

RELIGIOUS PERCEPTIONS OF SUICIDE AND IMPLICATION FOR SUICIDIOLOGY ADVOCACY IN NIGERIA

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ABSTRACT: *The role of religion in contemporary suicide advocacy cannot be overemphasized. Suicide, in most cases had lent itself to multidisciplinary considerations, although before now has been largely scientific. This includes a combination of psychology, medicine, psychiatry, biomedicine, psychobiology, neurology, medical sociology and others. In most situations, religion, philosophy of religion and philosophy have not been given the rightful place in suicide consideration. This approach could be seen clearly as a negative oversight. The goal of this paper is to examine some common religious perceptions, and consequently apply such in the quest for suicidology advocacy. The paper applied religious, philosophical, historical and sociological research methodology. It is recommended that a clear understanding of some common religious perceptions of suicide would engender an aggressive drive towards suicidology advocacy. Consequently, there would be a reduction in the level of suicide behaviour or complete suicide.*

KEYWORDS: Implication, Religious perception, Suicide, Suicidology advocacy

INTRODUCTION

Religion is commonly adjudged as one of the major disciplines that can play the role of moral authority and unalloyed conscience in suicidology consideration. The fields of religion, philosophy and philosophy of religion, are saddled with the overwhelming responsibility of discussing morality. The other disciplines may not have the actual mandate of discussing morality. The role of religion, philosophy of religion and philosophy, interject at the point of religion making claims of scriptural authority. While philosophy of religion and philosophy, act as critics or play the role of investigators of the truth claimed by religion. The role played by philosophy and philosophy of religion are that of epistemological investigators of the truth behind every claimed scriptural authority or revelation (religion). In other words, religion is commonly acknowledged as being saddled with the responsibility of issuing the moral laws. On the other hand, both philosophy of religion and philosophy, apply the appropriate tools in the investigation of those laws, while contending the origin, rightness and wrongness of the said moral laws. The various common moral laws, which are basically, religious laws and mores/norms (mainly traditions or taboos), have taken various positions with respect to suicide.

Religion and Suicide

On the strength of the above consideration, the writer would examine religion and suicide. The study, from the perspective of religion and suicide would therefore examine Judaism, Christianity, Islam, African religion and other religions. The perception of these groups on suicide would establish a robust comprehension of the various religious positions on suicide.

Thus engender an aggressive quest for suicidology advocacy in South West in particular and Nigeria in general.

Judaism and suicide

Judaism is commonly acknowledged as the earliest of the Abrahamic faiths. The Abrahamic faiths are a group of religions that trace and claim their origin to Abraham, the patriarch. They are also referred to as Abrahamic religions. Other religions in this group are Christianity and Islam (which is the most recent of the three). In some level of conformity with the other Abrahamic religions, Judaism is said to place deep emphasis on the sanctity of life. On the strength of this, she views suicide as one of the most serious sins. It is on this premise that suicide has always been forbidden by Jewish laws in most cases (New World Encyclopedia, 2013).

Although there is a great shift in the contemporary belief by Judaism with regards to suicide. It is important to mention that before now, suicide was not seen as an alternative, even when one is forced to commit certain cardinal sins. This position is, however, still not made clear by the Talmud. The Talmud is described by Canney (2013) as the literary production by the Jewish schools and the rabbinic fathers. It is made up of the *Mishnah* and the *Gemara*. The *Mishnah* consists of most part of the traditional discussions of the Rabbis who lived between 70AD and 200AD. The issues discussed in the *Mishnah* are referred to as the *Gemara* or commentary. According to Canney (2013), the type of issues discussed in the *Mishnah* is called *Halachah*, and the types of commentary in the *Gemara* are called the *Haggadah*. He further posited that the word *Halachah* refers to the act of walking in life in accordance with the law. Whereas the word *Haggadah* means telling and recitation (of the law).

The various rabbinic injunctions on suicide and other extra-scriptural Jewish laws are said to be formulated in the portions of the *Talmud*. In support of the Jewish position on suicide, Weblowsky and Wigoder (2013), cited the position expressed by an outstanding, and, pioneer Christian historian, Josephus. He is said to have recorded a Jewish doctrine that says that suicide has no place in the hereafter. This doctrine, is, however, argued as not appearing in the *Talmud*. It is the position of Roth (2013) that suicide is not explicitly forbidden in the *Talmud*, though the *Talmud* authorities see it as a terrible or heinous sin. They argued that it must be separated from circumstantial martyrdom.

The Jewish scripture consist of five main sections. The *Torah*, which is the law, is regarded as the most important. Within this portion is the decalogue, from *Yahweh*. The law, “thou shalt not kill” (Exodus 20:13) is one of the greatest laws in the Torah. The other portions of the Jewish scriptures include the *Nebhim* (the prophets) and *Ketubhim* (the writings). They are revelations and writings of men of God. These writings make up the Jewish scriptures commonly referred to as the Old Testament. The position of Judaism with respect to suicide is based on these Jewish writings. Judaism draws a distinction between suicide and martyrdom. In this regards, martyrdom (also referred to as *Mitzvah*) is seen as sacrifice. That is, death resulting from one’s faith convictions, as against suicide, which is seen as malicious act. This may be why Judaism argued that martyrdom should not be condemned, but seen as the greatest sacrifice for Judaism. In the argument by Roth (2013), he drew a sharp dichotomy between killing one’s self and letting oneself to be killed.

It could be concluded that there is nowhere in the *Talmud* that explicitly stated that suicide is forbidden. However, it is implied from the belief that only God gives life and takes life. Therefore, through the position of the Old Testament (“Thou shalt not kill”), any violation is seen as against the instructions of God. This led the Judaizers to contend that suicides have denied the doctrines of salvation and the hereafter. Consequently, they have denied the sovereignty of God, and would have no place in the world to come. This may have informed the position held by Judaism. Here, suicides are frowned at, rejected and often buried in a separate part of the Jewish Cemetery. They may also be denied certain mourning rites. The only major consideration before the suicide may be accepted is if it is proven that the suicide was not in his or her right mind before committing the act. It should also be proven, if the first situation was not applicable, whether the suicide repented after the act, shortly before death occurred.

It is claimed by the New World Encyclopedia (2013), that, although in the past the bodies of Jewish people who committed suicide were buried in the outskirts of Jewish cemetery, this traditional repercussion has been jettisoned. In support of this contemporary stance, Perlman (in New World Encyclopedia, 2013:9), contested that “suicide deaths today usually are death with the same way as others”. He further sounded quite empathetic when he argued that “to put those bodies in a corner or on the side is really additional punishment for the survivors”. He then concluded that, we would just classify the suicide as another death. Unfortunately, a suicide’s death in most cases punishes the living. This position is quite instructive as we appreciate the fact that, the views on suicide that were traditionally held before now, have shifted greatly in these contemporary times.

The writer wonders, from the general position of Judaism on suicide, if martyrdom should not be seen as a type of suicide. The categorization made by Durkheim, placed martyrdom as a form of altruistic suicide, since, in most cases, it is a form of sacrifice likely made for the good of the group or the belief held by the group. A clear example is the experience of Meshach, Shadrach and Abednego (Daniel 3:16-23), who were noted as willing to perform the *mitzvah*. Samson was also seen as portraying heroic suicide (Judge, 16: 28-31). The notable Christian philosopher, Saint Augustine even applauded Samson’s death as an act prompted by divine wisdom. Other forms of suicide are replete in the Old Testament. They would be considered under the section on Christianity and suicide.

Christianity and suicide

The traditional Christian teaching views suicide as a grave crime and sin (McDonald, 2013). In this instance, most early theologians who were from the Catholic Church saw suicide as murder. On this ground it was seen as a mortal sin. It is important to note, however, that:

Early Christianity emerged at a time of heavy Roman persecution. Beginning with the death of Steven, there was an attraction to death as martyrdom and there was an understanding that death at the hands of evil could benefit the cause of salvation. Even the death of Jesus was interpreted as a kind of suicide (self- sacrifice) by some (Tertullian, in New World Encyclopedia, 2013:10).

The above position was canvassed by Tertullian, one of the early church fathers.

Christianity is one of the Abrahamic faiths. Like others, that is, Judaism and Islam, she also believed in the sanctity of life. Her position is hinged on the sixth commandment in the scriptures, “Thou shalt not Kill” (Exodus 20:13). Although the position of most of the early church fathers tend to be heavily inclined to this scripture, it is important to note that the objection to suicide from the point of view of being an unforgivable sin cannot easily be traced to the scriptures. The bible could be said to be inexplicit about suicide and the act of suicide. The early church fathers like St. Augustine and Thomas Aquinas, who were great antagonists of suicide, based their arguments on the sanctity of life. However, it is important to note that in the Hebrew *Torah*, the verb “*ratsah*” is used with regards to the sixth commandment, “Thou shalt not kill”. The verb is translated as murder and it refers clearly to the criminal act of killing a human being (Dignitas, 2013).

The position of St. Augustine, expressed in his book, “*City of God*”, chapter 20, book 1, tend to run contrary to the true Hebrew translation of the sixth commandment. On his part, St. Augustine interpreted the sixth commandment as a blanket prohibition of suicide (Dignitas, 2013). Saint Thomas Aquinas concurred with Saint Augustine. He attempted justifying the argument against suicide. His position was hinged on three reasons. First, “suicide was contrary to natural self-love, secondly, it injures the community of which we are a part, and, lastly, it violates our duty to God, who gave us life in the first place, by taking away his right to decide when we shall die” (Dignitas, 2013:3). The position expressed by Aquinas became acceptable and led to the criminalizing of suicide especially althrough the Middle Ages.

Some common Suicide in the Bible

It is pertinent, on a general note, to describe some suicides in the Bible. It is argued that, in spite of these suicides recorded in the bible, no direct judgment was explicitly passed on the act, neither was their sinfulness highlighted. They include the following:

- a. **Samson- (Judges 16:30):** “Then Samson said, “let me die with the Philistines”. He strained with all his might and the house fell on the lords and all the people who were in it. So those he killed at his death were more than those he had killed during his life”
- b. **Saul- (1 Samuel, 31:4):** Then Saul said to his armour bearer, “Draw your sword and thrust me through with it, so that these uncircumcised may not come and thrust me through, and make sport of me. “But his armour bearer was unwilling, for he was terrified. So Saul took his own sword and fell upon it”.
- c. **Saul’s Armour bearer- (1 Samuel 31:5):** When his armour bearer saw that Saul was dead, he also fell upon his own sword and died with him.
- d. **Ahitophel- (2 Samuel 17:23):** When Ahithophel saw that his counsel was not followed; he saddled his donkey and went off home to his own city. He set his house in order and hanged himself; he died and was buried in the tomb of his father.
- e. **Zimri-(1 Kings 16:8):** When Zimri saw that the city was taken, he went into the citadel of the King’s house, and he burned down the King’s house over himself with fire, and died.
- f. **Abimelech- (Judges 9:52,54):** Abimelech came to the tower, and fought against it and came near to the entrance of the tower to burn it with fire. But a certain woman

threw an upper millstone on Abimelech's head, and crushed his skull. Immediately he called to the young man who carried his armour and said to him, "Draw your sword and kill me, so people will not say about me, "A woman killed him". So the young man thrust him through and he died

- g. Judas Iscariot (Matthew 24:5):** Throwing down the pieces of silver in the temple, (Judas) departed, and he went and hanged himself.

There are also instances in the scriptures where some prophets and others expressed suicidal feelings and thoughts. They include the following:

1. **Jonah- (Jonah 4:8):** When the sun rose, God prepared a sultry east wind, and the sun beat down on the head of Jonah so that he was faint and asked that he might die. He said, "It is better for me to die".
2. **Job- (Job 6:8-9):** "O that I might have my request and that God would grant my desire, that it would please God to crush me, that he would let loose his hand and cut me off.
3. **Elijah- (1 Kings 19:14):** But he himself went a day's journey into the wilderness, and came and sat down under a solitary broom tree. He asked that he might die: "it is enough, now, O lord, take away my life, for I am no better than my ancestors".
4. **Paul- (Philippians 1:21-24):** For me, living is Christ and dying is gain. If I am to live in the flesh, that means fruitful labour for me, and I do not know which I prefer. I am hard pressed between the two: my desire is to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better, but to remain in the flesh is more necessary for you".

The motives behind the actions of those who committed suicide as earlier on considered can be deduced from the statements they made. On the part of Samson, his motive is commonly seen as a demonstration of vengeance against his enemies and captors. For Saul, it was injury in battle, and Saul's armour bearer demonstrated the suicide motive of loyalty to God's anointed, who was also his master. In the case of Ahithophel, the motives were disgrace and betrayal. While for Zimri, it was defeat. The suicide of Judas Iscariot had elicited several reactions. However, his motive could be that of guilt feeling.

The question that continues to agitate the minds of most people is, "what is the explicit position of the scriptures in these suicide acts?" It is however, noteworthy that, of all the instances of suicide highlighted in the scriptures that of Judas Iscariot remained the most condemned. The reason, primarily, been that he betrayed the Lord Jesus and used the money paid to him to purchase a plot of land, where he eventually was buried after falling headlong and dyeing. Apart from this, Phipps (2013) argued that there is no explicit prohibition of suicide anywhere in the canonical texts of Christianity. The researcher agreed with this position, as the argument often advanced by most Christians is usually premised on the sanctity of life and the biblical injunction in the fifth commandment: "thou shalt not kill."

Islam and suicide:

Islam is commonly acclaimed as the most recent of the Abrahamic faiths or religions. The first is Judaism and the second, Christianity. They all claim to have their root in Abraham, the patriarch. Like other Abrahamic religions, Islam views suicide as sinful, as a result highly

detrimental to one's spiritual journey. To Islam, those who believed, but ultimately rejected belief in God, the result seems unambiguously negative. This claim is copiously highlighted by the New World Encyclopedia (2013). It also quoted a verse in the fourth chapter of the Qur'an, An-Nisaa (The Women) instructs: "And do not kill yourselves, surely Allah is most Merciful to you" (4:29).

The position of Islam with respect to suicide is also highlighted in the Hadith. These are statements or sayings of the prophet, Muhammad. In these statements, the prohibition of suicide is clearly recorded. For example:

Narrated Abu Huraira: The prophet said, "He who commits suicide by throttling shall keep on throttling himself in Hell Fire (forever) and he who commits suicide by stabbing himself shall keep on stabbing himself in the Hell-Fire. (Sahih al-Bukhari, 2:23-44)

Also narrated by Abu Huraira: The prophet said:

Whoever purposely throws himself from a mountain and kills himself, will be in the (hell) fire falling down into it and abiding therein perpetually forever, and whoever drinks poison and kills himself with it, he will be carrying his poison in his hand and drinking it in the (Hell) fire wherein he will abide eternally forever, and whoever kills himself with an iron weapon, will be carrying that weapon in his hand and stabbing his abdomen with it in the (Hell) fire wherein he will abide eternally forever (Sahih al-Bukharia, 7:71:670).

The other sources also relevant to our consideration of Islam and suicide are that of Ja'far Al-Sadiq, the sixth Shia Imam. He expressed the following with respect to suicide:

Abi Walad said: I heard Aba Abd Allah say:

"Whoever kills himself intentionally, he will be in the fire of hell for eternity"

It is generally opined by most Muslim scholars and clerics that suicide is forbidden, and they also sue for peace and its maintenance by all. That is both Muslims and non-Muslims. This is hinged on the premise that true Islamic spiritualism is not attained without genuine adherence to peace. In support of this, two of the most renowned scholars in Islam, Bukhari and Muslim, state: "He who believes in God and the last Day should honour his guest, should not harm his neighbor, should speak good or keep quite". This provides a strong incentive for Muslims to preserve peace so as to attain higher status in the sight of God.

It is pertinent from the foregoing to state unequivocally that, the Qu'aran explicitly forbids suicide, and sees it as the gravest sin. This, it sees as more serious than the homicide. The premise is that, Muslims believe that each individual has his or her "*Kismet*" or destiny, which is pre-ordained by God and must not be defied (Glen, 2003).

The various theologies of the Abrahamic faiths, regard suicide as an act of grave sin, but none of them, that is, Islam and Judaeo-Christian faiths have any specific revelation of suicide in their scriptures. In Islam, there are however, various passages that are interpreted as divine

prohibition of suicide. Amongst them are: Quran 4:29-33 (“And do not kill yourselves”). Others are Quran 2:85, Quran 2:51-54, Quran 18:5-6.

The exception to the general aspect of suicide is said to be recorded in the Hadith of Prophet Muhammad. In this instance, though suicide is forbidden, no matter the circumstances, the exception is when such act is accidental. This tends to be in agreement with Forensic Medicine. According to Noguchi (2013), it stated that, it is the responsibility of forensic experts to distinguish between real suicides, accidental self-destruction and outright accidents. For some, they may be involved in automobile accidents due to the effect of alcohol. The problem that may result from this is the onus of proof that the claimed suicide act is actually an accident. How this could likely be done is a herculean task, except through a strong reliance on the proof by forensic experts. It is not clear if the rationale for this stance is based on the fact that the victim may not be in a sound mind at the time of the accident. Or if the victim committed the accident deliberately. These are still gaps to be addressed with regards to exonerating claimed accident (Suicide) victims from the wide cover of disapproval with regards to suicide.

In conclusion, it must be noted that in Islam it is commonly claimed that a suicide will forfeit paradise. Apart from this, the second punishment will be to repeat the very act of how he killed himself and was found in hell. While, the Imams could also follow the prophet’s example as they refuse to say the customary prayers for the suicide.

Some Oriental Religions and Suicide

The previous sections dealt with the aspect of suicide and the perceptions maintained by the Abrahamic religions. That is Judaism, Christianity and Islam. In this section however, consideration would be given to some Oriental religions and their perceptions of suicide.

Hinduism and Suicide:

Apart from the Abrahamic faiths or religions, that is, Judaism, Christianity and Islam, there are other religions that have maintained different stance on suicide. One of such religions is Hinduism. It is regarded as the oldest living religion in the Far East, and one of the oldest religions in the world. Hinduism, according to archaeology is acclaimed to have begun around 2,500 BC, in modern Pakistan, somewhere in Mohenjo-Daro and Harapa (Nault, 2013). Hinduism is one of the major religions in India and has spread to the other Asian countries. Her major scripture is *Veda*. It is further claimed that Hinduism was initially polytheistic (believing in many gods), but soon developed the idea of the Supreme God from the ancient writings referred to as *Rig-Veda* in 1500 BC. Their philosophical writings are called the *Bhagvad-Gita* (Nault, 2013). The word Hindu, he further averred, was used as a clear reference to the people living around the areas beyond the River Indus (or Sindhu according to the ancient Sanskrit language). The faith practiced by the Hindus is known as *Santana dharma*, which when interpreted means the eternal or ancient religion.

The Hindu religion is said to favour grave austere practices. This has made her a typical oriental mystic religion that favours suicide-like conducts and attitudes. This may be why such doctrines as *Sati* or widow burning are accepted. This practice involves self-sacrifice of a woman at the death of her husband. However, it is generally claimed that in Hinduism,

There are a number of views in regard to suicide. Generally, committing suicide is considered a violation of the code of *ahimsa* (non-violence) and

therefore equally sinful as murdering another. Some scriptures state that to die by suicide (and any type of violent death) results in becoming a ghost, wandering on earth until the time when one would have otherwise died, had one not committed suicide (Hindu Website, 2013:4). In the Hindu scriptures, suicide is referred to as *pranatyaga* (which means Abandoning life force). It generally means intentionally ending one's life through poisoning, drowning, burning, jumping, shooting and so on.

It is claimed that Hinduism accepts a man's right to commit suicide, that is, right to end one's life through the non-violent practice of fasting to death, referred to as *prayopavesa*. It should be noted that *prayopavesa* is strictly reserved for people who no longer have any desire or ambition left, and no responsibilities remaining in life (Hinduism-Euthanasia and suicide, 2013). The argument is that, suicide in Hinduism is traditionally condemned due to the fact that it is seen as an abrupt escape from life, and it creates unseemly Karma to face in future. The exception to this position is those who are suffering from terminal diseases or great disability, thus religious self-willed death through fasting is allowed. According to Subramuniaswami, (2013), the person making such a decision is expected to declare it publicly as this will allow for community regulation, thus separating the act from the suicide that is performed privately in traumatic emotional state of anguish and despair. He further stated that, the Ancient lawgivers make reference to various stipulations. These include: one, the inability to perform normal bodily purifications. Secondly, death appears imminent or the condition is so bad that life's pleasure is nil. Lastly, the action must be done under community regulation.

In conclusion, it would be noted that, all Hindus believe in a supreme spirit referred to as *Brahman*. They also believe in the reincarnation of a person's *atman*, that is the soul.

Buddhism and Suicide.

Buddhism is one of the Oriental religions and it holds that life is a cycle of rebirth, death and endless suffering (Winternitz, 2013). The views of Buddhism on suicide is said to be quite conflicting. This is so, due to the fact that *Buddha*, the enlightened one, is said not to have supported suicide, but his followers recommended suicide for salvific purposes. As one of the oriental religions, ascetic practices are quite common in Buddhism, hence self-termination is very likely.

In Buddhism, unlike Christianity, Islam and other religions, suicide is not condemned, but she states that the reasons for suicide are mostly negative and thus counteract the part to enlightenment. For Buddhists, they subscribe to the fact that the first precept is to restrain from suicide or any other act that leads to the destruction of life, including one's self. In this instance, Buddhism claimed that if someone commits suicide in anger, he is likely to be reborn in a sorrowful realm as a result of the negative final thoughts. This is supported by the fact that, Buddhism believes in the doctrine of *Kama*. In this wise, it is believed that, "individual's past acts heavily influence what they experience in the present, past acts in turn, became the background influence for the future experiences (the doctrine of *Karma*). Intentional action by mind, body or speech has a reaction. It is believed in Buddhism that this reaction or repercussion could be the cause of conditions and differences one eventually faces in life.

When is suicide justified in Buddhism? The argument put forward by Lamotte (in New World Encyclopedia, 2013:9) is quite instructive. According to him, from the Buddhists perspective,

Suicide is justified in the persons of the Noble ones, who have already cut off desire and by so doing neutralized their actions by making them incapable of producing further fruit. From the point of view of early Buddhism, suicide is a normal matter in the case of the Noble ones who, having completed their work, sever their last link with the world and voluntarily pass into *Nirvana*, thus definitively escaping from the world of re-births.

The position of the Noble One (*Arhat*) is differentiated here. This means that the Noble One (*Arhat*) acts without desire, whereas the unenlightened person acts in a contrary manner.

The *Nirvana* appeals to the Buddhists a great deal. They claimed that it is beyond all heavens. According to Ferguson (2013), the Buddhists see *Nirvana* as a state of perfect peace, free from this world of space and time. The *Nirvana* is also a state of liberation, spiritual freedom, true health, immersion in cosmic consciousness, and freedom from life and death and all passions. It is actually the escape for what is born, beyond deaths, they averred.

The above may have informed why Buddhists teach that all people experience some level of suffering (*dukkha*) and such suffering originates from the past negative deeds (*Karma*). They may, however, result as a process of the cycle of birth and death (*Samsara*). The other reasons for the prevalence of suffering relates to the concepts of impermanence or illusion (*maya*). Due to the fact that everything is in a constant state of impermanence or flux, most people are bound to likely experience dissatisfaction with the fleeting events of life. For one to break out of *Samsara* (cycle of birth and death), Buddhism advocates the Noble path.

The perspective maintained by Buddhism with respect to the *Nirvana* appears to agree with schizophrenic state, as examined by psychiatry. According to Philip (2013), the mystic *Nirvana* in Buddhism compare with the schizophrenic state in psychiatry. This is due to the fact that the latter is primarily a state of withdrawal from cosmic reality.

The position of Buddhism can therefore be captured in the words of Muller (2013). He declared that the sacred Books of the East stated that, “only ascetics are permitted to commit suicide having reached the highest degree of perfection when they are ripe for the *Nirvana*. This position is further corroborated by Eliade (2013:29), that, “Buddhism in its various forms affirms that, while suicide as self-sacrifice may be appropriate for the person who is an *arhat*, one who has attained enlightenment, it is still very much the exception to the rule”.

African Religion and Suicide:

It is mostly logical to say that, one cannot easily separate most aspects of an African’s culture from his religion. This may be why there is the consistent clamour by some African religious scholars for an urgent contextualization. In this regards, Imasogie (1983:2) in attempting to make a case for Christian theology in Africa, argued that such a theology “must take the African context and world view seriously if the word is to take flesh in the life and language of the African”. He posited that this has become relevant due, largely to the fact that Christianity is an incarnation religion. The researcher, drawing from this, agreed that the African world view and his religion are mostly intertwined. On the basis of this therefore, several of the references

in this study may not draw a sharp dichotomy between the religion of the African and his culture. It is also important to mention that, while the main thrust of this study, and in particular the section under focus is on religion and suicide, the references will likely emphasize on religion in South West, Nigeria. However, this should be seen within the background of African religion.

In spite of some glaring difficulties that confront African religion, its value in addressing the African paradigm and culture generally cannot be overemphasized. Some of the difficulties as enumerated by Idowu (in Imasogie, 1985) include the following: Lack of sacred scriptures, the difference between external medium of expression of one's experience of a reality and the reality so expressed, unfair comparison of one form of religious expression with the other, the evolution theory of the origin of religion, the influence of the traveler-writers on the traditional concept of African religion, the stay-at-home writers, the humanistic approach to religion and the vastness of and the fact that there are about 800 ethnic groups or language groups in Africa. These difficulties in the study of African religion as highlighted by Idowu (in, Imasogie, 1985), are also relevant in the consideration of African religion and suicide, and African culture in South West, Nigeria.

How then can a synergy be achieved as a response to the challenge of suicide in South West, Nigeria? It is pertinent to examine some common aspects, cum culture of the people of South West, Nigeria, as they relate to her position with respect to suicide. The researcher, on the strength of the aforementioned presupposition, submitted that the aspect of morality stands out as the nucleus of African religion and culture. With particular reference to the Yoruba (who are the predominant group in South West, Nigeria), Idowu, (1996:150), argued that, "with the Yoruba, morality is certainly the fruit of religion. They do not make any attempt to separate the two, and it is impossible for them to do so without disastrous consequences". He further argued that, taboo took its origin from the fact that people acknowledged that there were some things that were morally approved or disapproved by the Deity. On this note, the Yoruba refers to taboo as "*Ee wo*", that is something forbidden or things not done, he further averred. It is inferred that, in most African culture there are taboos. In addition to this there are also superstitions, although they are not as serious as taboos. In Edo culture for example, it is believed that you should not look at the mirror at night as one is likely going to see an ominous spirit, and there are great repercussions, for example, illness. There are therefore laws attached to this, *albeit*, minimal. In the case of taboos, the laws are stiffer.

It is common knowledge that in most parts of South West, like other parts of Africa, morality is held in high esteem. In the Yoruba culture, it is reflected by the character of the one in question, and such is accountable to the society, whose norms and mores are said to be upheld or broken by the individual. Aderibigbe (2002:300), argued that, "morality when considered from the operational and practical perspective, could be defined as the pursuit of the virtuous or a way of life that reflects principles, behaviours and attitudes that determine relationship in any given society which ultimately would produce a cohesive, harmonious, peaceful and stable society". This is in agreement with the position of Mbiti (1975:175), who surmised that, "African morals lay a great emphasis on social conduct, since a basic African view is that the individual exists only because others exist". This, according to him, means that, it is actually morals that keep any society from disintegration. Thus, Aderibigbe (2002), further classified moral issues in African religion into two categories. These are approved behaviour and actions, and disapproved conducts. As part of the approved behaviour and actions, he listed the

followings: humility, truth, kindness and hospitality, chastity, loyalty, respect and protection. For the disapproved conduct, he listed the followings: stealing, incest, murder (which includes suicide), and covenant or oath breaking. It is within this categorization of disapproved conduct that suicide falls.

The aspect of suicide in African culture and religion is said to fall into the large category of murder. Simply put, murder can be seen as the unjustified killing of a fellow human being. It is an act that is often totally condemned. However, it is worth mentioning that in African society, killing is permitted in war situation and for self defense. But for other circumstances it is considered as a crime that is punishable by the Supreme Being and divinities (Aderibigbe, 2002). In this instance, he maintained that the common forms of killings that likely have common moral implications in African culture and religion are human sacrifice, infanticide and suicide.

The grave moral implications that suicide connotes in African culture and religion cannot be overemphasized. It is safe to say that, suicide is mostly, generally frowned at and not tolerated in most part of Africa. Among the Yoruba of South West, for example, suicide is seen as “bad death”. Therefore, those who committed suicide are not given full burial rites but are buried in the “bad bush” outside the village (Aderibigbe, 2002). The same position is maintained by the Ibos. In most of the Ibo clans, suicides are denied burial rites as their deaths are seen as a grave offence against “*Ala*”, the earth goddess. This is why, Onwubiko (1991), opined that the position of the Ibo to the act of suicide is a reflection of their belief in the sanctity of life. Thus, they argued that due to the sacredness of life, it is an abomination to take one’s own life or that of someone else.

It is noted by the researcher that there may be exceptions to the general rules concerning suicide among the Yoruba. A defeated Yoruba Balogun who engages in heroic suicide to avoid shame as a defeated general is praised for such act. It was also recorded by Smith (1988), that an *Aremo* (that is the eldest son of the *Alafin*), is expected to kill himself on the death of his father. This is due to the fact that, the *Aremo*, who may be overambitious, is then eliminated from wishing to succeed his father. This aspect of suicide for the rejected *Alafin*, according to Smith (1988) started from the 1700-1730, during the reign of Agaju and Abiodun, and the rejected *Alafin*’s oldest son was expected to die with his rejected father.

The position of the Hausa culture abhors suicide. According to MaNewman (1997), they are influenced largely by the Islamic religion, thus their condemnation of suicide is greatly influenced by Islamic injunctions. An interesting dimension is added to the study on suicide and culture as the researcher examined the position of the Dogon of Mali and their culture. In examining this, Blakely, Van Beek, Walter and Thomas (1994), submitted that, in order to avoid shame associated with public exposure as a liar, thief, witch or as disrespectful to elders, one could generate suicidal behaviour, thus commit suicide. They however, argued that this incidence of suicide is not actually recommended by the Dogon society, but it often draws some level of public approval, not condemnation.

In further examination, the position of the Yoruba culture and religion permits suicide for certain reasons. According to Aderibigbe (2002:304), suicide committed for certain reasons such as escaping terminal illness, being captured in wars, protecting family and personal honours, avoiding shame and disgrace, either personal or communal is not only tolerated, but praised for demonstration of rare courage.

The metaphysical aspect of suicide appears to generate some level of contradictions with the African culture and religious belief. According to Imasogie (1985:51) it is commonly believed by the Edo and the Yoruba that, “at death, (that is the cessation of the life-force and hence the physical body) the personality constituent of the soul returns to heaven. It must be remembered that the return is not immediate since the performance of funeral rites has a part to play....” He further postulated that, “should death come before the allocated time (according to destiny), the personality-soul hovers around as ghost for some time until the life-span originally given him is completed. Sometimes such personality-soul of a person who dies before his time in one city may materialize in another distant location, where he lives a normal life until he finally dies (Imasogie, 1985:51).

The metaphysical challenge in the above consideration has to do with death and after-life. The researcher is of the opinion that it is then impossible for the one who has not been given the right funeral rites to return to heaven after death. It therefore follows that most suicides, according to the Yoruba culture, may likely not return to heaven since they were denied burial rites. Apart from this, some suicides that are assumed to have died before their allotted time are likely to have their personality-soul still wandering. The challenge then would be, if these limitations are also tied to suicide on the basis of heroism and other exceptions, the researcher wonders what will become of such suicides. This is due to the fact that the Yoruba culture appears to excuse suicide committed on the basis of heroism and other special situations. The researcher’s argument is premised on their fate with regards to the metaphysical position previously canvassed.

In spite of the above argument it should be noted that the general norm is that African culture and religion lay high premium on the sanctity of life. This could be why Awolalu and Dopamu (1979) concluded that, sin is doing anything that is against the will of God. Therefore, doing any abominable thing, like breaking of taboos is against God and man. The researcher is of the opinion that in African culture and religion, suicide exemplifies breaking of taboo, hence it is not tolerated.

Suicidology advocacy in Nigeria

It is commonly argued that there is a dearth of information concerning the prevalence of suicide in Nigeria. This, however, should not stand as an acceptable argument in favour of reduced occurrence of suicide. It is expected that all stakeholders, that is the government, church, non-governmental organizations and others, should mount a formidable advocacy towards the reduction of suicide in Nigeria. This can be achieved through the following efforts: First, there is the need to begin an outstanding enlightenment of the citizenry with regards to the negative impact of suicide.

Secondly, all religious organizations should be mobilized towards appreciating the harm done to the nation, the victims (who are relatives of the one who has committed suicide) and the one who committed suicide (who would have contributed towards the development and advancement of the society and his immediate family). Thus, appreciating the fact that they are stakeholders in the advocacy for suicide reduction in the nation.

On the other hand, the press and all media organizations should be involved in regular enlightenment of the public on the harm done by suicide. Furthermore, the medical organizations, like the hospitals, should be involved in rendering prompt attention to those who

exhibit suicidal behavior and those at risk. This involves those going through depression, mental imbalance and others.

It is also necessary to establish counseling centers in various venues where different people have contacts. For example, in schools, hospitals, churches, mosques and others. This would afford the people robust opportunity to seek help on time once they discover the prevalence of suicidal behaviour. As a follow-up to this, it is important for religious leaders to continue to educate their followers, through their sermons, on the value of the sanctity of life. They should be made to appreciate the fact that the creator of life has not given man, the prerogative to take life, no matter how justifiable he sees the reason for engaging in that act.

It is conceded by the writer that the situation that man sometimes finds himself may necessitate the contemplation of suicide. However, there is the need for the church, mosque and others to give hope to man. This can be achieved through counseling and preaching of sermons that encourage the adherents. Thus giving them hope for living.

In conclusion, the writer opined that the aspect of suicide advocacy is the responsibility of all stakeholders. However, the church and other religious organizations should see this as an onerous task that requires her full support and attention. This is premised on the fact that the church and other religious organizations have the real privilege of reaching vast number of people with the message of hope and joy. This privileged position which is occupied by religious organizations, have further placed a greater moral burden upon them as those who should serve as the harbinger of an enduring suicidology advocacy.

CONCLUSION

There are definitely different religious perspectives with respect to suicide. However, majority subscribe to the fact that life is sacred, therefore should not be terminated indiscriminately or at will. It is the position of the writer that the right value be placed on life no matter the prevailing circumstances. It should also be appreciated that the situation that may have necessitated suicide could eventually be reversed if the right level of panaceas is applied. The consequence is that it becomes fruitless to have been involved in the act of suicide. On the strength of this, the writer is of the opinion that the various preventive measures should be explored by the church and other religious organizations so as to avoid the possibility of complete suicide. The society, in most cases depends on the church and other religious organizations as guide towards prevention of suicide.

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