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The Approach of the World's Dominant Religions Toward the Taking of Life and Suicide

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Abstract

The phenomenon of suicide has been causing a heated debate in the minds of people for centuries. The mysterious phenomenon was described from antiquity as an act of freedom worship, to the Middle Ages as a grave sin against God. Consideration of the attitudes we take toward the act of suicide is still a debatable issue today. Judaism, Islam and Christianity are all religions that oppose taking a life. An important question should be asked here: what is in the background of the contempt for committing suicide? When analysing the literature and articles on religious attitudes toward the phenomenon of suicide, we can find many aspects related to exclusion and ostracism in historical perspective.

In contrast to the attitude towards suicide, chosen religions relate differently to the death of people, who had their lives taken as a consequence of war or in the name of religion. Using the example of Janusz Korczak, who sacrificed his life for the children during World War II, we can find publications and words of praise towards his martyrdom. For it was not the fault of Korczak and millions of other people, during this and other wars waged around the world for centuries, that they died. People, who died in the name of politics, nationality disputes or just religions. So, if we focus from this perspective on suicide deaths and the reasons for individuals' decisions to take their own lives, we can find fault with social stereotypes and the stigmatization of social groups that are at risk of suicide crisis. Thus, a fundamental question must be asked here: does religion rightly place the suffering of victims of international conflicts above that of people in suicidal crisis, who not rarely take their own lives because of society's approach?

The stance of the various religions, which clearly express negative approach towards the intentional taking of life differs in terms of attitude about death itself and death martyred or taken in the name of religion. In this article, I shall analyse the catechisms and dogmas of chosen religions related to the above issues and compare their stances towards various causes of human death.

Keywords

suicide; religions; martyrdom; faith; sacrifice

Introduction – Antiquity

“We die a little bit each day. A little bit of life escapes every day, and even when we grow, life shortens. ... A brave and wise man should not run away from life but go out.”¹ In the philosophy of the ancient Romans, suicide was not a sin. This is because they believed that it was an individual’s right to decide for himself how to end their life. Lucius Annii Seneca, the Roman philosopher and author of the above quote also ended his own life by suicide, having previously been sentenced to death by one of his students.² In his work “Moral Letters to Lucilius,” he touches on the ethicality of suicide, concluding that it is morally acceptable.³ Seneca also points out the matter of decision-making in situations, where our lives are not dependent solely on ourselves. He gives the example of Socrates, who in 399 BC, accused of demoralizing youth and being impious, was sentenced to death.⁴ Seneca, in describing of his death, wrote that Socrates had the option of committing suicide on his own terms, but still waited out the last days of his life in prison to finally drink poison prepared from the venomous shawl. He concludes with a discourse, in which he asks an important question: “If one death is connected with martyrdom and the other is simple and easy, why not partake in the second one?”⁵ He also casts into doubt the words of scholars, who see suicide as a manifestation of impiety. Seneca concludes that since nature has given us the opportunity to “get out” of life, why, when a person is shrouded in agony and pain caused not only by illness, but also by the abuser, not end it on his own terms?⁶

For the ancient Romans, honour meant more than life. That’s why, even though there had to be a good reason (for example: old age and fear of infirmity, or loss of honour, among others), Romans chose to commit suicide. In modern terms, suicides performed at that time can be described as “theatrical.” Sometimes special farewell parties were prepared, to which relatives of the suicide were invited.⁷ It is also an important fact that suicide was the privilege of free people. Slaves and people imprisoned and sentenced to death had no such right.

¹ L.A. Seneka, *Listy moralne do Lucyliusza*, W. Kornatowski (trans.), Warsaw 2010, pp. 90–91.

² J. Kempys, *Samobójstwo u starożytnych Rzymian na podstawie pism moralnych Lucjusza Anneusza Seneki*, “Polonia Sacra” 2008, R XII(XXX) (23/67), pp. 213–214.

³ *Ibidem*, p. 217.

⁴ A. Gross, *Samobójstwa słynnych ludzi – Sokrates i cykuta*, “Archiwum Medycyny Sądowej i Kryminologii” 2000, 50(4), pp. 365–371.

⁵ L.A. Seneka, *Listy moralne do Lucyliusza*, *op. cit.*, p. 257.

⁶ *Ibidem*, pp. 257–258.

⁷ *Samobójstwo w świecie Rzymian*, IMPIERIUM ROMANUM, 2015 <https://imperiumromanicum.pl/ustroj/prawo-rzymskie/samobojstwo-w-swiecie-rzymian/> [accessed: 21.08.2024].

Judaism and Suicide

Jewish law assumes that human life has the highest value and God is the decision-maker when it comes to taking life. Jews regard the taking of life, either one's own or someone else's, as an intervention in reality.⁸ In Judaism, suicide is forbidden, however, the way it is treated is defined by Brunon Hołyst in *Suicidologia* as minimalist. This concerns caring about the family of the person, who committed suicide by not accepting this act as a cause of death. Jewish law refuses to perform religious rituals on those, who die by suicide. The Purification Ritual is not performed on them and burial is done in parts of the cemetery away from the rest. Nowadays, religious authorities pay attention to prevention, support for people in psychological crisis and raising children in a sensitive and safe community. Religious observance is also very important, which is reflected in the low suicide rate for the Israeli population.⁹

During the Second World War, the Polish-Jewish politician Szmul Zygielbojm decided to take his own life in protest against the murder of the Jewish population. In this way, he wanted to alert the Allies of the tragedy that was taking place in the Polish territories. At the time he committed suicide, he was in London as a member of the National Council of Poland. Before his death, he wrote a letter addressed to the President of the Republic of Poland and the Prime Minister explaining his decision – “By my death, I wish to give expression to my most profound protest against the inaction, in which the world watches and permits the destruction of the Jewish people. I know that there is no great value to the life of a man, especially today. But since I did not succeed in achieving it in my lifetime, perhaps I shall be able by my death to contribute to the arousing from lethargy of those, who could and must act in order that even now, perhaps at the last moment, the handful of Polish Jews, who are still alive can be saved from certain destruction.”¹⁰ His grandson, Arthur Zygielbojm, spoke long after his death about his grandfather's courage and the values his desperate act carried.¹¹

⁸ B. Hołyst, *Suicydologia*, 2nd ed., Warsaw 2012, p. 110.

⁹ *Ibidem*, pp. 111–112.

¹⁰ S. Zygielbojm, *The Last Letter from Szmul Zygielbojm, the Bund Representative with the Polish National Council in Exile*, 1943, www.yadvashem.org/docs/zygielbojm-letter-to-polish-national-council-in-exile.html [accessed: 25.08.2024].

¹¹ *Remember Szmul Zygielbojm!*, Jewish Socialists' Group, 2023, www.jewishsocialist.org.uk/news/item/remember-szmul-zygielbojm [accessed: 14.08.2024].

Martyrdom in Islam

In the Muslim faith, suicide means opposing Allah. As in Judaism, only God has the power to decide about the death of a person, no matter what suffering he experiences.¹² There are many texts, both in the Qur'an and Hadis, where suicide is described as a forbidden act and the Prophet says that a person, who tries to take his own life will also be condemned after death.¹³

The case is different with suicides, which are considered acts of martyrdom. In order to become a martyr, one must fulfil the prerequisites for this. In Imamism, the representative of the doctrine Muhammad ibn al-Hasan al-Shaybani described that it is acceptable for a suicidal person to be named a martyr, if his chances of survival are not poor. This is when any of the following premises could have absolved the suicide bomber.¹⁴ It said:

- they may only take place during a war;
- they must be carried out by soldiers;
- the soldiers must not pretend to be non-combatants;
- the attacks must not harm civilians or civilian property; and
- the device used must not mutilate bodies.”¹⁵

The concept of the suicide-bomber was created for conventional warfare, used as a weapon to be used against those, who are directly involved in armed conflict.¹⁶

In the case of the Muslim faith, the problem facing the Western world is the refusal of some Muslims to accept the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. This involves the difficulty of absorbing and respecting the universal principles and human rights requirements of the Islamic faith.¹⁷ There is a low level of acceptance of suicide attacks targeting civilians. Moreover, those who contemplate committing suicide are aware that after death they will face the punishment of hell for taking their own lives.¹⁸ Terrorist attacks only find acceptance among radical Islamic minorities. Suicide attacks targeting civilians are condemned by both international humanitarian law and religious Islamic authorities. Acceptable in the Iranian Shi'a conception were attacks directed at the military in the course of war,

¹² B. Hołyst, *Suicydologia*, Warsaw 2012, p. 117.

¹³ P. Łubiński, *Prawo do życia a ataki samobójcze w islamie i prawie międzynarodowym*, “Annales Universitatis Paedagogicae Cracoviensis. Studia de Securitate” 2018, 8, p. 57.

¹⁴ *Ibidem*, pp. 57–58.

¹⁵ M. Munir, *Suicide Attacks and Islamic Law*, “International Review of the Red Cross” 2008, 90(869), p. 89.

¹⁶ P. Łubiński, *Prawo do życia a ataki samobójcze...*, *op. cit.*, p. 60.

¹⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 61.

¹⁸ B. Hołyst, *Suicydologia*, *op. cit.*, p. 117.

but it is these attacks that have given rise to a peculiar interpretation that has resulted in civilian attacks around the world.¹⁹

The figure of the martyr is defined in the Qur'an as 'shahid' and has a much broader etymological meaning than when we think of 'martyr' in the Christian religion or Judaism. The martyr figure as we know it is connoted as a victim of religious oppression, whose life is taken. A shahid in Islam is a figure, who died for a higher purpose and lived his or her life according to the dictates of the religion.²⁰ Today's shahids appear in articles about the religious conflict between Palestine and Israel. The media has often shown one side of the conflict as partisans and the other as terrorists, although the detail that it is Hezbollah (a radical Shia political party formed in 1982) that has idealised the image of the shahid is notable. In this way, a perception was formed in the minds of Palestinian children that becoming a martyr could be defined as a life goal.²¹

Suicide terrorism that the modern world confronts is an international threat. Effective propaganda combined with ideological brainwashing creates self-proclaimed soldiers, ready to commit suicide bombing in the name of religion, for obtaining the title of shahid.²²

Christianity

Each of the religions described in this article sees suicide as a grave sin and defiance of the God in common. In Christianity, the first references date from the Middle Ages, in which it is described as socially unacceptable to take one's own life. Already St Augustine, in his work 'De Civitate Dei' (426 AD), claimed that suicide means divine punishment after death, since such a person breaks the 5th rule of the Decalogue, 'Thou Shall Not Kill'.²³ Christian scribes reflected on the praise of suicide by antique philosophers, having also in mind the Saints who preferred not to await death from the executioners, but to leave the world on their own terms. In particular, the examples of virgins, who chose to take their own lives under threat of violence were pointed out.²⁴

¹⁹ P. Łubiński, *Prawo do życia a ataki samobójcze...*, op. cit., p. 62.

²⁰ M.M. Kłagisz, P. Niechciał, *Co znaczy być męczennikiem? Termin Szahid w afgańskim i tadżyckim dyskursie politycznym w końcu XX w.*, "Przegląd Orientalistyczny" 2018, 3–4(267–268), p. 295.

²¹ A. Machniak, *Terroryzm samobójczy – uwarunkowania zjawiska i jego wpływ na środowisko bezpieczeństwa międzynarodowego*, "Annales Universitatis Paedagogicae Cracoviensis. Studia de Securitate" 2020, 10(20), p. 86.

²² *Ibidem*, pp. 83–84.

²³ Z. Chałubińska, *Social Exclusion of People in Suicidal Crisis*, [in:] E. Dąbrowa (ed.), *Acceptance, Participation, Solidarity. The Importance of the Interdisciplinary Approach*, Warsaw 2024, p. 171.

²⁴ T. Reroń, *Samobójstwo*, www.wikijp2.pl/index.php?title=Samobójstwo [accessed: 21.08.2024].

The synod of Braga in 452 prohibited the burying of suicide victims and the performance of any religious rituals after suicide. In the course of later synods, the rules as to the treatment of suicide victims after death were expanded. In Toledo in 693 it was stated that suicide victims were excluded from the community of the Church and in Nîmes in 1096 it was prohibited to have them buried on consecrated land. This involved the practice of burying them outside cemeteries, a custom that still continues to this day and the clergy state, according to canon law, can refuse to bury a person, who has taken his own life.²⁵ Conversely, it is not easy to establish whether a person actually attempted to take his or her life. Sometimes families mask this fact to avoid social exclusion.²⁶

In the practice of the Church's doctrines about suicide it has been recognised that it can be done on three terms: "voluntary martyrdom, death caused by asceticism and cases of suicide committed by a virgin or a married woman in defence of her own virtue" ["dobrowolne męczeństwo, śmierć spowodowana ascezą oraz jeśli samobójstwa dokona dziewczica albo kobieta zamężna w obronie własnej cnoty"].²⁷ In another way, suicide is not considered a sin, when the person felt the fear of apostasy. Two cases are known: that of St Pelagia of Antioch, who committed suicide at the age of 15 for fear of being raped by soldiers, who came to capture her.²⁸ The second was St Apollonia, whose story is described as the heroic act of a devout and pious Christian. St Apollonia, kidnapped by pagans was beaten and tortured. She was given a choice: either die by burning at the stake or disown God in favour of the Pagan Gods. St Apollonia, asked to think for a moment, decided to throw herself on the already burning stake, taking her own life in the name of the faith.²⁹ Both women were recognised as martyrs, who sacrificed their lives for God and the belief.

Nowadays, a suicide can obtain redemption of sins, if it is proven that the death was caused by persuasion of the devil, strong stress, depression, mental illness or self-sacrifice.³⁰ However, it should be borne in mind that each case is dealt with individually and it sometimes matters whether the person, who has committed suicide has led a life in line with the teachings of the church. Children and ado-

²⁵ B. Hołyst, *Suicydologia*, *op. cit.*, p. 113.

²⁶ T. Szwagrzyk, *Samobójstwo i pogrzeb kościelny*, "Ruch Biblijny i Liturgiczny" 1961, 14(5), p. 234, <http://dx.doi.org/10.21906/rbl.2836>

²⁷ B. Hołyst, *Suicydologia*, *op. cit.*, p. 117.

²⁸ M. Cholewa, *Męczeństwo formą samobójstwa?*, "Polonia Sacra" 2012, 16(1), p. 96, <http://dx.doi.org/10.15633/ps.536>

²⁹ P. Skarga, P. Leszczyński, O. Bitschnau, *Żywot świętej Apolonii, Panny i Męczenniczki*, Warsaw 1910, https://pl.wikisource.org/wiki/%C5%BBywot_%C5%9Bwi%C4%99tej_Apolonii,_Panny_i_M%C4%99czenniczki [accessed: 22.08.2024].

³⁰ B. Hołyst, *Suicydologia*, *op. cit.*, p. 115.

lescents also experience a redemption and their cases are treated quite differently from that of an adult.

Martyrdom has been a controversial topic in Christianity during our era. Just as in Islam the issue of martyrdom and the granting of the title of shahid was defined concretely and all the provisions still exist today and are used, so the rules as to the recognition of martyrdom in Christianity were changed and reflections were carried out on them as to what should be accepted as martyrdom and what should not. An important element from antiquity was that the victim should not offer himself voluntarily to become a martyr.³¹

Another aspect of martyrdom is that, in addition to the examples given earlier, a martyr must die at the hand of another. Here an example is the case of Jesus Christ, who died condemned by Pontius Pilate, through crucifixion.³² As another example, a more systemic one, it is recognised that the oppressor against the innocents was the Nazis during the Second World War. People were killed too because of their faith, their prayers and because they were members of the clerical state. This is how, for instance, Father Maximilian Kolbe, who gave his life in the name of his faith, died. He stayed religious to the end of his life and was finally recognised as a martyr, who was killed by the system.³³

Altruistic Suicide

That leaves us with the topic of altruistic suicide. Suicide in both the Judaic, Christian and Islamic religion is regarded as the greatest sin and is condemned. What is different is when a person has overly strong connections with society and identifies with the interests of the group, in which they find oneself. In such a situation, a person puts the worth of an idea above his own life and commits suicide in the name of someone else. This example of behaviour was what Emile Durkheim called altruistic suicide.³⁴ Durkheim explored the problem of suicide from a sociological point of view, contributing a work called 'Le suicide' to the world of science, finding a correlation between society and suicidal behaviour.

The issue of altruistic suicides has been further elaborated by Adam Czabański, who, describing their mechanisms of occurrence and social consequences, has also singled out categories that are important for the topic of this work. These include

³¹ M. Cholewa, *Męczeństwo formą samobójstwa?*, *op. cit.*, p. 96.

³² *Ibidem*, p. 95.

³³ *Ibidem*, p. 96.

³⁴ B. Hołyst, *Suicydologia*, *op. cit.*, pp. 640–641.

suicides related to politics, during war (as in the case of Zygielbojm or Father Kolbe) and all suicide terrorist attacks.³⁵

Czabański, defining the common attributes of altruistic suicides, notes that they are related by 'intentionality'. Each altruistic suicide has a purpose and a sense of acting for the benefit for some social group. The motive of each may be different, but it is the intentionality that plays an important role.³⁶ In one of his studies, Czabański has talked with seniors, who experienced the hell of World War II. When asking about altruistic suicides, some of the seniors were able to give examples of suicides that remained in their memories and which at times bore the hallmarks of heroism, for example; a man who gave his life for his wife, whom the German soldiers wanted to sexually abuse (in the end they did not do so and the man was hailed as a hero), or a mother who hanged herself in front of the SS, who threatened to shoot her children if she did not do it.³⁷ Another example was that of an 83-year-old man, who wanted to volunteer as a 'Human Torpedo' during the 1939 war, but never got a response to his application. As the author of the study described: "He believes that altruistic suicides in the name of a higher cause such as the homeland are commendable and, if they are of benefit, are well worth doing. However, it is interesting to point out that the respondent considers himself to be a person of deep faith, which manifests in participation in frequent religious practices" ["Uważa, że samobójstwa altruistyczne w imię wyższego dobra, jakim jest ojczyzna, są godne pochwały i jeśli przynoszą korzyść, to warto je uczynić. Warto nadmienić, że sam badany uznaje siebie jako osobę głęboko wierzącą, co manifestuje się w udziale w częstych praktykach religijnych"].³⁸ And while some respondents strongly emphasised that suicide is a sin, regardless of the idea, there were some, who emphasised the value of sacrifice. One woman pointed out the pointlessness of taking one's own life: "they don't make sense at all because it's not a way out of the situation, it's just an escape from problems. Even those being a sacrifice for others should not take place, because they do not help at all, they only hurt others" ["w ogóle nie mają sensu, bo nie jest to żadne wyjście z sytuacji, tylko ucieczka od problemów. Nawet te z poświęcenia dla innych nie powinny mieć miejsca, bo wcale nie pomagają, tylko krzywdzą innych"].³⁹

³⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 642.

³⁶ J. Mariański, *Recenzja książki: Adam Czabański, Samobójstwa altruistyczne. Formy manifestacji, mechanizmy i społeczne reperkusje zjawiska*, Zakład Wydawniczy NOMOS, Kraków 2009, pp. 517, "Wrocławski Przegląd Teologiczny" 2010, 18(1), p. 309.

³⁷ A. Czabański, *Przypadki samobójstw altruistycznych we wspomnieniach seniorów*, "Nowiny Lekarskie" 2012, 81(1), p. 52.

³⁸ *Ibidem*.

³⁹ *Ibidem*.

Korczak About Death

Janusz Korczak, a Polish pedagogue who dedicated his life to children and raising them, died sacrificing himself for his charges on 7 August 1942. Father Jan Twardowski, during a mass in 1971, said of him: "He was holding the children's hands to the end, he died with them. He passed away in the worn-out uniform of a Polish military doctor, which he put on the first day the Germans entered Warsaw and wore ostentatiously until his death" ["Odszedł w wytartym mundurze polskiego lekarza wojskowego, który włożył w pierwszym dniu wejścia Niemców do Warszawy i nosił ostentacyjnie, aż do śmierci"].⁴⁰ He lived in the first half of the twentieth century, although he came from a Polish-Jewish family, faith was of little importance in his family home. His parents, Józef and Cecylia Goldszmit, emphasised a non-religious but respectful Christian education.⁴¹ Korczak personally searched for the truth about God in his life. In his belief, he focused on individual experience rather than rituals and passed on his beliefs to the children of the orphanage. Korczak believed that faith allows him to keep an inner balance and to experience personal growth.⁴²

He made many references to the topic of death in his work. He often spoke about the morality of euthanasia. Even before the war, he mentioned that it should be legalised. Korczak argued the rationality of euthanasia by giving the arguments: "if someone voluntarily wants to leave the world, one should not prevent him from doing it, on the opposite – one should help him, why should a person exhaust himself and others" ["jeśli ktoś dobrowolnie chce opuścić świat, nie należy mu w tym przeszkadzać, przeciwnie – powinno się pomóc, po co ma człowiek męczyć siebie i innych"].⁴³ In the *Ghetto Diary*, he spoke of the ease, with which death comes and how difficult life is. He talked to children about the subject of death to prepare them, in a sense, for the inevitable. He did this not only for them, but also for himself.⁴⁴

Korczak dedicated his life to his idea. He took care of those, who nobody wanted to care for and, in a peculiar style, decided to raise them. His kindness was punished with the highest possible cost. Can we therefore say of Janusz Korczak that he was a martyr?

⁴⁰ M. Prochner, *Janusz Korczak i jego dzieci*, 2022, <https://ciekawostkihistoryczne.pl/2022/01/29/janusz-korczak-i-jego-dzieci/> [accessed: 24.08.2024].

⁴¹ A. Gretkowski, *O religijności i wierze Janusza Korczaka*, "Rocznik Towarzystwa Naukowego Płockiego" 2017, (9), pp. 528–529.

⁴² *Ibidem*, p. 539.

⁴³ P. Mitzner, *Zaciemniony pokój*, "Teksty Drugie" 2007, (5), p. 155.

⁴⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 161.

Summary

Not every death triggers the same emotions. One death will be seen as heroic, another will be completely condemned. Especially, if we are talking about a suicide death. Altruistic suicide, especially if a martyrdom meaning is attributed to it, is largely not condemned the same way as suicides we know. Even though each of them is related by the final taking of one's own life, the motive and context of the act is an important factor for the religious society. Self-defeat done in the name of sacrifice is considered heroic and worthy of respect. With the pointing out that such a person may be called a hero in certain social circles, such as terrorists, who attack civilian groups. In such cases, the suicide bomber for the rest of the world will be a mere fool.

Ancient philosophers glorified the possibility of leaving on one's own terms, treating suicide as something down-to-earth and human. Practitioners of all religions entrusted the responsibility for their lives to God, so suicide was unacceptable for many ages. People living in previous centuries, who saw no perspectives for the rest of their lives, who faced pain and lack of acceptance while alive, also did not experience any compassion or a worthy funeral after death. So, what is the difference between them and those who are called heroes and martyrs, who in the name of an idea took their own lives or had their lives taken from them? Both, implicated in social systems, have suffered the world. And although the clergy place increasing emphasis on supporting people in psychological crises, not every person will be convinced to seek help from the church.

Suicidal people are a kind of martyr caught up in the mismatch between society and the health policy system, in which they live. With no access to adequate treatment and psychological support, a person in suicidal crisis has no chance of healing. It is necessary to introduce a solid prevention policy based on education of the first line of intervention: primary care doctors, clergy, teachers and pedagogues. It is also important to prevent social exclusion of people at risk and to raise public awareness of psychological crises. With real systemic change, it is possible to prevent unnecessary deaths among people, who have been marginalised for centuries, especially in religious communities, in which faith plays an important role for the community.

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