

Suicide A Selfish Act Or Selfless Act: Does It Really Matter?

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Abstract

Globally, over 800,000 people die by suicide every year with one death every forty seconds. There are more deaths from suicide than from war and homicide together (World Health Organization, 2000). Some researchers concluded that suicide is as an act of eternal response to impermanent problems. One perspective is that suicidal behaviour a selfish act. Conversely, other quarters believe that suicidal behaviour is a selfless act. This study aimed to discuss the religious perspectives of suicide from the Christianity, Islam, Hinduism and Buddhism views. As, in the context of religion not all suicides are regarded as selfish acts. This study found that Hinduism accepts a man's right to end his life through the non-violent practice of fasting to death or to save one's honor. Suicide is morally valid if it is practiced one under divine command. Also at the same time, recommendations on suicide prevention in different religious contexts were addressed.

Keywords: Suicide; suicidal behaviour, religious perspectives, religious influence, suicide prevention

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1.0 INTRODUCTION

Religion has functioned as one of the fundamental idea in sociological work on suicidality (Durkheim, 1897/1996; Colucci & Martin, 2008). Life is a complex journey viewed through different lenses by different faith groups. However, different eyes of all our ethnicities increasingly see the great potential of people of faith to the issues of suicide (Suicide Prevention Resource Center, 2009). Utterly meaningless! Everything is meaningless! (Ecclesiastes 1:2, New International Version). If life ends at the grave, then it makes no difference whether one has lived as a Stalin or as a saint. Since one's destiny is ultimately unrelated to one's behavior, you may as well just live as you please (Craig, n.d.). Our living is not out of something or in something. Nor is it about something, or on behalf of something. Rather, who were at any moment is precisely our living (McDermott, 1991). Is life worth living? The term "life" can be only used looking back as in my own life, or, if you knew of my life, or what a life I have had, or I have no life, or and lamentingly say is this a life? (McDermott, 1991). In 2000, there were an estimated 1 million suicides worldwide, numbering one every 40 seconds. Suicide now ranks as the world's 13th leading cause of death. Furthermore, there are an estimated 20 unsuccessful suicide attempts for every completed suicide (Stack & Kposowa, 2011). This is realism in a universe lacking God: there is no hope; there is no purpose (Craig, n.d.).

Globally, attempted suicide is commoner in women and completed suicide is commoner in men (Phillips, Yang, Li & Li, 2004). The simplest explanation of the association between suicide and individualism is that suicide is an individualistic act, and the greater the senses of personal autonomy the more likely people are to choose to die. Indeed, suicide might well be regarded as an ultimate expression of individual freedom of choice and control over one's life. About 18% of suicide victims had a previous suicide attempt before dying (Bhatia, Aggarwal, & Aggarwal, 2000). The association may say nothing more about a society and people's well-being. A truism in suicide literature is that "not all persons who commit suicide want to die and not all persons who want to die commit suicide" (Eckersley & Dear, 2002). The intentionality and lethality of suicide are important dimensions which describe the motive behind the act. Lethality is a function of the mode of suicide and has already been examined in an earlier section. Motives may go beyond Freud's concept of the 'wish to kill', the 'wish to die' and the 'wish to be killed', and beyond Durkheim's sociological typology; and may be more complex than just a cry for help. The motive for suicide may be as diverse as a need for identification as in the case of 'copy-cat' suicides (also called the Werther effect) to delusional beliefs as in the case of Klings or syndrome (genital self-mutilation based on religious delusions) (Radhakrishnan & Chittaranjan, 2012). In addition, religious beliefs are addressed as a key mechanism that may influence suicide risk (Colucci & Martin, 2008). However, social support is also a mediating factor between religion and suicidal behavior. Specifically we highlighted some common attitudes and practices that are relevant to suicidal behavior within each religion. This review examines the Malaysian four most prevalent religious traditions (Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, and Buddhism).

2.0 SUICIDE AND RELIGION

When an act of suicide causes the end of a life, it affects the community of survivors in a very profound way. It is much different from a death caused by heart disease, cancer, or an accident (Barrett & Scott, 1990). The assumption here is that the person committing suicide is

fully aware of what he is doing. It is not true that suicides are "crazy" people, for the latter rarely kill themselves. It is also not true that suicide is necessarily a selfish act in that it leaves behind gaping wounds in the lives of others. Obviously, that can be and often is the scenario. Just as often, however, suicide is an act of moral courage and altruism, putting an end to the mayhem and hurt caused by the person who no longer believes that life is worth living (McDermott, 1991).

Christianity

Suicide in the context of Christianity is regarded as a sinful act and this act violates the commandment of God. For it is written in Exodus 20:13 (King James Version), that "Thou shall not kill". Killing others is considered as act of murder. When an individual take off his or her life, it is equal murdering his or her self. Obviously, the life that we are living comes from God and He is the source of all life. "But to us there is but one God, the Father, of whom are all things, and we in him; and one Lord Jesus Christ, by whom are all things, and we by him" (1 Corinthians 8:6, King James Version). Jesus himself declares that He came to this world that we have life and have it more abundantly. The Bible portrays Satan as 'thief, who cometh, not but for to steal, and to kill, and to destroy' (John 10:10, King James Version). Therefore the act of killing others or oneself is act of devilish. God's Lord's plan for everyone is that their life and has it abundantly through Jesus Christ. 'Jesus said I am the resurrection, and the life: he that believes in me, though he was dead, yet shall he live' (John 11:25, King James Version). God knows at times, our life is also colored with many failures, depression and ceaseless problems. Therefore, the whole world agonizes; Christian and even the non-Christian as it is written in Job 5:7 (King James Version), 'Yet man is born to trouble as surely as sparks fly upward'. However, many Christians often respond to misery like how the prophets like Moses, Elijah, Job Jonah, and even Sarah have responded. Out of the frustration and anguished we pleaded to God to take our life away. These prophets knew that they cannot suicide themselves but they knew that only God has the authority to take one's life. Therefore, they brought their matter to God and be transparent before Him. The Bible teaches the Christians who are in depression and wish to end their life to bring the matter to God for His divine help in order to sustain their life. Paul learnt this experience through his own miseries, as revealed in (2 Corinthians 12:8-10, New International Version). 'Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it [a thorn in my flesh] away from me. But he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me. That is why, for Christ's sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong.' In the biblical concepts, suicide is not regarded as an option and in fact God condemns the act of self-killing. Furthermore, God turns deaf ear to these appeals for suicide. He does not want to bring death to Moses, Elijah, Job Jonah, or even Sarah, but wanted all to live. He even show this desire to give life to all by using nature to save them, for the crows fed Elijah, God responded to the pleas of Job with justice, prosperity and comfort, the whale saved Jonah and God sent the angel Raphael ("God heals") who gave Tobias to Sarah to marry her and he also gave Tobit a cure of his blindness (Rober, 1997).

In spite of these, there was one suicide that was tolerated in the Bible for Samson. Samson suicide was morally valid as he did not focus on him, but it was to glorify God. Samson acted in that way as the Philistines saw him and uses his defeat to praise their god, saying, "Our god has delivered our enemy into our hands, the one who laid waste our land and multiplied our slain. (Judges 16:24, New International Version). Then Samson prayed to the Lord, "Sovereign Lord, remember me. Please, God, strengthen me just once more, and let me with one blow get revenge on the Philistines for my two eyes." Then Samson reached toward the two central pillars on which the temple stood. Bracing himself against them, his right hand on the one and his left hand on the other, Samson said, "Let me die with the Philistines!" Then he pushed with all his might, and down came the temple on the rulers and all the people in it. Thus he killed many more when he died than while he lived (Judges 16:28-30, New International Version). Furthermore, Samson act clearly illustrates heroic selflessness devotion to God and his desire not defile the God name in any way.

In addition, the other type of suicide in the Old Testament was performed by those who were utterly alienated from God, and these suicides were sign not of devotion and loyalty to God, but total alienation from Him. The suicide of Saul, Abimelech, Zimri, Ahitophel, Judas Iscariot and the Philippian Jailer were not exalted but criticized as a penalty for the evil of one's life and the evil of one's sin "recoiling on one's head" (Robert, 1997).

Islam

Leach argues that Islamic religious texts clearly state that suicidal behavior leads to an eternity in hell (Leach, 2006). Committing Suicide is a Major Sin: Bukhari Volume 2, Book 23, Number 445: Narrated Jundab the Prophet said, "A man was inflicted with wounds and he committed suicide, and so Allah said: My slave has caused death on himself hurriedly, so I forbid Paradise for him." Bukhari Volume 8, Book 73, Number 73: Narrated Thabit bin Ad-Dahhak: "And if somebody commits suicide with anything in this world, he will be tortured with that very thing on the Day of Resurrection".

In general, the predominant view of suicide among Muslims is that suicide takes away the gift of life that God gave us, and, therefore, suicide is definitely not forgiven. The Quran says to trust God, have faith in the mercy of God, support the family, have patience, and do not destroy life. Despite the teaching that one should not destroy life, Muslims generally do not condemn the individual who dies by suicide. They believe that the death is a personal matter between the victim and God (Basit, 2009). Stronger evidence, however, has been found for an association between suicide and the intention of suicidal act. French documentarian Pierre Rehov, who interviewed the families of suicide bombers and would-be bombers in an attempt to find out why they do it, says it's not a myth or fantasy of heretics He says "there's no doubt the Quran "promises virgins" to Muslim men who die while fighting infidels in jihad, and it's a key motivating factor behind suicide terrorism (*World Net Daily*, 2006).

Sunan al-Tirmidhi Hadith 2562 says:

The Prophet Muhammad was heard saying: "The smallest reward for the people of Paradise is an abode where there are 80,000 servants and 72 wives, over which stands a dome decorated with pearls, aquamarine, and ruby, as wide as the distance from Al-Jabiyah [a Damascus suburb] to Sana'a [Yemen]"

Although there are reasons to believe that a strong relationship exist between the nature of a decision to be suicide bombers yet Sunan al-Tirmidhi Hadith 2562 is regarded as a weak Hadith that has no Sanad which has no line or sequence of narration. Although listed in an authoritative collection, this particular Hadith has technical weaknesses in its chain of transmitters and is therefore not considered impeccable. As a result, Muslims are not required to believe in it.

Whereas CAIR [Council on American-Islamic Relations] founder Omar Ahmad praised suicide bombers who "kill themselves for Islam," and they are "Fighting for freedom, which is fighting for Islam, and thus it is not suicide," Ahmad asserted. "They kill themselves for Islam." (*World Net Daily*, 2006). Suicide bombings are sometimes viewed as acts of martyrdom or self-defense. It is important to recognize the reasons that may lead a group of people to perform acts of suicide bombings. Often, suicide bombings are considered when groups of individuals feel they have been victimized, and are considered as measures of last resorts (Burnham, 2011 as cited in Nelson, Hanna, Hourii, & Klimes-Dougan, 2012). Since the U.S. invasion of Iraq, the number of suicide attacks has increased further, with more than 500 carried out in 2006 compared to 142 suicide attacks were carried out worldwide between 1983 and 2000 (Pape, 2005 as cited in Ginges, Hansen, & Norenzayan, 2009). In addition, acts of suicide bombings often occur when conflicts exist between unequal groups. In these particular cases, suicide bombings are viewed as acts of self-defense, and not suicide (Nelson et al., 2012).

Hinduism

Hindu scriptures are comparatively nonaligned on the subject of suicide (Robert, 1997). You must not use your God-given body for killing God's creatures, whether they are human, animal or whatever. Yajur Veda, chapter 12, verse 32 (Suicide Prevention Resource Center, 2009). The Bhagavad Gita convicts suicide is for selfish reasons only and posits that such a death cannot have the last important rites. Upanishads, the Holy Scriptures, condemn suicide and state that 'he who takes his own life will enter the sunless areas covered by impenetrable darkness after death' (Isha Upanishad, verse 3). Hindus hold a belief that individuals who commit suicide may encounter suffering in their next life or may even be reincarnated in a lower animal form Leach (2006).

In contrast, the Vedas permit suicide for religious reasons and consider that the best sacrifice was that of one's own life. Meanwhile, within the Brahmanical view, those who attempt suicide should fast for a specified period only Suicide by starvation, also known as 'sallekhana', was linked to the attainment of 'moksha' (liberation from the cycle of life and death) (Radhakrishnan & Chittaranjan, 2012). Across India, nearly 300 – 400 Jains die annually in such fasts and their deaths are usually celebrated publicly by the community. This monk believed that suicidal act is a great sin and is the result out of despair. Meanwhile, "sallekhana" is a triumph over death and an expression of hope and there is no distress or cruelty (Biswa, 2009). According to Brahmachari Dharamchand Shastri, a Jain holy man, the art of dying is to take death in advance. He has assisted some 60 other holy men in carrying out santhara. He describes "sallekhana" the act as the ultimate test of spirituality and self-discipline. He further claimed that in all religions the art of living is taught and how to live a good life. But, there is no religion which taught how to die. So santhara is basically the art of dying," he says (McCarthy, 2015).

Contrary to "Sallekhana", Prāyopaveśa is another self-willed fasting death, which is also tolerated in the Hindu religion. Prāyopaveśa is acceptable when a devout is suffering from a terminal illness or is unable to carry out self-grooming practices. According to Mannan (1989), Prāyopaveśa must be declared publicly in order to distinguish this religious act from other acts of suicide (as cited in Nelson et al., 2012). Elderly person with an incurable disease or an ascetic who has dedicated himself to a monastic life stop eating and drinking and "let nature take its course." Such people are admired for being calm as they die, knowing they have fulfilled the purpose of their lives (Suicide Prevention Resource Center, 2009).

Since 1829, Sati which was a famous Hindu tradition in India which widowed woman are required to commits suicide on her husband's funeral pyre. Under the Commissions for Sati (Prevention) Act, 1987, this tradition was banned in India. However, this tradition has not been completely eliminated in the society. Dozens of small and big temples flourish unchecked in Bundelkhand, Uttar Pradesh, and across Rajasthan (Aron & Tomar, 2008). Women who commit Sati are worshipped as Sati Devi or a goddess. In Hindu tradition, Sati is an act of godliness, and is said to cleanse a woman who has more sin (RT News, 2009). Although India is too ambiguous to be prevent Sati from taking place yet India has at least 250 sati temples and the ruling on pujas are still conducted and Sati is still glorified (RT News, 2009). Contrary to findings Hindu tradition and religion is believe that suicide act is still wrong as it has been said in Manusmriti, chapter 6, verse 45 that said 'Let him not desire to die, let him not desire to live; let him wait for his appointed time, as a servant waits for the payment of his wages (Suicide Prevention Resource Centre, 2009).

Buddhism

Buddhists' attitudes towards suicide are centered on its relationship with this fundamental suffering. Buddhists believe that suicide is a form of suffering those results from a craving for non-existence (Disayavanish & Disayavanish, 2007 as cited in Nelson et al., 2012).

"Some people commit suicide; they seem to think that there is suffering simply because there is the human life, and that by cutting off the life there will be nothing. But, according to the Buddhist viewpoint, that's not the case; your consciousness will continue. Even if you take your own life, this life, you will have to take another body that again will be the basis of suffering. If you really want to get rid of all your suffering, all the difficulties you experience in your life, you have to get rid of the fundamental cause (greed, hatred and delusion) that gives rise to the aggregates that are the basis of all suffering. Killing yourself isn't going to solve your problems." (Basit, 2009).

Furthermore, Buddhists do not accept that the result of suicide is the end of suffering, but rather believing that "human beings cannot avoid suffering by taking their own life as that act is a rebirth in the miserable planes of existence, and hereafter further the suffering endlessly". Nelson et al. (2012) have found that Buddhism places great value on human life, and thus suicide is viewed negatively as the killing of a living being (Nelson et al., 2012). Thus, Leach feels the result of this act is actually an act of being unprepared for the next realm and a disturbance in the karma of the individual (Leach, 2006). Ultimately, Buddhism is focused on the relief of suffering, and suicidal behavior is believed to promote rather than protect against this suffering (Nelson et al., 2012).

In contrast, suicide is justified in the persons of the Noble Ones who have already cut off desire and by so doing neutralized their actions by making them incapable of producing further fruit. From the point of view of early Buddhism, suicide is a normal matter in the case of The

Noble Ones, who having completed their work, sever their last link with the world and voluntarily pass into Nirvāḍa, thus definitively escaping from the world of rebirths (Keown, 1996).

Acts of self-immolation by Chinese Buddhists are but part of a longer history of the ideals and practices of “abandoning the body” that may be found throughout the Chinese Buddhist tradition from the late fourth century to the present. Since February 27, 2009, 143 Tibetans have self-immolated in Tibet and China (International Campaign for Tibet [ICT], 2015). In its strictest sense self-immolation means “self sacrifice,” derived from the Latin *molare* “to make a sacrifice of grain.” It does not mean suicide by fire, although of course the term is commonly used in that sense. While bearing the everyday usages in mind, I employ the term ‘auto-cremation’ to refer to the practice of burning one’s own body, and ‘self-immolation’ for the broader range of actions which in Chinese Buddhist discourse constituted ‘abandoning the body’—such as drowning, death by starvation, feeding the body to animals or insects, etc. Three terms are commonly encountered in the Chinese sources, and they are used more or less interchangeably: *wangshen* 亡身, meaning “to lose, or abandon the body,” or perhaps “to be oblivious (*wang* 忘) to the body;” *yishen* 遺身, meaning “to let go of, abandon, or be oblivious to the body;” and *sheshen* 捨身 “to relinquish, or abandon the body.” The glyph *shen* (body) that is common to these terms also carries implications of ‘self,’ or the person as a whole. These three binomes are also used to translate terms found in Indian Buddhist writings such as *ātmabhāva-parityāga*, *ātma-parityāga* (abandoning the self) and *svadeha-parityāga* (abandoning one’s own body). So we can say that, at least at the terminological level, self-immolation may be considered (and it was by some Chinese exegetes) as a particular expression of the more generalized ideal of being detached from the deluded notion of a self. Auto-cremation is usually marked with expressions such as *shaoshen* 燒身 (burning the body) and *zifen* 自焚 (self-burning) but these terms are deployed mostly descriptively rather than conceptually. That is to say, in the Chinese sources auto cremation is understood to be a way of abandoning the self, but auto-cremation is not usually discussed as a separate mode of practice or ideal in its own right (Benn, 2012).

Tibetan self-immolations are basically an act of protest against China’s cruel rule. Furthermore, the protesters have so far refrained from causing even the slightest harm to the leaders and cadres of the Chinese government or to the military camps and industrial centers. They have sacrificed themselves only in the pursuit and belief of doing something meaningful with their lives for the common cause. They have as yet not chosen the path of mutual destruction with suicide attacks. Therefore, there is as such a great value in the significance of their deaths (Kun-khyab, 2013).

■3.0 CONCLUSION

The major understandings with regard to suicide among Christianity, Islam, Buddhist and Hinduism views are twofold: the historical view grounded in these teachings and the more present-day view, neither of these religions condones suicide. However, there is some academic discussion about circumstances which these religion may have condoned suicide. All the religion teaches that one should not take a life, and it is a delusion to think that suffering will end with suicide. Be that as it may, all religion still believe that their teachings able to offers all the answers to life’s problems. The ritual murders were all tolerated in all religion because that expressed astounding devotion to the Law and Gods will. Dr. David Rosen, who has written numerous books on depression and suicide, will say to someone who is suicidal, “Something needs to die, but maybe it is not you.” That is a very way of thinking of all religion; that there is some suffering here that needs to go away, but it is not “I” who needs to go away. Yet, in all these religion some death were tolerated more as martyrdoms than as suicides. Thus, suicide was not to be done for any reason, either for selfless or selfish reasons but under the divine devotion to God Almighty.

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