easy, and thus a person may by an objectively unlawful act take his life and nevertheless consider it permissible and even an act of exalted virtue.

It may be asked whether by performing or omitting a certain act a person may injure his health and shorten his life. To apply the foregoing principles: it is first of all clear (1st and 3rd propositions, A and C) that one may not have in view this hastening of death, but, this hypothesis aside, it may be said on the one hand that to expose oneself without sufficient reason to a considerable shortening of life constitutes a serious injury to the rights of the Creator; but on the other hand if the danger of death be not imminent, although it is to be feared that life may be shortened even by several years, it is not a grave but only a venial sin. This is the case with the drunkard who by his intemperance causes his premature death.

Again it must be borne in mind that with the addition of a reasonable motive the thing may be entirely lawful and even an act of virtue; thus the workman does not sin by devoting himself to rough labor, and the saints performed a very meritorious and highly virtuous act when in order to overcome their passions they lacerated and tortured their flesh by penance and fasting and were thus the cause of their earlier death.

The frequency of suicide and its chief causes

The plague of suicide belongs especially to the period of decadence of the civilized peoples of antiquity, Greeks, Romans, and Egyptians. The Christian Middle Ages were unacquainted with this morbid tendency, but it has reappeared at a more recent period, has developed constantly since the Renaissance, and at present has reached such an intensity among all civilized nations that it may be considered one of the special evils of our time.

This suicide rate obviously includes suicides attributable to mental illness, but we cannot accept the opinion of a large number of physicians, moralists, and jurists who, led into error by a false philosophy, lay it down as a general rule that suicide is always due to insanity, so great is the horror which this act inspires in every man of sane mind. The Church rejects this theory and, while admitting exceptions, considers that those unfortunates who, impelled by despair or anger, attempt their life often act through malice or culpable cowardice. In fact, despair and anger are not as a general thing movements of the soul

which it is impossible to resist, especially if one does not neglect the helps offered by religion, confidence in God, belief in the immortality of the soul and in a future life of rewards and punishments.

Widely different reasons have been advanced to explain the high frequency of suicide, but it is more correct to say that it does not depend on any one particular cause, but rather on an assemblage of factors, such as the social and economic situation, the misery of a great number, a more feverish pursuit of what is considered happiness, often ending in cruel deceptions, the ever more refined search for pleasure, a more precocious and intense stimulation of sexual life, intellectual overwork, the influence of the media and the sensational news with which it daily provides its readers, the influences of heredity, the ravages of alcoholism, etc. But it is undeniable that the religious factor is by far the most important, the increase in suicides keeping step with the de-Christianization of a country.

France presents a painful example parallel to the systematic de-Christianization; the number of suicides for each 100,000 of population increased from 8.32 in 1852 to 29 in 1900. The reason is obvious. Religion alone, instructs us with regard to the true destiny of life and the importance of death; it alone furnishes a solution of the enigma of suffering, inasmuch as it shows man living in a land of exile and suffering as a means of acquiring the glory and happiness of a future life. By its doctrines of the efficacy of repentance and the practice of confession it relieves the moral suffering of man; it forbids and prevents to a large extent the disorders of life; in a word it is of a nature to prevent the causes which are calculated to impel a man to the extreme act.

Sources

General works of moral theology as also of moral philosophy, especially in reference to the principles as well as the frequency and causes of suicide: WALTER in *Staatslexikon* (2nd ed., Freiburg, 1903), s.v. *Selbstmord*; MASARYK, *Der Selbstmord als sociale Massenerscheinung der modernen Civilisation* (Vienna, 1881); MORSELLI, *Suicide, International Scientific Series* (New York, 1882); BAILEY, *Modern Social Conditions* (New York, 1906); SCHNAPPER-ARNDT, *Socialstatistik* (Leipzig, 1906); KROSE, *Des Selbstmord im 19en Jahrhundert* (Freiburg, 1906); NIEUWBARN, *Beknopt kerkelyk Handwoordenboek* (Tilburg, 1910); JACQUART, *Essais de statistique morale: I, Le Suicide* (Brussels, 1908).

About this page

APA citation. Vander Heeren, A. (1912). Suicide. In *The Catholic Encyclopedia*. New York: Robert Appleton Company. Retrieved December 11, 2010 from New Advent: <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/14326b.htm>

MLA citation. Vander Heeren, Achille. "Suicide." *The Catholic Encyclopedia*. Vol. 14. New York: Robert Appleton Company, 1912. 11 Dec. 2010 <<http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/14326b.htm>>.

Transcription. This article was transcribed for New Advent by Tomas Hancil.

Ecclesiastical approbation. *Nihil Obstat*. July 1, 1912. Remy Lafort, S.T.D., Censor. *Imprimatur*. +John Cardinal Farley, Archbishop of New York.

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Now we can begin our presentation on various Christian sects on suicide.

I have chosen excerpts that best summarize these positions. In some cases I have edited the original versions for the sake of clarity and brevity but have kept the authors views and original presentation style intact.

Roman Catholic Position:

The authoritative *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (paragraphs 2280-2283) makes the following points about suicide:

- "Everyone is responsible for his life before God who has given it to him. It is God who remains the sovereign Master of life. We are obliged to accept life gratefully and preserve it for his honor and the salvation of our souls. We are stewards, not owners, of the life God has entrusted to us. It is not ours to dispose of."
- "Suicide contradicts the natural inclination of the human being to preserve and perpetuate his life. It is gravely contrary to the just love of self. It likewise offends love of neighbor because it unjustly breaks the ties of solidarity with family, nation, and other human societies to which we continue to have obligations. Suicide is contrary to love for the living God."
- "If suicide is committed with the intention of setting an example, especially to the young, it also takes on the gravity of scandal."
- "Voluntary co-operation in suicide is contrary to the moral law."
- "Grave psychological disturbances, anguish, or grave fear of hardship, suffering, or torture can diminish the responsibility of the one committing suicide."
- "We should not despair of the eternal salvation of persons who have taken their own lives. By ways known to him alone, God can provide the opportunity for salutary repentance. The Church prays for persons who have taken their own lives."

Greek Orthodox position:

Suicide, the taking of one's own life, is self-murder and as such, a sin. More importantly, it may be evidence of a lack of faith in our loving, forgiving, sustaining God. If a person has committed suicide as a result of a belief that: such an action is rationally or ethically defensible, the Orthodox Church denies that person a Church funeral, because such beliefs and actions separate a person from the community of faith. The Church shows compassion, however, on those who have taken their own life as a result of mental illness or severe emotional stress, when a condition of impaired rationality can be verified by a physician

<http://www.goarch.org/ourfaith/ourfaith8083>

Wesleyan Church

Suicide is wrong. It is the taking of a life for whatever reason. To take one's life while fully rational is Presumption on the atonement of Christ. We must leave the fate of such in the hands of a merciful God. The Wesleyan Church believes the atonement "is unconditionally effective in the salvation of those mentally incompetent from birth, of those converted persons who have become mentally incompetent, and of children under the age of accountability. But it is effective for the salvation of those who reach accountability only when they repent and exercise faith in Christ" (Discipline 226). The unconditional provision of the atonement covers the act of suicide of Christians who are irrational at the time the act occurs (Public Morals and Social Concerns). http://www.wesleyan.org/gc/blog/positional_letters/

Evangelical Lutheran Church:

Suicide testifies to life's tragic brokenness. We believe that life is God's good and precious gift to us, and yet life for us ourselves and others sometimes appears to be hell, a torment without hope. When we would prefer to ignore, reject, or shy away from those who despair of life, we need to recall what we have heard: God's boundless love in Jesus Christ will leave no one alone and abandoned. We who lean on God's love to live are called to "bear one another's burdens and so fulfill the law of Christ" (Galatians 6:2). Our efforts to prevent suicide grow out of our obligation to protect and promote life, our hope in God amid suffering and adversity, and our love for our troubled neighbor. <http://www.elca.org/What-We-Believe/Social-Issues/Messages/Suicide-Prevention.aspx>

Baptist Position

Expert: Rev. Robert Woods - 1/11/2009

Question

if a saved Christian commits suicide will they go to Hell and what does the Bible say about suicide?

Answer

Suicide, though it is a grave sin, does not necessarily mean the forfeiture of one's salvation. It is sometimes said that taking one's own life is "the unpardonable sin," since there is no opportunity for repentance after death (on the unpardonable sin see Mark 3:28-30-definitely not suicide). No Christian believer in his right mind will take his own life-a life redeemed by Christ-but there may be cases in which due to a variety of circumstances-such as stress, worry, anxiety, and the like-when even a Christian, out of his right mind, might do this extreme thing. Suicide is definitely wrong; however, we may believe that Christ's death can cover such a person's death and allow him to enter heaven. Jesus said in John 10:29 that "My Father, who has given them to Me, is greater than all; and no one is able to snatch them out of My Father's hand." Once you belong to God, you can never be taken away.

Southern Baptist Position

Bobby G. Bodenhamer, D.Min.

When a person commits suicide, do they automatically consign themselves to hell? Let me say up front, I do not believe that suicide necessarily condemns to hell. Indeed, Samson took his own life (Judges 16:25-31) in killing many Philistines yet one finds his name listed among the faithful of God (Hebrews 11:32). In this article I propose to challenge the view of many that suicide guarantees hell.

All humans experience grief. Paul said, "Brothers, we do not want you to be ignorant about those who fall asleep, or to grieve like the rest of men, who have no hope." (I Thes. 4:13, NIV). Here Paul encourages us in our grief to realize that grief for departed Christians comes with hope of our seeing them again, "We believe that Jesus died and rose again and so we believe that God will bring with Jesus those who have fallen asleep in him." (I Thes.4:14). To grieve comes naturally and healthy to us all.

I believe that depression from grief comes out of stacking bewilderment on top of hurt, on top of guilt on top of anger. We get to thinking about our loss and we become bewildered. Then we may get angry about our bewilderment, i.e., what will I do? Then we feel guilty about feeling angry. These emotions just stack

on top of each other in continuing loop that keeps magnifying the other until we work up a great case of depression.

Then, how come do we have the logic that if someone breaks the commandment that "Thou shalt not kill" that they automatically go to hell when we don't apply this to the other commandments? How come we apply the marvelous forgiving grace of Jesus to the other commandments but not to suicide? I personally believe that Jesus died for my past, present and future sins even if I should become so mentally deranged that I should commit suicide. Paul teaches us that salvation comes VIA grace and not by what we do or don't do, "For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith--and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God-- not by works, so that no one can boast" (Eph. 2:8-9). What about you? Do you believe that when a Christian becomes so mentally deranged that they commit suicide, that the God who saved him/her will throw away His grace and consign that person to hell for committing **one** sin? I don't.

Michael Hall, Ph.D. says concerning whether or not a suicide victim necessarily goes to hell, "The whole issue really comes down to **Response--Ability**. God only holds **response-able** those who truly have the ability to respond. Infants don't. Children don't. People in the midst of emotional crises don't. We can indeed lose -- permanently or temporarily -- the ability to respond. Such describes the nature of despair -- when one suffers from a "broken spirit."

In my mind the question becomes, has the suicide victim acknowledged Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior? If he or she has, I believe their sin of suicide will meet the greater grace of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Nowhere in the Bible does God say that He forgives all sin but the sin of suicide, nowhere. Running through the pages of the Bible is a scarlet thread of the blood of Jesus. His blood covers all sin including the sin of suicide. So, does suicide guarantee hell? No, only unbelief in Jesus guarantees hell.

Note:

While I do acknowledge that there is much more to say about Christian perspectives on suicide I believe that I have answered the question that was presented of what happens to the soul of one who commits suicide.

I believe that the general Christian opinion is that we have a merciful God who gives His compassion to everyone including those who commit suicide. Thank you Lord.