

The Social Problem of Suicide: A Theological Perspective

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ABSTRACT: This study addresses suicide as a real problem for social communities. With the development of social and cultural societies, this issue of suicide has become more and more common and discussed. This study will analyze, in the first part of it, an explicit approach on the meaning of the notion of suicide. We will focus on the explanation that Vasile Dongoroz offers from the point of view of criminal law; Thomas Beauchamp from a philosophical point of view and Emile Durkheim from a sociological point of view. Then we will offer a medical perspective on suicide, focusing on the explanation of medical terms and processes by which certain suicidal acts are committed. In the third part, we discuss the philosophical approach to suicide, presenting an evolution of the discussions as we find it categorized in certain historical periods. In the fourth part, we will approach the theological perspective on the suicidal act. We will turn to the theological understanding of suicide through the prism of five subchapters, drawing on biblical principles to better understand the Christian view of suicide. At the end we will find three important moral issues to which Christian thinking, grouped in religious communities must proclaim answers for social life.

KEYWORDS: suicide, sociology, theology, christian vision, morality

Introduction

An increasingly common social problem among developed or developing societies is that of suicide. The famous philosopher-sociologist Emile Durkheim states in his study "About Suicide" that this act of suicide is a normal problem, not a pathological one, because this problem, as an act in itself, is encountered in every culture and in every age.

This social fact has become so discussed and so common that it has penetrated into certain religious communities. Thus, the Church has come to be in a position to seek answers, from a biblical point of view, to this social problem of its ecclesial existence. Some questions arise among Christian communities about the fate of those who choose this end of earthly life. What happens to those who commit suicide? Where are they going? What is the reason behind their suicidal act? Is there social and religious penance for those who choose the path of suicide? and so on these are just some of the questions that Christian dogmatics must answer, and it does.

This study will not dwell directly on the dogmatic problem of suicide, but we will deal with its moral problem, from the point of view of sociology and theology, with brief presentations on the medical and philosophical perspective on this fact. Before making these presentations, I will dwell on the meaning of the term suicide or suicide and how it has been defined and understood in various circles of scientific research.

1. Defining the term

Suicide as a term has been introduced into the vocabulary of modern languages from a French direction. It comes from the combination of the words "sui", which translates to self or self, and the word "cidium", which translates to the term killer.

Sociology, as a science, offers a fairly broad perspective on understanding the term suicide, and because of this it is difficult enough to present a universally valid definition in all circles of scientific research. In order to provide a clearer understanding of this term, I will present three definitions, or three ways, in which this word can be understood, namely legal, philosophical, and sociological.

1.1. Vasile Dongoroz - criminal law

Vasile Dongoroz (1939, 1), a specialist in criminal law, defines suicide as an act "by which a lucid man, being able to live, causes his own death, apart from any ethical obligation." In other words, the definition of the Romanian professor of Criminal Law leads to suicide in the way it is perceived by those who remain alive. He explains that if the man caused a good by his suicide, this act is not suicide, and if he did it without doing good to another, it is something to be condemned (Dongoroz 1939, 3).

1.2. Thomas Beauchamp - philosophy

Thomas Beauchamp, a professor of philosophy at Georgetown University (USA), believes that "an act is considered suicidal if a person intentionally causes his death in cases where external circumstances do not force him to choose this action, except in cases where death is caused by external conditions that are chosen by the agent but not in order to censor his death" (Beauchamp 1982, 88). We can see that both Dongoroz and Beauchamp define suicide according to a factor external to the person and claim that this act is either a good one or one that is not good, all depending on the intention with which this act is done.

1.3. Emile Durkheim - sociology

Emile Durkheim (2007, 13) believes that suicide means "any case of death that results directly or indirectly from a positive or negative act, committed by the victim himself, and about which she knows what the result will be." Personally, I find the French sociologist's definition as the most complete of the three. It discusses both the direct or indirect act and the motive, positive or negative, which the person resorting to this act has in mind, aware of the consequences or effects of his deed or cause.

Nowadays, in postmodern society, the notion of suicide tends to be replaced by that of suicidal behavior, which encompasses successful suicide, suicide attempts, suicidal ideation, presuicidal syndrome. Replacing the probable with the possible with nothingness, with the insignificant, proves that suicide is not an option, but rather the total denial of the possibility to choose. Suicide also has an operational-psychological definition by which "suicide is a human act of cessation of life, self-produced and with its own intention" (Shneidman 1980, 130).

2. Suicide - the medical perspective

In his oath, Hippocrates, the father of medicine, states that "I will not prescribe a deadly drug and I will not give any advice that could cause his death. Nor will I give a woman a pessary (a medical tool used in ancient times to provoke abortion) to cause an abortion. I will preserve the purity of my life and my art" (Hippocrates 2014, 1). Through this oath, it can be seen how Hippocrates indirectly declares himself against the practice of suicide, but this medical oath has not remained applicable in our times. The public space has developed

continuously, and today we can observe all kinds of social anomalies practiced in hospital spaces.

2.1. Euthanasia

One point of this discussion is that of euthanasia. A group of doctors around the world talking about euthanasia divides it into several categories, namely: voluntary euthanasia (by patient consent), involuntary euthanasia (against the wishes of a competent person), non-voluntary euthanasia (non-competent patient), euthanasia active (intentional termination of a patient's life by a physician), passive euthanasia (withdrawal of treatment), medically assisted suicide (Brock 1993, 13). This suicidal act is done in most cases with the patient's consent, but there are also cases in which the patient, without reason, can no longer make personal decisions, and the family is the one who becomes decisive for him, so that the former is removed from certain devices that keep him alive.

2.2. Biological factors

New studies in the field of suicide, from a medical point of view, state that biological factors may play a major role in some suicidal behaviors. It is claimed that there is a much clearer concordance in terms of suicide and suicide attempts between monozygotic twins (those with completely identical genes) than between dizygotic twins (they only have half of the genes in common). In a 1978 study of a group of adopted children, Schulsinger found that there had already been suicides in the biological families of those who committed suicide. The suicide of these adopted children was largely independent of the existence of psychiatric disorders, which may lead us to believe that there is a genetic predisposition to suicide. It is very likely that other factors, such as social, added to family history may increase the risk of suicide (Schulsinger 1979, 227-287).

2.3. Neurobiological processes

Other studies in the medical field of suicide show that in neurobiological processes, which are responsible for many psychiatric disorders, including those that predispose to suicide, it turns out that there is a biological basis for suicide. It is found, for example, that the level of serotonin in the cerebrospinal fluid is different in psychiatric patients who have committed suicide. Serotonin is a very important neurohormone that responds to mood and aggression. It is possible that the malfunction of neurons containing serotonin in the prefrontal cortex of the brain may be one of the underlying causes of a person's low ability to resist the impulses that push him to the actual act (Coccaro 1989, 587-599).

2.4. Sigmund Freud - the psychoanalytic perspective

Sigmund Freud's psychoanalytic perspective links suicide to melancholy as a deep and painful depression, in which all interest in the outside world ceases, with the loss of the capacity to love, due to diminished self-esteem. In his conception, this depression generates self-accusations, self-insults, all with self-destructive meanings, going as far as the dissolution of the person by himself. Freud's conception of suicide is also based on his theory, developed in 1920, which states that in every human being there is a "death instinct, *destrudo*, which would oppose the instinct of life and reproduction, *libido*, and which, in some cases, it may prevail if it is not sublimated into substitutes such as self-denial in devotion to others" (Minois 2002, 337).

2.5. Alfred Adler - psychology

Austrian psychologist Alfred Adler believes that suicide is an active protest against useful collaboration, a total withdrawal from life's problems, generated by defeat, or the fear of defeat in one of life's three great problems: society, profession, or love. "Suicide can be considered the most impressive challenge for psychology, it is favored by the deficiencies of the feeling of communication, appearing against the background of a melancholy" (Adler 1986, 100-124).

Condemned by religious prescriptions, public attitudes, and last but not least by the regulations of contemporary law, suicide seems, at least in appearance, a kind of conduct that involves only the individuality of the person and whose inner motivations are difficult to perceive or decipher. In a sense, Professor Radulescu remarks that "the suicidal act concentrates in him a whole universe of human feelings: frustration, hatred, jealousy, morbid passion, damage to dignity, violence projected on one's self, all intertwined with the loss of the primordial instinct of of life" (Radulescu 1999, 214).

3. Suicide - the philosophical perspective

The famous French philosopher Albert Camus, in the work *Myth of Sisyphus*, speaking of suicide, strongly states that "the man who is able to face the absurdity of human existence, who sees the meaning of life disappearing, still faces the problem of suicide. There is only one really important philosophical issue: suicide. To consider whether or not life is worth living is to answer the fundamental question of philosophy" (Camus 2020, 47). In light of the importance that Albert Camus attaches to this act, research into suicide from a philosophical perspective will continue with the way it has been viewed by various philosophers throughout important historical periods.

3.1. Antic Greece

In ancient Greece, the view of suicide was characterized by pluralism. "Each important philosophical school had its own particular position, being represented by all this plurality, from the categorical opposition of the Pythagoreans to the permissive approval of the Epicureans and Stoics" (Minois 2002, 50).

Plato was generally against suicide, but mentioned three major exceptions: condemnation (the case of Socrates), very painful and incurable disease, and a miserable fate, which could include various situations, from misery to shame (Plato 1999, 34).

The epicureans, on the other hand, argued that wisdom advises us to calmly commit suicide if life becomes unbearable. The individual can "leave without noise", after reflecting deeply, without haste, "as if you were leaving a smoky room." The Stoics also recommended thoughtful suicide, when reason shows us that this would be the most worthy solution to our order of things, or when we can no longer follow the line of conduct we have drawn. In epicurean thought, suicide was recommended if life became unbearable. If the epicurean faced in his life the so-called adverse conditions of human existence, the best thing for him was the act of suicide. But if the whole human race were to suffer at once, what must it do if it were led by this philosophical current? "In response, it should be noted that the whole human race may be wrong. Entire communities, such as Jonestown, have committed mass suicide. What if the vast majority of the human race decides that suicide is the best "solution" to the world's problems? Is the nonconformist obliged to comply?" (Brie 2009, 4)

In ancient Greece, there were some philosophical schools that were against suicide. The most important school with such a creed was the Pythagorean one. Their opposition was based on two main reasons, namely: "the spirit, fallen in the body as a

result of an original defilement, must endure atonement to the end; the association between soul and body is governed by numerical relationships, to which suicide could break the harmony” (Brie 2009, 4-5).

Seneca, in the *Letter to Lucilius*, presents the obvious connection between suicide and the age of the individual. "If the body is no longer good for anything, why not release a struggling soul? ... I will not give up my old age, if it will leave me whole, whole by what is best in me. But if it starts to scare me or take my mind away, if it leaves me with no life, only breath, I will run away from this rotten and downhill hardughie ... it is a reluctant and a villain who dies of the cause of pain, but it is a fool who lives only to suffer pain” (Seneca 1967, 148-149).

Another important philosophical current that condemns suicide is the neoplatonic one. According to Plotinus, suicide “disturbs the soul of the dead and prevents it from detaching itself from the body in order to return to the celestial spheres; he admits, however, the practice of suppressing his own life in cases of physical pain, shortcomings caused by old age, trials to which man is subjected in captivity” (Minois 2002, 61).

3.2. Middle Ages

The Middle Ages were marked by a period in which suicides among the important people of society were absent, compared to the high number of suicides in ancient Greece. Beginning in the second half of the thirteenth century, in England, the courts decided to distinguish between cases of suicide non compos mentis (those who committed suicide suffered from a mental illness) and those of suicide (traitor of one's own person), only the assets of the latter being confiscated. Explaining suicide only by the action of the devil and by madness, the Middle Ages made it a completely irrational act. Suicide, long thought and explained by the simple reason of disgust with life, was only a category of madness, melancholy (Saucan 2005, 7).

3.3. Renaissance

The renaissance is a special picture in terms of suicide. Although the essence of the Renaissance vein was man (Rotaru 2005, 350), the personalities of the time speak clearly of an increase in the number of suicides. Boccaccio was surprised by the frequency of suicides by hanging in Florence. Erasmus of Rotterdam rhetorically wondered what would happen to mankind if people did not fear death anyway, given the ease with which they meet it. Luther talks about the suicide epidemic in Germany in 1542.

This period is also the time when the first statistics on suicide began to appear, and England remains the best example of this (Minois 2002, 70). In London, the registration of deaths allows us to understand the amplifying role of rumors about suicides. From the beginning of the seventeenth century, the municipal authorities published a weekly list of deaths, first in connection with the plague epidemics, then regularly, indicating the causes of death; is what was called the "bills of mortality." Thus, a weekly list of suicides was available in each parish, which also mentioned cases of insanity and sometimes the profession of victims, making an annual total” (Saucan 2005, 9).

3.4. The Enlightenment

Enlightenment philosophers are all interested in the phenomenon of suicide, some condemn it without hesitation, others proclaim the total freedom of man to dispose of his own life, others are more nuanced, accepting or rejecting it depending on the context (Montesquieu 1993, 109).

3.5. 19th century

The nineteenth century brought a change in the debate on suicide, and the causes of the phenomenon, whether social or psychological, began to be discussed more and more. The problem of individual responsibility becomes secondary, man being increasingly perceived as manipulated by social or psychological factors, factors that he can not control (Saucan 2005, 12).

4. Suicide - the theological perspective

Holy Scripture has a very clear message on this issue. Thus we find that the sixth commandment, "Thou shalt not kill" (Exodus 20:13) shows a categorical prohibition to suppress life, whether personal or personal.

Life is the most beautiful but received from God, the source and foundation of all other existential goods (Rotaru 2019, 201-215). That is why this commandment forbids killing, that is, the raising of one's neighbor's life, but also the cessation of one's own life, that is, suicide. If human life is confined to an economy of God's gifts, then he who respects the gift, that is, life, respects and honors God, the Giver of life. That is why Scripture considers killing a blatant sin in heaven (Genesis 4:10). In the current context, this order also extends to very subtle forms of killing or suicide, which are related, for example, to drug and alcohol use, genetic interventions on the plant and animal kingdom, which endanger human health, techniques and techniques. cloning and genetic modification of the human embryo, to manipulative subliminal messages, etc. "Unmasking these subtle forms that kill the physical or spiritual lives of many people is the right way to keep this commandment and contribute to the transfiguration of our present life into the light of eternal life in the Kingdom of God, which is peace and joy in the Spirit. Holy, the Giver of Life" (Brie 2009, 105).

As we see from the fourth commandment, suicide is a crime, it is a murder, and it falls under this commandment. Taking your own life is as guilty as taking someone else's life. Suicide is specifically condemned in the Bible. The Bible gives us some condemnable cases of suicide. Abimelech decides to kill himself near the tower of Thebes. Then Saul, Ahithophel, Judas, etc., and of the latter the Lord Jesus Christ said, "For it were better that he should not have been born" (Matthew 26:24).

Suicide is a terrible sin. Why is suicide so guilty? The answer to this question is multiple and I want to give it briefly (Brie 2009, 106).

4.1. God's sovereignty

According to the Christian view, suicide rejects God's sovereignty over life. God gives life, and God takes life. Whoever interferes in this, taking the life of another or his own life, violates the sovereignty of God. The only one who is Lord of life is God. In 1 Corinthians 3:16, we read that "if anyone destroys the temple of God, God will destroy it, "and Moses clearly states God's words, "I give life, and I kill." I will heal, and I will heal; and no man shall deliver me out of my hand" (Deuteronomy 32:39).

4.2. The sanctity of life

According to the Christian conception, suicide is considered to be an attack on the sanctity of life. It is the church fathers who introduce the expression *sanctitas vitae* (Feige 1997, 435). Man's life is holy. That's how God gave it. It is made in the image and likeness of God. We find in Genesis 1:27 the words "God made man in his own image, in the image of God he created them," and by this we mean that in the Christian vision when one man attacks the life of another, he actually attacks his image and likeness. God in man, in the holiness of the life that God has placed in him (Ephesians 4: 22-24).

4.3. The body as the Temple of the Holy Spirit

Suicide is to blame for destroying the body, which is the Temple of the Holy Spirit. Through this body man must worship God and give Him to Him by his deeds. The apostle Paul wrote to the Corinthians: "Know ye not that ye are the temple of God, and that the Spirit of God dwelleth in you? If any man defile the temple of God, him shall God destroy; for the temple of God is holy, and so are you" (1 Corinthians 3: 16-17).

4.4. Life - God's gift

Suicide is the culprit because the suicide bomber fails to take responsibility for the life God has given him. The Lord said, "There is no temptation to you, which is beyond the power of men" (1 Corinthians 10:13). God weighs the circumstances in our lives, and His purpose for us is to force us through these circumstances to return to Him and assimilate our Christian moral values. When a person commits suicide, he refuses to take responsibility for fulfilling God's plan for him, for the Apostle Paul exhorts "glorify God in your body and in your spirit, which are God's." (1 Corinthians 6:20).

4.5. The possibility of repentance in the Christian vision

Suicide is to blame for giving man the opportunity to reconcile man with God. In the Christian view, all sin receives God's forgiveness on condition that he repents (Acts 26:20), repents of his sin (Proverbs 28:13), and receives divine forgiveness and correction (John 3:16; Romans 12:2). Suicide, thus, in Christian theological thinking, is the only sin that remains without the possibility of repentance, because it can no longer offer time and life to repentance.

5. Moral issues

Responding to this problem of suicide from a moral perspective is very difficult when it comes to certain special situations, with exceptions. In the following, I would like to focus on a few issues in this category, such as:

5.1. How guilty is the suicide attempt?

The attempted murder is condemned by law. If a man tries to kill someone and fails, but it is legally proven that he wanted to kill him, he is sentenced to prison. However, the suicide attempt is not condemned by law. But, as we have seen above, from the point of view of Christian morality, the suicide attempt is guilty before God.

5.2. The problem of self-sacrifice.

Is self-sacrifice suicide? She is the mother who refuses to eat bread because the bread is too little, she gives it to the children, and as a result she dies of starvation. Is she guilty? Is the one who is in a boat with friends guilty, and who throws himself into the sea to lighten the boat so as to save the others? Is self-sacrifice suicide? If so, it means that the most guilty "suicide" would be the Lord Jesus Christ, who gave his life for all. John, the apostle of love, presents his Christian vision of self-sacrifice and remarks: "We have known His love by the fact that He gave His life for us; and we ought to lay down our lives for the brethren" (1 John 3: 6).

5.3. Can refusal of medical care be considered suicide?

He is a sick man, he is old, death is near, and he says: "Don't take me to the hospital anymore, I don't go to the hospital anymore! I believe in the Lord Jesus, I know that the

Lord heals me, and if His glory heals me, and if not, I still owe death. " And he dies! Is it suicide before God?

Based on Horatiu's aphorism, *carpe diem* or live the moment, we can understand that the principle of people without faith in God is the capitalization of earthly life, "escape your life". The highest value in their eyes is their lives, if they lost their lives they lost everything. But for Christians, not bodily life is the greatest value, but greater than bodily life is eternal. Paul stated, "For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain. But if I have to live in the flesh, make me live; and I don't know what to choose. I am close in two ways: I would like to move and be with Christ, because it would be much better; but it is more necessary for you to abide in the flesh" (Philippians 1: 21-24).

6. Conclusion

Voluntary or intentional homicide or murder (Genesis 4:8-10) that can be mediated or committed, committed in one's own life (suicide) or alien, born or not yet born (abortion), from the Christian point of view is the greatest evil which man can do, because - according to the teaching of the Church - life is the greatest gift of God, of which we have no right to lack the one who has this gift.

John Breck in his study *Euthanasia: A Good Death?* believes that Orthodox Christianity cannot accept the solution of active euthanasia, no matter how popular this solution is in any given society (Breck 2001, 54). Christian religious societies continue to be challenged to find morally acceptable alternatives.

In a Christian vision we know, and what we know we can say: suicide, from the point of view of Christian religious communities, is guilty before God. It is guilty as a crime, as an attack on God's sovereignty, on the sanctity of life, on the image and likeness of God in our lives, and on the peace of others.

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