

**Lutheran Church of Australia:
Commission on Social and Bioethical Questions**

The Church and Suicide – one snapshot

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What has been the church's response to suicide?

Over the centuries the church has voiced a variety of attitudes towards suicide, and, it seems, will continue to do so.

This fluctuation has not come from confusion but from sincere efforts to give helpful guidance to one and all. Another contributing factor is the Bible's relative silence as regards suicide. Rather than moral assessment, the Scriptures constantly proclaim the sacredness of life in, with and under God (eg, Gen 1 & 2; Ex 20:13; Jer 10:23; Ezek 18:4; Gal 2:20) and love expressed as helping service (eg, Lev 19:1-18; Luke 10:25-37). As a matter of interest, the attitudes of ancient philosophers such as Plato and Aristotle accorded with these scriptural tenets, whereas other civilizations (eg, Roman, Japanese) gave sanction to suicide where personal honour was at stake.

Under the influence of St. Augustine (354-430 AD), the church of his day synthesized Greek, Jewish and biblical views to speak of suicide as morally wrong and sinful. This view developed in reaction to sects like the Donatists who encouraged suicide in their yearning to enter the afterlife – even stopping travelers and either paying them or threatening them with death to have them kill the presumably heaven-bound martyr!

However, reaction became rule in time. Church synods moved to treat suicide as a heinous sin and ruled that normal religious rites were not to be used at the burial of suicided persons, nor were they permitted to be buried in 'white soil' (a consecrated cemetery). In many European countries, it became common social practice to drag their bodies through the streets before burial in a crossroads with a stake through the body and a stone over the face, or even to leave bodies unburied and exposed to animals and birds. We moderns hear such strong reactions with distaste and disgust. But is the stigma really less distasteful if we stand in judgment of those who have suicided and contend that they must be buried apart from other family members and 'upright' people?

Why this stern attitude?

The three main objections were established by Thomas Aquinas (1224-74), namely (i) suicide violates the natural law which urges proper concern for oneself; (ii) it violates the moral law as an anti-social action; and (iii) it violates the divine law that God is sovereign over human life and death.

This last has been the church's chief reason against sanctioning suicide. In this view, suicide is seen as turning one's back on God, on the life He generously gives, and on any trust that He can intervene for a person's good. The assumption is that the suicidal person is saying: 'God is absent, or uncaring, or powerless. I have to take things into my own hands.' The concern, then, is that the person who suicides dies in a state of rebellion against God and is removed from hope of reconciliation with God, to experience eternal judgment hereafter.

Does that mean that everyone who dies by suicide will go to hell?

From what has been said, it could seem only an affirmative answer can be given, as death by suicide apparently allows no opportunity for forgiveness of this final sin.

That logic, however, must create a life of dread for all believers. Who of us is without unconfessed sin – or even aware of all our sins? Will we be condemned to hell because we died with some unforgiven sin lingering?

God has removed that false focus and burden from us in Christ crucified and risen. God has '*clothed me with salvation and arrayed me in a robe of righteousness*' (Isaiah 61:10) through the once-for-all sacrifice. St John declares: '*The blood of Jesus [God's] Son cleanses us from all sin*' (1 John 1:7b). Saved now – that is our divine experience in baptism. In this truth and grace we live and move and have our being.

This wonderful knowledge and confidence has led believers of every generation to forego concern about the eternal placement of those who have committed suicide. Their focus is to witness to our gracious Lord who alone knows an individual's spiritual condition, and to find ways to help people who express suicidal thoughts and behaviours. Despite the callous reactions of medieval societies stated above, the church in the Middle Ages increasingly considered the view that a person's wish to end their life was something to be understood and hopefully prevented, and if at all possible to ease tormented hearts and minds. In our modern era, this compassion and aid has been accompanied especially by developments in psychiatry and its interest in emotional dysfunction, the impacts of traumas and illicit drug use, and mental pathology.

Shouldn't a person be allowed to die if they want to?

This attitude increasingly infects our society and church as a relativistic and individualistic spirit is preferred to the moral moorings that helped previous generations. This spirit is heard in comments that appear to make gods of concepts like Quality of Life and Autonomy; more crassly put, the attitude is: 'It's my life; I can do what I want with it'.

We sinners don't make good gods. No longer diabolically hoodwinked, counter-culturally and with pride in the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world, we humbly submit to the truth: '*You are not your own; you were bought with a price. So glorify God in your body*' (1 Cor 6:19b,20).

And when the storms of life roll in against us, we are blessed to live knowing that the Lord is Immanuel, God with us, and that He 'is greater than our hearts' (1 John 3:20b).

– Pastor Tim Kowald
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