

ISSUE 2

*Western religion does/does not  
plainly forbid suicide (and a fortiori  
assisted suicide or euthanasia)*



*Religious Arguments for Maintaining  
That Suicide Is Morally “Wrong”*



I chose to include the Judeo-Christian tradition and its opposition to suicide in my journey for a number of reasons. I am religious like my father and grandfather. My grandfather, who emigrated from Slovakia in 1906, was a practicing Orthodox Jew. Recently, my sister gave me the hand-embroidered pouch containing his father’s yarmulke (skullcap) and tallith (prayer shawl). Touching the pouch, I know that I am touching something holy. There was always God in our house—Hanukkah candles, Passover dinner—but not always temple. When the family suffered a financial reversal during my early teens, it could no longer afford the dues for our temple. Whether from pride or an accurate assessment of the social realities of mid-1950s suburban America, with its preoccupation with gossip and climbing the social ladder, my parents refused to request a “scholarship” for membership dues, instead withdrawing from the temple. But God was still there.

In the last weeks of my father’s life, he spent time with a rabbi in a visit arranged by either the hospital or hospice. I do not now recall. I do remember that afterward my father, though a staunch pragmatist, told me he had enjoyed “the chat” and found comfort in knowing that he was “surrounded by a spiritual realm.”

I am a Reform Jew who strongly believes in a God as a moral power and consciousness in the universe and believes in the presence and immediacy of God in my everyday life. No doubt a portion of my reluctance to

help my father and guilt over my role in ending my mother's life spring from those religious roots.

My choice to deal with the religious perspective on suicide (and a fortiori assisted suicide and euthanasia), however, was motivated by more than my own traditions and experiences. As I began to read, I found that the articles and books could be divided into those that credited religion in their arguments and those that did not (although some of the latter did oppose assisted suicide).

For those supporting assisted suicide, religious views are discounted or even defined from the start as carrying no weight in a "rational" discussion. Even those who support a ban on assisted suicide on nonreligious grounds take pains to emphasize that their arguments against assisted suicide are based on policy or logic and in no way depend on religious faith. America is a "pluralistic" society,<sup>1</sup> a nation of countless beliefs and interests. Thus, if I disagree with you, and you try to support your position by saying, for example, "but God has told us . . .," I don't even have to consider what you are saying because it is based on the individual, the personal, the subjective—your faith.

But I could not accept that position as I began to delve into the morality of what I had done. Religion has been, and continues to be, a major influence in the life of this nation. And there are significant numbers of religious people. To hold that religious arguments have no currency in the suicide debate means that you have made a decision to exclude a huge number of fellow citizens from the discussion. Anyway, you can't really avoid the religious. It rests somewhere within the moral mix of nearly every discussion on the subject of suicide whether in an academic forum, in a living room, or at a bus stop.<sup>2</sup> Religious views, in fact, provide the single strongest correlation in recent surveys with positions pro and con on suicide and assisted suicide.<sup>3</sup>

So I had to be willing to explore what for me was a fundamental question: does a belief in God make suicide immoral in all forms and circumstances? I had never questioned that it did, but then I had never really thought about it. So I read about Christian history and tradition, carefully considered suicide and the Bible, thought about the Sixth Commandment, and delved into the classic religious arguments against suicide.

#### CHRISTIAN HISTORY AND TRADITION

While the Christian church has consistently taken the position that suicide is wrong, a careful look at that history does not result in as clear an answer

as one would have imagined. In the first place, there is some dispute about the evolution of the ban against suicide in the Christian church. Some scholars claim the ban arose as a result of fanatical Christian groups, exemplified by the Donatists, who aggressively sought martyrdom so that they could immediately enter heaven and not take the risk of staying on earth and committing some sin that would disqualify them from entering into the Kingdom of God. Under this view of history, Saint Augustine stepped in and made suicide a mortal sin, thereby taking away the incentive for Donatist-type strategies and ensuring that the Christian population would not be depleted because Christians were resorting to suicide as a way to gain early entry through the pearly gates.<sup>4</sup> If this theory is correct, the ban on suicide is far more pragmatic than moral in origin.<sup>5</sup>

Other scholars flatly reject this claim. They contend that suicide was condemned in the early church and that the group of martyrdom-seeking fanatics was far too small and geographically remote to pose a threat to the church.<sup>6</sup> Unlike the fanatics who were seeking a shortcut to heaven, most martyrs during the persecutions did not seek death but let themselves be killed by pagans rather than renouncing their faith.<sup>7</sup>

Even those scholars who claim that Christianity was opposed to suicide from the earliest days of the Christian church, however, acknowledge that suicide by Christian virgins and married women who killed themselves rather than face rape by pagan males was accepted by the church. Suicide to avoid arrest and torture after arrest was also apparently accepted during the persecution of early Christians.<sup>8</sup> What do I conclude from this? I conclude that at that time and place that culture defined that violation (rape or torture by a pagan) as a “fate worse than death.” Such a history, however, does not make clear to me why within our own cultural constructions we cannot similarly define situations that, from our perspective, are worse than death.<sup>9</sup> Thus, it is unclear to me why suicide to avoid torture by a human enemy is permissible while suicide to avoid torture by a microbe or human cell gone mad is not.

#### THE HOLY BIBLE AND SUICIDE

When I looked carefully at the Bible in order to determine what it said about suicide, I was quite surprised. The Bible presents a number of suicides, none of which is explicitly condemned.<sup>10</sup> Samson atones for abandoning God while taking vengeance on his enemies. Saul, wounded in battle, tries to kill himself rather than let himself be taken by his enemies.

Failing in his attempts, he allegedly enlists the aid of his armor bearer to complete the deed. Razis, the temple high priest, kills himself rather than let the Greeks demoralize his people, the Jews, by his capture. Zimri kills himself and his whole family when surrounded by his enemies. Ahithophel, an adviser to David and Absalom, kills himself after it is discovered that he committed an act of treason by advising Absalom to take over David's harem. Judas hangs himself, no surprise there.<sup>11</sup>

Now that's a lot of suicides without a single word of protest and this in a text that is not shy about telling the reader what is morally right and wrong. This is the Bible after all. Those propounding an absolute moral ban on suicide, however, seem to have a rationalization or explanation for each self-inflicted death in the Bible. They posit that God inspired or gave permission for each death.<sup>12</sup> But there is not a sentence in the text that bears any evidence of this. They point out that the persons committing suicide were avoiding the degradation and/or horror of capture and torture by the enemy. But what did the Philistines have on an army of cancer cells eating your pancreas or liver one cell at a time? They pronounce that many of the suicides in the Bible were the fate of those who abandoned or rebelled against God, a sign of their total alienation from God. One could contend, however, that this is just another way of saying, using theological metaphors, that a person (such as Judas) was severely depressed, as is true of so many who commit suicide.<sup>13</sup>

Those seeking to find a prohibition against suicide in the narratives of the Bible (in addition to the Sixth Commandment, which I discuss next) also point out that the armor bearer who allegedly carried out Saul's request for death was himself executed by David. Is that a statement against suicide (and assisted suicide)? Perhaps, but I don't think so. This person, without a single witness, comes before David and says, "Trust me. I killed the king, but I was really helping him."<sup>14</sup> That simply is not the type of behavior a monarchy can tolerate and still retain some sense of royal security.

The defenders of the ban on suicide also point out that in the Bible Paul discourages Christ's jailer from killing himself after the Crucifixion.<sup>15</sup> But how does that lead to the conclusion that suicide is immoral? No one believes that suicide is an appropriate response to guilt and depression. Anyone would suggest counseling for the jailer, which is exactly what Paul did.

Finally, not surprisingly, being a prophet is an extraordinarily stressful calling. At one time or another, Elijah, Jonah, Job, Moses, and Tabil all

asked God for death. God did not heed any of their requests. But why would He? Their pain was a phase God knew they would move through. Their request for death was a way of telling God what they were experiencing. (Like my grandfather told my grandmother: “You expect me to paint the house after I’ve worked like a dog all week? Why don’t you just bury me now, and we can skip the heart attack?”) It is also a roundabout way of both telling God “You’re asking too much” and saying that they need strength from God if they are to go on. If these prophets truly wanted to kill themselves, they could have done so without divine assistance.

Plainly, nothing in the Bible speaks to the desirability of suicide. Yet nothing about the suicides reported in that text explicitly indicates that suicide is even a moral issue.

#### THE SIXTH COMMANDMENT

We are all familiar with the Sixth Commandment: “Thou shall not kill.”<sup>16</sup> This powerful biblical proscription has consistently served as a moral basis for condemning suicide. Not killing means not killing, including yourself. But can this properly be inferred from the Sixth Commandment? When I looked again at the Ten Commandments, I saw a unified and what at the time must have been a radical vision of deity and community. For these commandments do far more than lay down a list of rules and concepts that are now so familiar to us in Western society, so incorporated in how we see the world, that it is extremely difficult to see their conceptual unity. These commandments pronounce the vision of a different type of deity and resulting community. This is not a God responsive to discrete material interests such as rain, fertility, hunting. (In fact, the Israelites came in conflict with their God when they later began worshipping these types of household and field deities.) These commandments represent what is basically a moral God who is establishing the preconditions for a moral community.<sup>17</sup> Other than the duties owed Jehovah (holy times, keeping the Sabbath, the primacy of Jehovah, etc.), all the commandments have to do with relational injuries, the type of injuries that would subvert a moral community—stealing, adultery, false witness. Within this context, “Thou shall not kill” most reasonably refers to a similar type of relational injury in the community:<sup>18</sup> murder (i.e., killing others in the tribe) not killing oneself.<sup>19</sup>

Additionally, the Sixth Commandment’s prohibition against killing seems to me to have obvious pragmatic roots. The fact that a society holds

to the moral principle that my life cannot be unjustly taken gives me *security* in going through my day. I know that life is filled with risks and unknowns, that the door to a parallel, tragic universe is always waiting to open. I recognize that deciding to get out of a grocery line to get another stick of butter will ever so slightly change the timing of my day and that, if the fates are so aligned, that change in timing can literally be a matter of life (get on the freeway moments after a multiple car accident) or death (arrive at the spot just as a truck loses control and crosses the median or as some lunatic sniper decides to fire in my direction). I also have no doubt that out on the streets there are people who would be more than willing to hurt or kill me for my wallet or even for fun. Still, all this risk and danger in everyday modern life is nothing at all like a “lawless,” junglelike world in which there are no norms about killing.

But what does this have to do with suicide? It is hard to see how my sense of security is undermined if I face death as result of a decision that is not being carried out by someone from the outside but is all my own.<sup>20</sup> In fact, this is as far away as one can get from a situation in which others control one’s existence. It is the self deciding the ultimate fate of the self.

#### THE CLASSIC RELIGIOUS ARGUMENT AGAINST SUICIDE

The classic religious argument against suicide is based on the notion that our lives are not ours to take because we were created by God.<sup>21</sup> I hesitate before I plunge into articulating my thoughts regarding this powerful argument, an argument that no doubt resided deep within me when I denied my father and agonized over my decision to keep my mother from food and hydration. I do not want to appear detached and analytic, a professor spinning ideas untouched by real experiences. My problem, however, is that the argument is just that, an analytic argument. The core of the argument itself does not come out of any religious or spiritual relationship with God. My belief in the existence of God is a matter of faith, of unprovable experiences. That God created me is likewise a matter of these same elements.<sup>22</sup> But in this argument I am dealing not with religious faith but with an argument created by a man, an argument that links the faith-based belief that God created man to the conclusion that suicide is immoral. I therefore must probe this analytic connection. Yet, in digging into the logic of this crucial analytic link between faith-based revelation and the human conclusion that suicide is immoral, I also am con-

cerned that I will appear to be disrespectful to God, though nothing could be farther from my intent. My powers of reason are also gifts from God. I need to use those gifts to look at this argument, which has maintained such a hold on Western religious thought.

The argument that “your life is not your own to take” resonates in the Jewish moral condemnation of suicide because “every moment is sacred”<sup>23</sup> and in the arguments of Saint Thomas Aquinas.<sup>24</sup> In fact, there are actually a number of different senses within which this position is understood.

- Life is a gift from God.
- Your life is only on loan.
- You are a steward of your life.
- Only God determines when you die.

### *Life Is a Gift from God*

This seems like a strange basis on which to argue that suicide is immoral. If I’m given a gift, do I have to keep it?<sup>25</sup> It’s a gift after all. Admittedly, there are times when the giver’s feelings would be hurt if he or she thought I had returned a gift or stashed it away in a closet. I may even drag out some odd-colored bowl or fertility statue from the Fiji Islands when the relatives who gave me the gift make a rare pilgrimage to my area of the country. I don’t want to hurt their feelings, to offend. But no one finding me about to recycle such a gift through a garage sale would say I was being immoral. Even if the gift is wondrous and magnificent and people might think I’m foolish to get rid of it, it is hard to imagine that they would find my actions immoral.

As to the giver being hurt or offended, I’m not saying God transcends feelings. My God does feel, hurt, laugh. It’s just that if someone rejected what I thought was a wondrous gift I’d be hurt but I’d have to get over it, let it go. God’s a lot spiritually bigger than I am; God can deal with having me reject His gift. Also what hurts people’s feelings about a gift is not that you returned it, gave it away, or threw it in the giveaway box in the garage. Those are just physical manifestations of your feelings about the gift. The point is that you did not like it. That’s what hurts the feelings. But if you don’t like a gift from God it makes no difference whether you keep it or throw it away. God knows all your thoughts and feelings.<sup>26</sup> God knows your heart and knows in that heart whether you value God’s gift.

Some might say that the gift of life given by God is not like some birthday or housewarming present. Rather, it is like the gift of a child or some extraordinary talent. These gifts come with obligations: use them to God's glory.

I do not accept that line of argumentation. I can choose not to have a child. It may be that the only means to accomplish this is abstinence (if my religion so demands), but I can still choose not to have a child. As for some great talent—musical, intellectual, mathematical, or such—am I really obligated to use it? People certainly talk that way (“You should feel guilty wasting your talent, as it is a rare gift most people would give anything to have”). But I've often wondered if that's fair. You did not ask for the talent, and it's not as though you have the choice of giving it to someone who wants it as opposed to not using it. But even if it comes with obligations, surely as the gift diminishes so must the obligations. Must an 80-year-old man who was once a virtuoso violinist but is now arthritic be forced to play in this diminished state because of the great gift? Whatever potential was inherent in the original gift could no longer be manifested. (One could respond that, unlike the violinist, my father still possessed his gift, albeit in diminished form; he was still alive. I disagree. The great violinist still possesses the gift of music in his mind, which I could not even begin to fathom. It's just that, like my father, his body will no longer let him express it.)

Even a favorite gift at some point may get old, break down, no longer be useful. Surely, at that point, even within the etiquette of gift receiving, let alone fundamental moral law, I can dispose of the gift. For then it is no longer truly the gift; it is not what the giver bestowed. And in finally disposing of the gift I am not being ungrateful. Life is a great gift from the greatest of gift givers. Yet I do not understand why I cannot honestly stand before God and thank God for the miraculous gift of life and the life I've had but still want to end that life when, like my father's, it is old, worn, and broken—and filled with excruciating pain.

It is true that we say that each day is a gift, and it is. I saw my dearest friend fight to delay certain death from cancer, fight by resorting to nightmarish experimental treatments just so he could share more moments with his young daughter and live long enough for her to remember him. Yet saying that each day is a gift is not really so much about what we have been given as it is a figure of speech reflecting that it is a blessing, something to which we are not entitled, on which we have no claim, and which we have

not earned. We are just plain lucky to see the sun rise. If we do not feel that way, so be it.

From the gift perspective, no matter how lucky we may feel to have any particular gift (even one as magnificent as life), it is a strange notion of a gift if I am *obligated* to keep and use it. We don't usually think of this as a true gift, using instead figures of speech such as "with strings attached." Not that it's unimaginable to have a true gift that comes with conditions or obligations. I'll pay for your college, but I expect you to work hard in your classes. I'll give you a skateboard, but I expect you to use it safely and always wear a helmet. In such cases, I do take on a moral type of obligation in accepting the gift. I can also refuse the gift and with it the attached obligations. But how do I refuse the gift of life? I cannot choose not to be born. So, ironically, once I enter this mortal plane of life, it seems that the only way I can refuse the gift and its obligations is suicide, which violates the conditions of this gift, which has been given without my acceptance of either the gift or its conditions. Logically, then, there should be an age at which I am considered capable of choosing whether or not to accept the gift (14, 16, 18?), at which, in some societal ritual of passage, young people can kill themselves or accept the gift and its conditions. I don't think any of us would find this "logical" system of teen suicide to be very appealing.

*Your Life Is on Loan and Is Not Yours to Do with as You Wish*

I can enter my own car in a demolition derby race, though my mental state may be in question. If you loaned me your car to pick up a friend at the airport, and, if, instead, I destroy it by entering it into the same race, calls to police aside, my actions would be unimaginable. You loaned me the car. It's your car, and my rights are limited to using it for the understood purposes and time to which you've agreed and to care for it during that time. Under this form of the religious argument, my life is the same. It is not my life but merely a loan from God, and, as such, it is mine only to maintain not destroy.

This, however, is a very strange sense of a loan. The normal idea of a loan is that lenders get the item back so that they can use it again as they see fit (including loaning it again). But thinking of our lives as a loan is akin to "loaning" someone a Popsicle for an hour on a hot, tropical beach. You aren't going to get it back; hence, it doesn't really fulfill the normal model of a loan. When we die, we destroy the body. We bury it in the

ground to rot or cremate it. God never gets that back, although the elements composing the body are returned to the earth and sky where they can support new (plant, animal, human) life.

On the other hand, it may be some spirit, some unique human life force, that is the subject of God's loan. This is what God breathed into Adam and apparently did not breathe into the beasts of the fields, birds of the air, or fish of the sea. It is a sacred breath that is something more than the life of the ox, the mere existence of the waterfowl. If it is this life force and not the material body that is on loan, death seems to present two possibilities: (1) death destroys this life force; and (2) the life force survives death. If it's the first possibility, God never gets the spirit back, so it is not really like a loan. If it's the second possibility (which I believe), the life force is never destroyed and the loan is returned. While the notion of a mind-body dichotomy may be discredited by modern philosophers,<sup>27</sup> that does not refute the possibility of a mind-body versus life force (spirit) dichotomy. I believe that at death the spirit survives and it is our temporal identity that is lost.

Also, if it is really a loan, we have no right to risk damage to the item loaned. Recall the borrowed car, which was entered into a demolition derby. That means we couldn't risk our lives, even as heroes or saints. After all, it's not yours; it's on loan. No one in our society, however, would believe that the hero or saint acted immorally. (Of course, one could argue that the purpose of God's loan anticipated its use for heroism and sainthood.)

### *You Are a Steward of Your Life*

God gave you life, and it is not so much that it is a loan as that it is entrusted to your care for safekeeping. You are the steward of that life,<sup>28</sup> with the responsibility to care for it and help it flourish. Here mere life is not what's important; it's the perfection of the self according to God's plan, as part of a life "mission." But what if you are dying, exhausted, continually fighting pain, and no longer have the wherewithal to carry out any perfection, any mission except to exist in a state of perpetual existential misery?

Also, as was the case with the loan and gift metaphors, this is a strange sense of stewardship. You are not maintaining something for future generations, like a beautiful park or an Earth that is unpolluted. No future generations can enjoy you (as opposed to your legacy and stories). You

will be dead. If, however, you insist on adhering to this notion of stewardship, you must take seriously your own care. Like a park that must be tended, watered, and so on, you must maintain yourself. That means exercise, eat the right food, lower your stress level, avoid too much alcohol, don't smoke, and don't engage in high-risk recreation. The fact that most in any particular congregation espousing the stewardship argument likely do not follow its implications does not mean the principle is wrong. It does make one at least wonder, however, why, when having great abs, tight buns, and such seems so important in this culture, the motivation to attain these magazine-perfect bodies is never portrayed in terms of our obligation to God.

Also, if you are the steward of a park that has been destroyed by an earthquake, what further responsibilities of stewardship remain? The situation would not seem different if the life over which you are a steward has broken down, leaving you wracked in cancer-caused agony.

### *Only God Determines When You Die*

God is sovereign over life and death. It is God who decides when you die,<sup>29</sup> and it is the height of human arrogance to try to make this decision for yourself. In doing so, you are literally playing God. On the other hand, if someone dies in an avalanche or from a heart attack has God made the decision that the person is to die? If you characterize these as "neutral" forces resulting in death (i.e., a nonmoral actor), then you seem to be saying that death from such causes is not God's decision. Or, if God makes any decision, it is not to intervene. Since God has no "duty" to keep us alive forever, God cannot be said to be responsible for our death from such neutral causes. God has merely chosen not to intervene as opposed to having chosen them as an instrument to kill us. But, if we can die in such a random way, then it cannot be said that God is the one who invariably makes the decision when our time is up. If, on the other hand, the avalanche or heart attack were God's chosen method for tolling our lives, it is hard to understand why God cannot use us as agents of our own deaths, ending our lives by means of suicide.

One could answer that the difference between the avalanche and suicide is the matter of man's free will. Suicide, unlike the avalanche (putting aside such nuances as the fact that the man freely chose to climb a particular mountain when the risk of an avalanche was great), was a product of free will and thus the man's choice as to the moment of his death. But that

assumes that having given man free will God is incapable of or unwilling to influence those choices. Such powerlessness is inconsistent with an all-powerful being. It is also inconsistent with the record. I would say that the Flood and the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah are two indications that God can and will try to influence the course of human choices. Repeatedly “hardening Pharaoh’s heart” against letting the Jews leave Egypt so that God could demonstrate to all the world the awesome power that would support those who worshipped Him is another. So are the carnage God orders after the incident of the Golden Calf, the protection of Cain from retribution, and many other stories of God interfering in the choices of man. Also, no matter what choice a man might make as to ending his life, that choice is not final until God says it is. God can always bring the person back to life.

Looked at from a slightly different perspective, are lifesaving medicine (transplants, antibiotics, etc.), immunizations, knowledge of hygiene, and such immoral because they alter the time when a person would otherwise have died,<sup>30</sup> thus, intruding on God’s sovereignty over the time of death? Or, as the philosopher David Hume wondered, is it immoral to leap away from a falling rock that would otherwise have killed us because by doing so we’ve interfered with our imminent death?<sup>31</sup>

One response could be that, whether developing antibiotics or avoiding a falling rock, man is aligned with cherishing God’s gift of life and using the “nature” with which God endowed him to mitigate the otherwise natural world of wild animals, disease, and so on.

On the other hand, while modern medicine and ducking rocks admittedly lengthen, not shorten, life, they nevertheless alter the moment of death. As such, they intrude on the notion of absolute sovereignty over the time of death. To contend that God gave man the power to lengthen, but not shorten, the term of life cannot be logically derived from the initial stance positing God’s sovereignty over death. If God gave man powers that allow him to influence death’s timing, why alone among all man’s techniques for influencing that timing is his conceptualization of suicide not a legitimate tool for negotiating with death?

In the end, it may be better to think of God’s sovereignty as concerned with the fact that man will die as opposed to when each person’s time will come. It was God, after all, who, when banishing Adam and Eve from the Garden, placed the fiery sword around the tree of life so that man, unlike angels, cherubim, and seraphim, would not be immortal.<sup>32</sup>

Finally, as far as I know, no one has ever said it is immoral for the suf-

fering to pray to God for release, to beg God to let them die.<sup>33</sup> After all, that totally respects God's sovereignty over the moment of death. If I may make such a communication, surely God can say yes. God could, of course, just stop my heart, but God could also let me do it myself (by means of suicide). I know I have spoken to God. I can feel God's presence. I can feel God's answers to my questions. I don't get a cosmic e-mail or hear a voice in the flame of my gas barbecue. I just know. So if someone who is dying, near the end of life, existing in misery, claims that he or she spoke to God and got the go-ahead to end his or her life, who is to say it isn't true? If someone responds to this notion by arguing that this could not have happened because the person could not have really talked to God, that God doesn't tell people they can kill themselves, that this is not how God works, I'd just shake my head at such arrogance. For, in effect, that person has said, "God may work in mysterious ways, but I have a copy of God's manual, and that's not one of them."