On Suicide in Islam

In a historical investigation of suicide it is necessary to distinguish between the occurrence of actual cases of suicide and the theoretical discussion of the problems connected with it. Cases of suicide may occur in any place and at any time. Unfavorable social, or psychic, or psycho-physiological conditions have been considered as causes of the phenomenon. Suggestions have been made as to how to limit, or eliminate, its occurrence. It would seem possible that the frequency of suicide could be curbed by remedying the conditions conducive of it. However, under the prevailing circumstances, such general improvement appears not to be in sight, and, at any rate, the occurrence of various cases of suicide is and will be unavoidable.

Discussions of the problems connected with suicide, on the other hand, are much less to be taken for granted. It is true that there is evidence for the presence of speculation about the ethical aspects of suicide even among “primitive” human beings. There are instances which show that men at a very low stage of cultural development considered suicide as a violation of the established social order or as an act directed against the welfare of the “soul” of an individual.1 In general, it would seem that “primitive” human beings reflected along approximately the same lines as the author of the most penetrating modern discussion of suicide, David Hume, who started out to prove that “if suicide be criminal, it must be a transgression of our duty either to God, our neighbour, or ourselves,”2 and came to the conclusion (contrary to that of the “primitive” thinkers) that it was none of those three possibilities.

Yet, it remains a fact that theoretical reasoning about suicide is comparatively rarely encountered among “primitive” groups. During certain periods it also is very little noticeable in higher civilization. A possible explanation of the attitude of “primitive” groups may be found in the assumption that they were so stunned by the unnatural character of suicide that they considered it a catastrophe beyond the sphere of human reasoning. Such a mental attitude, however,

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1 Cf. J. Wisse, Selbstmord und Todesfurcht bei den Naturvölkern 516 f. and passim (Zutphen, 1933); S.R. Steinmetz, Der Selbstmord bei den afrikanischen Naturvölkern, in Zeitschrift für Socialwissenschaften 10,362, 374 (1907).
could hardly be expected to have prevailed in the more highly developed stages of society. Here another explanation suggests itself.

Only in the assumption that the life of an individual is continued in some form or other after his death and that he will then be punished for his deed can there be not the slightest doubt that suicide in fact is a harmful act. The religions which thus convinced their faithful believers of the frightful consequences of suicide succeeded in keeping the rate of its incidence very low. The lack of, or the emancipation from such religious guidance has to be paid for by an increase in the number of cases of suicide, but at the same time a keen interest in the theoretical aspects of suicide comes to the fore. Consequently, it would seem that the prevalence of a firm, unshattered religious belief accounts for the periodic avoidance of independent discussions of the problem of suicide.

The correctness of this assumption is borne out by the situation prevalent in Graeco-Roman and, especially, in modern times. Suicide was a favorite topic of Hellenistic philosophy and of the period of enlightenment in the eighteenth century, when the prestige of traditional religion was at a low ebb. The history of suicide in Islam lends itself, *mutatis mutandis*, to similar observations.

It follows from the preceding remarks that the investigation of suicide in Islam falls into two parts: 1) The actual (or legendary) cases of suicide, or attempted suicide, as they have been reported in Arabic literature, and 2) the theoretical discussions of the problem of suicide, both those reflecting the official attitude of Islam and those which originated outside the sphere of Muslim theology. Since the latter aspect is the more important one, it has here been given precedence over the statistics of actual cases which appears to be of limited significance.

I Theoretical Discussions of Suicide

1 The Official Religious Attitude

(“A religion amongst the followers of which suicide is almost absolutely unknown ...”)³

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