

Precipitating Paradise: Delayed Suicide as a Shortcut to Heaven

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The Catholic Church has always considered suicide a mortal sin. Though their positions on the seriousness and consequences of the act have varied throughout the centuries, from the publication St. Augustine's *City of God* in the fifth century to the modern catechism, a human taking his or her own life has been seen as a violation of the fifth commandment, "Thou shalt not kill." As the only sin that cannot be repeated or repented for, suicide is seen in many cases as a surefire path to damnation. However, in the late ninth century, records show that devout European Catholics began taking their lives en-masse by way of slow-acting poisons, assassin-assisted suicide, and what later came to be called "infernal machines." The focus of this paper is an analysis of this trend, its origins, and theological consequences.

Biblical References to Suicide

In the Bible, there are only seven instances of men taking their own lives. Six are in the old Testament: Abimelech, who, after being mortally wounded by a woman, asked to be slain by his armor bearer so as not to have been killed by a woman (Judges 9:54); Saul and his servant, after Saul went mad and lost his army (1 Samuel 31:3-6); Ahithophel, who hung himself after betraying King David and being disgraced by Absalom (2 Samuel 17:23); Zimri, who chose to set fire to his palace and burn with it rather than surrender his city (1 Kings 16:8); and Samson, who collapsed a building he occupied in order to defeat thousands of Philistines (Judges 16:29-31). In the New Testament, the only clear suicide is that of Judas Iscariot, who hung himself after throwing away the silver coins he received for betraying Jesus (Matthew 27:5). These seven biblical suicides are neither condemned nor celebrated in the Bible (though Saul is given a war hero's burial), and not one is mentioned as a sin, despite the fact that only in Samson's case could the suicide be justified as an act of martyrdom. Thus, there is no clear scriptural declaration of suicide as sin.

Pious Suicide in the Early Church

In the early Christian Church, suicide was not the grave sin it is regarded as today. In fact, throughout the centuries before the First Council of Nicaea many suicides were recorded as pious acts. One account from Eusebius's *Ecclesiastical History* tells of two young women that chose to drown themselves instead of succumbing to rape. The early church celebrated them as martyrs. Other accounts depict throngs of early Christians taking their own lives as an alternative to religious persecution – in fact, the practice was so prevalent that Jewish leaders enacted laws forbidding eulogies, public mourning, and religious burial of suicides (Eusebius 145).

Perhaps the strongest early example of pious suicide is that of the Donatists, a fourth-century Christian sect in what was then Roman North Africa. As evidenced by St. Augustine's writings, Donatists would often declare their plans for suicide weeks in advance, spending their final days in feast and revelry before hurling themselves off cliffs.

These practices continued through the fifth century, at which time they were condemned at length in St. Augustine's *City of God*. However, many Donatists continued to worship at the shrines of self-killed martyrs until their sect disappeared after the Conference at Carthage in 411 (Chapman).

Official Catholic Stance on Suicide

From Augustine's formal condemnation of suicide onward, the Catholic Church's position on suicide has remained the same. Though the modern catechism teaches that a suicide victim's admission to heaven is up to God, and thus cannot be determined by mortals (Catholic Church 2180), theologians widely agree that suicide is a mortal sin that is excluded from the possibility of absolution.

The Church's stances on how suicides should be treated have varied throughout the centuries. In the Middle Ages, suicide was seen as very shameful. Catholic cemeteries had separate sections for suicides, grave markings were often forbidden, and many normal mourning privileges were prohibited for those who took their own lives. In the twentieth century however, Catholic funerals for suicide victims began to be treated as any other. Scholars have posited that this is more in an effort to conciliate families and friends of the victims than it is a change in stance on the act of suicide (Shannon 63).

The Absolution Loophole

Though the official Catholic position on suicide has not changed since its Augustinian roots, a trend appeared in the ninth century that allowed believers to exploit a "theological loophole" permitting an individual to set in motion a chain of events that would inevitably bring about their death, but with enough time before the conclusion to confess their sins, thus gaining absolution from the act.

Theological writings from the early church show that Middle-Age Europeans Christians believed strongly in a literal paradise after death (Walther 94). It seemed logical to many, then, to hasten their arrival in heaven by way of suicide. This trend of precipitating paradise began in the ninth century and continued on until the writings of Thomas Aquinas three hundred years later (Walther 90). From that time onward, suicide, even after confessional absolution has not been seen as a reliable way of arriving in heaven sooner. Unfortunately, suicides were rarely counted in medieval census records, so exactly how widespread this trend was is still unknown.

Methods of Delayed Suicide

For those Christians who chose to take their own lives in an attempt to seek paradise, a variety of methods were available, including consumption of slow-acting poisons, the employment of assassins, and in a few rare cases in the thirteenth century, booby-trap-like contraptions that would trigger as soon as a victim left a confessional booth (Rodgers 45). It is possible that other methods were employed as well, but records of these incidents are scarce.

The most common (recorded) technique for delayed suicide in the medieval church was that of poison. A Christian could take a poison with a postponed effect, seek absolution from a priest, and upon gaining it, return home to await death. This was largely seen as the least sinful way of dying, as it did not cause others to sin and would most closely resemble a natural death (Rodgers 47-48).

After poison, the next most prevalent method of suicide was the hire of paid killers. According to theologians' accounts, victims would pay the assassins in advance with an agreement that the contract could not be revoked. Thus, upon payment, the victim's death was assured. In most cases, the victim had at least twenty-four hours to gain absolution, say farewell to their families, and set their affairs in order before being killed (Walther 123-128).

Last, and perhaps most curiously, are the few cases of parishioners setting traps for themselves outside churches and even confessionals. These devices were often used in the twelfth century, upon concerns that sinning would occur between the time of absolution and the time of death, thus rendering the absolution ineffective. Making death follow absolution almost immediately was seen as a viable workaround to this problem. In later writings, these traps were referred to as "infernal machines", marking the first use of the phrase in the English language (Online Etymology Dictionary).

The Church's Response

Despite a few theological defenses of delayed suicide, most clergymen were outspokenly against the practice. Though they had no sound theological argument against the acts, their logic was simple – suicides led to a large and undesirable decrease in congregations. In the tenth century, it had become a problem in so many places in Europe that priests were actively trying to stop the acts. Cases of poison proved to be hardest to deal with, as remedies and antidotes were not immediately available (and in cases when they were, plans for cures were often subverted). A few accounts remain of attempted poison suicides prevented by concerned clergy, however (Dallworth 93).

Also troublesome for many communities were the assassin-assisted suicides. In the tenth and eleventh centuries, many areas had travelling assassins that would move from village to village, offering instant salvation to believers. In at least one medieval writing, these men were celebrated as true Christians, performing a service to faithful believers (Walther 125). In response, clergymen would rally the local population against these contract killers and would occasionally manage to stop a planned suicide by killing or imprisoning the assassin.

The "infernal machines," while often crude and easily visible from outside confessional booths, often posed a problem for the clergy inside. Obviously, it was seen as a failure of a priest when a parishioner died feet from confession, so priests began inspecting all sides of their confessionals before entering. It's believed that a holdover of this practice is why priests still thoroughly inspect the booths before entering today (Dallworth 95).

An End to the Trend

From the ninth century on to the mid-thirteenth, delayed suicide flourished, despite the best attempts of church officials. But it wasn't until Thomas Aquinas wrote the first official theological condemnation of the practice in his *Summa Theologica* in 1265. His basic argument was thus: if a man sets in motion events that he knows will take his life, then repents afterwards, then he cannot truly be absolved unless he does all in his power to prolong his life after repenting (Aquinas 2354). Thus, one would have to sincerely try to stay alive after setting a delayed suicide in motion if he or she wished to die without sin. Though viewed by some scholars as an unsound loophole to a loophole, having an official church position, in addition to the practical pleas from priests to their congregations and restrictions on funerals of suicides that were already in effect, brought an end to the practice by the close of the thirteenth century (Rodgers 50).

Conclusion

Delayed suicide is not widely discussed in the modern church. In fact, practices of religious suicide are far from the mainstream, and are often ridiculed (as in the case of Jonestown and Heaven's Gate cultists in the twentieth century) and condemned (like fundamentalist suicide bombers to this day). What few realize, however is that the practice was extremely common throughout the Middle Ages, and took a variety of forms. Perhaps most interestingly, since Aquinas's theological writings against pious suicide over seven centuries ago, no theologians have offered a sound argument against the practice as it stood medieval times. Perhaps in the coming years, especially given the looming problem of overpopulation, theologians will attempt to tackle the issue again.

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