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THE PURITAN PROBLEM OF SUICIDE

Man debates death at a focus of his debate with life, and where the question has been one of voluntary departure, his motives for staying, shift as they might, have been drawn to a burning point. It was thus with the Puritans. They called even to death and the deep, in zeal of the higher life.

In the seventeenth century, suicide became for the first time a subject for complete books. The earliest to get into print was John Sym's *Lifes Preservative against Self-Killing*, published at London in 1637, and still selling for four shillings in 1655, shortly after which, for all one can see, it disappeared from circulation. Sym was an Anglican clergyman of Puritan inclinations; part of his expressed motive was to supply the lack of an entire tractate on the subject, at a time when he thought, with the aspiration of a true author, that there was a "surcharge" of books on most topics, many less necessary than his. Taking up his subject by a Puritan handle, he divided it systematically according to the current practice of the pulpit, wrote steadily through such topics as Knowledge of Life and Death, Uses of the Knowledge, Methods of Self-Murder, Motives, Persons Prone, Arguments Against, and Antidotes, and provided the market with a sober treatise of pastoral theology.

Only ten years later, in 1646 or 1647, John Donne's *Biathanatos* was published posthumously with a short preface by John Donne Junior. Written about 1608, this daring book was the first to be published in England to defend the unorthodox thesis that "self-homicide is not so naturally sinne, that it may never be otherwise." Contentious and paradoxical, it may seem a mere tour-de-force of learning, and Lecky, the historian of European morals, has called it "feeble and involved;" to others it may look straight as a die in organization, steady in attitude, pointed in argument, and sometimes wickedly lively in expression. Donne had been interested neither in methods nor in antidotes; he gave his pages to an intellectual unravelling of knots of theology, philosophy, and civil and canon law. In the wry light of reason, he contended less, I think, to foster suicide, than to establish that there might be circumstances in which the deed was not a deviation from the laws of nature, reason, and God, and therefore that it was not inherently sinful and not always unpardonable.

In 1653 a third whole, if not unified, book on suicide appeared, neither tractate nor thesis, but a poem in twelve cantos, with prose explanations and "consolatory" essays. This was Sir William Denny's *Pelecanicidium: Or the Christian Adviser against Self-Murder*. As the psalmist had quieted Saul, a notorious Biblical self-killer, so Sir William chose verse "to disenchant the Possessed," happily obtuse to the fact that his paragon had failed. The new David is not a candidate for inclusion in the canon of English classics. He might just possibly have an effect of some kind on a reader with suicidal tendencies. His intent was to dissuade from the sin, and to provide an attractive allegorical guide to the virtues that calm tormented souls.

The publication, within the space of sixteen years, of three books on a theme previously handled as a sub-topic of wider subjects, ought to carry some significance, though scholars, with *joie de vie*, have passed it by. Denny was prompted by his learning of actual cases of suicide. "Mine Eares do tingle," he wrote, "to hear so many sad Relations, as ever since March last concerning Severall Persons of diverse Rank, and Quality, inhabiting within and about so Eminent a Citty, as late-fam'd London, that have made away, and Murder'd Themselves." He composed out of Christian compassion "lest the Frequency of such Actions might in time arrogate a Kind of Legitimation by Custom, or plead Authority from some late publisht Paradoxes, That Self-homicide was Lawfull." Obviously, he was referring to Donne's *Biathanatos. A Declaration of That Paradoxe, or Thesis . . .* The prevalence of suicide had been noted in 1647, when *Biathanatos* itself was coming on the market, as in *A Petition vnto His Excellencie, Sir Thomas Fairfax* an anonymous observer wrote that people's cutting their throats or hanging or drowning themselves "is now growne so common, that selfe murther is scarce accounted any newes." Earlier, cases of suicide had been attracting attention when Sym's book came out. His fellow minister William Gouge wrote in a preface to it dated 1637: "I suppose, that scarce an age since the beginning of the world hath afforded more examples of this desperate inhumanity, than this our present age, and that in all sorts of people. Clergie, Laity, Learned, unlearned, Noble, Female, young and old."

On their own these remarks might be disregarded. Throughout history parsons and schoolmasters have affirmed that religion or education is not what it used to be. In the reigns of Elizabeth I and of James I clergymen could be heard declaring that "some" or "many" persons had committed suicide. Gouge's words, like those of every other Jeremiah, invite a higher criticism. It comes to hand in recently compiled statistics for the incidence of suicide in Greater London in the seventeenth and

eighteenth centuries. These show that in the period from the mid-1640's to 1660 suicide was some fifty per cent commoner than in the years either immediately before or after. In 1660 the rate was nearly three times as high as it had been in the mid-1630's, but in 1661 it fell back nearly to its earlier level and remained there for twenty years. (I shall publish the tables elsewhere; unfortunately, owing to the nature of the data the rate of suicide in the seventeenth century cannot validly be compared with that of the present day.) So William Gouge was a prophet in Israel, and the first English books on suicide must be taken realistically. There had been a temporary increase in suicide in the early 1630's, and Sym's book perhaps grew out of that warning. The period of the marked increase in suicide coincided closely with the period of the political triumph of the Puritan regime. Simultaneously, political philosophy almost certainly promoted some part of the increase, and at the Restoration reduced it. This consideration apart, in the mid-seventeenth century suicide was a practical and urgent problem in the Puritan way of religious life.

One would like a large filing cabinet of personal case histories, but clinical evidence cannot be had. Stray reports of individuals tell us little. On Thursday, March 17, 1653, in the parish of St. Giles, Cripplegate, Thomas Mince, of Colonel Whalley's regiment, shot himself after writing a religious note to the Saints to clear his wife of complicity: "The best men have failings either in one kind or another." A man "of very sober life and conversation," he was thought to have "secretly laine under the guilt of the highest degree of premeditated murder against himself." A published tract moralized and found fault with him: he had begun to slight prayer and preachings and had confessed to his wife that he was ambitious. Who can tell from this what was the secret turmoil in his mind? Perhaps we rarely understand, even in present-day instances. Suicidal types had become traditional: the epicure, the disappointed lover, the great spirit, the melancholiac, the jealous man, the frightened child, the debauched apprentice, the unfortunate merchant, the bloody murderer despairing of God's pardon, the desperate zealot, the "tender Conscienc't Despairer"—though Denny's poetic pictures, touched up with local colour, show us the hopeless client come from Westminster with a pen-knife in his sleeve, and—what may have been historical and recent—"one that hang'd himself, upon his Knees, with a Bible on a Stool open before him, and a Paper to signifie that he had repented." We cannot say, it must be confessed, what proportion of those who committed suicide were Puritan and what Royalist. Royalists were not immune; one recalls, if Aubrey is right, the gay Suckling, who in earlier years had written a light letter on someone else's suicide, and the moderate Falkland, who is

believed to have sought the death he found in the thick of the enemy at the Battle of Newbury. Sir Thomas Browne had dreamed suicide, and the younger Casaubon was held from it in sickness only by "obligation of conscience." Yet the over-large number of Londoners who made away with themselves in the glorious year of the Restoration can hardly have been Royalists, even allowing for the excesses of loyal joy.

The causes of the epidemic must be supposed to have been complex. Statistics for suicide in the twentieth century are sometimes held to justify the statement that the deed is more characteristic of Protestant countries (Denmark, Sweden the Swiss Protestant Cantons) than of Catholic (Italy, Spain, Portugal, Eire). (The rate in Canada as a whole is comparatively low, except in British Columbia, where it is nearly as high as what is called high in Europe; in the Province of Quebec it is half that of the Dominion as a whole, less than half that in Ontario, and a fifth of that in British Columbia.) In the general European picture there are exceptions. In France the rate is high. In England it is fairly low, and in Scotland lower still; it is low too in Norway and in the Netherlands. Squinting at the exceptions, the modern seers of the statistics reveal that suicide depends little on theology but more on the degree to which a church controls its members' lives; in this respect Anglicanism in England is said to function like Catholicism outside France. Whatever the truth of this, we may feel little surprise that in seventeenth-century England militant Protestantism could have been accompanied by an increase in suicide; the question will arise how the increase could have been associated with a collapse of church discipline. Suicide is said to be less frequent among persons who have a sense of belonging to a group (such as a race, nation, family, or church) than among those in communities not hostile to the individual—a view that gains support from a study recently reported in the *Canadian Medical Association Journal* (LXXV, 1956). A coincidence has also been seen between suicide and periods of social disorganization. In general, it may be supposed that in the mid-seventeenth century members of both parties made away with themselves under the strain of a national crisis. The factor of civil war alone seems insufficient; the epidemic grew more severe after the cessation of hostilities, and in recent eras civil suicide seems to have declined during wartime, though there is a form peculiar to the services; perhaps the character of a modern war effort does not permit any comparison between popular wartime behaviour now and during the Puritan struggle. Relations between suicide and changing social and economic conditions in the mid-seventeenth century require a specialized study. I believe it is true that in that century poverty as such was rarely regarded by perpetrators or opponents of suicide as being enough

on its own to drive a man to the deed. It is, however, not my purpose to discuss all the causes of the Puritan epidemic.

In the eighteenth century poverty came to be citable as an insuperable obstacle to living. Granted that the shocks and problems of the environment had altered: so had the mental attitude. In the twentieth century the important factor "state of mind" is taken to include large irrational and subconscious elements. In the seventeenth century it was held to be quite within the control of the reason. This difference is one of the sharpest distinctions between the earlier and the present-day approaches to suicide. In the absence of theories of the unconscious mind and of group behaviour, suicide was regarded less as a psychological and social problem than as the subject of a religious and moral debate in which sound opinions made up a sound state of mind.

From antiquity to the nineteenth century, philosophers, theologians, and poets who treated of suicide thought that they had to deal with ideas, and expected their arguments to disturb the balance of men's minds. Undoubtedly, orthodox horror of suicide amounted to a religious and social taboo; ancient pagan dreads had been sanctified by the Church in the sixth and again in the thirteenth century when restrictions were applied to the Christian burial of the bodies of those who had committed suicide. Ecclesiastical practice, seconded by civil law and custom, had assuredly nurtured deeply-rooted group responses. At the same time, the seventeenth-century community inherited a body of dogma against suicide, was instructed in it, and passed it on into the eighteenth century. A complex of ideas circulated in sermons, commentaries on Scripture, collections of cases of conscience, philosophic *quaestiones*, and moralized romances and poems. Near the middle of the century Thomas Fuller could go quite naturally into the pulpit of St. Clement's, Eastcheap, with the aim (remarkable if accomplished) "to confute such as are guilty of Selfe-homicide. . . Either of Omission, or Commission." He seems to have been reading Sym, who had divided self-murder into direct and indirect, and the indirect variety into that wrought by commission and that by omission.

Since Augustine's time, the fulcrum of the Christian religious abhorrence, as distinct from pagan philosophic opposition, was the argument that suicide was a direct sin against God because it was contrary to the sixth commandment, "Thou shalt not kill." The penalty was everlasting damnation. The absolute prohibition rested squarely on Scripture; the Scriptural ban was abetted by arguments of reason. Suicide was contrary to general Providence as that might be known by the law of nature, which prompted to self-preservation. Aquinas reasoned that suicide was evil in its nature, and life was the gift of God. Stoic and Epicurean

philosophers had approved of suicide as honourable and courageous, or as a legitimate withdrawal from a state of insupportable and incurable pain; Christians countered with arguments borrowed from other philosophers. A favourite from Plato was that a man is sent into life like a sentinel appointed to a post that he cannot abandon without orders from his commander. Aristotle provided the important view that the citizen has an obligation to the state. Legal penalties were justified on such a basis. Dozens of *ad hoc* arguments can be recited—but their general conclusion is that it would be sinful, as well as unnecessary, to murder ourselves.

The Anglican approach and emphases in 1660 are neatly revealed in Jeremy Taylor's treatment of suicide as a case of conscience. Beginning from the practical situation, he maintained that penalties imposed by judges must be suffered but may not be inflicted by the hands of the condemned himself. It is not lawful on any account for a man to kill himself of his own accord. Suicide is cowardice and shows distrust of God's grace. It is directly against divine commandment. "It is impiety and rebellion against God; it is desertion of our military station, and a violation of the properties and peculiar rights of God." "It is against the law, and the voice, and the very prime inclination of Nature. Everything will preserve itself." It is injurious to the commonwealth. Examples and precedents do not authorize it. A similar "sensible" and civic view was current in the Anglican Henry Hammond's popular *Practical Catechism*, which went through at least fourteen editions between 1645 and 1700. The sixth commandment forbade one to kill himself in any circumstances whatever; rather he was "to submit to God's providence, and to wait, though it be in the most miserable, painfull, wearisome life, till God please to give him manumission." In the first quarter of the century Launcelot Andrewes had also treated suicide in connection with the sixth commandment.

In *Lifes Preservative* John Sym dutifully iterated the arguments. Self-murder was "utterly unlawfull" because, firstly, it was contrary to religion. It was forbidden by the law of God in the sixth commandment and was contrary to the general sum of the law, which was love and justice. It was a most heinous crime against God himself because it destroys and defaces the image of God, it is "*peccant* and injurious against Gods *soveraign authority*," it opposes God's goodness and providence. It is against religion also because it is

against *nature* it selfe, and against that *naturall affection* and propensnesse, whereby it endeavours to preserve and cherish it selfe. . . : that *religion* requires the observation of the *law of nature*, is manifest; *because* religion and *natures law* are not repugnant, but differ in extent and degrees of perfection; the *law of nature* being more universall, and lesse divinely perfit.

It is irreligious because it is injurious to mankind and the commonwealth and because it does sin and wrong to the suicide himself. In the second place suicide is harmful to honour—to that of God, the Church, the commonwealth, a man's friends, posterity, and self. Thirdly, nearly a score of rational arguments were marshalled against it, some of them feeble syllogisms, some taking account of perennial issues.

Suicide was a transcendent sin beyond law and mercy both. Self-murderers were "certainly, and infallibly damned soule and body for evermore without redemption." It should, however, be said that, despite the doctrine, the prevailing view seems to have been that of John Foxe, that we should "rather dysallow the example of the dead, then dispaire of hys salvation." Strode, Burton, and Fuller, though opposed to suicide, thought mercy might be found *inter pontem et fontem*, betwixt the bridge and the brook. Some Puritans shared this view, and Anthony Tuckney censured Sym for his rigour. Still, suicide was sin and the consequence of sin. No one with a sound, logical, and sanctified mind could fail to draw the truth from infallible Scripture and Right Reason; hence, anyone who had come to the conclusion that suicide was permissible must be guilty of passion and unbelief. Sym recognized eight "motives" to suicide; they included acceptance of human philosophic arguments in its favour, desire to escape afflictions, and the sway of violent passions such as love or anger. He thought these only "specious pretexts," which involved an "abuse" of reason. The "true causes," "more secret and latent," were religious and moral: unbelief, impatience, stubborn pride, pusillanimity. Suicide could not be seen by Sym except through the frames of religious and moral ideas which made it abhorrent.

Both Sym and Denny gave comparatively little attention to proofs of the unlawfulness of suicide, which in other writers usually took the centre of the stage. Sym's proofs filled fifteen per cent of his pages, Denny's half that—and in secular prose. Both presented suicide within the context of the inner life of piety. *Pelecanicidium* was mainly a verse allegory offering the pilgrim a "guide" and a "passe" to the land of the living through the den of idleness, the grotto of repentance, the lodge of patience, and other stations faintly—alas! too faintly—reminiscent of Spenser and looking to Bunyan. Denny expostulated briefly with the would-be suicide and then led him off to haunts like the farm of self-resignation and the hill of contemplation. Sym's fundamental approach was that suicide is a rejection of the spiritual life of sanctification that is to be sought in a state of grace; the first half of his treatise is occupied with this subject. Self-murder of the soul was his theme. The natural end of man's being is the perfected spiritual life; suicide is unnatural in opposing self-preservation

on that plane. All sin (and it is nearly all in his book) is suicidal. The free choice of spiritual death, not the physical deed, is what makes bodily suicide sinful.

This was not the emphasis in Anglicans' thinking about suicide, though they would have agreed. Puritans spiritualized the subject. "Wilfull disobedience is soule-murder," thundered William Fenner in 1648, in three topical sermons, published five times in ten years, not on bodily suicide but on sin. "What is the meaning of the sixth Commandment?" he asked again in 1648 in *The Spirituall Man's Directorie*, published four times in eight years. The answer was first "Thou shalt not kill thy selfe," and then "Thou shalt not kill another." The prohibition, common enough, extended to harsh words, angry looks, talebearing, etc. Then he ran clean through all sins known to man or woman. (Calvin had seen in the sixth commandment "all that whiche were requisite to the well ordering of our whole life," though he had stopped short of considering suicide.)

Similarly, the preventive for suicide was intensification of the life of sanctity. Get into a state of grace, Sym advised; cultivate the virtues, live by faith, withstand temptations, gain good employment, engage in prayer and fasting, order your thoughts rightly, and in the last resort confess to a clergyman. Public prophylaxis lay in seeking advice, and in prayer either with a few or publicly with the church. Other people could help by prayer, observation, removal of the causes, and finally physical restraint. In view of the modern theory of relations between suicide and society's reception of the individual, it may be noted that Sym envisaged a cure in the bosom of a congregation. Denny's panacea was the same. "God's Church is Noah's Ark." It had sprung a leak. Richard Capel proposed stout resistance: "Stand our ground, out-looke the divell." This rousing advice against temptations to suicide, offered in *Tentations* in 1633 in the premonitory stages of the epidemic, reveals how psychological tactics were constricted by the spiritual strategy of the battle against Satan. Capel advised that instead of going around or running pell-mell across a bridge that regularly gave one an urge to leap off, one should march over with a constant heart, and after a time or two one would be free from the horror. If one were afraid to sleep in a particular bed or room, one should not get up and fly, but "Lye still, looke to God, and to his Word."

A false meanes is for a man to yeeld to [*sic*] much to feares, so as to thinke to avoid tentation, by declining, and not by resisting; as some dare not carry a knife about them, or when their knife is out, cast it from them, this is to yeeld too much to Satan: neither doth it helpe the matter, but rather keepe the tentation in. . . . Indeed if a man have his knife about idle occasions, perhaps it may doe well to put it up, to put it out of sight,

and so out of mind; but if a man have it in his hand, about his meales, or any other good use, then to put the knife up ere one hath done, out of these feares, is to faint, and come in too much to the devil. . . . The way to drive away our tentation is to keepe our knives about us, . . . to fight it out against Satan, by setting the Word and Christ against him. . . .

Capel's counsel included the usual admonition to be conscious and critical of our sin. In 1655 at the height of the epidemic he enlarged his treatment of suicide; he thought it best prevented by the "very feare of hell."

The atmosphere of the Puritan life of piety was heavy with possibilities for suicide. A habit of giving attention to fleeting impressions on the mind, lest one missed the call of Almighty God, could create a condition of dissociation if not of neurosis. It cannot always have been wise to tell a contemplative, potential self-murderer to labour for faith, to examine himself again to see if there were not some unrepented sin that stood between him and God. The pursuit of perfection in holiness carried its own temptation to despair from failure to attain or progress. Meanwhile, beneath these practices the sting of temptation to suicide lay deeper still in theological doctrines.

Religious life itself had long been known to give rise to the problem. A pious contemplative of depressive temperament might fall into despair and kill himself. Writing against suicide in 1534, the Catholic Sir Thomas More thought that a person of such tendencies should be "fair handled and sweetly, and. . . put in good courage"; he needed "a good wise spiritual leech." Melancholy was accepted by all, including Sym, as predisposing to suicide. Anglicans in particular emphasized its importance; Burton recognized it in the *Anatomy*, and in the last quarter of the seventeenth-century it re-appeared in Anglican discourses on suicide. Melancholy alone, however, was insufficient. Bright, Spencer, and Gregory wrote treatises on it without regarding suicide as a significant part of their subject. Melancholy was resistible, at least in its early stages, and it was distinguished from legitimate grief for sin, which was to be encouraged, and from illegitimate sad opinions, which ought to be refuted. A religious self-murderer was customarily thought to have yielded to temptation by the devil and to have despaired of salvation. Puritans were aware that some of the best among them suffered from what Sym called "fits" of self-murder while under great temptation. Capel thought that "many of the people of God" were tempted to murder themselves (or their nearest relatives). It was one affliction among many. Not even Christ escaped this trial; "No, no, thousands of Saints have gone thorow this tentation." Hence its being broached in books of practical devotion like the lawyer George Strode's *Anatomie of Moralitie* (1618). The occasions were sins

or crosses; the Saints might be overwhelmed by "the sense of the horror of their own raging corruptions and lusts" and by the power of these to prevail over all opposition, or they might conclude that heavy crosses of affliction under which they laboured had been imposed by the wrath of God.

Their grief was exacerbated to terror by Calvinist theology. A depressive predestinarian who could not feel in his spirit the movement of grace that signified that he was called to salvation might conclude that he was elected to damnation. Why delay death? If grace were wanting, he could not repent. Further sin, in disobedience to God, heaped up future torments. In Spenser's *Faerie Queene* (I, ix, 21-44) the Red Cross Knight was tempted by such false reasoning: "The longer life. . .the greater sin." Plato's argument about the sentinel fell unconvincing from his lips, and he accepted the dagger held out by Despair. Only an intervention preserved him. As he drew back his hand to strike, the Lady Una, appearing from next to nowhere, knocked away the knife and bade him recall that he had a part in heavenly mercies, for he was "chosen." Even in the 1580's Spenser had been aware of the Calvinist temptation to suicide; in his great epic allegory of the Christian virtues the episode was fitly included in a canto concerning the struggle to holiness. (Milton's later portrayal of Adam resisting Eve's plea for a suicide pact has only faint reflections of the Calvinist situation in the light of Nature.) The predestinarian temptation to despair was perhaps the pre-eminent aspect of the problem of suicide in the years immediately before the epidemic, when Capel was advising "Out-looke the divell." There was no despair like the despair of grace.

A more insidious prompting could spring from the conviction that one was directly inspired by God to commit suicide. A contemplative might discover "deep impressions in the thoughts. . .that it is the unalterable, and irresistible decree of God, that he must kill himself." Sym thought that this false oracle proceeded from Satan's "cunning suggestions" in a mind tempted to despair and obsessed with the idea of suicide. These suggestions would be recognized as devilish if, despite the sense of conviction that accompanied them, they were seen intellectually to be wrong—hence the need for the Puritan community to propagate the truth that suicide was by nature sin. The peculiar force of the temptation rose with belief in immediate inspiration. The practical problem for the Saint was to determine whether his inspiration was from God or the devil. Sir Thomas More had had no difficulty. He reasoned that, since Scripture forbids suicide, any seeming command to the contrary is disallowable—he had nearly said ridiculous. Sym took the same view; he seems to have

regarded divine illumination in the mind as—to use modern terms—increasing one's intelligence in spiritual matters rather than furnishing new information: "Gods secret decrees containe no *formall commandements* to us what we should doe; *nor* put any reall *influxe* to incline us to sin." Yet the habit of waiting on God, expecting him to speak and to make his will known, led believers to feel that a rational attitude like Sym's fell short of faith and indeed of experience. "Apprehension of the presence of God. . . persuades the minde." The compelling notion might contradict human reason and even human interpretations of Scripture; but grant that it was from God, and how could it be wrong? To kill oneself in obedience to the infallible command of God himself would be to reach the end to which one was predestinated, were that hell itself. Suicide in the Puritan era was not a mere occasion of theological fascination; it was an occupational hazard of the religious calling.

Appeal to Scripture was now indecisive, for through the centuries interpreters had had to allow that some Scriptural worthies who proposed or committed suicide had been immediately inspired in contradiction to the general commandment against it. The crucial case of Samson was frequently debated. Augustine had thought him inspired; More and Hammond allowed it. Others like Strode, Ames, and Taylor thought that, inspired or not, he had intended primarily to kill his enemies rather than himself; Sym added, with Tuckney's later approval, that he had been a judge. In *Samson Agonistes* Milton presented him stirred with "rouzing motions" and moved by an "Inevitable cause / At once both to destroy and be destroy'd." The Puritans were stabbed with their own dagger. Sym admitted that "godly persons that have killed themselves" proceeded "by speciall *motion* of the holy Spirit;" Capel allowed that Samson "had special order for it from God," and he continued all too confidently: "Shew the like order, and then do the like as *Sampson* did." The endeavour to prove Samson no just precedent could not but concede that he was called to the work, even if his intent and the nature of his inspiration were undecided. In Puritan experience the authority of Scripture did not clearly proscribe suicide.

Despair of holiness and incorrigibility of inspiration are the heart of the Puritan problem of suicide. Trial to the death may be supposed to have been keenest in the period 1640 to 1660, when spiritual aspirations were uncommonly elevated and "experiment" of the private spirit was eagerly sought. Belief in immediate inspiration thrust individuals outside the spiritual authority of organizations. The Puritans' coming to power may well have laid on them in their spiritual life as in their public activities the strain of proving the doctrine by showing its works. When the good

old cause seemed lost in 1660, some may have willingly departed, faithful to a higher call. After the Restoration the survivors would have had trials enough to exercise and to show forth their faith without suicide. The disorganization and subsequent stabilizing of law and society may have had an effect, through religious community life, on proneness to suicide. In 1678 Bunyan's *Pilgrim*, held in the dungeon by Giant Despair, thought of suicide, but soon cheered up when Hopeful told him it was forbidden by God, killed soul as well as body, and opened the terrors of hell; early on Sunday morning he pulled the key called Promise from his own bosom and let them both out.

Donne's *Biathanatos* did not arise from the Puritan epidemic of suicide, but it was involved in the intellectual debates. It dealt with the same fundamental issue of religious epistemology: what are the criteria of an individual's knowledge of divine will? He no more forwent divine intimations to sinless suicide than did the enthusiasts themselves:

If then a man after convenient and requisite diligence, despoyled of all humane affections, and self-interest, . . . do in conscience believe that he is invited by the spirit of God to do such an act as *Jonas*, *Abraham*, and perchance *Samson* was, who can by these rules condemn this to be sin?

In common, however, with More and Sym, he denied the enthusiasts' belief in private spirit:

Whensoever I may justly depart with this life, it is by a Summons from God; and it cannot then bee imputed to any corruption of my will. . . . Yet I expect not ever a particular inspiration, or new commission, such as they are forced to purchase for *Sampson*, and the rest; but that resident and inherent grace of God, by which he excites us to works of morall, or higher vertues.

In opposition to all parties he held that the dictate of individual reason was the voice of God in man; suicide in accord with that was not contrary to universal nature and reason and Scripture. In the mid-seventeenth century this conclusion from relativist philosophy coincided with tendencies favourable to suicide in Puritan religious experience and political thought, and at last it drew an answer—but that is part of the history of *Biathanatos* to be related in another place.