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**Divine Grace and the Problem of Suicide:  
Does Suicide Exempt the Deceased from the  
Hope of Future Redemption?**

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**Introduction**

In order to address the question of whether suicide exempts the deceased from the hope of future redemption, it is crucial to understand that the Bible does not contain any explicit moral declaration against suicide, though it does however contain several accounts of its practice. Given the lack of biblical foundation to declare the moral condemnation of suicide, it is important to interrogate the practice of Christian theologians who have adopted

such a concept that has such profound implications on our doctrinal formulations about the nature of God and the nature of humanity. A Christian theologian *par excellence*, Augustine is posited as a formidable conversationalist on the issue of suicide. This work explores Augustine's theological method in order to explicate the process by which suicide *becomes* known as a sin within Christian discourse. By examining Augustine's contribution and the varied appropriations of this "sin-talk" in the work of John Calvin, Jacobus Arminius, and John Wesley, this work questions whether suicide can be understood as a moral offense, and contends with the moral arguments that exempt those who die by suicide from the hope of future redemption. In an effort to complicate the condemnation of suicide, this essay intends to make a positive intervention into the practices of damning those who have died by suicide by suggesting ways in which we can draw from Reformed understandings of grace in order to affirm the sacred worth of individuals who die by suicide and reaffirm the hope of their eternal security.

### **I. How Suicide Becomes A Theological Dilemma**

First and foremost, scholars must acknowledge that the condemnation of suicide is not an ideological invention of Christianity, but a stance that many early theologians and faith communities appropriated from ancient philosophy. The acclaimed medieval historian, Alexander Murray devotes the majority of his work entitled *Suicide in the Middle Ages: The Curse of Self-Murder* toward making this point. Murray historical excavates the centuries of desecrated bodies of those who died by suicide from antiquity throughout the Middle Ages in order to locate the theological arguments behind these rituals of condemnation. Murray's excavation leads him beyond the medieval period to the suicide doctrine of the Stoics and the oppositional stances to such doctrines held by Plato and Aristotle, which he argues as the leading driving forces behind the early church's suicide rhetoric.<sup>1</sup> Murray continues by arguing that this Greek philosophical tradition was, in actuality, more instrumental

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<sup>1</sup> Alexander Murray, *Suicide in the Middle Ages: The Curse on Self-Murder*, vol. 2 (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 123-142.

than the Bible when it came to shaping early Christian stances on the issue of suicide.<sup>2</sup>

The dialogues of the middle period substantiate this argument, particularly in Plato's *Phaedo*, *The Laws*, and Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*, each containing colloquies on the morality of suicide. Echoing the Pythagorean prohibition of suicide, Socrates asserted to Cebes in the *Phaedo* that philosophers should be ready to die, but not willing to take their own lives because human beings 'belong' to the gods<sup>3</sup>. Socrates was reflecting on his own impending death and built upon this thought in his endorsement of divine punishment and wrath against those who die by suicide when he stated:

Well if one of your belongings were to kill itself, without signifying that you wanted it to die, wouldn't you be vexed with it, and punish it, if you had any punishment at hand?...So perhaps, in that case, it isn't reasonable that one should not kill oneself until God sends some necessity, such as the one now before us. <sup>4</sup>

Comparably, Plato added in the *Laws* that the bodies of those who die by suicide have lost their sanctity to the extent that he states confidently the following:

For him [the suicide] what ceremonies there are to be of purification and burial God knows... They who meet their death in this way shall be buried alone, and none shall be laid by their side; they shall be buried ingloriously in the borders of the twelve portions of the land, in such places uncultivated and nameless, and no column or inscription shall mark the place of their internment.<sup>5</sup>

Aristotle, a student of Plato, contributed to the ancient conversation on suicide in his *Nicomachean Ethics* in which he qualified courageous death and cowardice death. Aristotle argued that courage is expressed when one bears the threat of death as an aspect of his or her endurance, but the antithesis to courage being cowardice when death is an individual way of breaking free of suffering.

The reckless are impetuous, and though prior to the dangers they are willing, in the midst of them they withdraw, whereas courageous men are keen in the deeds

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid, 108-11, 116-117.

<sup>3</sup> Plato, *Phaedo*, trans. David Gallop (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), x,6; 61c-62c.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid, 7.

<sup>5</sup> Plato, *Laws*, trans. Benjamin Jowett (New York: Cosimo, Inc, 2008), 220; 874.

but quiet beforehand. In accord with what has been said, then, courage...inspires confidence and fear...and it chooses and endures what it does because it is noble to do so, or because it is shameful not to. But dying in order to flee poverty, erotic love, or something painful is not the mark of a courageous man but rather of a coward.<sup>6</sup>

So what we have in these perspectives of a few of the leading philosophers of ancient Greek philosophy is a primer of sorts on what will become markers of Christian discourse on suicide. It is a representative interpretation of suicide as the cowardice seizure of divine power to choose one's death that incites the wrath of God and sanctions communities to affirm this divine punishment of the soul through the desecration of human bodies. These are arguments that Greek philosophers used to argue against the Stoic defense of suicide as an expression of the "self-preservation will." The philosopher and historian John Sellars describes this "self preservation will" as the desire "to pay more attention to the preservation of oneself as a rational being, even if this might lead one to suicide."<sup>7</sup>

Demonstrating the point that these condemning perspectives pertaining to suicide were not invented by Christian theologians but existed even prior to the common era is not enough for the objective of this work. It is more fruitful to note the ways in which Christian theologians integrated these perspectives as sources in their formation of what would become written and customary doctrinal stances of the Church. Acknowledging the fact that the Bible does not contain any explicit moral declarations condemning suicide, one is further compelled to consider the validity of Murray's argument that Christian theologians, such as Origen, Jerome, and Augustine, relied upon their knowledge of the Greek philosophical tradition and its tenets as a source for Christian moral deliberation.<sup>8</sup>

Given the brevity of this work, it would be sufficient to explore the arguments of Augustine as representative of the early church's stance on the issue of suicide. Though Augustine did not know Greek as a language, but became acquainted with Greek philosophy through the Latin dialogues of Cicero and Plato, he was extensively educated

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<sup>6</sup> Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. Robert Bartlett and Susan Collins (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011), 57; 1116a 9-13.

<sup>7</sup> John Sellars, *Stoicism* (Los Angeles, University of California Press, 2006), 110.

<sup>8</sup> Murray, *Suicide in the Middle Ages*, 99-100.

in the ancient classics in Thagaste with the intention to learn the skills of master orators.<sup>9</sup> It is for this reason that it comes as no surprise that Augustine flourished under the tutelage of Ambrose in Milan. Ambrose was a master rhetorician who was educated in Rome and an expert in Greek literature.<sup>10</sup> Within just a few years under Ambrose's mentorship, Augustine became a priest in 391 A.D. and ordained Bishop of Hippo in 396 A.D. where he demonstrated his own competency in philosophy and theology, not as a Professor but in the fight to unify an intensely divided North African Church.

By the time Augustine became the Bishop of Hippo, the North African church had been separated into two different churches for nearly a century between the Catholics and the Donatists who each had their own resident bishop.<sup>11</sup> The Catholics were clearly those who were aligned with the Church of Rome, its sacramental theology of one baptism, and its ecclesiology of the unified church. In stark contrast, the Donatists claimed to be the chosen church of purity and strict adherence to law and ritual. Donatist re-baptized its membership and engaged in what ritual suicides, which were argued not to be Christian but an inherited practice carried over from their Numidian traditional religious practice of worship of the High God of Africa named Saturn.<sup>12</sup>

The ritualization and valorization of suicides among the Donatists warranted a formalized condemnation of suicide from the Roman episcopacy, and Augustine assumed this responsibility. Historians have identified the Donatists as the historical impulse behind Augustine's fervency to construct a sound and official moral declaration against suicide.<sup>13</sup> It is because of the Donatist controversy

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<sup>9</sup> Peter Brown, *Augustine of Hippo: A Biography, Revised Edition* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2000), 24-25.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 25.

<sup>11</sup> See W.H.C. Frend, *The Donatist Church: A Movement of Protest in Roman North Africa* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 1-25 and Erika Hermanowicz, *Possidius of Calama: A Study of the North African Episcopate in the Age of Augustine* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008) chapters 3 and 4 for more on the origins of the century long controversy between the Donatists and the Catholics of North Africa that resulted largely in the repeated persecution of the Donatists by Roman emperors Constantine and Honorius. Frend and Hermanowicz note, in the aforementioned sections, the excessive violence of the Donatists that included vicious physical attacks on Catholic and frequent suicides among their own group.

<sup>12</sup> Brown, *Augustine of Hippo*, 21.

<sup>13</sup> See Murray, *Suicide in the Middle Ages*, 106-107 and Hermanowicz, *Possidius of Calama*, 34-35.

that Augustine becomes the most influential Christian theologian in the shaping of the early church's doctrinal stance on suicide.

Accordingly, Augustine responded aggressively against the Petilian and Gaudentius, the Donatist Bishops, and by expressing his outrage about the "daily suicides" and "false martyrdom" of the Donatists.<sup>14</sup> Most exceptionally, it is in Augustine's *The City of God* that Augustine devoted several chapters to the specific issue of suicides. In our examination of these particular writings, one can note the 'improvisational' nature of Augustine's method for the biblical and theological interpretation of suicide and the presence of inconsistencies within that method. Utilizing these writings as a collective source of evaluating Augustine's praxis and theological assumptions that undergird his praxis, one can argue that his soteriology of the 'elect' is appropriated here with dire implications on theological anthropology. I argue that it is Augustine's soteriology and its subsequent adoption by Thomas Aquinas and John Calvin that propagates and legitimates the *desacralization* of those who die by suicide.

In the first book of *Contra Gaudentium*, Augustine devoted much of the chapters twenty seven to thirty one to the use of scripture and civil law to argue against what became the common practice of suicide in Hippo. In chapter twenty-seven, Augustine argued incoherently that suicide is the work of the devil and damnable by God. This is an argument that he later contradicts in his suggestion that, at times, God commands us to be ready to kill ourselves and others, and even in those cases the killing is an immoral action. In order to elucidate Augustine's contradictions it is important to consider his method of biblical interpretation.

Augustine noted the parallels between demonic possessions as witnessed to in scripture and the temptation to do harm to oneself. Augustine argued that the devil is behind the demon possessed boy who often fell in fire and water, the herd of pigs who after receiving the Legion of demons threw themselves in the sea, and Satan's attempt to get Jesus to throw himself off the pinnacle of the temple.<sup>15</sup> Characteristic of patristic biblical interpretation, Augustine employed

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<sup>14</sup> Augustine, *Contra litteras Petiliani libro duo*.

<sup>15</sup> Augustine, *Contra Gaudentium Donatistarum Episcopum libri du*, 1.27.30.

the allegorical method exemplified by that of his predecessor Origen who believed that biblical passages that appear to be indirect or vague should be interpreted by comparing these texts with other passages of scripture that are more straightforward.<sup>16</sup> However, Augustine did not continue interpreting scripture in this way. He departs from this method in his refutation of Gaudentius' argument that the Bible does not condemn suicide, but in fact, valorizes it.

Gaudentius cites the account of Razias, the Jewish elder in who fell upon his sword in order to 'die nobly rather than to fall into the hands of sinners.' [2 Maccabees 14:42]<sup>17</sup> In response, Augustine used the aforementioned Platonist understanding that suicide is excusable only when 'God sends some necessity,' and denotes the account of Razias readiness to kill himself as a demonstration of human courage to execute divine command such as the case of Abraham who was ready to kill his own son, and Samson who tore down the wall in order to defeat the Philistines.<sup>18</sup> Without any notations of divine command being present in the passage, Augustine assumes this must be the case—an invention that is referred to as such by Alexander Murray in his analysis of Augustine's theological method.<sup>19</sup> Murray describes Augustine's intertextual method of biblical interpretation as 'inventive inconsistencies' given that soon after Augustine's assumes that divine command is a factor in Razias' suicide, he concludes that his suicide is in actuality wrong.<sup>20</sup>

What becomes even more self-contradictory is Augustine's argument in the same chapter that suicide as both immoral and damnable. Augustine stated:

Quomodo enim **vindicetur**, nisi qui eum ausus est trucidare damnetur? In hac ergo voce non estis nisi accusatores vestri, quia vos estis rei sanguinis vestri. **Nec Deus nisi vos damnabit**, quando a vobis vel collisum, vel suffocatum, vel

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<sup>16</sup> David Dockery's *Biblical Interpretation Then and Now: Contemporary Hermeneutics in the Light of the Early Church* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1992), 94.

<sup>17</sup>Jacques Bels, *La mort volontaire* dans l'oeuvre de Saint Augustin. In: *Revue de l'histoire des religions*, tome 187 (1975), 161-162.

<sup>18</sup> Augustine, *Contra Gaudentium*, 1.31.39.

<sup>19</sup> Murray, *Suicide in the Middle Ages*, 109.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid*, 108.

exustum, vel quocumque pacto trucidatum, vel si hoc elegeritis, effusum sanguinem vestrum vindicabit.<sup>21</sup>

Note Augustine’s usage of disparaging phrases such as *Nec Deus nisi vos damnabit*: ‘Nor would God have, but will damn’ in the same sentence with the term *vindicabit* which means to avenge or punish.<sup>22</sup> It is clear that Augustine wishes to express that suicide is the work of the devil as well as an offense against God that necessitates and foresees the enactment of God’s retributive justice. What is most observable in Augustine’s argument is the lack of biblical justification and abundance of Greek philosophy upon which he bases his argument.

Just in a short passage, one can become aware of the operational framework from which Augustine develops a formal Christian declaration against suicide. Though Augustine did not quote Plato or Socrates here, he clearly withdrew upon their expressed beliefs that suicide is both a damnable offense in such a way that it becomes definitive “sin-talk.” It is important to state that Augustine was not the first to engage in this philosophical-Christian dialectic, but other Christian rhetoricians like Lactantius discussed the abominable nature of suicide in the eyes of God and God as the avenger of such an offense.<sup>23</sup>

However, distinguishable from Lactantius, Augustine writings occur during a pivotal period in the development of the Christian church as an institution evidenced by the Roman Edict of Milan in 313 A.D. and the Council of Nicea in 325 A.D. As an episcopal leader of the church during such a formative time, Augustine’s perspective stigmatizes suicide within Christian religion in an unprecedented fashion to the extent that this stigma becomes the definitive position of the church.

## II. Problematic Dimensions of Suicide as “Sin Talk”

What makes Augustine’s formidable contribution to Christian discourse on suicide so problematic is the degree to which he relies on

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<sup>21</sup> Augustine, *Contra Gaudentium Donatistarum Episcopum libri du*, 1.27.31.

<sup>22</sup> Francis E.J. Valpy, *An Etymological Dictionary of The Latin Language* (London: Balwin & Co, 1828), 511.

<sup>23</sup> Lactantius, *Divinae Institutiones III*, trans. Mary F. McDonald in the *Fathers of the Church* (Washington: Catholic University of America Press, 1964), 214; 3.18.30-35.

philosophical ideas as well the staggering observations of *discretionary grace* and contradictions within the style and form of his argumentation. These ‘inventive inconsistencies’ fail to demonstrate a sound moral declaration against suicide. They bear witness to the reality that Augustine wrestled with the convergence of his abstract theological and philosophical ideals and the tangible lived realities that complicate the practical application of those ideals.

#### **A. Augustine’s Discretionary Grace**

The convergence of the theoretical assumptions and the practical implications of Augustine’s sin talk here on suicide can be better understood if one considers the relationship between Augustine’s theological anthropology and his soteriology as expressed in his doctrine of grace. In Augustine’s aforementioned language of damnation as the divine punishment for suicide, it is clear that it is from his understanding of limited atonement that allows his doctrine of grace to be susceptible to exclusive interpretations of salvation. Augustine demonstrated a disconcerting form of *discretionary grace*, specifically when he addresses whether suicide is permissible in order to retain honor or avoid punishment.

Leaning in the rhetorical arguments expressed by his mentor St. Ambrose in *De Virginibus*, in the *City of God*, Augustine sympathized with the Christian virgins who commit suicide in order to avoid being raped or the dishonor of having been raped. Though these virgin suicides lack the ability to repent like all other suicides as he notes in the case of Lucretia, Augustine makes the claim that the Christian virgins must have been commanded by God (a claim he does not suppose or propose in defense of Lucretia) and argued that with divine command these Christian virgins are to be forgiven.<sup>24</sup> Augustine exonerated Abraham and Samson as justified by the “special intimation from God Himself.”<sup>25</sup> Augustine also absolved the Christian virgins whom he references earlier by pronouncing that they are to be granted forgiveness for their incurrence of guilt even by what he suggests must have been by divine command. Readers become aware quickly that Augustine did not appear to have a sound

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<sup>24</sup> Augustine, *City of God*, translated by Marcus Dods (Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers, Inc., 2011), 1.17.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid. 1.21.

perspective on suicide fully developed. This was expressed in his rendition of a kind of discretionary grace by way of pardoning sins to some and not others who commit the sin of suicide.

The most indicting incident of Augustine's practice of discretionary grace can be observed in his commentary on Judas Iscariot in his *Exposition of the Psalms* and *Tractates on the Gospel of John*. Augustine commented on Psalm 94 which describes God as an avenger against the wicked. He utilized Judas as a biblical example of the abominable upon whom divine punishment was rendered to avenge the betrayal of Christ. Augustine stated:

and we execrate Judas, through his deed God hath confessed so great a blessing upon us; and we rightly say, God hath recompensed him after his iniquity; and in his malice hath He destroyed him. For he delivered not Christ up for us, but for the silver for which he sold Him"<sup>26</sup>

We find continuity in Augustine's thoughts on Judas later in his remarks on Psalm 109, where he writes to encourage his parishioners to use the Psalms in their prayer life, and to 'pray in Christ.' Again, Judas was used as a negative example of an individual who did not 'pray in Christ,' and who indicated such by virtue of his suicide. Speaking hypothetically, Augustine believed that if Judas did pray that he would have received forgiveness and would have expressed hope to live instead of choosing to die.<sup>27</sup>

It is in the *Tractates on the Gospel of John* that Augustine provided a declarative statement on Judas' damnation. Theologian, Anthony Cane properly notes that Augustine complicated Jesus' admission in John 6:71 by suggesting that Judas was not chosen as a part of God's elect, but for another purpose within God's plan.<sup>28</sup> Understandably, Augustine was not expected to be a fan of Judas Iscariot; however, the argument here is that he erred in his use of speculation to justify condemnation. Augustine interrogated Judas' hope for future redemption by downplaying the probability of Judas being forgiven, even if he did confess his sin. For Augustine, it was Judas' betrayal of Christ *coupled* with his suicide that excluded him

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<sup>26</sup> St. Augustine, *Exposition on the Psalms*, trans. Rev. H.M. Wilkins (Baxter: Oxford, 1850), XCIV, 379-380.

<sup>27</sup> Anthony Cane, *The Place of Judas Iscariot in Christology* (Burlington, Ashgate Publishing Ltd, 2005), 99.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*

from being a recipient of God's redemptive grace but a target of God's wrath.

### **B. Augustine's Doctrine of Predestination & Perseverance of the Saints**

Scholars of Augustine have come to understand the rationale behind Augustine's pronouncement of damnation on those who commit suicide not by divine command, such as the case of Judas Iscariot, when examining his *Treatise On the Predestination of the Saints*. In this treatise, Augustine systematically outlined his thoughts on divine grace and human freedom relative to the doctrine of election. In summary, he described divine grace as the unmerited gift from God to come to faith in Christ, and argued that it could only be rejected by hardened hearts against God who are those non-elected by God.<sup>29</sup> Augustine believed that God chose the elect based on God's foreknowledge of who would choose to come to faith in Christ; therefore God instructed all to come to faith in Christ not because all would, but because God designed it to be impossible for humanity to be saved without doing so.<sup>30</sup>

The second book of the treatise entitled *On the Gift of Perseverance*, Augustine described what he believed to be the mutual inclusivity of election and perseverance whereby the extent of an individual's endurance is dependent upon whether or not he or she has been predestined by God to be saved.<sup>31</sup> Augustine explained that there was no such thing as a temporal perseverance, but true perseverance was unto death, which was presumably not caused at one's own volition.<sup>32</sup> This is an important point that makes it more comprehensible why Augustine understood suicide to be indicative of an individual's non-election, and therefore under condemnation.

Demonstrated here is one of the most significant areas of discontinuity within Augustine's theology and it brings to light both his genius and shortcomings. While Augustine make a pristine contribution toward an orthodox Christian understanding of the Fall

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<sup>29</sup> Augustine, *On the Predestination of the Saints*, trans. Robert Ernest Wallace, in Saint Augustin's Anti-Pelagian Works: A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Father of the Christian Church, ed. Philip Schaff (Grand Rapids:Eerdmans, 2007), 1.3 and 1.13.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid, 1.14 and 1:34.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid, 2.1.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

of humanity that helps make sense of sin and evil in the world, his doctrine of predestination and perseverance fails to make sense of how the elect might be able exercise their restored human freedom to determine the extent to which they allow the divine grace to sustain their human participation on earth.

Through a critical engagement of Augustine’s arguments so far we can make some crucial observations in the task of surmounting the condemnation of suicide and its exemption of the deceased from future redemption. The first observation is the presence of this convergence between the abstract and the concrete evidenced by Augustine’s practice of *discretionary grace*. In *On Nature and Grace*, Augustine states: “This grace, however, of Christ, without which neither infants nor adults can be saved, is not rendered for any merits, but is given *gratis*, on account of which it is also called grace. “*Being justified,*” says the apostle “*freely through His blood.*”<sup>33</sup> Theoretically, Augustine believed that even in the absence of actual sin or actual repentance, all of humanity (infants and adults) shared in both sin and in redeeming grace of Christ. However, in his praxis, Augustine conditions the extent to which individuals based on the condition of their death and genders are worthy of this grace.

The second observation is the problematic presence of contradictions or exceptionalism contained within Augustine’s argument describing the sinfulness of suicide. Theoretically, Augustine believed in adherence to the commandment ‘Thou shall not kill’ [Exodus 20:13] that God does not permit homicide, but in his practical interpretation of this commandment, he exercises the aforesaid discretionary grace to note Abraham and Samson as exceptions without biblical evidence to support this claim. In desperation to apply this divine command not to kill as a sufficient argument against suicide, Augustine argues that though the text does not add ‘yourself’ at the end, it is implied.<sup>34</sup> The main challenge that comes with Augustine’s aim to treat this commandments as though they cover all aspects of life causes him to alter his argument with a series of exemptions that permits the killing of *irrational creatures*, or

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<sup>33</sup> Augustine, *On Nature and Grace*, IV.1.

<sup>34</sup> Augustine, *City of God*, 1.20-21.

killing prompted by divine command.<sup>35</sup> Through what reads as impromptu exemptions and discretionary proclamations of grace and forgiveness, Augustine enters into a gridlock of practical and moral issues that are all predicated on perseverance, which becomes a criterion of worthiness.

Augustine does not invent the criterion of worthiness that is inherent in the theorization of suicide because it is visibly displayed in the assertions made in the works of Plato and Aristotle. However, it is through Augustine's integration of Greek philosophical ideas in his interpretation that allows the criterion of worthiness to be adopted in traditional Christian theological discourse on suicide. The *worthiness* criterion that Augustine adopts is a troublesome motif that is inherited in the religious doctrine of Christian theologians *par excellence* within the tradition such as Thomas Aquinas and John Calvin. This next section examines each of their respective appropriations of this moral standard.

### III. The Criterion of Worthiness within Christian Tradition

#### A. Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274)

Aquinas quotes Augustine's speculative commentary on the commandment 'Thou shall not kill' to ground his argument that suicide is unnatural, contrary to the assumption of individual responsibility within the human community, and an offense against the God's power to determine life and death.<sup>36</sup> The most distinctive aspect of Aquinas' contribution to the Christian conversation is found in his delineation between sins that are venial (forgivable) or mortal (unforgiveable) . Emerging out of this conceptualization of sin, Aquinas identified suicide as a mortal sin that was the "most grievous" and "most dangerous" of sins because one has no time left to repent.<sup>37</sup> This characterization of suicide as a mortal sin demonstrates a parallel between Augustine and Aquinas in that Aquinas expands upon the criterion of worthiness in Augustine's theological formulations concerning the nature of human redemption and its antithesis, which is human damnation.

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* (North Carolina, Hayes Barton Press, 2000), 2.64.5.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

## B. Aquinas & Medieval Literary Tradition

The influence of Aquinas' during his time is unprecedentedly illustrated in the literary work of Dante's *Divine Comedy* which describes the eternal fate that awaits humanity. For individuals who have committed suicide, they are sentenced to the seventh level of hell. Suicides are forever stripped of their human bodies, dramatically changed into thorny trees from which they hang for all of eternity---maintaining an unending disposition of shame.<sup>38</sup> One cannot dismiss the Aristotelian idea that suicide is unnatural that Aquinas furthers during the medieval period that is reflected here in allegorical form. The individual who commits suicide is perceived as one who has abandoned rationality, which is marker of their humanity, and therefore cursed to take on the form of an irrational creature. The individual who usurps the power of God to determine his or her own fate steals a life that does not belong to them, and therefore is condemned to bear the defilement of thieves, or 'harpies.'<sup>39</sup>

The most fascinating part of Dante's literal illustration of suicide and the punishment of eternal damnation can be found in his conversation with whom the reader comes to know as Pietro della Vigne. Pietro explains that killed himself in order to escape the contempt of the emperor, and he states:

My mind, in scornful temper thinking by dying to escape from scorn, made me, just, unjust to myself. By the new roots of this tree I swear to you, never did I break faith with my lord, who was so worthy of honour; and if either of you return to the world let him establish my memory, which still lies under the blow that envy gave it.<sup>40</sup>

Given the level of religious symbolism within the *Divine Comedy*, one cannot help but consider Pietro's appeal as the author's literary depiction of a sinner's plea that wishes to express to a

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<sup>38</sup> Dante Alighieri, *The Divine Comedy: 1: Inferno* trans. John D. Sinclair (New York: Oxford University Press, 1969), 1.13.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 'Harpies' were described in the Greek mythology as the winged creatures who often stole food from Phineus, the king of Thrace. In an attempt to escape the torment of the harpies, Phineus voyages with the Greek hero Jason to retrieve the Golden Fleece for King Pelias. See Apollonios Rhodios, *The Argonautika: Expanded Edition*, trans. with introduction and commentary by Peter Green (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2007), 85-91; Giovanni Boccaccio, *Boccaccio's Expositions on Dante's Comedy*, trans. with introduction and notes by Michael Papio (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2009), 529-530.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 171.

medieval audience the context of the human struggle not to “sin” while attempting to abide in faith. In order to make this conjecture, one must interpret Pietro’s earnest request to Dante to carry this message of his abiding faith to the emperor as an effort made to redeem his honor. Pietro’s situation bears striking similarities to Jesus’ parable of the rich man and Lazarus in the gospel of Luke 16: 19-31. Drawing on these parallels as such, the moral principle to be grasped is that, be it pride or wealth, a perversion of either is sinful and ushers one into damnation.

In Wallace Fowlie’s *A Reading of Dante’s Inferno*, he interprets Pietro’s condition to be a theological representation of the relentlessness of God’s divine punishment toward suicides who “deny the mobility of their God-given body”<sup>41</sup> Fowlie summarizes the Catholic perspective on suicide that Aquinas carried forth in the Christian tradition---a perspective that Dante wished to elucidate in this piece of artistic literature. In such a case, there is no hope for redemption for those who commit suicide because they are not subject to the grace of purgatory, but sentenced to hell where they will never be forgiven of their sin. The criterion of worthiness that Dante illustrates is Aquinas’ valorization of Aristotelian idealization of courage. Aquinas appropriates this idealization of courage in such a way that he interprets courage to be a defining component in an individual’s ability to embody the virtues of faith, hope, and charity.<sup>42</sup> Otherwise stated, one is not worthy of redemption if one is not faithful enough to bear the brunt of longsuffering; hopeful enough in the power of God’s deliverance; or charitable enough to have positive regard for the divine gift of human life.

Understanding the historical trajectory within which philosophical ideals are reinscribed by key formers of Christian theology is necessary in order to contend with the spirited history of condemnation that is associated with suicide. The brief history of ideas on suicide is an exemplar among many instances in which Christians utilize secular license in their ethical mediation. The most convincing element of this age-old argument that suicide is immoral is the intertextual interpretation that Augustine engages to support the

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<sup>41</sup> Wallace Fowlie, *A Reading of Dante’s Inferno* (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1981), 93.

<sup>42</sup> *Summa Theologiae*, 2:2:64:5.

argument that there are particular instances of suicide that are associated with diabolical motivation. However, what remains unacknowledged is how a preoccupation with the condemning of suicide impedes the consideration of how the omnipotence of God is at work even in the midst of perceived evil. How are we to affirm the intrinsic value of life and encourage the ascent of the both the soul and body into participation with the divine while at the same time resisting the urge to condemn which arguably seeks to repel the redemptive work of Christ?

Within Christian tradition there is no escaping the groundwork of Augustine and this work of Aquinas, nor is it the intention of this work to convince one to do so. However, the criterion of worthiness must be evaluated in order to utilize the genius of their contribution without inheriting its contradiction. It can also be seen to be inadequate to dismiss the biblical revelation in a place of eternal suffering and punishment that is referenced in the gospels (Matthew 25:46; Luke 16: 22-28) and in the book of Revelation (14:10-11; 19:3; 20:10). Considering this reality, damnation should not be seen as a non-factor within the Christian saga of sin and redemption but as a matter that occurs out of divine omnipotence. Jesus instructs us not to be fearful of human power, but to have reverence for the power of God who determines the fate of our soul.

### **C. John Calvin (1509-1564)**

John Calvin was one within the Reformed tradition who attempted to moderate the urge to damn suicides while at the same time affirm the sanctity of humanity. Calvin clearly inherited the idea that suicide was sinful from Augustine and Aquinas, and believed it to be a perversion of pride, unnatural, and indicative of demonic influence.<sup>43</sup> Jeffery Watt's article entitled *Calvin on Suicide*, examines his condemnation of suicide and notes that Calvin believed it to be not only a sin, but the result of divine punishment for resisting the will of God.<sup>44</sup> Though much of what we find in Calvin is the influence of Augustine on his theology, Watt's notes that Calvin did not engage Augustine's distinction between martyrdom and suicide

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<sup>43</sup> Jeffrey Watt, "Calvin on Suicide" in *Church History* 66:3 (Cambridge University Press, 1997), 466-470, 512-514.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 462-465.

nor did he agree with the desecration of bodies and the disgraceful burial of suicides.<sup>45</sup> Though Augustine and Aquinas did not speak in favor of these practices in particular, there is no evidence that suggests that either of the two spoke against it. One can only assume that the Catholic and Protestant practices of denying Christian burial to suicides would not have become a Christian religious tradition had they did speak in any way against it. The point here is that there is evidence that Calvin rejected the common idea and customary practice that held that those who died by suicide were completely devoid of any sanctity.

In Calvin's sermon on Ahithophel in 2 Samuel 17, he stated: "God wants our enemies to be honored even after their death...It would seem as if they were unworthy to be buried in the earth, or rather that the earth was not worthy to have them."<sup>46</sup> Calvin speaks against this concept of worthiness in one respect, but relies upon it in his discourse on Judas Iscariot. Calvin commented in his *Fourth Sermon on the Passion of Our Lord*: "For there is Judas who is entirely cut off from the number of the children of God. It is even necessary that his condemnation appear before men and that it be entirely obvious."<sup>47</sup> The criterion of worthiness emerges consistently, and allows for the discretionary and exclusive problematized discourse on eternal security.

Augustine's doctrine of predestination and Calvin's appropriation encounters a key problem to be restated here: though they wish to stress God as the sole actor in salvation, their commentaries on suicide are lack scriptural basis and overly influenced by secular philosophy. When Christian theologians speculate on the degree to which certain things are sinful, these speculations can lay groundwork for "sin-talk" that leads to further speculation as to which sins are *worth* of exoneration and/or which sins are an indication of God's predestination.

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<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 472-473.

<sup>46</sup> Calvin, *Supplementa Calviniana*, ed. Hanns Ruckert (Neukirchen, Germany, 1961), 517.

<sup>47</sup> John Calvin, "Fourth Sermon on the Passion of Our Lord Jesus Christ," in *Sermons on the Saving Work of Christ*, trans. L. Dixon (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 1980), 108.

#### D. Jacobus Arminius (1560-1609)

The practice of exempting those who die by suicide from the hope of future redemption is exacerbated in early modernity and in the Age of Enlightenment. During this span of time, Christian theologians grappled extensively with ideas on human reason and autonomy expounded upon by philosophers such as Rene Descartes, Thomas Hobbes, and John Locke.<sup>48</sup> On the heels of Calvinism would emerge the competing voice of Dutch theologian, Jacobus Arminius who came to develop a different perspective on human freedom and divine grace.

Arminius adopted the orthodox belief in the depravity of humanity that was formidably articulated by Augustine and that persisted to a modern height in the teaching of John Calvin.<sup>49</sup> Though he believed that humanity was only free to sin without the grace of God, Arminius expressed a concept of divine grace that acknowledged the importance of the human will and the *persuasive* role of God that opposed Calvin's perception of a more *coercive* divine grace.<sup>50</sup> An understanding of divine grace to be persuasive highlighted the possibility of human beings to opt out of salvation. Arminius argued that all of humanity, the elect and the non-elect had the opportunity to experience the grace of God, but that this grace was not irresistible. Arminius held that faith would be the determinant of salvation because, for him, the doctrine of justification by faith implied divine mercy that absolved the believer and divine judgment that indicted the non-believer.<sup>51</sup> John Wesley came behind Arminius a century later to add that the lack of faith as well as non-repentance could cause a once believer to lose their salvation. In Wesley's *Thoughts on Suicide*, he described suicide to be an expression of

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<sup>48</sup> See Michael Losonsky's *Enlightenment and Action from Descartes to Kant* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007) for a thorough historical explication of philosophical ideas from classical modernity to the Age of Enlightenment and its influence on how epistemology is determined to be influenced by human society and social relationships.

<sup>49</sup> Jacobus Arminius, *Arminius Speaks: Essential Writings on Predestination, Free Will, and the Nature of God*, ed. John D. Wagner (Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 2011).

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 334.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 140.

human resistance to grace and a crime of impatience that justified punishment and disgraceful burial in order to deter others.<sup>52</sup>

From the early church to the Reformation and into the Age of Enlightenment, we have observed the trend of condemnation within Christian discourse. An examination of Augustine's philosophical hermeneutics that guided his allegorical and intertextual method of theological and biblical interpretation revealed a speculative and inconsistent moral declaration of suicide as a sin of perdition that influenced his soteriological idealization of perseverance. Failure to acknowledge the moral ambiguity within his argumentation denied those who died by suicide hope for future redemption and provided Christian communities with license to posthumously imagine and physically dramatize the desacralization of human beings.

Human history has attested to the reality that human hands are far too feeble and frail to handle creation without the assistance of the divine. When left to our own devices, we conceptualize out of our misconceptions and appraise with unreliable scales that are liable to be both erroneous and misleading. An unprecedented example of such misguided measurement has been in the theoretical and material handling of the bodies and souls of our brothers and sisters who have died by suicide. This desacralization has been documented throughout European history from the refusal to extract the bodies of suicides from open doors due to the social and religious identification of those bodies to be unworthy of proper extraction to the public mutilation and hangings of bodies, and the denial of Christian burials. The first eighty pages of Alexander Murray's work provides an account of how the bodies and property of those who died by suicide were physically handled and how the fate of their souls were theorized in religious and philosophical discourse.<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> John Wesley, "Thoughts on Suicide" written on April 8, 1790, *The works of the Reverend John Wesley A.M. Vol. VII*, (New York: J. Emory and B. Waugh, 1831), 463.

<sup>53</sup> Murray, *Suicide in the Middle Ages*, 10-84.

#### IV. Positive Interventions: From the Exemption of Hope to the Embodiment of Hope

##### A. Implications for Theological Anthropology

It was not until the Age of Enlightenment and the development of the social sciences that important shifts were made to consider mental illness as not merely an indication of demonic influence, but a significant public health issue.<sup>54</sup> This shift in Christian discourse on suicide opens the door for some positive interventions in the practice of condemning suicides in such a way that allows room within the faith tradition to lament in acknowledgment of the many men and women who have been desacrilized by our “sin talk,” and to express our repentance for allowing our “sin-talk” to recapitulate sin through an expressed commitment to be attentive to the need to affirm the sanctity of humanity in our processes toward suicide prevention. Lamentation and repentance in this context necessitates some constructive work within our doctrinal formulations on God and humanity.

Working with the poignant suggestion made by Stephen G. Ray in his work *Do No Harm: Social Sin and Christian Responsibility* where he draws attention to how some Christian theologians in their incongruent descriptions of sin actually impede their efforts to astutely discern the way the sin is being witness in the concrete realities of individuals in community.<sup>55</sup> Ray articulates a constructive theological anthropology that cautions against sin talk that renders assumptions about how sin affects our closeness to God. He substantiates his theological anthropology by seeking to redeem “sin-talk” by working with Augustine’s understanding of human depravity without inheriting the aforementioned appraisal of his shortcomings. Ray argues that a responsible theological anthropology leans toward the Augustinian principle that all of humanity stands before God in both a state of disgrace because of original sin as well as a state of grace because of the redemptive work of Christ.<sup>56</sup> By leaning on this

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<sup>54</sup> Anton J.L. van Hooff, “A Historical Perspective on Suicide in *Comprehensive Textbook of Suicidology*. ed. Ronald W. Maris, Alan L. Berman, and Morton M. Silverman ( New York: Guilford. Jordan, John R. 2001), 119-122.

<sup>55</sup> Stephen G. Ray, *Do No Harm: Social Sin and Christian Responsibility* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003), 75-76.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, 108-11.

principle of participation, we are able to resist the tendency to qualify sin in a way that leads toward the development of a system of hierarchy that contains upper and lower echelons of human standing with God. The historical condemnation of suicide that is described in this work bears witness to the creation of this system of hierarchy within Christian discourse that has marginalized those who die by suicide, and this principle of participation provides a way to dismantle this oppressive discourse.

In an effort to move from the practice of articulating the exemption of hope toward the embodiment of hope, I propose for consideration Psalm 139:8. It is a psalm that testifies to the presence of the divine even in the darkest residences of our souls. Hebrew Bible scholar, J. Clinton McCann notes that the psalmist here wanted to emphasize the inescapable presence of God even in the bowels of Sheol, which was usually believed to be outside of divine proximity.<sup>57</sup> McCann cautions against reading Psalm 139 with the aim to justify the classical doctrine of predestination, but clarifies “however, the word *predestination* may be appropriately applied to Psalm 139 if it is understood fundamentally as an affirmation that our lives derive from God, belong to God, and find their true destination in God’s purposes.”<sup>58</sup>

To take McCann’s observation a step further, how might we understand to be the work of God in the midst of our eternal state of belonging within proximity to God? The Eastern Orthodox tradition helps us to understand the divine activity that furthers the constructive work of a theological anthropology that affirms the presence of divine activity in both human life and death. Gregory of Nazianzus uses the term *perichoreo* to describe the relationality of the members of the Trinity in which he states: “Just as the natures are mixed so also the names pass reciprocally (*perichoreo*) into each other by the principle of this coalescence.”<sup>59</sup> In Gregory’s *Oration 18*, he uses the term *perichoreo* to describe the reciprocal nature of life and death and says:

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<sup>57</sup> J. Clinton McCann Jr., “*The Book of Psalms: Introduction, Commentary, and Reflections*,” in *The New Interpreter’s Bible*, vol. 4 (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996), 1237.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, 1237.

<sup>59</sup> Gregory of Nazianzus, *Epistle CI: To Cleodius the Priest against Apollinarius*, par. 4.

Verna Harrison, “Perichoresis in the Greek Fathers,” *St. Vladimir’s Theological Quarterly* 35, no. 1 (1991), 55-56.

“Life and death, as they are called, apparently so different, are in a sense revolved into (perichorei), and successive to, each other.” Scholars like Brian Scalise interpret Gregory’s use of the term *perichoresis* to describe the Trinity as well as to offer an explanation on how humanity is renewed in the image of Christ through the passing of divine properties to humanity.<sup>60</sup> If we apply these observations of perichoresis in our task to restore the hope of future redemption to those who die by suicide, then we are able to problematize Augustine’s assertion that the perseverance of the believer can only be expressed within the realm of human life and the state of that believer’s death. Demonstrated here is a departure from Western theology toward a more holistic view of life that includes a view on the continuity of life and death as integral to the renewal of life.

Continuing in this departure from traditional Western theology, it would be advantageous to consider two of the tenets of Womanist theology and ethics in our conversation. For example, by considering the Womanist ethical tenet of radical subjectivity, we are encouraged to acknowledge, even within the case of suicide, the ways human agency can be used in order to ‘seriously, responsibly, and audaciously’ forge new possibilities in the world.<sup>61</sup> This acknowledgment of human agency permits believers to choose *how* they wish to participate in divine grace in a way that does not nullify divine justification just as in their human choice to have faith does not nullify God’s prevenient grace that extends to them the invitation to faith. This is how we are able to construct a theological anthropology that expresses the sovereign activity of God’s grace without posthumously oppressing those who die by suicide.

## **B. Implications on Theological Praxis**

Let us now consider ways in which we can both articulate the sovereign activity of God’s grace within our theology as well as embody such a hopeful declaration within our communal praxis. Considering that more than ninety-percent of those who die by suicide

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<sup>60</sup> Scalise, Brian T. (2012) "Perichoresis In Gregory Nazianzen and Maximus the Confessor," *Eleutheria*: Vol. 2: Iss. 1, Article 5, p. 3-5; 9.

<sup>61</sup> Stacey Floyd-Thomas, *Mining the Motherlode: Methods of Womanist Ethics* (Cleveland: The Pilgrim Press, 2006), 8.

in the United States are found to have diagnosable mental disorders, one can only reasonably deduce that humanity had a handling problem when it comes to those who have died by suicide; humanity, historically and presently, has had a handling problem with the living, and particularly those who are living with mental illness.<sup>62</sup> In *Testamentum Imperium*'s last volume that attended to this question of redemption for suicides, Karen E. Mason attends to this reality in her proposal of a non-judgmental method of pastoral care that nurtures suicidal members in hope and galvanizes the surrounding faith community as an embodiment of that hope as intervention and method of suicide prevention.<sup>63</sup> Communal embodiment of hope can then be seen as the passing of divine properties of creative relationality that exists within the Trinity and the believer toward the transformative renewal of communities in the image of Christ.

Creative relationality is described also within Womanist discourse to suggest that instances of communal transformation and renewal have a soteriological dimension that is essential in the human struggle against sin and evil in the world. Echoing Delores Williams' argument that the salvific work of Christ can be found in the ministerial vision of Christ, Monica A. Coleman interprets the ministerial vision of Christ to have a communal dimension that she refers to as creative transformation. Coleman describes communal transformation as the discernment and action taken upon the call of Christ in particular situations where it is necessary to challenge the destructive behaviors at work in order to affirm the life giving and redemptive incarnation of God in the world.<sup>64</sup>

Through these considerations of radical subjectivity and creative transformation, perceptions of suicide can cease to be entrapped in speculative dialogue concerned with whether or not it is a sin. Rather, the dialogue can be opened up to consider suicide and all that influences it as an existential reality. Considering the role of human agency, the redemptive work of Christ, and the reality of systemic evil as operative factors at work, it can then be possible to see suicide not as sin, but as a way of grappling with sin and evil. Is it possible to

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<sup>62</sup> National Institute of Mental Health. Suicide in the US: Statistics and Prevention.

<sup>63</sup> Karen E. Mason, Does Suicide Exempt the Deceased from the Hope of Future Redemption?

<sup>64</sup> Monica Coleman, *Making A Way Out of No Way: A Womanist Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2008), 89-90.

consider suicide then, as the simultaneous stretching forth of the human soul toward divine grace and a willful turn away from a fallen world shaped largely by systemic evil and the human resistance to be conformed by grace? The systemic evil within a fallen world that I am referring to operates on a number of levels and materialize in what social scientists have identified as risk factors for suicidal behavior. These risk factors are inclusive of but not limited to family conflict, mental disorders, social isolation, and economic oppression.<sup>65</sup>

Working with the social theory of Emilie Durkheim (1897) and Shneidman (1987), a recent study has identified that when the strongest of these risk factors are present and the human need to belong and to feel valued are unmet, the risk of suicidal behavior increases.<sup>66</sup> Though there are more male suicides than female suicides, this study also highlights the reality that women are more likely to attempt suicide because they are more likely to experience the aforementioned risk factors.<sup>67</sup> Instead of debating the sinfulness of suicide, theologians should examine how such disparities on suicide are reflective of systematic oppression and the intersections of sexism, racism, and classism. Statistics on violence and rape indicate that women of color are, arguably, the most unsafe group of people in the U.S.<sup>68</sup> The theological agenda should be to determine how the way we talk about sin and worthiness provides a theoretical framework that allows this to be the case. This is the question behind the question. Meaning, in order to investigate the theological marginalization of those who die by suicide, we must be able to discern the ways in which theological conversations become gestures of the faith community to place or *displace* people within the salvation narrative. The first task of the theologian is to see this *displacement* by human beings to be contrary to the gospel of Jesus Christ, and to be fortuitous enough to identify its practice as *sinful*.

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<sup>65</sup> Kimberly Van Orden, Witte TK, Cukrowicz KC, Braithwaite SR, Selby EA, Joiner TE. "[The Interpersonal Theory of Suicide](#)." Psychological review. 2010 Apr 0; 117 (2):575-600. This research found that these.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid., 588-591.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid., 591-592.

<sup>68</sup> M.C. Black, Basile, K.C., Breiding, M.J., Smith, S.G., Walters, M.L., Merrick, M.T., Chen, J., & Stevens, M.R, *The National Intimate Partner and Sexual Violence Survey (NISVS): 2010 Summary Report* (Atlanta, Center for Disease Control and Prevention, 2011), 83-86.

And secondly, theologians must help communities, in their care of suicidal persons, to be attentive to the individual as well as the conditions within society that shape them and their perceptions of their realities. In this respect, the dialogue on the sinfulness of suicide can no longer be a distraction in our communal discernment and fight against systemic evil, but we must work to help people escape condemnation in life and in death.



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