



THE ROLE OF CHURCHES IN CURBING THE MENACE OF SUICIDE IN THE SOCIETY

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Abstract

The sanctity of human life cannot be overemphasized, and suicide, whether voluntary or not, is a grave violation of this principle. Human beings are unique in their composition of body and soul, and this gives them an inherent and inviolable right to life. Unfortunately, suicide is a pervasive phenomenon that cuts across all borders, affecting people from various walks of life, races, religions, ages, and social classes. Its negative effects are far-reaching, as it dashes many hopes and leaves families, societies, and organizations in disarray. This work is a critical analysis of suicide, highlighting its negative implications and charging the church with the responsibility of curbing this menace. As human beings, we have a duty to ourselves, society, and nature, and taking one's life thwarts this divine mission. The church has a vital role to play in enlightening people on the evils of suicide, providing succour to those in distress, and delivering a message of hope to those who feel lost and hopeless.

Keywords *Suicide in the Society; Role of Churches; Menace of Suicide*

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Introduction

Many people feel uneasy talking about suicide, partly because of a social taboo on talking or learning about suicide. One popular myth is that suicide should not be mentioned around depressed people because it would plant the idea in their minds. But most mental health professionals agree that people who have suicidal wishes can benefit by discussing it. Suicide is not a new phenomenon. The plague became more pronounced during the moral decadence of the civilized peoples of antiquity - Greeks, Romans, and Egyptians. In ancient Egypt people considered suicide a humane way to escape intolerable conditions. In ancient Japan, people respected the traditional hara-kiri (ritual suicide with a dagger) as a way for a shamed individual to make amends for failure or desertion of duty. During World War II Japanese kamikaze pilots considered it an honour to perform suicidal missions by crashing their airplanes into an enemy target. While in our traditional India, it was a common phenomenon for women to perform the custom SUTTEE - by burning themselves on a funeral pyre at their husband's death. At the turn of time, suicide attracted strong condemnation and became to a very high extent illegal. Ancient Roman governments opposed suicide. Suicide was clearly prohibited by Judaism unless one faced capture by an enemy, as in the mass suicides at Masada.

Christianity on its own condemned suicide as a failure to uphold the sanctity of human life. The condemnation was so intense to the extent that by the Middle Ages, the Roman Catholic Church forbade the burial of suicide victims in consecrated ground. However, the morbid face of Suicide has reappeared at a more recent period, developing constantly since the Renaissance and at present has reached such intensity among all civilized nations that it may be considered one of the special evils of our time.

What is Suicide

Suicide according to Catholic Encyclopaedia 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. It is pertinent however to distinguish suicide from heroic deeds which involves the sacrifice of one's life for God as in the cases of martyrdom, or of offering one's life or risking it to save another person. In this case, the man does not desire it, either as an end or as a means, and to that effect the act cannot be considered as suicidal.

Types / Morality of Suicide

It is apt at this time to classify suicidal acts and determine their morality.

Positive and direct suicide

This is a well thought, planned and well executed ending of one's life. It is positive and direct, and therefore bad. No one has right to terminate one's life. The moral base of the above position lies on the fact that God is the author of life and to that effect has the sole responsibility towards life, and suicide is an attempt against the dominion and right of ownership of the Creator.

Positive and indirect suicide

This involves acts which may lead to one's death as consequence. This may however be justified if there is sufficient reason for that; especially if done in accordance with Divine will. To this effect, it becomes an act of exalted virtue. For instance, to go into savage lands to preach the Gospel. In theory the person in question does not envisage the evil result either as an end or means. On the other hand, a positive and indirect suicide becomes a sin if one exposes oneself to danger of death to display mere courage to win a wager.

Negative and Direct Suicide

Negative and direct suicide involves the neglect of those things necessary to preserve and protect life with the hope of ending his life. Negative and direct suicide without the consent of God constitutes the same sin as positive suicide. Man has as a moral right, corresponding obligations to preserve his life. Hence, it follows obviously that he fails in this obligation if he neglects the necessary means for the preservation of life.

Negative and Indirect Suicide

This occurs when one without sufficient reasons neglects all the ordinary means of preservation of his life. Thus, one is bound to make use of all the ordinary means which are indicated in the usual course of things, namely:

- I. He should employ all the ordinary means which nature itself provides, such as to eat, drink, sleep, and so on;
- II. 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.

Suicide as Sinful Act

God is the sole author of life and has absolute dominion over it. Man does not enjoy independent existence. God however attributed to man a serviceable dominion only, that is, the right of use, with the charge of protecting and preserving life itself. Consequently, suicide is serious offence against the charity of God, and a serious slight on the part of man as by his very act he deprives himself of the greatest good in his possession and the possibility of attaining his final end. Suicide is opposed to be the instinct for self-survival, and therefore is an absolute contradiction to everything that the Christian religion teaches. Suicide is a sign of deprivation of spiritual nourishment.

Also, suicide is a clear manifestation of total lack of faith in the omnipotence nature of God who is capable of wonders. It is sinful by wrongly asserting dominion over what is God's and holding despair over salvation. Thus, in the Catechism of Catholic doctrine in points 2281 and 2325, Suicide is contradictory to 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 neighbour because it unjustly breaks the ties of solidarity with family, and other human societies to which we continue to have obligations. Suicide is seriously contrary to justice, hope and charity. It is forbidden by the fifth commandment.

Thus, the intentional taking of one's own life is wrong for several reasons:

- I. First, it is antithetical to natural instinct for self-preservation. To take one's own life defies both the divine positive law as well as natural instinct for love of self.
- II. Second, every individual owes some level of responsibility to humanity. Suicide violates that commitment of contributory living. Other people need us and depend upon us in ways we may not even know.
- III. Suicide defies the love we owe God. Of course, we are bound to face tough times, hardships, and sufferings. In spite of these hurdles of life, we are called to place ourselves in the hands of God who will never abandon us, but see us safely through this life
- IV. Suicide has also a devastating emotional impact on surviving family members and friends. The loss of a single life to suicide is a tragedy, and the tragedy is multiplied many times over when the friends and family members of the deceased are counted

Causes of Suicide

Biological Perspectives

Research indicates that suicidal behaviour runs in families, suggesting that genetic and biological factors play a role in one's suicide risk. People may inherit a genetic predisposition to certain psychiatric disorders, such as schizophrenia and alcoholism that increase the risk of suicide.

In addition, an inability to control impulsive and violent behaviour may have biological roots. Research has found lower than normal levels of a substance associated with the brain chemical serotonin in people with impulsive aggressiveness.

Psychological Theories

- I. In the early 1900s Austrian psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud emphasized suicide as a result of hostility turned against the self. American psychiatrist Karl Menninger elaborating on Freud's ideas, maintains that all suicides have three interrelated and unconscious dimensions: revenge/hate (a wish to kill), depression/hopelessness (a wish to die), and guilt (a wish to be killed).

- II. Edwin Schneidman, has described several common characteristics of suicides. These include a sense of unbearable psychological pain, a sense of isolation from others, and the perception that death is the only solution to problems about which one feels hopeless and helpless.

According to psychologists, many suicide attempts are a symbolic cry for help, an effort to reach out and receive attention.

Sociological Theories

Most social scientists believe that a society's structure and values can and do influence rates of suicide. French sociologist Émile Durkheim argued that suicide rates are related to *social integration*—that is, the degree to which an individual feels part of a larger group. Durkheim found suicide was more likely when a person lacked social bonds or had relationships disrupted through a sudden change in status, such as unemployment. As one example of the significance of social bonds, suicide rates among adults are lower for married people than for divorced, widowed, or single people.

Studies consistently show that although suicidal people do not appear to have greater life stress than others, they lack effective strategies to cope with stress.

Religion and Suicide

Among the above enumerated factors responsible for suicide, religious factor is by far the most outstanding; the increase in suicides keeps in step with the systematic de-Christianization of our society. Man is fundamentally a religious animal hence to have a breakage between man and religion which is becoming the bane of modern science and technology, is completely devastating. Religion is saddled with the responsibility of acquainting man with the true destiny of life and the importance of death. A denial of this basic fact of life is culpable.

Our Lord Jesus entered this world in our own human condition. He knew joy and pain, success and failure, pleasure and suffering, happiness and sorrow that come in this life. Jesus suffered, died, and rose to free us from sin and give us the promise of everlasting life.

Therefore, the preservation of our life – body and soul – is not something discretionary but obligatory. Preservation and nourishment of our physical and spiritual life become paramount

If religiosity is experienced as a source of hope and confidence, it reduces the risk of depression in times of mounting stress, facilitates recovery and diminishes suicide risk. To survive in this existential world, social bonding and confidence in God are a *modus operandi*.

The Role of Churches

The Church may not have the explicit financial strength or the holistic sophistication needed to curb suicide in its entirety yet the Church can serve a corroborative role with other agents, by enhancing many of the activities that are already central to their very nature. These include:

- I. Teachings on the sacredness of human life. Religion holds human life to a high esteem. Churches should mount serious enlightenment on the value of life especially human life as a being created in the image of God, and whose right of existence is inviolable. This will help in checking negative orientations and teachings with lopsided values.
- II. A revaluation of family ties and responsibilities. Churches have among its tasks to review the concept of family, underscoring the components of the family with particular emphasis on the responsibility of each person in the family. This will help in curbing tendency towards suicide as it will generate the sense of 'belongingness' among members.
- III. Fostering cultures and norms that are life-preserving. There are many cultural practices as well as norms of society that are geared towards fostering human life inherent in our socio-cultural settings. Churches are

expected to throw their weight in promoting such practices. This will enhance a synergy between Religion and Tradition in ensuring quality of life.

- IV. People oriented programmes. Churches should ensure people-oriented programmes, forming small communities of believers where individuals have one and one contact. This would help in easy detection of people in need including those at risk of suicide.
- V. Providing perspectives and social support mechanisms for instance, entrepreneurial schemes in order to engage their members in meaningful 'survivalistic' activities. This is achievable by encouraging life-enhancing strengths that are the foundations of our most ancient faith traditions.
- VI. Churches should compassionately help people navigate the great struggles of life and find a sustainable sense of hope, meaning, purpose, and even joy in life. Church is a mother and should play motherly role by offering comfort to the devastated and forlorn through sensitization by means of teachings, organization of seminars, social media, catechesis, evangelization and most especially offering listening ear to the deprived etc.
- VII. Churches should consider training personnel in suicide management as well as developing suicide-prevention programs with the task recognizing warning signs of victims at risk of suicide, for prompt actions.

Conclusion

The discussions so far have shown that the cause of suicide is multifaceted, an assemblage of factors including social and economic situation, cruel deceptions, the ever more refined search for pleasure, a more precocious and intense stimulation of sexual life, the influence of the media and the sensational news with which it daily provides its readers, the influences of heredity including the ravages of alcoholism.

However, a proper religious orientation as discussed above has the propensity to curb all these factors given the supremacy of God - a fact which one has to be appreciative of. God the giver of life has all it takes to nourish and sustain it. One is bound to appreciate this fact, and by so doing come to respect one's life as a special gift from God. Life has no duplicate. It is unique. No one has right to bargain with his life. Churches should help to create this consciousness.

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