



The Bible, Christianity and Suicide

"The Bible says suicide is wrong."

Well, no, actually, it doesn't. There are seven suicides and one attempted suicide reported in the Bible, and they are presented either neutrally or as appropriate, under the circumstances:

OLD TESTAMENT SUICIDES:

ABIMELECH (Judges 9:54), dying of a skull fracture during a siege, ordered his armor-bearer to slay him, to avoid the ignominy of having been seen to have been killed by a woman (she threw a millstone at him).

SAMSON (Judges 16:26-31) killed himself to avoid being "made sport of" by the Philistines, after his capture and infamous haircut, taking his tormentors with him. Samson's act of Faith earned him a place among the saints of Christianity (Hebrews, 11:32).

SAUL (1 Samuel 31: 3-6), wounded and defeated in battle with the Philistines, asked his armor-bearer to kill him. When the aide was afraid to do it, Saul fell on his own sword. The armor-bearer then did likewise.

ACHITOPEL (or Ahitophel, var. spellings) (2 Samuel 17:1, 23), plotted to overthrow David. When his plan failed, he put his household in order and hanged himself. It is interesting to note that the account specifies that he was buried in his father's sepulcher, in contrast to the Christian Church's long history of refusing burial in hallowed ground to suicides.

ZIMRI (1 Kings 16:18) usurped the throne of Israel; when he failed, he burned down the palace around himself.

NEW TESTAMENT SUICIDES:

JUDAS ISCARIOT (Matthew 27:4-5) hung himself after betraying Jesus. Generally presented as an appropriate act of remorse.

THE JAILER AT PHILIPPI (Acts 16:26-29), under the mistaken impression that all his prisoners had escaped during an earthquake, thought that his career and life were in jeopardy and prepared to fall on his sword. Paul stopped him, not arguing that suicide was wrong, but merely that the jailer was acting under a misapprehension.

JESUS OF NAZARETH (all four Gospels) chose to aggravate the authorities into crucifying him. Jesus was explicit in stating that his life was not being taken but that he was voluntarily choosing death: "No man taketh it from me, but I lay it down of myself." (John 10:18) While many Christians would vehemently deny that this amounts to suicide, Jesus' actions in behaving in a way that he knew would cause the authorities to condemn and execute him, and his refusal to take any action to avoid his execution, is similar to what today would be called "**suicide by cop**," and even more closely parallels the execution/suicide of Socrates, and the self-imposed martyrdoms carried out by members of the heretical Donatist schism and condemned by St. Augustine (see below).

So, how did the Bible's neutral position on suicide become translated by the Christian Church into a dogmatic opposition to suicide?

In the Fourth Century AD, the Empire and the Catholic Church sought to suppress the heretical Donatists and the closely allied Circumcellions, partly because these heretics opposed the intermingling of church and state. The Donatists' fanatic belief in an obligation to resist persecution in practice sometimes expanded into goading magistrates and other authorities into killing them, secure in the knowledge that this "martyrdom" ensured them a place in Heaven. (Donatism originated and was strongest in North Africa, and persisted until the region was conquered by Islam; there has been some speculation that Donatist beliefs may have influenced that new religion. (<http://www.abelard.org/heresies/heresies.htm#donatism>))

It was to "correct" this heresy that St. Augustine of Hippo, in the early fifth century, wrote his arguments opposing suicide.(1) Augustine does make a weak attempt at finding a Biblical injunction against suicide, claiming that it violates the Sixth Commandment, "Thou Shalt Not Kill" (though a more accurate translation from the original Hebrew is "You Shall Not Commit Murder") (5). Augustine is forced to admit that (there are exceptions <http://www.utm.edu/research/iep/s/suicide.htm>) making it all right to kill another person, but dismisses reasons for wanting to end one's own life.

Augustine's arguments did not immediately take hold in Western culture. The first comprehensive Christian-era legal code was the Code of Justinian. This codex, drafted about a century after St. Augustine, did not punish suicide, if the person had a good reason for killing himself; good reasons cited include, "impatience of pain or sickness, or by another cause, weariness of life... lunacy or fear of dishonor." In short, every reason except no reason at all, and that was punished only on the grounds that it was irrational: "whoever does not spare himself will not spare another."(8) Suicide did not become a crime under English Common Law until the 10th Century, in the appropriately-named Dark Ages.

Medieval theologian St. Thomas Aquinas, (2) also condemns suicide, basing his arguments about suicide reasoning principally on the works of three pagan Greek philosophers, Aristotle,(3) Socrates, and Plato. In Summa Theologica, Aquinas gives three arguments against the permissibility of suicide.

The first argument is based on natural law, or the natural purpose of a thing: suicide is wrong since it is contrary to the natural life asserting purpose of humans. This is not based upon Scripture, but on Aristotle's "Nicomachean Ethics" (Bk. 5, Ch. 11). It should be noted that, while Aquinas held Aristotle in almost sacrilegious adoration(4), calling him "The Philosopher," Aristotle frequently makes unsupported and incorrect assertion about the "nature" of things. Aquinas goes on to argue that an obligation of charity and love for oneself precludes suicide. Aside from beginning from another unsupported premise that all suicides stem from self-hatred, Aquinas is inconsistent in this argument: when circumstances are such that the loving and charitable act might be self-deliverance, Aquinas abandons these virtues for the virtue of "fortitude."

Aquinas's second argument against suicide is a utilitarian type argument: suicide is not justified because of the greater social harm that is done. Enlightenment philosopher David Hume, in particular, pointed out the flaws in this assertion that were ignored by Aquinas, namely, that suicide does not, on balance, always cause greater harm than good (society might be better off, for example, if an incipient Hitler were to commit suicide, or the carrier of a deadly plague were to kill himself before spreading the contagion). And, carried out consistently, the doctrine of greater social good would logically obligate a person to commit suicide, if that person's suicide would benefit society (such as the old or infirm avoiding becoming a burden on society). (insert Hume Footnote)

Aquinas's third argument is that suicide is wrong since it is like stealing from God. Our lives are property that is owned by God, and we are merely the trustees of that property. This, again, is an assertion propounded by the Pagan philosopher Plato: "The gods are our guardians, and that we are a possession of theirs. ... Then there may be reason in saying that a man should wait, and not take his own life until God summons him..." (Insert footnote for "Phaedo", 62) More specifically, men are the possessions of (the) God(s) representatives on earth. Aquinas explicitly compares the relationship of man and God as that of slave and slaveholder. (6 Footnote). It should be noted that

Plato was quoting Socrates, as Socrates was preparing to commit suicide. Socrates excused this inconsistency, saying, " ... a man should wait, and not take his own life until God summons him, as he is now summoning me" (ibid. Phaedo, 62)

Both Augustine and Aquinas also offer the oft-cited claim that suicide somehow violates God's exclusive prerogative to decide the duration of one's life. Enlightenment philosophers Jean Jacques Rousseau and Hume(7 - ibid.) effectively disposed of this argument, pointing out that again, carried to its logical conclusion, it would prohibit any medical treatment as also interfering with God-willed lifespans.

Finally, both Augustine and Aquinas deal with the uncomfortable facts that the Bible *does* present the suicide of Samson as the act of a saint, and that the Church has from its earliest days honored as saints certain Christians who, faced with persecution, committed suicide, by resorting to Socrates' excuse: without any Scriptural support whatsoever, they assert that God must have "secretly commanded" these suicides; and, again without Scriptural basis, they claim that God would not and has not ever "summoned" any other person in this way.

REFERENCES

- [1] St. Augustine, "[The City of God](#)"
- [2] St. Thomas Aquinas, "Summa Theologica" <http://www.newadvent.org/summa/>
- [3] Aristotle, "Nicomachean Ethics" http://www.constitution.org/ari/ethic_00.htm
- [4] Pegis, Anton, "Introduction to St. Thomas Aquinas" Random House, New York, 1948, Introduction
- [5] Holy Bible, King James Version, New Scofield Edition, Exodus 20:13 - note
- [6] St. Thomas Aquinas, "The Sin of Suicide" Excerpted from "Summa Theologica" http://www.csulb.edu/~jvancamp/452_r4.html
- [7] Hume, David, "Essays On Suicide And The Immortality Of The Soul," 1783 http://www.infidels.org/library/historical/david_hume/suicide.html
- [8] A. Alvarez, "Savage God: A Study of Suicide" New York, 1970

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