Suicide as the Unpardonable Sin and the Multi-Dimensional History of a Theological Error

Dr. Timothy J. Demy
Professor of Military Ethics
U. S. Naval War College, Newport, Rhode Island[1]

Introduction

The development of doctrine is rarely pristine and lineal from revelation to articulation and application.[2] Popular religious beliefs

---

[1] See www.USNWC.edu, Timothy.Demy@usnwc.edu; prior to appointment at the lwar college, Timothy J.Demy, Ph.D., Th.D., served as a Navy chaplain for 27 years with the Navy, Marine Corps, and Coast Guard. He is the author and editor of numerous articles and books on a variety of historical, ethical, and theological subjects and serves as the American managing editor of the *Journal of Military Ethics*. The views presented in this paper are solely those of the author and do not represent or reflect the position or endorsement of any governmental agency or department, military or otherwise.

come from many sources. Some beliefs are grounded in Scripture and in theology. Sometimes beliefs derive from tradition and history. On other occasions beliefs may be primarily grounded in cultural practices and values. At other times beliefs may have their origins in literature. Finally, theological ideas may be an amalgamation of any or all of the above. The process of untangling the many strands of a doctrine and belief are compounded significantly when working with medieval history and theology. Historian Alexander Murray astutely observes that "to understand anything medieval at all you must give a lot of time to it, and specialize."[3] Such is the case with the idea of suicide as the unpardonable sin, an idea with an unclear history but heavily indebted to medieval thought.

Values have consequences. So, too, do beliefs. Personal, cultural, historical, and theological ideas converge daily in the lives of individuals as they face the trials, traumas, and tragedies of life, and life's many uncertainties. Perhaps nowhere, apart from the ravages of war and cataclysmic disasters, is the personal challenge of theodicy and the ramifications of the Adamic fall more intense than in matters of health and bioethics. This is especially true of the issue of suicide. No one who is touched by it remains unchanged.

Is there an action or sin so great and significant that either by timing or consequence it deprives the Christian of redemption and the blessings of eternal life with God? Why would it do so? If there is such an act, it would do so because the finality of it prohibits the individual from the opportunity to ask divine forgiveness. If so, is suicide such an act, and perhaps the only such act? Such a sin would be unpardonable. It seems from the vantage point of time alone that if such an action existed, it would be suicide since there is no opportunity for the individual who commits suicide to ask forgiveness after the fact. Yet, if this is true, and assuming that suicide is a sin, would not *any* sin that was not confessed prior to the individual's death cause the same result? If so, this then might lead one to

---

[2] For an overview of the history of Christian doctrine, see John D. Hannah. *Our Legacy—The History of Christian Doctrine* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 2001). See also Maurice Wiles, *The Making of Christian Doctrine—A Study in the Principles of Early Doctrinal Development* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975).

[3] Alexander Murray, *Suicide in the Middle Ages*, vol. 2, *The Curse on Self-Murder* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 483.

categorize sins according to their severity (and this is exactly what happened in the history of the doctrine of sin—hamartiology).

The question under consideration in this essay is that of the possibility of future redemption for those whose lives are terminated through suicide. It is a theological response to a multifaceted issue. In considering the answer, it is understood that the question pertains primarily the suicide of a Christian, and as such, it is an issue relating to the doctrines of sin and salvation (hamartiology and soteriology). While the same question may be asked regarding the non-Christian, the response in such an instance need not be linked directly to the act of suicide.

The issue of redemption for the non-Christian who commits suicide is one of soteriology and tied to beliefs of about either universalism or a post-death final opportunity for repentance regardless of the cause of the physical death. Considerations of universalism and second-chance possibilities for repentance are beyond the scope of this presentation and are not addressed, although the author considers acceptance of such views to be unbiblical.

This essay presents a negative response:

<p align="center">**suicide does not prohibit redemption.**</p>

And we present within four facets: historical-theological, literary, biblical, and cultural-pastoral. In doing so, we argue that acceptance of the view is grounded in history and culture rather than in interpretations of the biblical text. Although some might argue for no redemption for those who commit suicide based on biblical texts, in the history of the idea of "no redemption for those who commit suicide," such arguments are secondary and tangential. The history of that idea is one that primarily is a theological misconception rooted primarily in medieval theology and the influence of Dante Alighieri's fourteenth-century epic poem *Divine Comedy* (*Commedia*, AD 1320), specifically the first part of the three-part poem, *Inferno.* In short, when one asks the question of those who commit suicide and affirms that there is no redemption, the ideological lineage of the question and answer is historical, literary, and cultural. It is not biblical, even though biblical texts may (or may not) be cited.

A. Historical-Theological Considerations

Suicide is not a new issue in Christian thought. Today, when a person asks the question about redemption and suicide, he or she is not asking so much a question of theology, but a question of history and the misconception of an idea about theology. The arguments and presuppositions are not grounded primarily in the biblical text and contemporary theology, but are mostly grounded in medieval views influenced by theology and literature of that era.

1. Suicide and the Classical World

The intellectual world in which Christianity emerged was well acquainted with the concept of suicide. In Jewish history, there were the deaths of the defenders at Masada, and in Greek history there was the famous death the philosopher Socrates (though he considered his death not a suicide, but rather, capital punishment imposed by the Athenian polis).[4] Plato, citing Socrates, believed that individuals were the possession of the gods just as a slave was the possession of the master, and therefore an individual's life was not his or her own to destroy.[5] This same idea, but based upon biblical revelation and worship of God, would be expressed later by Christians. Aristotle rejected the idea that there were any extenuating circumstances in which suicide was permitted.[6]

In Roman society, suicide was often imposed by the state as punishment, and the practice reached its apex under the rule of Nero from AD 58–64. Breaking with earlier philosophical thought, the Stoic philosophers of Roman society did not consider suicide morally unjust or evil but, instead, found it at times desirable—something Christians of the era such as Augustine (AD 354–430) rejected.[7]

---

[4] On the deaths at Masada (AD 73), see Barry R. Leventhal, "The Masada Suicides: The Making and Breaking of a Cultural Icon," in *Suicide: A Christian Response*, ed. Timothy J. Demy and Gary P. Stewart (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1998), 269–83.

[5] Plato (c. 427–347 BC), *Phaedo* 62.

[6] Aristotle (384–322 BC), *Nicomachean Ethics* V.11.

[7] Marcus Aurelius (AD 121–180), *Meditations,* VIII, 50 and X, 8. In Georgia Noon "On Suicide," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 39, no. 3 (Jul–Sept. 1978): 371–86, which is an overview of the history of the idea of suicide, Noon states that the Stoic response was eclipsed by "religious hysteria" (375). This misconstrues the nature of the Christian response. The response was decisive and dogmatic, but that is not the same thing as the uncontrolled panic and emotion of hysteria. Likewise, she later misunderstands and misconstrues the doctrine of predestination which she argues creates a spiritual atmosphere conducive to suicide (377).

2. Suicide and the Early Church

The issue of suicide was not in and of itself a major social concern in the patristic era although it was addressed, especially in opposition to the views of the Stoics. Among the writers voicing theological and biblical objections to it were Ignatius (*Romans* 4.1f; 5.2f; c. AD 100), Lactantius (*Div. inst* iii.18; c. AD 303), Chrysostom (*De consolatione Mortis*; c. AD 375), Jerome (*Commentary ad Matthew* 4.17; c. AD 400), and Augustine (AD 354–430) who used the sixth commandment to say it was wrong, an act of cowardice and did not give opportunity for repentance (*Civ. Dei* 1.4–26). Such views, especially those of Augustine would be formalized and reinforced in the councils of Gaudix (305), Carthage (348), and Braga (563).

While it was not one of the greatest social concerns of the Fathers, suicide was a tangential concern insomuch as it intersected with realities of the persecution and martyrdom of Christians.[8]   Also addressed by the early church was the issue of the suicide of women facing sexual assault. Even so, classics scholar Professor Darrel W. Amundsen observed, "There is absolutely no evidence in the corpus of Christian literature for the first 250 years of the Christian era that any Christian under any circumstances committed suicide for any reason, unless one should argue that Judas is the one exception."[9] With respect to suicide and illness, Amundsen notes, "So foundational are the goodness and sovereignty of God in patristic theology and so consistently is patient endurance of affliction stressed as an essential Christian virtue, that it is not at all surprising that patristic texts do not refer to suicide by the ill."[10]

In recent years, as debates regarding suicide, physician-assisted suicide, and euthanasia became more prevalent in social discourse and public policy, some theologians and historians argued that martyrdom was a form of suicide that was accepted, sought, and applauded by

---

[8] On historical and theological concerns relating to the martyrdom of early Christians, see W. H. C. Frend, *Martyrdom and Persecution in the Early Church* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1965). Regarding suicide and early Christianity, see Darrel W. Amundsen, *Medicine, Society, and Faith in the Ancient and Medieval Worlds* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), 70–126. See also his essay "Did Early Christians 'Lust After Death'?" in *Suicide—A Christian Response*, ed. Timothy J. Demy and Gary P. Stewart (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1998), 284–95.

[9] Darrel W. Amundsen, *Medicine, Society, and Faith in the Ancient and Medieval Worlds* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), 71.

[10] Amundsen, "Did Early Christians 'Lust After Death'?" 292–93.

early Christians.[11] Such views, however, distort history and confuse the motives of the martyred Christians. There is a very great difference between seeking death and being willing to die. Suicide, assisted or otherwise, is an act in which someone *intends* to die and actively pursues that end. Martyrdom is an act in which someone who is *willing* to die for his or her beliefs and is then killed by the hand or order of another. There is no intent to die in martyrdom. Whereas martyrdom is the ultimate act of suffering and sacrifice for one's faith, suicide is often the ultimate and final act of escape from suffering. Amundsen said, "Suicide in the face of illness can be seen as analogous to martyrdom only if God is viewed as either significantly less than sovereign or as an oppressive tyrant."[12]

The apostles of the early church understood very well that their commitment to Jesus Christ might cost them their lives. Jesus had warned them of the world's hatred of Him and of them because of their discipleship (John 15:18–25). Some Christians will pay the ultimate price for their faith and proclamation of the gospel. However, to compare such sacrifices with suicide is to confuse an act of selfless love with self-centered destruction.

No individual in the early church had greater influence on theology and Christianity in the West than Augustine (AD 354–430). His views on many subjects shaped western thought for centuries to come. Augustine's views on suicide heavily influenced subsequent Roman Catholic and Protestant theologians and perspectives. While some have argued that he first articulated and developed the Christian attitude toward suicide, such is not the case. Augustine affirmed earlier understandings and, said Amundsen, "by removing certain ambiguities, he clarified and provided a theologically cogent explanation of and justification for the position typically held by earlier and contemporary Christian sources."[13] Several earlier and Augustinian-era Christian writers and sources rejecting suicide include Clement, Cyprian, Justin Martyr, *Epistle of Diognetus,* the Clementine *Homilies,* Tertullian, Lactantius, Ambrose, Jerome, and

---

[11] See for example, Arthur J. Droge and James D. Tabor, *A Noble Death—Suicide and Martyrdom among Christians and Jews in Antiquity* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1992).

[12] Amundsen, "Did Early Christians 'Lust After Death'?" 292–93.

[13] Amundsen, *Medicine, Society, and Faith in the Ancient and Medieval Worlds,* 73.

Chrysostom.[14] Arguing against suicide as something honorable as viewed by the Stoics, Augustine believed suicide to be self-murder and sin. He writes:

> It is not without significance, that in no passage of the holy canonical books there can be found either divine precept or permission to take away our own life, whether for the sake of entering on the enjoyment of immortality, or of shunning, or ridding ourselves of anything whatever. Nay, the law, rightly interpreted, even prohibits suicide, where it says, *"You shall not kill."* [15]

Augustine covers suicide in depth in Book 1 chapters 16–28 of *City of God* (*De civitate Dei,* c. AD 413–426) as well as in various letters.[16] In chapter 26, Augustine alludes to the inability to repent stating:

> No man ought to inflict on himself voluntary death, for this is to escape the ills of time by plunging into those of eternity; that no man ought to do so on account of another man's sins, for this were to escape a guilt which could not pollute him, by incurring great guilt of his own; that no man ought to do so on account of his own past sins, for he has all the more need of this life that these sins may be healed by repentance; that no man should put an end to this life to obtain that better life we look for after death, for those who die by their own hand have no better life after death.[17]

Augustine and the early Christians were firmly opposed to suicide and acknowledged that suicide was a sin of enormous consequence. What he does not expound upon further is the meaning of the last phrase "for those who die by their own hand have no better life after death." However, his strong views regarding predestination would seem to rule out any idea of loss of eternal life due to suicide.

Furthermore, Augustine wrestled with the possibility that Christian women might be tempted to commit suicide rather than allowing themselves to be raped by barbarians. Some had done so earlier and had been declared saints by Christian leaders. Women had been raped in the sack of Rome in AD 410, and Augustine was writing the chapters on suicide in the *City of God* probably about 413. On this matter, Augustine was opposed in principle to suicide, but in Book I chapter 26 stated that he would avoid rash judgments. Though opposed to suicide, he argued that in such cases, suicide might be

---

[14] Ibid., 89–101.

[15] Augustine, *De civitate Dei*, 1.20.

[16] Amundsen, *Medicine, Society, and Faith in the Ancient and Medieval Worlds*, 111–17.

[17] Augustine, *De civitate Dei*, 1.26.

permitted if divinely commanded in special instances such as those of Samson. And such cases were primarily ones that had already occurred and not those that might occur in the future. They were exceptional rather than normative.[18]

3. Suicide and Medieval Theology

The Middle Ages was an era rich in theological development and history. It was during this era that theology as the formal discipline of the systematization of biblical teaching came into existence. The breadth and depth of theological inquiry was enormous; and suicide as biblical, theological, legal, and pastoral issue received attention, sparingly at first, and then in greater detail by the eleventh and twelfth centuries. Historian Alexander Murray notes:

> When confronted by suicide, medieval theologians of all periods accepted that suicide was not only bad but very bad indeed *gravissumum* ["gravest"—a term widely used], and indeed, in the opinion of many, the worst sin it was possible to commit. That *nec plus ultra* ["highest" or "ultimate"] judgment is found as far apart in spirit and time as Lactantius, in fourth-century Constantinople, and late medieval urban law in Europe, and at innumerable places in between." [19]

The tragedy of suicide from an intellectual perspective was two-fold—theological and legal. Murray adds, "It gathers force from the semantic elision, general for much of the Middle Ages and traceable throughout appropriate dictionaries, of our words for sin (*peccatum*) and for crime (*crimen*), since suicide could be said to be both the worst sin *and* the worst crime."[20]

It is during this era that the theological gravity of suicide is linked exegetically with the words of Jesus in Matthew 12:31–32 regarding blasphemy of the Holy Spirit:

> Therefore I say to you, any sin and blasphemy shall be forgiven people, but blasphemy against the Spirit shall not be forgiven. Whoever speaks a word against the Son of Man, it shall be forgiven him; but whoever speaks against the Holy Spirit, it shall not be forgiven him, either in this age or in the age to come. (NASB)

---

[18] Alexander Murray, *Suicide in the Middle Ages. Vol. II, The Curse on Self-Murder* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 110–21. Murray's work is the most extensive history available and provide an enormous amount of information and documentation.

[19] Ibid., 189–90. Murray's work is the most extensive history available and provide an enormous amount of information and documentation. See also his first volume *Suicide in the Middle Ages: Volume I: The Violent against Themselves* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999).

[20] Ibid., 190.

Murray contends (with documentation) that the linkage was argued by "some divines, throughout the period," noting that Thomas of Strasbourg (ca. 1275–1357) identifies the belief as a tradition.[21]

So grave was suicide, that it was believed that the only rationale for the act was that the person did so at the instigation of the Devil (*diabolo instigante*)—a view that would continue to be part of the theology of suicide for several centuries.[22] The most frequent comments on suicide in biblical commentaries during the Middle Ages are those pertaining to the death of Judas, and usually drew from the writings of Augustine. One interesting commentary is that of Paschasius Radbertus (785–865). Murray writes:

> Paschasius seems to echo Origen, in speculating on Judas' motives. Judas had tried to repent, Paschasius points out, and he goes further. Judas may even have hanged himself in the mistaken hope of being in the next world before Jesus so he could fall at Jesus' feet and ask for pardon the moment that Jesus himself died. Paschasius here makes his own a reading he may have found in Origen, and whose presence is a legend fairly well known in the East.[23]

Apart from the novelty of the view, Paschasius' perspective is indicative of the nature of comments regarding suicide in the early Middle Ages. They were largely tied to biblical commentary rather than the articulation of theology.

a. Twelfth-Century Precursors to Aquinas

Peter Abelard (1079–1142) was one of the greatest theologians of the age. In his work *Sic et non,* chapter 155, a work looking at theological issues from views affirming and denying doctrines, he discusses whether or not suicide was permitted in the case of impending sexual attack. As noted above, this is something earlier Christians had considered in view of the barbarian invasions and persecutions. Eusebius, Jerome, and Ambrose had answered *yes* and Augustine and Macrobius had answered *no*.[24] Abelard also discussed suicide in his *Christian Theology.*

It was in the twelfth century that the term suicide, *suicidium,* was first coined by Walter of St Victor (d. c. 1180). Suicide was also

---

[21] Ibid., 190 and n. 3.
[22] Ibid., 191.
[23] Ibid., 196.
[24] Ibid., 202.

discussed by John of Salisbury (c. 1115–1180) in his work *Policraticus.*[25]   John of Wales (d. 1285), like Augustine, acknowledges that some women committed suicide to avoid sexual assault, but did so with divine approval or divine command (as they said, did Samson) and concludes in his work *Communiloquium*, "May the faithful therefore eschew the aforesaid error, by which a person might knowingly and voluntarily put himself to death."[26]

Peter Lombard c. 1100–1160, famous for his influential theological work *The Four Books of Sentences* (*Libri Quattuor Sententiarum*, c. 1150) did not address suicide, and this probably explains why the subject was not addressed more fully by others at the time. Murray noted, "The reticence of Peter Lombard goes a long way to account for that of other contemporary theologians."[27]

However, there was not complete silence on the subject. Bernard of Clairvaux (1090–1153) and Hildegard von Bingen (1098–1179) wrote against suicide. Hildegard, in her work *Scivias*, writes of one committing suicide as one who is

> performing the separation himself without any hope of mercy. Wherefore he falls to perdition, since he kills that by means of which he should do penance.[28]

In her dire words "without any hope of mercy," we see a glimpse of the idea of no forgiveness for those who take their lives.

By the thirteenth century and coinciding with the many classical authors being translated from Greek and Arabic, suicide was beginning to find greater discussion in theological writings. The first of those to do so was Alexander of Hales (ca. 1185–1245) in his theology text *Summa Alexandri* in which he references Augustine.[29] But it would be in the thought of Aquinas that the topic of suicide received its fullest medieval evaluation.

b. Thomas Aquinas

Thomas Aquinas (1225–1274), the most famous of medieval theologians, gave three arguments for why suicide is a sin. Suicide, he argued, was a sin against self, neighbor, and God. First, suicide is

---

[25] Ibid., 206–11.
[26] Ibid., 213.
[27] Ibid., 216.
[28] Ibid., 217.
[29] Ibid., 219–21.

contrary to nature in that every living organism naturally desires to preserve its life, and suicide is an unnatural rejection of that instinct. Second, suicide is contrary to human social obligations, because the entire community is injured by self-killing. Third, suicide is contrary to human religious rights and responsibilities, because God alone should decide when a person lives or dies. Aquinas argued:

> to bring death upon oneself in order to escape the other afflictions of this life, is to adopt a greater evil in order to avoid a lesser. In like manner it is unlawful to take one's own life on account of one's having committed a sin, both because by so doing one does oneself a very great injury, by depriving oneself of the time needful for repentance, and because it is not lawful to slay an evildoer except by the sentence of the public authority.[30]

Following the thought of the era regarding the doctrine of sin, Aquinas distinguished between venial sins and mortal sins with the latter being far more serious.[31] McDonagh observes:

> The scholastics attempted a systematic exposition of this distinction between mortal (deal-dealing) and venial sins. Aquinas insisted, in line with the tradition, that venial sins were called sins analogically; mortal sins were truly sins. Since then sins have been seen as venial either because of the imperfection of the act (lack of knowledge of consent) or the triviality of the matter involved. For mortal sin there must be full knowledge (awareness), full consent, and grave matter.[32]

Theological and philosophical discussions of sin were detailed and serious. The thought of Aquinas and his *Summa* epitomized the scholastic method. Nineteenth-century American medievalist Henry Charles Lea observed:

> When we turn to the schoolmen, who endeavored through their dialectics to solve in the minutest detail every problem of the moral and spiritual world, we find the greatest of them all, Aquinas, discussing with his accustomed thoroughness how far the imputation of sin is modified by passion, or influences the character of the sin and renders it either mortal or venial. He admits freely the mitigating influence of passion in depriving a man of the use of reason and inducing temporary ignorance through absence of advertence, but to relieve an

---

[30] *Summa Theologica* II–II 64.5

[31] Ibid., I–II 71–88. However, based upon interpretations of 1 John 5:16–17, the distinction was made earlier in the history of the doctrine. Hubert Louis Motry's *The Concept of Mortal Sin in Early Christianity* (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America, 1920) argues that the technical theological usage of *mortal* with reference to sin is traced to Tertullian.

[32] E. McDonagh, "Mortal Sin," *New Catholic Encyclopedia* 2nd ed., vol. 9 (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America, 2003), 903.

act of sin the passion must be such as to subvert the will and render the act wholly involuntary. If the will precedes the passion, the greater the passion the greater the sin; if the passion is antecedent, the greater it is the less the sin; an act suddenly performed without reflection may be venial when if committed with deliberation it would be mortal.[33]

Without ambiguity or dissent, suicide was considered a mortal sin. After the death of Aquinas, two subsequent Dominicans, Remigio de' Girolami (1235–1319), who was an early student of Aquinas, and Guido Verani (n.d.), did much to spread the ideas of Aquinas with respect to suicide. Efforts such as these, along with developments in canon law, the rise of penitential books, and the popularization of theology in writings such as those of Dante, set the idea of suicide as unforgivable into the collective Christian consciousness.

4. Suicide and the Reformation

In the sixteenth century Roman Catholic and Protestant theologians viewed suicide as sinful and abhorred it. There were some differences in how it was viewed with regard to its origins, but all viewed it as wrong and sinful. Yet, the distinction of suicide as a mortal sin was something that remained within Roman Catholic theology. There was no idea of it being an unpardonable sin in Protestant theology. "Wycliffe, and after him Martin Luther, Calvin, and others among the Reformers, rejected the distinction so far at least as it supposed a difference in the sin rather than the sinner."[34] What did remain, though, were severe civil consequences for the property of the deceased, restrictions on burial, and, often, mandatory desecration of the corpse.

a. John Calvin (1509–1564)

A lawyer as well as pastor and key Protestant theologian, John Calvin wrote very little about suicide. It is not addressed in any edition of the *Institutes.* In other writings, he addressed the subject only twice, and those instances were in sermons pertaining to suicides recorded in 1 Samuel 31 on King Saul and in 2 Samuel 17 on

---

[33] Henry Charles Lea, "Philosophical Sin" *International Journal of Ethics* 5, no.3 (April, 1895): 325–26.

[34] I. McGuiness, "Venial Sin," *New Catholic Encyclopedia* 2nd ed., vol. 13 (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America, 2003), 155.

Samson.[35] Using the imagery of a soldier serving as a sentry at a post, Calvin argued that God has placed every person at a post "which we must not abandon until God orders us to do so."[36] Showing continuity of thought, Calvin followed the views of Augustine on the matter. Similar imagery was used in classical thought in the writings of Pythagoras and later the Roman lawyer-orator Cicero.[37] Calvin acknowledged that Christians, as all people, sometimes face difficult circumstances. However, such times did not warrant suicide. In an environment where Reformed Christians in France often faced persecution, Calvin was realistic about matters of life and death. Though non-Christians might choose suicide as a means of avoiding trials, Christians were not to do so—"unbelievers at once panic and despair and try to end their lives, which the faithful, having received from God the creator, shall give back to Him."[38] Calvin then continued and argued against "pagan philosophers" (Stoics) who supported suicide. For Calvin, suicide was a theological and civil breach of trust and stewardship. It was "the worst crime."[39] While there were social and civil consequences of a suicide, such a death, for Calvin the issue was primarily theological. Aquinas and Aristotle had found strong civil ramifications in that a suicide deprived society of one of its members. Although this was true, it was not an emphasis in Calvin's comments.[40]

While he followed Aquinas on some ideas regarding suicide, Calvin and the Reformers did not argue that suicide was a mortal sin. Instead, he argued that it was diabolical in origin, because it made the individual go against the divinely given instinct for self-preservation. This perspective of Satan participating in suicide arose after Aquinas but before the Reformation era.[41] In such instances, the individual is not beyond the salvific mercy and grace of God, as Jeffrey Watt notes that we "cannot help but conclude that the devil has put such a rage in

---

[35] Jeffrey R. Watt, "Calvin on Suicide," *Church History* 66, no. 3 (Sept. 1997): 464.

[36] Ibid., 464.

[37] Watt, 465–66.

[38] Cited in Watt, 467.

[39] Ibid., 466.

[40] Ibid., 470.

[41] Ibid., 469.

[that man]; such a man is no longer himself and no longer knows what he is doing and what he is saying."[42]

In Calvin's era, there was the denial of ecclesiastical burial for suicides, something that had been adopted in Christianity as far back 563 and the Council of Braga. There was also in some areas such as France, secular law requiring forfeiture of the property of the deceased and desecration of the corpse. All of these traditions had roots in pagan antiquity and neither Augustine nor Aquinas said anything about the body or burial of a person who committed suicide.[43] Thus, although they were not actions originating in Christian theology, such practices reinforced the cultural stigma of suicide and may have added to the theological misconception of suicide as an unpardonable sin.

The seventeenth-century Westminster Shorter Catechism, which remains authoritative for Calvinists, follows Augustine in relating one of the Ten Commandments to suicide. It declares:

> Q. 68. What is required in the sixth commandment?
> A. The sixth commandment requireth all lawful endeavors to preserve our own life, and the life of others.[44]

b. Martin Luther (1483–1546)

Reformer Martin Luther likewise does not comment much on suicide. He is adamant that suicide was not an unforgivable sin. In 1532 in one of his famous *Table Talks*, Luther commented, "I don't have the opinion that suicides are certainly to be damned. My reason is that they do not wish to kill themselves but are overcome by the power of the devil."[45] With such a diabolical origin, he agrees with Calvin. Luther expresses a concern not be misunderstood or misused in a way that lessens the danger and seriousness of suicide as a sin. He argues, "It is not plain that their souls are damned."[46] Rather, the person who commits suicide is "like a man who is murdered in the

---

[42] Cited in Watt, 470.

[43] Watt, 472–73.

[44] Same prohibition against suicide is in the Larger Catechism in Questions 135 and 136.

[45] Martin Luther, *Luther's Works*, American Edition, vol. 54 *Table Talk* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1967), 29.

[46] Ibid.

woods by a robber."[47]   Luther is more lenient on suicide than theologians in previous centuries.

c. English Reformation

During the English Reformation there does not appear to have been any identification of suicide as the unpardonable sin, although Richard Hooker (1554–1600) in polemics against Arminianism discusses an individual who feared he had committed an unpardonable sin and committed suicide.[48] Yet, as with the remainder of Europe during the Reformation era, there was an enormous stigma against suicide and significant social and legal consequences. Michael MacDonald and Terence R. Murphy detailed:

> Suicide was a terrible crime in Tudor and early Stuart England. Self-killing was a species of murder, a felony in criminal law and a desperate sin in the eyes of the church. "For the heinousness thereof," observed Michael Dalton, "it is an offense against God, against the king, and against Nature." Suicides were tried posthumously by a coroner's jury, and if they were convicted as self-murderers, they and their heirs were savagely punished. Their moveable goods, including tools, household items, money, debts owed to them, and even leases on the land that they had worked were forfeited to the crown or to the holder of a royal patent who possessed the right to such windfalls in a particular place. Self-murderers were denied Christian burials; their bodies were interred profanely, with a macabre ceremony prescribed by popular custom. The night following the inquest, officials of the parish, the churchwardens and their helpers, carried the corpse to a crossroads and threw it naked into a pit. A wooden stake was hammered through the body, pinioning it in the grave, and the hole was filled in. No prayers for the dead were repeated; the minister did not attend.[49]

By the later years of the Reformation there was in England a legal circumstance by which the judgment on suicides could be lessened.   The finding of suicide need not bring on the harsh punishment that was customary if the individual who committed suicide was found by a court to be *non compos mentis* (not in their right mind). However, this was not often declared.   What this shows however is the beginning of a cultural shift on ideas about suicide. With the coming of the Enlightenment and the desire by its

---

[47] Ibid.

[48] Baird Tipson, "A Dark Side of Seventeenth-Century English Protestantism: The Sin against the Holy Spirit," *The Harvard Theological Review* 77, no. 3/4 (July–Oct. 1984): 328.

[49] Michael MacDonald and Terence R. Murphy, *Sleepless Souls* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), 15.

proponents to eradicate revelation and religion as a foundation for moral judgments and social standards, there were the beginnings of the secularization of theories about suicide. There was also fuller consideration of the separate ideological strands that viewed suicide as primarily a mental illness. In the history of suicide, the act is not so much a definitive unpardonable sin, but rather a mortal sin (Roman Catholic theology) or a sin sometimes enacted because one believes he or she has committed an unpardonable sin. This latter view is found more in Protestant history and culture.

B. Literary Considerations

Literature is very powerful in conveying ideas in a culture and this is true more so in previous centuries. In the aftermath of the medieval distinction between mortal and venial sin, nonreligious literature also portrayed the seriousness of suicide. Especially noteworthy was Dante Alighieri's (1265–1321) epic poem *Divine Comedy* (*Commedia*), specifically, the first part of the poem, *Inferno* written in the wake of the life of Aquinas (1225–1274). Dante's allegorical pilgrimage of the soul heavily influenced western thought and imagination for centuries to come. In it, he assigns the souls of those who committed suicide to the seventh circle of lower hell. See Dante's description in Canto 13, line 94-105:

> When the ferocious soul departs from the body where from itself has torn itself, Minos sends it to the seventh gulf. It falls into the wood, and no part is chosen for it, but where fortune flings it there it sprouts like a grain of spelt; it rises in a sapling and to a wild plant: the Harpies, feeding then upon its leaves, give pain, and to the pain a window. Like the others we shall go for our spoils, but not, however, that anyone may revest himself with them, for it is not just for one to have that of which he deprives himself.[50]

Georgia Noon said writes of this passage:

> The poet is filled with fear and great pity at the anguish and eternal torment of these souls and stands in horror at the awareness of their dreadful sin which has placed them beyond redemption. *It may well be that it is in the combination of*

---

[50] Cited in Noon, 376. The harpy was a winged creature in Greek mythology known for stealing. Longfellow's translation goes, "When the exasperated soul abandons the body whence it rent itself away." *Writings of Henry Wadsworth Longfellow*, vol. 9 of 11, *Divine Comedy of Dante Alighieri, Inferno* (Cambridge, 1886), 80.

> *this passage with medieval theological acceptance of the idea of mortal and venial sins that the popular idea of suicide as the unpardonable sin emerges.*[51]

In the nineteenth century, Dante's image was transmitted into English art in *The Wood of the Self-Murderers—The Harpies and the Suicides*, a pencil, ink, and watercolor work by the English poet, painter, and printmaker William Blake (1757–1827). In French culture, the Dante scene was portrayed by engraver and illustrator Gustave Doré (1832–1883) in his 1861 work on *The Divine Comedy.*

In English literature, in the works of John Milton (1608–1674) and William Shakespeare (1564–1616), both writing in the aftermath of the Reformation, there is also imagery of suicide. Other writers such as John Donne (1572–1631) and, earlier, Thomas More (1478–1535) also addressed the topic but from a different perspective. Shakespeare does so in the musings of Hamlet. Milton draws upon the thought of Lactantius and Augustine and writes negatively of two suicides from classical literature in *Paradise Lost.*[52]

In American literature, Herman Melville (1819–1891) and Nathaniel Hawthorne (1804–1864) both write of unpardonable sins.[53] However, only Hawthorne ties it to a suicide, and the suicide is not the unpardonable sin but the sin does end in a suicide. Hawthorne's suicidal figure is Ethan Brand in the story "Ethan Brand—A Chapter from an Abortive Romance." The short story was originally titled "The Unpardonable Sin." In it, Ethan Brand tells a man and his son who operate a lime kiln that he once worked the same kiln until he went in search of the "unpardonable sin." Brand then claims to have found it. When asked what it is, Brand points to his heart:

> "What! Then are Ethan Brand himself?" cried the lime-burner, in amazement. "I am a newcomer here, as you say, and the call it eighteen years since you let the foot of Graylock. But, I can tell you, the good folks still talk about Ethan Brand, in the village yonder, and what a strange errand took him away from his lime-kiln. Well, and so you have found the Unpardonable Sin?"
> "Even so!" said the stranger, calmly.

---

[51] Noon, 376. Italics hers.

[52] Joseph Horrell, "Milton, Limbo, and Suicide," *The Review of English Studies* 18, no. 72 (Oct. 1942): 422.

[53] See, James E. Miller, Jr. "Hawthorne and Melville: The Unpardonable Sin," *PLMA* 70:1 (March 1955): 91–114. See also, Nina Baym, "The Head, the Heart, and the Unpardonable Sin," *The New England Quarterly* 40, no. 1 (March 1967): 31–47; and Ely Stock, "The Biblical Context of 'Ethan Brand.'" *American Literature* 37:2 (May 1965): 115–34.

"If the question is a fair one," proceeded Bartram, "where might it be?"

Ethan Brand laid his finger on his own heart.

"Here!" replied he. . . .

"What is the Unpardonable Sin?" asked the lime-burner; and then he shrank further from his companion, trembling lest his question should be answered.

"It is a sin that grew within my own breast," replied Ethan Brand, standing erect, with a pride that distinguishes all enthusiasts of his stamp. "A sin that grew nowhere else! The sin of an intellect that triumphed over the sense of brotherhood with man and reverence for God, and sacrificed everything to its own mighty claims! The only sin that deserves a recompense of immortal agony! Freely, were it to do again, would I incur the guilt. Unshrinkingly I accept the retribution!"

"The man's head is turned," muttered the lime-burner to himself. "He may be a sinner, like the rest of us—nothing more likely—but, I'll be sworn, he is a madman too."[54]

Then after interacting with others from the nearby village and with a wandering Jew, later in the night Brand decides his "task is done, and well done," and climbs to the top of the kiln and falls into it immolating himself. While literary portrayals of suicide such as those above do not declare suicide to be an unpardonable sin, they did much to influence readers by providing literary and cultural awareness of the linking of suicide with other acts thought to be unpardonable.

C. Biblical Considerations

Even though the concept and act of suicide—the deliberate killing of oneself—is present in the Bible, the word itself is not found in the Bible or classical literature, although there are many terms and phrases used that denote the idea.[55] Amundsen observes that "Ancient Greeks and Romans, whether pagans or Christians, were quite able to distinguish between various circumstances, motives, and methods of self-killing."[56] The term comes into English in the early to mid-seventeenth century from modern Latin (not classical) *suicidium* (*sui* "of oneself" and *-cidium* "a killing").

There are six suicides recorded in the Bible, five in the Old Testament (Jud. 9:50–55; 1 Sam. 31:1–6; 2 Sam. 17:23; 1 Kings

---

[54] Nathaniel Hawthorne (1804–1864), "Ethan Brand—A Chapter from an Abortive Romance, *The Snow-Image, and Other Twice-told Tales*," accessed April 1, 2011, www.ibiblio.org/eldritch/nh/eb.html. From Hawthorne's *The Snow-Image, and Other Twice-told Tales* (Boston: Ticknor, Reed, & Fields, 1851).

[55] Amundsen, "Did Early Christians 'Lust After Death'?" 291.

[56] Ibid., 291–92.

16:18) and one in the New Testament (Matt. 27:3–10; Acts 1:18–19). The death of Samson (Judges 16) is debated as whether or not it was a suicide. It could be viewed as an act in which Samson knew he probably would die, but in which death was not his intent. The intent was the defeat of his enemies. In none of the other cases is there a moral approval of the act. In none of these passages is there any mention of suicide being an unpardonable sin.

How then should we understand Matthew 12:31? What is blasphemy against the Holy Spirit, and why did Jesus say it isn't forgiven? Evangelical commentary on these verses is readily available, and for the present purposes a summary explanation is presented.[57]

These are among the most enigmatic and emphatic words Jesus speaks in the New Testament. His words in this verse (also in Mark 3:28–30 and Luke 12:10) certainly raised the eyebrows of the religious leaders, the Pharisees, to whom he was speaking. Not surprisingly, many people since then have also wondered about this unforgivable sin. In the Gospel of Mark's account of this much debated saying (Mark 3:29), Jesus declares that not only is blasphemy against the Holy Spirit unforgivable, it is also eternal.

When Jesus spoke of this unpardonable sin, He had been confronted by the Pharisees, who condemned Him for healing a man who was blind, unable to speak, and demon possessed. The Pharisees accused Jesus of being under the power and influence of Satan, mockingly called Beelzebub after an Old Testament pagan deity (2 Kings 1:2). It was in response to these charges that Jesus spoke the words regarding blaspheming the third divine person of the Trinity, the Holy Spirit.

To blaspheme means to slander someone. In the Bible, blasphemy was an act in which the person, name, or character of God was insulted or demeaned. Rather than honoring God, a person guilty of blasphemy cursed or reviled God and His name through derogatory words and actions.

---

[57] See for example David L. Turner's *Matthew, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2008) or Grant R. Osborne and Clinton E. Arnold's *Matthew, Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing, 2010). On commentary in parallel passages, see Robert H. Stein's *Mark*, *Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2008) and Darrell L. Bock's *Luke 1:1–9:50 Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1994).

When the Pharisees proclaimed that Jesus' actions were tied to Satan, they were rejecting Jesus as Messiah and on the brink of making an irreversible decision with far-reaching consequences: They would never find national or individual salvation and forgiveness. Because they incorrectly attributed to Satan the power of the Holy Spirit exercised by Jesus in His miracles, they blasphemed the Holy Spirit. The religious establishment of Jesus' day misidentified divine actions as demonic actions and rejected the person and work of Jesus Christ as Messiah and Savior. Because Jesus was physically present when the rejection occurred, some interpreters of this verse hold that blasphemy against the Holy Spirit cannot occur today, although rejection of the Spirit's work is certainly possible.

In this passage (Matt. 12:32), Jesus states that a specific or single act of blasphemy against himself, the Son Man, can be forgiven; that is, speaking out against Jesus and his ministry is subject to forgiveness, because such words or acts of rejection come from misunderstanding the reality of His person and work. However, once the Holy Spirit works in a person's life convicting and convincing them of the truth of the gospel (John 16:8–11) or correcting misunderstandings about Jesus, a subsequent persistent and decisive rejection of the Holy Spirit's work regarding Jesus results in permanent judgment.

Persistent obstinacy leads to permanent condemnation.

Jesus tells His listeners that all blasphemies can be forgiven except this one against the Holy Spirit, because it is a blasphemy that entails in attitudes, actions, beliefs, and practices a defiant hostility toward God. It does so by rejecting God's offer of salvation expressed through the power of the Holy Spirit manifested in the words and work of Jesus. Although the Pharisees had been exposed to Jesus the Light of Truth (John 3:19), they permanently rejected Jesus, preferring spiritual darkness to light. In so doing, they blasphemed. Though apparently being convicted by the Holy Spirit that Jesus was indeed the Messiah, in rejecting Jesus the Pharisees and others refused to believe, and they rejected the only means of salvation offered by God (John 14:6). An unrepentant heart leads to an unforgivable heart. Present choices have eternal consequences. What a person believes about Jesus and His death on the cross has

eternal significance. Accepting or rejecting Jesus Christ as Savior is the greatest decision we make in life.[58]

Other than the linking of Matthew 12:31–32 with suicide during the Middle Ages, one looks in vain for support for the idea of suicide as the unpardonable sin in the history of interpretation of specific verses. Apart from Roman Catholic interpretations of 1 John 5:16–17 supporting categories of mortal and venial sin, a view rejected in evangelical Protestantism, specific texts supporting forfeiture of redemption due to suicide are not present. It is likely that the contemporary *misunderstanding* of suicide and salvation should be traced back to the medieval interpretation of Matthew 12:31–32—a view that was accepted, but without extensive or unanimous presentation.

Certainly one might raise the question of verses that pertain to the doctrine of eternal security such as Hebrews 6:4–6, but discussions of the doctrine and specific texts pertaining to it are beyond the scope of this presentation. What is important for present purposes is that if one accepts eternal security (and the author does), then there is no sin that is so severe that it excludes an individual Christian from receiving eternal redemption. Conversely, if one rejects the doctrine of eternal security, then any sin has the potential of excluding the individual from eternal redemption. In either view, suicide does not in and of itself soteriologically mandate eternal separation from God.

D. Cultural-Pastoral Considerations

We live in a culture of death wherein there is growing acceptance of suicide and assisted suicide as legitimate actions. It is in the realm of pastoral care that one often hears the idea that suicide is an unpardonable sin. In the author's pastoral experience of ministry inside the context of several dozen suicides, there is then often a reference or allusion to Matthew 12:31 and blasphemy of the Holy Spirit. It is an illogical and hermeneutically unsupportable leap and linkage—but one that is very common. The most reasonable explanation for this biblical and theological misappropriation and misunderstanding is that it stems from the convergence of the theological and literary ideas discussed earlier. Articulation of the

---

[58] Adapted from the author's comments in Tim Demy and Gary Stewart, *101 Most Puzzling Bible Verses* (Eugene, OR: Harvest House Publishers, 2006), 95–96.

idea that suicide is the unpardonable sin illustrates the complexity of ideas and the consequences they may have. Yet, for those who are contemplating suicide or who have lost friends or loved ones to suicide, the issues are very real and should never be minimized.[59]

It also raises questions regarding human forgiveness and divine forgiveness. Must sin be forgiven only after the action? Is this true for divine and human responses, or only the divine response? For example, can a person forgive an individual who is in the process of murdering or executing them?

Yet, Jesus asks the Father to forgive those who were killing him before the completion the death. This then raises the question of whether there can be forgiveness before an offense or only after it. Though it is true that the request might be that Father would forgive once the death was complete, the process of killing had already started and likely could not have been humanly reversed, even though it was not yet final.

This consideration aside, it is important to realize and communicate the truth that a post-conversion confession of sin, precluded in the case of suicide, is not the criteria for complete realization of redemption in the future.

Conclusion

Prior to the Reformation and even after it in Roman Catholic theology, the idea of suicide as unpardonable stems largely from medieval theology and distinctions between mortal and venial sin. To be sure, there has been much in more recent Catholic theology that views suicide as stemming from mental problems, but the core theological ideas remain. This perspective along with a long history of literary rejection and condemnation of suicide has informed and shaped popular cultural and religious ideas about suicide.

In post-Reformation Protestant societies, the vestiges of distinctions between mortal and venial sins along with literary and cultural ideas about suicide likely created a mindset to which was then added confusion about Matthew 12:31 and 1 John 5:16–17. The idea

---

[59] In addition to the author's edited volume *Suicide—A Christian Response,* referenced above, see also Gary P. Stewart, William R. Cutrer, Timothy J. Demy, Dónal P. O'Mathúna, Paige C. Cunningham, John F. Kilner, and Linda K. Bevington, *Basic Questions on Suicide and Euthanasia: Are They Ever Right* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel, 1998), and Timothy J. Demy, "Feel Trapped? A Biblical Perspective on Suicide," *Kindred Spirit* (Autumn 1999): 10–12.

of suicide as an unpardonable sin is not uncommon in contemporary society, but one searches with difficulty and little success to find articulation of it in contemporary theological writings.

For Christians today, the idea of suicide as the unpardonable sin and a sin that causes forfeiture of salvation is an idea grounded in a misunderstanding of the biblical text, a misunderstanding of theology, and an idea then coupled with legal, historical, and literary concepts that yield a confusing, harmful, and erroneous conclusion. Suicide does not in itself condemn a person who has been saved.

We should help to the uttermost every person contemplating such, communicating the love of God in a fashion that rescues.