



# Suicide and the Sanctity of Life: Analyzing the Role of the Present Day - Church

Olunlade Taiwo Bamiji PhD<sup>1</sup> & Pius Barinaadaa Kii PhD<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Department of Religions, Faculty of Arts, University of Benin, Nigeria.

<sup>2</sup>Department of Religious and Cultural Studies, Faculty of Humanities, Rivers State University, Nigeria.

<sup>1</sup>[tayebamiji@yahoo.com](mailto:tayebamiji@yahoo.com)

<sup>2</sup>[pius.kii@rsu.edu.ng](mailto:pius.kii@rsu.edu.ng)

**Abstract:** *This study explores Suicide and the Sanctity of Life: Analyzing the Role of the Present-Day Church. Suicide is an act of killing oneself intentionally while sanctity of life is a principle that emphasizes the inherent value and sacredness of human life. As suicide rates continue to rise globally, including within African societies, the sanctity of life—a core Christian belief—faces new challenges. Despite the Church's strong theological stance on the sacredness of human life, increasing cases of suicide, including among Christians, point to possible shortcomings in how the Church engages with mental health and emotional well-being. This research investigates the role the modern Church plays in addressing suicide and promoting the sanctity of life in today's society. Using a mixed-methods approach, the study combined surveys, interviews, and content analysis. Data were collected from clergy, youth, church members, and Christian counselors across various denominations. Sermons and church programs were analyzed to assess the extent to which suicide and mental health issues are addressed within congregations. Findings reveal that while the Church maintains a clear doctrinal stance on the sanctity of life, many congregations lack practical support systems for mental health. Suicide remains stigmatized, with many churches avoiding open discussion, resulting in silence and shame among those struggling. However, churches that have adopted mental health education and counseling ministries demonstrate better support for at-risk individuals, especially youths, who often feel neglected or misunderstood by church leadership. The study recommends that churches actively integrate mental health education, reduce stigma through open dialogue, collaborate with mental health professionals, and create youth-centered programs. Additionally, it calls for a compassionate theological approach that emphasizes hope, healing, and the value of every life. Strengthening the Church's practical response can help uphold the sanctity of life and offer refuge to those in crisis.*

**Keywords:** Church, Life, Role, Sanctity, Suicide.

## 1. Introduction

Suicide is a complex and deeply personal act often influenced by mental health disorders, trauma, social isolation, or existential despair. According to the World Health Organization (2023), more than 700,000 people die by suicide each year globally. Despite the church's moral teachings on the sanctity of life, many affected individuals may feel abandoned or misunderstood by religious institutions. This article investigates the role of the present-day church in suicide prevention, exploring its theological convictions, pastoral care responsibilities, and the need for a renewed emphasis on compassion, mental health awareness, and support.

Suicide rates have continued to rise globally, including in many African societies, despite the increased availability of mental health resources and awareness campaigns. This tragic trend raises serious questions about the value placed on life and the effectiveness of societal and spiritual institutions in promoting the sanctity of life. The Christian Church, historically a moral and spiritual guide, teaches that life is sacred and should be preserved at all costs. However, the growing number of suicides, including among church members, suggests a potential gap between the Church's doctrinal

position and its practical role in suicide prevention. This study investigates how effectively the present-day Church addresses suicide and promotes the sanctity of life in contemporary society.

A mixed-methods approach was used, incorporating both qualitative and quantitative techniques. Data were gathered through surveys administered to church members, clergy, and youth groups across various denominations. In-depth interviews with pastors, Christian counselors, and individuals affected by suicide provided further insights. Additionally, a content analysis of church sermons, programs, and public statements related to suicide and mental health was conducted. Secondary data from theological texts and suicide prevention studies were also examined.

### **The Sanctity of Life: A Christian Perspective**

The concept of the sanctity of life holds that life is sacred because it is a gift from God. Scriptures affirm that human life is created in God's image (Genesis 1:27), and only God has the sovereign authority to give and take life (Job 1:21). Historically, the Christian church has condemned suicide as a sin. The early church fathers (e.g., Augustine and Aquinas) considered it a violation of the sixth commandment: 'Thou shalt not kill' (Exodus 20:13). This view shaped the church's longstanding doctrine that suicide is morally wrong and spiritually dangerous. Yet modern theology also embraces God's mercy, recognizing that suicide is often the result of unbearable psychological suffering rather than rebellion against God.

### **Suicide and Mental Health: A Shift in Understanding**

In recent decades, there has been a growing understanding that suicide is frequently linked to mental illness, particularly depression, bipolar disorder, schizophrenia, and PTSD. The church has gradually shifted from moral condemnation to pastoral sensitivity. Some churches now emphasize compassion and support rather than judgment. However, stigma surrounding mental illness remains a significant barrier. Many Christians struggle silently for fear of being perceived as lacking faith.

### **The Christian and Suicide**

If we come to this question with preconceived notions, we will, of course, already have an answer before we examine the evidence. There is only one preconceived idea we can have, however, and that is that it is sin and a grave sin at least as bad as murder. This means that we are seeking to determine if a Christian can do the worse kinds of sin.

Jesus implied it was possible when He gave the Sermon on the Mount. He said that it was not only murder when you kill, but it was also murder when you are angry without a cause, and so full of hate that you call a brother a fool. This puts the believer in grave danger. This becomes meaningless if it is not possible for the believer to do such evil. The whole New Testament implies by its moral standard and prohibitions that it is possible for a believer to commit any of the sins forbidden by the Ten Commandments. There is no basis for saying that the sin of suicide is impossible for the believer. It is morally impossible, just as stealing, adultery, lying, and covetousness.

What does history tell us? The question was debated in the early church. One of the big questions was this: Could a Christian woman take her own life in times of persecution to escape the dishonour she would suffer by brute soldiers, who would rape her before she was killed? Eusebius, the church historian, Chrysostom, the golden mouth preacher, and Jerome, the Bible translator, all favoured it as the lesser of two evils. Augustine condemned it, however, and later church councils did also. They passed a law refusing church burial to anyone who did so. The debate arose out of life's battles where women did take their lives to escape the awful fate awaiting them. Even Augustine allowed exceptions, since some were called martyrs and made saints. The modern Catholic Encyclopaedia says this question is still open for debate.

What is not debatable is the fact that true Christians did take their own lives. In more modern times we find that after the Reformation the question arises again. There was no problem with suicide in the so-called dark ages. It became a universal problem only since the Enlightenment. In Tirol, Austria, in 1897, 28 persons buried themselves alive to escape the census which they felt was evil and against God's will. In 1666 Russian Zealots looked for the antichrist to come so soon that they urged Christians to escape him by suicide and entering into heaven. Whole communities hailed with enthusiasm this gospel of death, and they put it into practice. Such fanaticism characterized the Anabaptist also. They claimed they were setting up the kingdom of God, and they brought destruction

on themselves when they tried to rebel and make society socialistic. Luther and his princes went to war and killed over 100,000 because of this fanaticism.

This was not suicide in the same sense as it was with the Russians, but it was close to it in terms of the folly of it all, and in terms of getting Christian people so fired up over fanatical ideas that they were willing to die for some man made scheme. Martyrdom was so prized at one time that Christians fought to be killed. Some early Christians deliberately threw themselves to their death under the delusion that a violent death gained merit.

Leslie T. Lyall in his book *Come Wind Come Weather* gives an account of evangelical reactions to the Communist takeover in China. Christian leaders were disgraced and accused by other Christians of crimes and sins. He reports that people of evangelical persuasion were driven insane, and a number of them committed suicide. These he mentions were leaders and not just new Christians. They were people like T. H. Sun who was editor of the *Christian Farmer*. Some were pastors, and one was Archdeacon James Fu who was accused by his own sons. How are we to look at this? First we must recognize the differences in cultures. To be accused by one's own family and friends, and have public demonstrations, and have it put in the paper was, for an oriental mind, a burden beyond us to comprehend. The saving face attitude is a part of the Christian life in the orient, and this type of thing could crush the heart of even the strongest. It will not do to say that maybe none of them were true Christians. That could very well be, but it begs the whole question, and ignores the testimony of their lives. Since there is no basis for believing that it is impossible for a Christian to take their own life, it is better to give them the benefit of the doubt.

The Bible makes it clear that the godliest of men can develop all the symptoms of loneliness and despair that lead to suicide. Moses who was tired and discouraged cried out to God in Num. 11, "The load is far too heavy! If you are going to treat me like this, please kill me right now; it will be a kindness. Let me out of this impossible situation." Moses spoke with the mind that fits the majority of people who commit suicide. Then there is Elijah who was emotionally and physically exhausted in his battle with Jezebel. He cries out to God in I Kings 19, "I've had enough. Take away my life. I've got to die sometime, and it might as well be now." Keep in mind; we are not looking at the words of new believers who could not take the pressure. These were pros, and the cream of the crop of God's best men. Job and Jeremiah both cursed the day of their birth they fell so low in depression. What about the prophet Jonah who was so embarrassed because God in His mercy did not destroy Nineveh after He preached that He would. He cried out to God in despair in Jonah 4, "Please kill me Lord: I'd rather be dead than alive." Life was unbearable, and that is precisely where the suicide is when he takes his life. From the time you ate breakfast this morning until the time you eat breakfast tomorrow one thousand people will have killed themselves on this planet. And not a day goes by but that some of that thousand are born again Christians.

Billy Graham has acknowledged that Christians can so fall under the deceptive power of Satan that they can be enticed into suicide. Duane Peterson who headed the Jesus People Organization published many letters from Christians who attempted or succeeded in suicide. Leslie Weather head, the well-known preacher and author in England writes, "When Captain Oates-a valued colleague of Captain Scott in his epic journey to the South Pole-found that frost-bite in his feet was holding up his companions, he walked out into the blizzard to lay down his own life and was rightly labelled, "A very gallant gentleman." No one would criticize a man who, after a shipwreck, leapt to certain death in a stormy sea because a raft containing women and children was already over filled." What he is pointing out is that there are circumstances in which the taking of one's life is an act of heroism.

You might think it is dangerous to make these facts known, and ask; won't this encourage Christians to take their own life? Not at all. The reason the Bible does not hide the deep negative emotions of the best of God's people is because God knows that the key to conquering Satan's temptation to suicide is the freedom to share your burden and be accepted. No Christian will ever be defeated by the devil or depression who can feel free to share their despair without fear of rejection. Christians need to know they can commit suicide and will if they refuse to use the weapons God has given to outwit the enemy. If I fell and sprained my back I would not hesitate to share with you about the pain, and get your encouragement and prayer. But if I fell into depression and life became a dark pit with no light penetrating into my gloom, I may try to hide that from you, and in so doing be

playing right into Satan's hands. If I could treat my mental injuries as I do my physical injuries, and be honest and open about them, I would discover they were often easier to heal than the physical ones.

All of this is to say that we need not fear to talk of suicide and despair. Nothing is more necessary than to get the gloom out into the light of God's love and understanding. It is the only way you are going to beat it. Since most human beings consider suicide at some point or another, it is folly to feel you are some kind of freak or weirdo if the thought ever comes to you. Fear it and hide it, and it could ensnare you. Face it and fight it, and you will certainly win. Having thoughts of suicide is not a sign you are not a Christian. Don't let Satan deceive you. Many of the greatest people God ever used in history had these same thoughts. If you recognize this you will disarm Satan of one of his most powerful weapons against you.

Christians can and do commit the grave sin of suicide, but they would do it far less if they could only realize it is no different than temptation to any other sin. Christians are tempted to lie, cheat, steal, and every other sin, but because they know it is possible to fall into these sins they fight the temptation. But when it comes to suicide they feel so depressed over it that they tend to yield to Satan out of sheer despair, and feeling forsaken even by God for such a horrible desire.

### **Suicide and Forgiveness**

If a Christian does take his own life for any number of reasons such as, to avoid what he thinks to be a greater evil, or out of devotion to a fanatical leader, or because pressure to the breaking point, does he commit a sin so evil as to forfeit his salvation? We know Judas was not forgiven, but the New Testament nowhere condemns his suicide, but only his betrayal of Jesus. Judas was not lost because of the way he took his life, but because of his betrayal. Nothing he could do after that could add to his condemnation.

Jesus made it clear that there is only one sin that is unforgivable both in this world and the next, and that was blasphemy of the Holy Spirit. If suicide was also unforgivable, Jesus would have said there are two such sins, but he said there is only one, and suicide is not it. So then the question is, is it possible to be forgiven after one is dead? Catholics have their purgatory, and so they say very definitely the answer is yes. Protestants have no such doctrine, and so they have to wonder how sin can be forgiven after death. If a Christian dies with some sin unconfessed, will he enter heaven with a sinful soul? This is, of course, not possible, and so the common view is that when a Christian dies he is made whole by the blood of Christ. If this be so, then we have no basis for saying the same is true of the suicide who is a Christian. This sin will be cleansed by grace just as all other sins.

In debate on this issue one of the first text to come to the surface is, "Thou shalt not kill." Self-murder is obviously also a grave sin. But this says nothing about it being unforgivable. David plotted to murder the innocent Uriah to cover up his adultery with his wife. It is one of the most despicable sins of history. Yet I know of no one in all of history that does not recognize that David was forgiven for that grave sin. What he did makes the suicide victim seem mild in comparison. The suicide may be laying down his life for the sake of others. David's sin was pure evil, and yet he was forgiven.

The Bible has been searched from cover to cover to find a shred of evidence that suicide is worse than murder, and after reading dozens of books by those who have done the searching, I know of no Bible verse that support the view that suicide is unforgivable. Karl Barth, one of the greatest theologians of the 20th century, said, "If there is forgiveness of sin at all, there is surely forgiveness of suicide." Bonhoeffer and Thielicke are two other great theologians who agree. All you have to ask is the question, did Jesus die for this sin also, or is this one He left out when He took on Himself the sins of the world? Unless you would risk the wrath of God by adding this sin to the only one Jesus said was unforgivable, you have to leave it where Jesus left it, and that is with all the other forgivable sins.

Joseph Bayly, one of the outstanding evangelical authors, says that he finds nothing in the Bible that alters his conviction that the blood of Jesus Christ cleanses from the sin of suicide. John R. Rice, a great fundamentalist leader who has influenced millions, responded to a letter about a Christian girl who committed suicide. He wrote, "I am so sorry about your sister, but I'm sure you can have sweet confidence that she is with the Lord, and now happy." This is from a fighting fundamentalist who split hairs over all kinds of issues. Why? Because he knew the Bible gives no

basis for thinking there is any difference in the destiny of a Christian who dies by the sin of suicide then the Christian who dies with the sin of lust, envy or pride in his soul.

Where then does the idea come from that so many Christians have in their head that anyone who commits suicide is automatically damned? It is a tradition that grew out of the middle ages, and has not yet died, but like many old wise tales and superstitions it clings to men's minds. The motive of the tradition was good. It was to so frighten people with the fear of hell that they would not dare kill themselves. It probably saved many lives through the centuries, and still does yet today. But there is a better way, and that is the way of truth. If the Bible does not teach it, then it is false doctrine, and it is wrong to use false doctrine even if you do well with it. It is better to use true doctrine and do more good in the will of God.

### **The Church's Current Role in Suicide Prevention**

#### **Religiosity and Spirituality in Discourage of Suicide**

There are several reasons why high levels of religiosity may prevent suicide in young adult males. First, some religions proscribe harmful health behaviours, such as substance abuse; therefore, if substance abuse is directly associated with suicide, high levels of religiosity could have an indirect preventive effect on suicide through the proscription of substance abuse. Second, many religions provide a social structure that results in relatively high levels of social support and integration. This social support may reduce feelings of isolation and anomie, as well as offer support during bouts of depression. If feelings of isolation, anomie, and depression are directly associated with suicide, active participation in a religion could have an indirect preventive effect on suicide. Similar social support and integration arguments could be made for another potential risk factor for suicide that has been suggested in the literature: downward occupational (economic) mobility. Finally, most religions place a high value on life and espouse a belief in the sanctity of life; therefore, a strong commitment to religious teachings would reinforce and strengthen a person's innate desire to live and have a direct preventive effect on suicide.

Furthermore, the church can play a multi-faceted role in addressing suicide, including: **Preaching and Teaching:** Sermons and Bible studies that highlight God's unconditional love, the value of each life, and the reality of emotional struggles can create a supportive atmosphere. Leaders must challenge stigmas and affirm that seeking help is not a spiritual failure. **Counseling and Mental Health Support:** Churches with access to trained pastoral counselors or partnerships with Christian psychologists can offer spiritual and emotional guidance. Encouraging members to seek therapy or medical help is a sign of pastoral maturity. **Community and Belonging:** A strong church community can counteract isolation, one of the most common risk factors for suicide.

**Crisis Intervention:** Churches can host suicide prevention training, develop crisis response teams, or establish helplines in partnership with professionals.

#### **Biblical Misinterpretations and Their Harm**

Some church teachings unintentionally promote harmful ideas. Misinterpreting scriptures like 1 Corinthians 3:17 ('If anyone destroys God's temple, God will destroy him') can deepen the shame felt by those with suicidal thoughts. The contemporary church must correct these views, emphasizing verses that affirm life and hope, such as Psalm 34:18: 'The Lord is close to the brokenhearted and saves those who are crushed in spirit.'

### **Case Studies and Global Practices**

#### **Nigeria**

In many Nigerian churches, suicide is still taboo. However, some Pentecostal and evangelical churches are now creating youth-focused ministries to address mental health and offer hope through testimonies, counseling, and healing services.

**United States:** Large churches like Saddleback Church (California) have launched mental health ministries in response to the suicide of Pastor Rick Warren's son. Their model combines biblical counsel with clinical care.

#### **South Korea and Philippines**

Churches are collaborating with suicide prevention programs and encouraging regular mental health screenings as part of faith-based initiatives.

### **Theological and Pastoral Response to Suicide**

Today's churches are moving toward a theology of grace and compassion, recognizing that mental illness is not a spiritual weakness. Suicidal individuals should be treated as people in deep pain, not as sinners in rebellion. Funeral practices have also evolved; most churches now offer full rites for suicide victims, affirming God's love and mercy. Some denominations officially acknowledge that suicide is not an unforgivable sin (Romans 8:38–39).

### **Summary Findings**

The study revealed several important findings:

#### **Doctrinal Clarity but Practical Gaps**

While churches affirm the sanctity of life and condemn suicide as morally wrong, many lacks structured mental health support systems or trained personnel to address psychological distress.

#### **Stigma and Silence**

Suicide remains a taboo subject in many churches, leading to silence, judgment, and shame, which discourage individuals from seeking help.

#### **Positive Roles of Compassionate Ministries**

Churches that have embraced mental health education, counseling ministries, and community outreach have seen more positive engagement with at-risk individuals.

#### **Disconnect between Youth and Church Leadership**

Young people, often the most affected demographic, report feeling misunderstood or unsupported by church leaders in matters of depression and emotional struggles.

### **1. Conclusion**

The present-day Church has a critical role to play in affirming the sanctity of life and addressing the crisis of suicide. While doctrinal positions are clear, practical engagement must evolve to meet the psychological and emotional needs of today's society. By integrating mental health care, fostering open dialogue, and extending compassionate support, the Church can become a life-affirming refuge and a powerful force in the fight against suicide. The sanctity of life remains a central theological truth for the Christian faith. However, the rising tide of suicide demands that the church expand its pastoral vision. Beyond doctrine, the church must be a living witness of compassion, healing, and presence. The present-day church has the resources—spiritual, communal, and practical—to save lives if it is willing to confront suicide not with silence or stigma, but with courage and care. Suicide has been identified as one of the major global public health issues (Cutcliffe 2003). Suicide is a complex and multidimensional phenomenon stemming from the interaction of several factors. Suicide remains an important and major cause of death in various populations' samples varying in age, nationality, and clinical severity. Suicide has being known to cause so much pain to the families of whoever commits it. Suicide is unheard of in Nigeria. But surprisingly, the rate at of suicide among adults and youths in Nigeria is now so alarming. Though not all suicide cases gets reported but one will still get to hear about them most of the times from eye witnesses. Suicide behaviour among adults and youths in Nigeria has being attributed to different causes like unemployment, financial crises, stress, frustration and even some commit suicide as a result of emotional trauma. Furthermore religion has being seen from the result to have a significant relationship with suicide, though in Nigeria, this may be positive and negative, because suicide bombers hide under the disguise of religion. But this work has concentrated on the positive side of religion as related to suicide. Religion has being seen to have assisted individuals with suicidal thoughts to discard them. The more religious people are, the more they cherish life and repulse the thought of suicide.

### **2. Recommendations**

To strengthen the Church's role in upholding the sanctity of life and preventing suicide, the study recommends:

### **Mental Health Education**

Normalize mental health discussions in church. Churches should integrate mental health awareness and training into their ministries, equipping leaders to recognize and respond to warning signs.

### **De-stigmatization Campaigns**

Develop programs that openly address suicide and mental health, creating safe spaces for discussion and support. Create safe spaces for struggling individuals to speak openly.

### **Partnerships with Professionals**

Collaborate with mental health experts and institutions to provide accessible counseling and therapy for congregants.

### **Youth-Centered Engagement**

Tailor programs to meet the emotional and spiritual needs of youths, incorporating technology, peer support, and mentorship.

### **Theological Reflection and Reform**

Promote spiritual practices that affirm life and hope. Encourage deeper theological engagement with the realities of mental illness, emphasizing God's compassion, mercy, and the hope of healing.

### **References**

- Aquinas, T. (1265–1274). *Summa Theologiae*. Genesis 1:27; Job 1:21; Psalm 34:18; 1 Corinthians 3:17; Romans 8:38–39 (The Holy Bible).
- Koenig, H. G. (2009). *Religion and Mental Health: Research and Clinical Applications*. Academic Press.
- Leavey, G., Loewenthal, K., & King, M. (2017). Faith-based organizations and mental health: A critical review. *Journal of Mental Health*, 26(4), 305–317.
- Pope, W. (1978). *Durkheim's suicide a classic analyzed*. Chicago: Chicago University
- Pope, W. & Danigelis, N. (1981) *Sociology's One Law*. *Social forces*, 60: 496-514
- Rist, J. M. (2013). *Stoic philosophy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Sacharoff, M. (2013). Suicide and Brutus' philosophy in Julius Caesar. *Journal of Ideas*. 115-122.
- Shneidman, E. S. (1971). The role of psychotherapy in the treatment of suicide persons: On the demonatization of death. *American Journal of Psychology*, 25 (1), 4-17.
- Stanford, M. (2020). *Grace for the Afflicted: A Clinical and Biblical Perspective on Mental Illness*. InterVarsity Press.
- Taylor, S. (1982). *Durkheim and the study of suicide*. London: Macmillan.
- Urmson, J. O and Rees, J. (1990) (Eds.). *Encyclopedia of Western Philosophy and Philosophers*. London: Routledge. 525.
- Waldron, J. (1981). A right to do wrong. In Brian Barry (Ed.). *Ethics*. Vol. 92, No. 1. Special Issues on Rights. Chicago: University of Chicago.
- World Health Organization (2023). *Suicide worldwide in 2023: Global health estimates*. WHO Publications.