



University of Alabama at Birmingham Student Counseling Services

Suicide and Religion:

A Review of the Past, Discussion of the Present, and Implications for the Future

About Me



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*Under the Supervision of Judith
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- Clinical Counselor Associate at UAB's SCS
 - Serve as Greek Life Liaison and Counselor-in-Residence
- University of Montevallo alum (2020, 2023)
- Formerly Worked with Kids and Teens
- Areas of Clinical Interest: Suicide Prevention, Existential Concerns
- Secretary of ASPARC
- Member of the UMC

Learning Objectives

Discuss origin of the relationship between religion and suicide

Describe how this relationship affects communities and the work we do with clients

Discuss at least one way that one can promote a more humane relationship between suicide and religion

Some FYIs and Important Info

- Participating is Encouraged!
 - Feel free to chime in with comments/questions
- Handouts at the Front
- Sensitive Topic with MANY Perspectives
- Confined Focus of Presentation
 - Client's Beliefs/Bible Belt
 - Time Limitations
 - More to (Hopefully) Come
- Every Individual is Unique



Discussion and Statistics

The “Why” of the Presentation Today

Some Thoughts

What are some religious/spiritual messages/beliefs you have heard (or even been taught) about suicide?

Statistics and Facts with Suicide and Religion

- Over **10,000** distinct religions in the world with $\frac{3}{4}$ of Earth's population following one of the "big 5:"
 - Christianity: 31%
 - Islam: 24%
 - Hinduism: 15%
 - Buddhism: 7%
 - Judaism: 0.2% (this would be doubled if the Holocaust had never occurred)

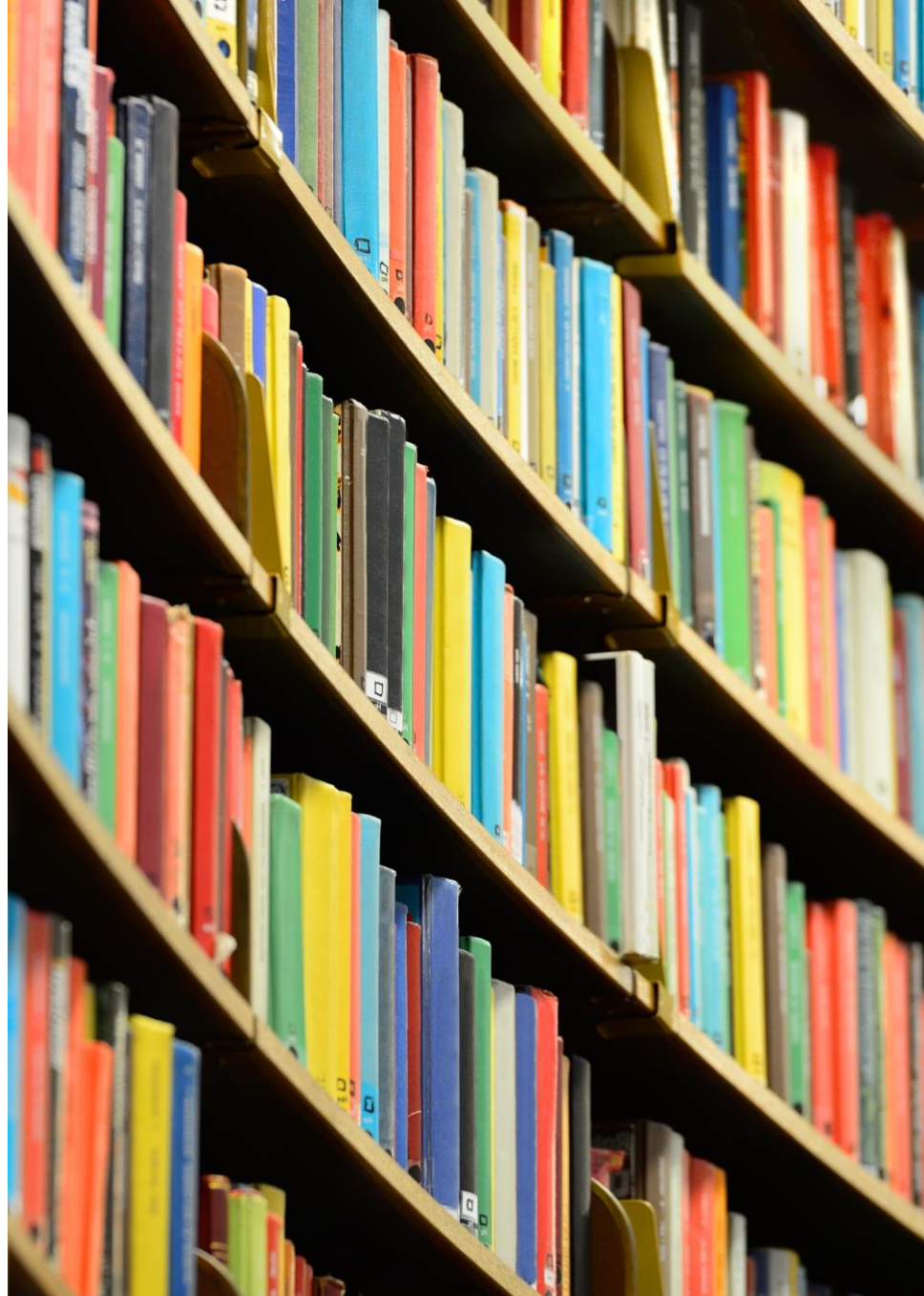
(Wasserman, 2024)

- Some of the earliest academic research on this topic comes from Emilee Durkheim ("father of suicidology")
 - Stated that countries with majority Roman Catholic population had fewer suicides due to how Catholicism provided more structure and integration
 - Also, Protestants have more freedom to create their own interpretations

(Durkheim, 1897)
- However, modern research has not seen this and has even found that some Roman Catholic countries have higher rates (Leach, 2006)

Suicidology Thought and Research

- People have theorized and written about about suicide for much of much of recorded history
 - For example, Plato discussed suicide and encouraged the burial of one who died by suicide away from other graves
 - Theories have come from many angles:
 - Marx believed it was due to the dysfunctional organization of society
 - Ingles believed it was due to how the working class felt they had no escape
- (Barbagli, 2009/2015)





Suicidology Thought and Research (cont.)

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- First recorded use of the term “suicide” comes from Sir Thomas Browne’s *Religio Medici*, which was written in 1643 (Barraclough & Shepherd, 1994)
 - Prior to this, suicide was called various names such as self-slaughter or self-homicide
- Due to the lack of documentation with early suicides, it is often difficult to see early trends (Barbagli, 2009/2015)

The “Why”

Why is it important that we discuss this?

The “Why”

“We tend, correctly, to assume that it is Christianity’s opposition to suicide which is the basis of much of our cultural and legal disapprobation of suicide. But what we do not stop to examine is whether the scriptural and theological foundations of this tradition in fact provide adequate support for this opposition.”

(Battin, 1982, p. 27)

A Look at the Past

How Social and Theological Views Towards
Suicide Have Changed

Overall Considerations

“Again, there is nowhere, in either the Old or New Testament, an explicit discussion of the moral status of suicide. There are cases in which a Biblical figure expresses despair or weariness of life, often from persecution or physical affliction ... but although these figures all recover an earlier enthusiasm for life, there is no condemnation of any consideration of suicide they may have had.”

(Leach, 2006, pp. 31-32)

- *Saul: Fell on his sword*
- *Ahitopel: Hanged himself after failed revolt against David, buried next to his father*
- *Zimri: King (for 7 days) who set fire to his own palace before it was besieged by Omri, who was elected King by the army*
- *Samson: Destroyed Philistinian house which also fell on him*
- *Abimelech: Had his armor bearer kill him to avoid having his head crushed with a rock by a woman*
- *Judas Iscariot: Died for repentance, no condemnation or condonement in text*

(Leach, 2006)

Pre-Medieval Times (pre 500 AD)

- Many differing perspectives on suicide depending on culture
 - In the second century, St. Justin praised Christians who sought death with some individuals advocated for voluntary martyrdom (Minois, 1995/1999)
 - Some Christian sects (Donatists and Cicumcellions) openly advocated for self-initiated death (Battin, 1982)
 - In the Roman Empire, it was viewed positively by the intellectual elite
 - Only populations discouraged from suicide was slaves and soldiers due to how they were property (Barbagli, 2009/2015)



Pre-Medieval Times (pre 500 AD) (cont.)

- In parts of pre-Christian Europe, suicide was viewed negatively
 - Possessions were contaminated
 - Their spirits viewed as causing weather conditions (frost)
 - Bodies were thrown into rivers for purification
- (Barbagli, 2009/2015)



St. Augustine

- Prior to the work of Augustine, church leaders had no official stance (Barbagli, 2009/2015; Battin, 1982)
 - But many of them had differing views on it (Minois, 1995/1999)
- Argued that suicide is a sin due to how it goes against the 6th Commandment (Battin, 1982)
 - (Thou Shall Not Kill)

Picture Citation: (Ng, n.d.)



Lead-Up to Medieval Period

- After Augustine's writings, we see more writings/statements on suicide
- Council of Arles (452 AD) made early ruling on suicide
 - Prohibited it for slaves who died by suicide to interfere with their masters' plans

(Barbagli, 2009/2015)

Picture Citation: (n.d.)





Medieval Period (500-1500 AD)

- Many changes and developments:
 - Council Of Orleans (533): If an imprisoned person died by suicide, priests could not accept mass offerings from the family or say prayers for them
 - Council of Braga (563): Condemned all suicides
 - In 570, we see the first case of someone being buried in a cemetery away from other Christians without a Mass
 - Views of martyrdom changed with conversion of Roman Empire, leading to “no need” for them

(Barbagli, 2009/2015; Minois 1995/1999)

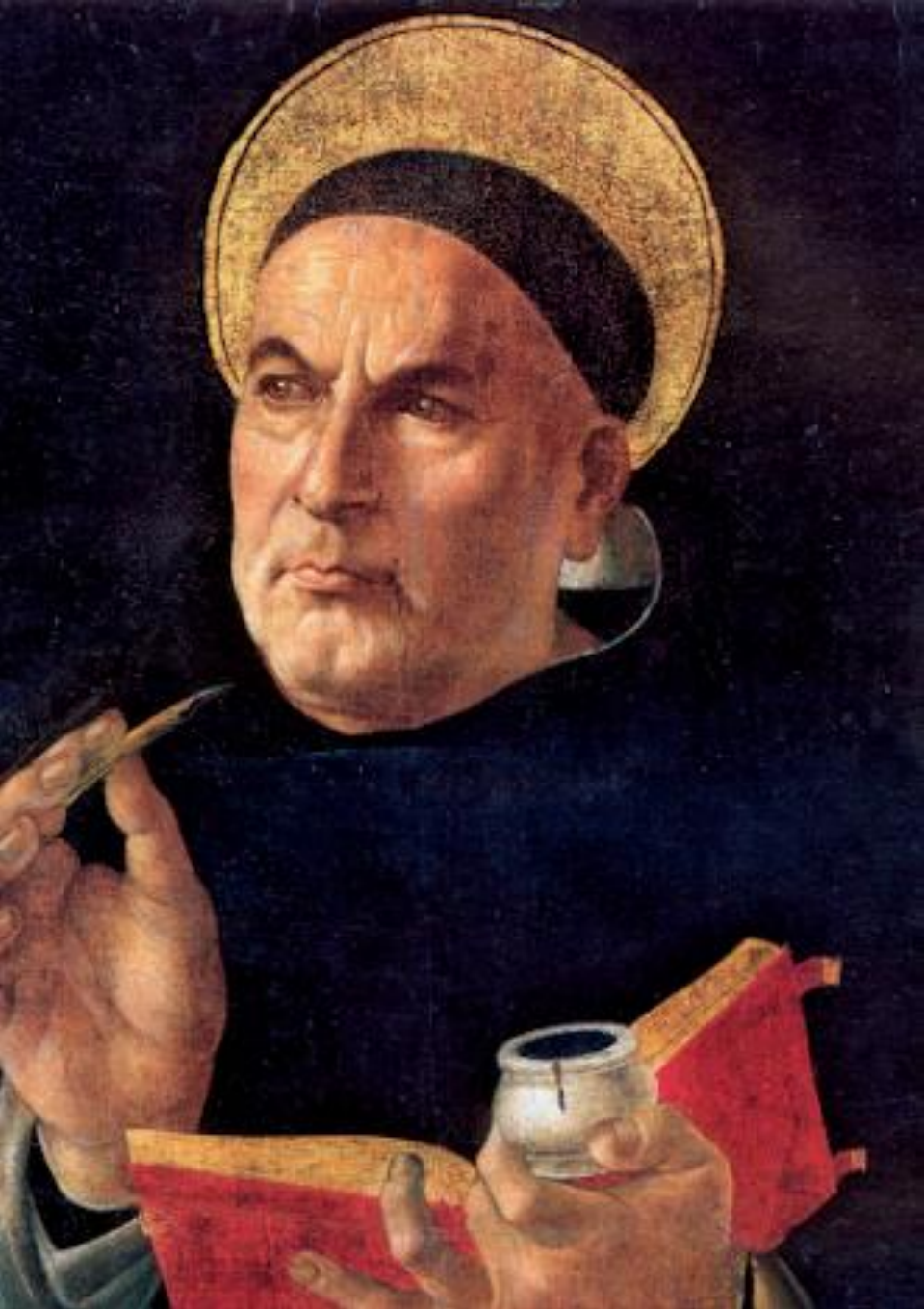
Medieval Period (cont.)

- Council of Auxerre (578): Funeral rights were prohibited, became part of laws under Charlemagne
 - From here, see suicide become treated harsher than murder
 - In the mid 800s, Pope Nicholas I stated that those who died by suicide were beyond help and hopelessly condemned
 - St. Bruno: They are “Satan’s Martyrs”
 - See anti-suicide beliefs begin to spread to legal frameworks and even literature
 - Dante’s Inferno
- (Barbagli, 2009/2015; Minois, 1995/1999)



Punishments

- Not only was there a great deal of language and religious pressure; there was also many legal consequences:
 - Possessions being confiscated
 - Body dragged through the street
 - Body hanged in town as a message
 - Family would be dishonored and ostracized
 - In England, the body was “executed” as a form of exorcism
- (Minois, 1995/1999)



St. Thomas Aquinas | 21

- Wrote a great deal on suicide with many beliefs being held today
- Believed that it was a grave sin that is worse than murder since it does not leave time for repentance
- Made 3 main arguments:
 - It goes against the natural law and the idea of charity
 - Since we all play a part in society, dying by suicide hurts society
 - God gave us life, and only he can move us from one form of existence to another

(Barbagli, 2009/2015)

Picture Citation: (n.d.)

Interesting Notes

- Suicide rates of nobility/leadership may have been much higher
 - Jousts, duels, etc.
- The suicide rate of clergy member was quite high (19%) at this time
(Minois, 1995/1999)



Picture citation: (Friend, 2024)



Renaissance Period (1300s – 1600s)

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- Much of the way suicide was viewed in the Medieval era persisted into the early Renaissance period
- Suicide as a weapon of religious superiority
 - Also used as opportunity to have the crown gain more property
- Superstitious practices with bodies due to how they were believed to be inhabited by Satan
 - Buried face down
 - Facing north-south rather than west-east
 - Body was staked
- Priests did not agree with said practices, but allowed them because it aligned with their teachings (Minois, 1995/1999)

Picture citation: (2023)

Late Renaissance Period and Scientific Revolution

- Playwriters, philosophers, and others begin to question the church's stance
 - Moved from viewing suicide having supernatural causes to natural
- During this time, people began to believe they had more freedom and choice in their life
 - Some attribute the rise in suicides to this shift
- Courts begin to relax on their punishments
(Barbagli, 2009/2015)



- We also see works on treatment being published
 - Cures, herbs, music, lifestyle changes, etc.
- Focus on the psychological rather than religious
- In 1621, Robert Burton wrote *The Anatomy of Melancholy* where he discussed the impact of ruminations and socioeconomic factors
(Minois, 1995/1999)

Interesting Theological Developments

- Council of Reims (1583) argued to excommunicate anyone that buried someone who died by suicide
- Protestant leaders begin to take a firmer stance than Roman Catholic leaders
 - One, William Whitaker, stated that even the suicides in the bible were reprehensible
- Belief that suicide is caused by the devil spread in the 17th century
- In 1637, Anglican pastor John Sym offered a new perspective on suicide
 - People do not wish to die, but are simply looking for a remedy
(Barbagli, 2009/2015)

Enlightenment Period (1600-1800) and on

- More debates occur, and philosophers begin to contemplate the topic
- Some Christian leaders discuss how preventing suicide is a duty of Christians
 - In 1734, we see multiple countries start programs to save those who were attempting. Some backlash to these programs
- Scientific advancement helps relieve much of the guilt from suicide
- Trials become rarer, less focus on barbarous punishments
- Decriminalized in nearly all of Europe by late 1700s
- In 19th century, resistance to progress from past 3 centuries
 - During this time, we see increase in suicides
- Authorities and media work to avoid publicizing anything about suicide

(Minois, 1995/1999)





Why do we think so many leaders (both spiritual and social) worked so hard to attach so much shame and stigma to suicide?

Why do we think so many leaders (both spiritual and social) worked so hard to attach so much shame and stigma to suicide?

- 1. Suicide led to loss of members of society, creating doubt and fear in the stability of society***
- 2. Could be viewed as a failure of the leadership of society. In a way, people prefer death than to live in society***

(Minois, 1995/1999)

Discussion of the Present:

How this topic may come up in our
work, and what is currently being done

Impact of Beliefs

How have these beliefs come up in your work with clients/students? How have they impacted your work?

Modern Beliefs

- Roman Catholic Church
- United Methodist Church
- Orthodox Church
- Episcopal Church
- Beliefs may not be universal to all denominations, churches, or individuals



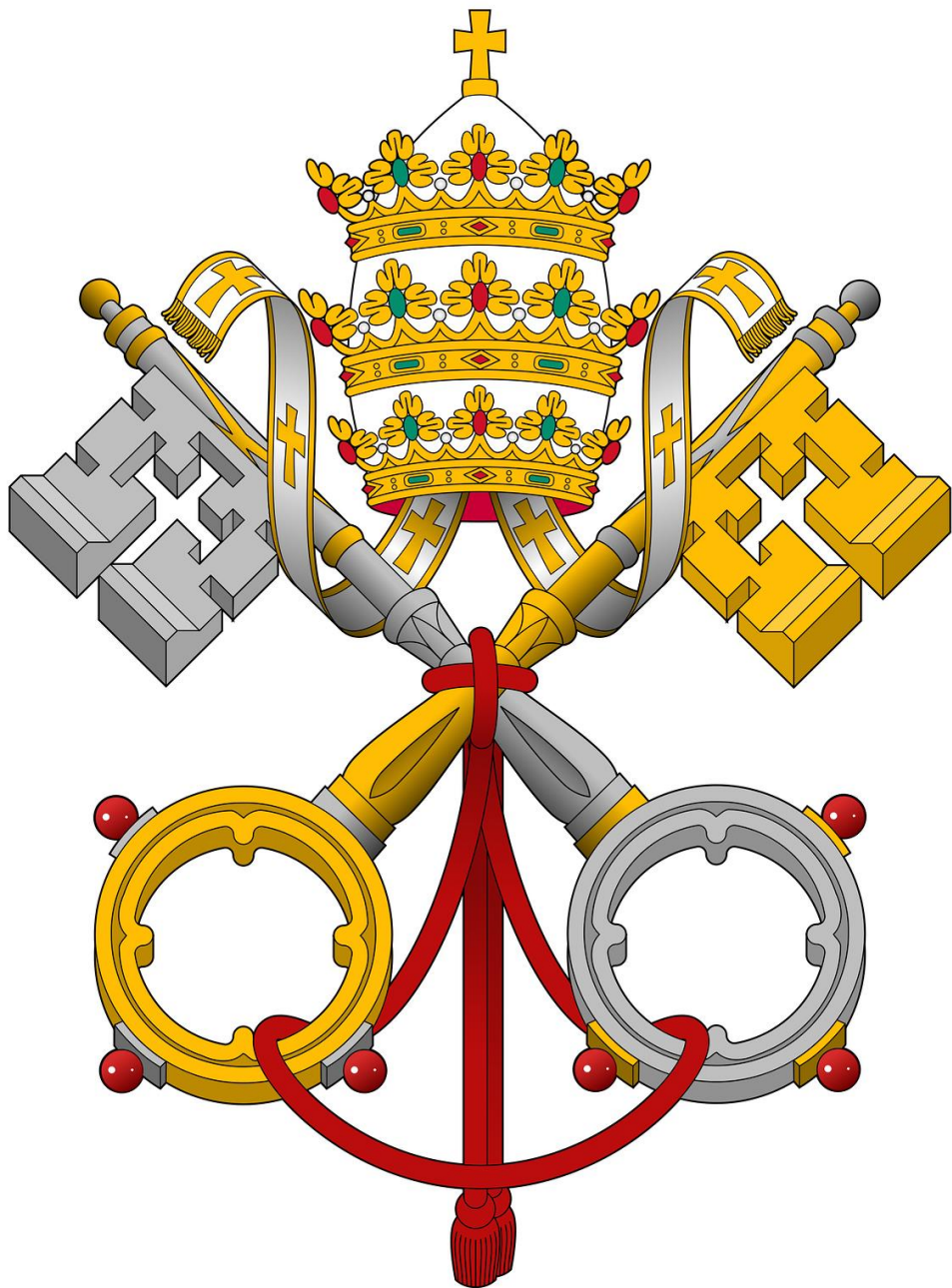
Roman Catholic Beliefs

- God gives life and we are stewards of it, not owners
- Suicide is contrary to human nature and to God’s love. It offends the love of neighbors due to the breaking of bonds with loved ones
- However, if one was experiencing psychological hardship or torture, it can diminish the person’s responsibility

“**2283** We should not despair of the eternal salvation of persons who have taken their own lives. By ways known to him alone, God can provide the opportunity for salutary repentance. The Church prays for persons who have taken their own lives.”

(Catholic Church, 2000, p. 550)

Picture Citation: (Gallina, n.d.)



United Methodist Church



- There is a social principle when it comes to suicide, but eternal judgement or damnation is not included
- Much more focus on the value of life and the love of God
- Methodism is centered on grace, and nothing can separate us from God's grace

(E.Penfield, personal communication, July 22, 2024)

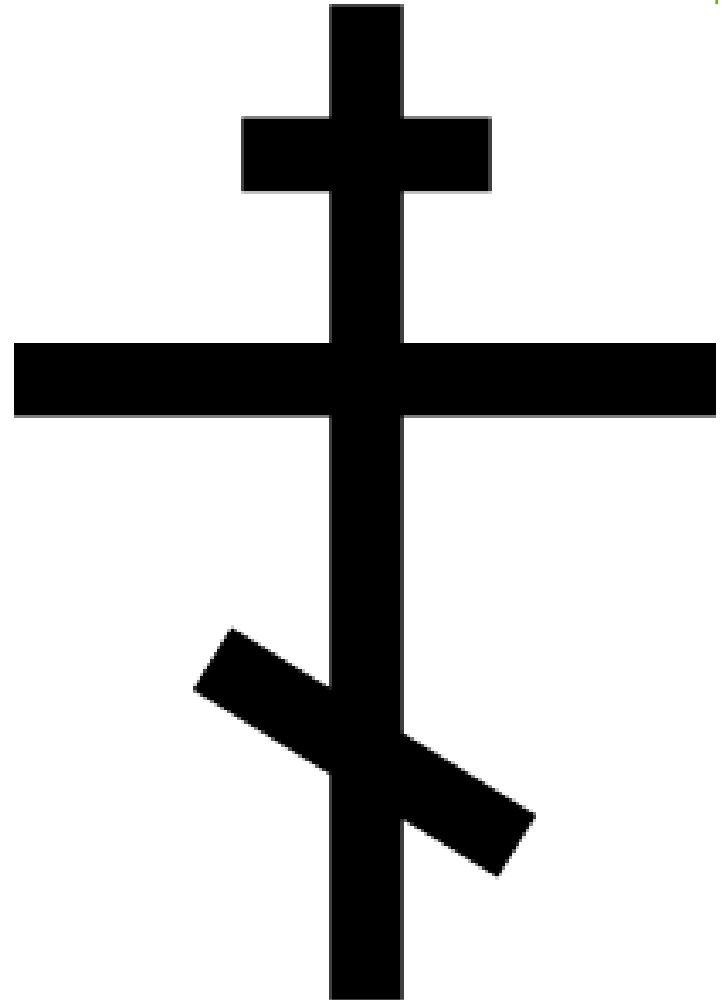
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Orthodox Church

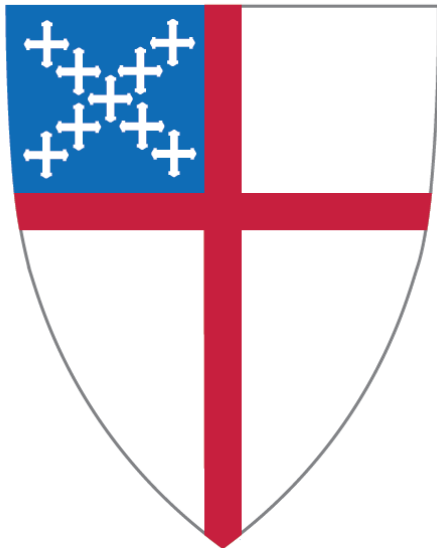
- In Orthodox belief, there is no will to punish those, only the everlasting presence of God
 - It is the perspective on the person if that experience is bliss or torture
- If someone dies by suicide, they may not get a full Orthodox funeral due to how funerals confirmed the person lived to the end of their life following the faith and teachings
 - The church does investigate the suicide and makes a determination

(M. King, personal communication, July 30, 2024)

Picture Citation: (2020)



Episcopal Church



- The 73rd General Convention discussed suicide prevention within the church
- Discussed how nothing can separate us from the love of God
- All levels of the Episcopal Church have been urged to place high priority on suicide prevention

(J. Sanford, personal communication, July 15, 2024)

Picture Citation: (2024)

What is Being Done?

- Many churches and denominations are investing resources into training clergy and lay-people
 - QPR, MHFA, Livingworks, SoulShop, etc.
 - Clergy are also working to sharpen their skills to identify warning signs
- Churches are collaborating with various organizations to extend support
- Clergy are familiarizing themselves with research to better understand suicide
 - Specifically how it is more than a spiritual issue

(Gibson & Mason, 2020)

(J. Sanford, personal communication, July 15, 2024)

(E. Penfield, personal communication, July 22, 2024)

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Hope for the Future

How we can address this issue with our clients
and in our communities

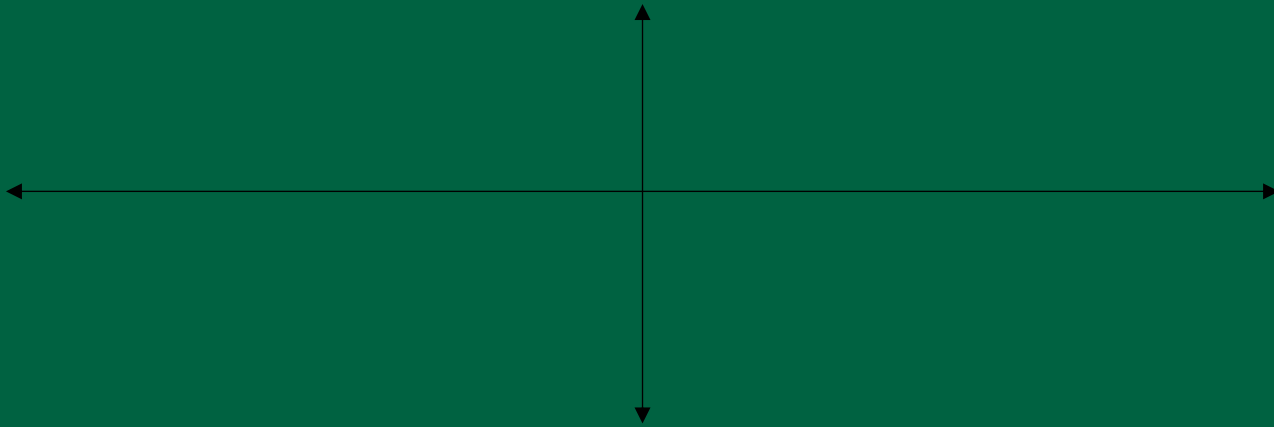
What Can We Do?



What Can We Do?

- Work with clergy and local faith institutions to educate on warning signs and how to have the hard conversations
- Collaborate on creating a resource list for referrals
- Educate on language, rising rates, and media
(Gibson & Mason, 2020)
- Collaborate and discuss the relationship between mental health and one's religious beliefs
(Mason, 2014)
- Be a leader in breaking the stigma in faith communities
- Encourage prayer request for those struggling
- Provide space and support for mental health support groups/charts
(Keefe, 2018)
- Be willing to lead/facilitate discussions on suicide within your community/faith institutions
- Help develop and foster a culture in communities that include prevention, intervention, and postvention
(Mason, 2023)

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(J. Sanford, personal communication, July 15, 2024)

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**Thank You for
Joining Me Today!**

Contact

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