

CHAPTER 1

Suicide

Considering religion and culture

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Believing with Max Weber, that man is an animal
suspended in webs of significance that he himself has spun,
I take culture to be those webs, and the analysis of it to be
therefore not an experimental science in search of law but
an interpretive one in search of meaning.

C. Geertz (1973, p. 5)

The parallels between natural and social sciences are numerous: in each, both field and laboratory studies may include qualitative and quantitative tasks, and in part of the book the researchers combine their expertise in a cross-disciplinary fashion. Studies in suicidology in general aim to prevent suicides. Suicidology is interconnected with social change initiatives, and accordingly, as researchers of applied sciences, suicidologists need pay close attention to the relations between the phenomenon studied and wider arenas of social action. Ahead lies great work, directing attention to ways of experiencing the everyday world that is tied into processes of ruling and rules of thoughts. This includes consideration of the multiplicity of religious expressions and the interplay of religion, history and politics on international as well as local levels. The local is not just a site of meanings and practices, but also a node within an extended set of social relations: as such it can never be studied as separate from larger religious institutional structures.

Themes related to suicide in some of the major religions worldwide are here considered alongside customs, myths, practices and attitudes related to suicide and the risk of suicide. The chapters that follow provide insight into the multiple intrinsically linked factors that influence the decision to commit suicide and the ways such deaths are perceived in and by society, offering tools to link such attitudes to religion. The emphasis of each chapter differs, yet they speak to each other, at times through their contradictions but often through the many similarities found in religions worldwide regarding the issue of suicide. By and large, the focus is on the religious and cultural influences on discourses on suicide as well as manifestations and articulations of such discourses in religious practices, scriptures and historically. Discourse is here understood to be a system of thought defining and producing the object of our knowledge providing us with a language to talk about something.

Accordingly discourse is linked to power, assuming the authority and construction of 'truth' (Foucault 1969).

When reading the chapters, concepts such as religion, culture and tradition surface. Working closely with the contributors in contextualizing these complex notions, an effort was made to move away from rigid and essential notions of cultural territories, regional identities and a static view of customs. Attempting to bypass the rigidity of these issues, the chapters encourage a more flexible view of a world in movement characterized by detachments and attachments (Appadurai 2001). Such cultural analysis should be carefully extended to, and contextualized in, a historical framework (Cooper 2005; Spivak 2006). Yet, the confused narrative of origin found in many theoretical discussions on culture, often linking it to colonialism, should not lead to dismissal of the very real and everyday experiences of culture (Dirks 1992; Sahlins 2000). These theoretical and lengthy discussions can be followed elsewhere: here we will only bear these efforts in mind in order to make contextually appropriate use of them by absorbing what can be considered the fundamentals of this debate. Let us consider culture, religion and tradition in their widest possible form: mobile yet historically specific, tied to authority and power structures yet open to negotiation and flexibility.

In Chapter 12, 'Maya religion and traditions: influencing suicide prevention in contemporary Mexico', Gaspar Baquedano calls for a composed 'psycho anthropological perspective' aimed at better understanding of the wider socio-economic and cultural contexts of suicides. Here, much like anthropologists, the suicidologist is not simply a recorder of material: some might argue that the suicidologist's interpersonal and/or cross-cultural encounter with the people and practices they describe produces the data in the first place. Hence a suicidologist cannot remain neutral, but must be aware of her own beliefs and values influencing the encounters themselves alongside the analysis of practices.

The contributors share knowledge acquired as clinical practitioners, psychologists or psychiatrists across the world. They are for the most part not religious or historical scholars or anthropologists; rather, they can be described as first-hand experts of the cultural connections and practices tied to the religious histories, myths, laws and belief systems described. Instead of performing shorter, or longer, periods of field work as anthropologists do, the authors have—as members of society and suicidologists equally—their everyday work and life, come into contact with the religious representations and notions that they bring to light. Years of experience and encounters with suicide attempters, hospital staff, family members, the public and the media is here connected to and coupled with religious themes. Who has better insight in the emotive and controversial subject of suicide, often surrounded by stigma, than the practitioners themselves? Personal encounters and clinical experience have led the authors to consider specific religious expressions instead of others, consequently providing this section with certain elasticity.

In Chapter 2, 'The role of religion in suicide prevention', H M van Praag directs attention to the scarcity of data on religion and suicide and associates this to early psychiatry's underestimation of such a linkage, ultimately grounded in its fixation with atheism. He writes that the secularisation of the Western world concerns religious institutions and not religiosity and spirituality as such. In suicidology, loss of religious affiliation is frequently referred to as a suicide risk. Ahmed and Tarek Okasha in 'Suicide and Islam' (Chapter 8) and Nils Retterstøl and Øivind Ekeberg in 'Christianity and suicide' (Chapter 9) concurrently point to the faith factor in suicide prevention, demonstrating this with lower suicide rates in more religiously active Muslim and Christian societies. The relationship is complicated, however, with varied rates among Orthodox countries as well as between Catholic and Protestant countries. Yet, it has been argued that supportive religious networks greatly benefit suicide prevention efforts (Pescolido and Georgianna 1989, Pescolido 1990). In Japan, Shintoism offers a sense of belonging, moral support and a reinforced sense of community nationwide. The contribution of such valuing of human life to suicide prevention is discussed in Chapter 6, 'The Shinto religion and suicide in Japan', by Yoshihiro Kaneko, Akiko Yamasaki and Kiminori Arai.

Nonetheless, identifying what factors may lead to an increase in suicide through the breakdown of religious affiliation in categories of attachments or detachments may prove to be a Sisyphean task. Lost, diminished or altered religious affiliation is for the most part inseparable from larger sociopolitical, economic and cultural contexts (Asad 2003). Norms and attitudes emanating from religious beliefs are intrinsically linked to cultural expressions and often to power-laden societal structures, and vice versa. Politics and religion are intertwined in a complex manner, and legal issues with regard to dying and death are often linked. Legal definitions of the right to die and the prohibition of suicide cannot be separated from questions of religion, especially in the case of state religion (Nowenstein and Henneke-Vauchez 2007). Retterstøl and Ekeberg mention the relevance of the late adaptation of legal responses in Ireland. Most European countries formally decriminalized suicide in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, however Ireland did not do so until 1993. In many countries across the world, suicide is considered a crime to this day. Moreover, despite official decriminalization, suicide remains an indignity across the world. Religion can be a source of fear and guilt, possibly leading to lower rates of

suicide, but throughout history, religious institutions have, more or less worldwide, played a part in obfuscating statistics about suicide. Stigma and taboos surrounding suicide also have very real consequences on under-reporting and individuals suffering in silence.

However, the association between religion, public opinion and suicide goes well beyond the sphere of the law. Religions are systems of thoughts composed of ideas, attitudes, courses of action, beliefs and practices. Philosophies of dying and death are often the foundation stones of religions, and contemplation and grounds for justifying and condoning death take multiple forms (Lambek 2008). In the ensuing chapters, concepts of after life and reincarnation and their influence on the dying, theologies of death, death rituals, morally accepted suicides, the ambivalence surrounding suicide and more is discussed.

In Chapter 3, 'Cultural and religious traditions in China: the influence of Confucianism on suicide prevention', Wu Fei tells us that suicide does not have an independent moral significance in Confucianism. He describes suicide as an acceptable way to resist and protect one's dignity, although it is never considered the best way to do so. Such contradictions are mentioned by many of the contributors, and are in fact the reality of everyday expressions of religion. Israel Orbach and Aron Rabinowitz, in 'Suicide in the Jewish scriptures' (Chapter 7), draw on the prohibition of suicide in these texts while emphasizing the narrowness of the definition of suicide. Condemnation of self-destructive behaviour is coupled with a call for an empathic state of mind in understanding the reasons for a suicide.

Ahmed and Tarek Okasha discuss Islamic scholars and philosophers who have sought to demonstrate that in spite of the condemnation of suicide by Islam, when life becomes too burdensome, physically or mentally, suicide may be a legitimate option. Lakshmi Vijayakumar explores the individual's decision over, his/her life and how religious suicides are not condemned in 'Hindu religion and suicide in India' (Chapter 4). According to Somporn Promta and Prakarn Thomyangkoon suicide is in some cases morally acceptable for Buddhists, as described in Chapter 5, 'A Buddhist perspective on suicide'. Representations of death and dying are abundant in religious myths, and the cultural and historical contingency of the acceptance and intolerance of suicide as well as the methods of taking one's life surface in these chapters. Wu Fei discusses historical idolization of female suicides for the sake of chastity in China, and Vijayakumar describes traditional practices of self-immolation among women in India for reasons linked to chastity and dignity. According to Baquedano, hanging is a common suicide method in some parts of Mexico, closely linked to pre-Hispanic Mayan traditions.

In 'Suicide prevention and religious traditions on the African continent' (Chapter 10), Lourens Schlebusch, Stephanie Burrows and Naseema Vawda correlate the rise in suicide to social changes and long-term strife. They underscore the importance of political stability and social health care systems, the obstacles of lack of infrastructure, funds, scarcity of data and the need for cross-national research. These difficulties are by no means unique to the African continent—but exist worldwide. The above-mentioned authors, alongside Gaspar Baquedano, and Emilio Ovuga with Jed Boardman, in Chapter 11, 'The role of religion in suicide prevention work in Uganda', all locate the development of customs in an historically ambiguous context of conquest. So-called traditional

religion is not separated from Christianity in Uganda or Mexico, attention should instead be directed to the ambivalence and contradictions found in customs and practices. In effect, religious ideas and the everyday activities and thoughts related to religion are not bounded and demarcated. Promta and Thomyangkoon underscore the importance of exceptions, identifying different Buddhist schools, interpretations and customs cross-nationally and also within Thailand.

The contributors each offer different takes on the study of religion and its influence on suicide ideation, completion and societal opinion. Inviting the reader to further contemplation of the multiple facets behind suicide, this part of the book is a thought-provoking forum for further debate. Reasons, motivations and causes for suicide are sought for on a number of interconnected levels. The diverse nature of the knowledge at hand renders it a useful tool in further understanding of the cultural religious expressions of suicide and more effective suicide prevention.

In the study of religious expressions and practices, one can find the means to formulate people's attitudes towards, and representations of, a phenomenon such as suicide. Suicide triggers profound feelings and expressions of human beings' existential and social conditions. To many, suicide violates the drive to live and consequently the act provokes much controversy. The role of hope, penitence and forgiveness are all imperative in the understanding of suicide. Cultural acceptance of suicide in specific contexts does not exclude pain and grief; it simply accentuates the importance of contextualizing such a response. Some of the authors touch on the important issue of bereavement and models of grief. The place that grief counselling and grief therapy take, as well as rites and sites of remembrance, are revealing. It is also vital to raise important questions about the broader institutional processes of management, administration, and knowledge production, such as processes of 'ruling' and power at play, to which social worlds and practices are unavoidably linked. In forthcoming studies it would be interesting to examine critically the role of religion in the development of attitudes and forms of social organization that coordinate local worlds and suicide preventive practices.

I will leave you with these final thoughts about the complexity of culture as expressed by Edward Said (1994). This statement may

prove a valuable analogy when coupled with religion, religiosity and secularism.

Far from being unitary or monolithic autonomous things, cultures actually assume more 'foreign' elements, alterities, differences, than they consciously exclude. Who in India or Algeria can confidently separate out the British or French component of the past from present actualities, and who in Britain or France can draw a clear circle around British London or French Paris that would exclude the impact of India and Algeria upon those two imperial cities?

Said (1994, p. 15)

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