

R. Killick
IS SUICIDE A SIN?

BY

COLONEL R. G. INGERSOLL.

WITH A REPLY BY

MONSIGNOR DUCEY.

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[COLONEL INGERSOLL'S letter on "Is Suicide a Sin?" was written for the *New York World*, in August, 1894. Many replies to it appeared in that journal, one of which was by Monsignor Ducey, a dignitary of the Romish Church in America. In reprinting Ingersoll's letter on this side of the Atlantic, it has been thought advisable to include Monsignor Ducey's reply.]

IS SUICIDE A SIN ?

I do not know whether self-killing is on the increase or not. If it is, then there must be, on the average, more trouble, more sorrow, more failure, and, consequently, more people are driven to despair. In civilised life there is a great struggle, great competition, and many fail. To fail in a great city is like being wrecked at sea. In the country a man has friends. He can get [a little credit, a little help ; but in the city it is different. The man is lost in the multitude. In the roar of the streets his cry is not heard. Death becomes his only friend. Death promises release from want, from hunger and pain ; and so the poor wretch lays down his burden, dashes it from his shoulders, and falls asleep.

To me all this seems very natural. The wonder is that so many endure and suffer to the natural end ; that so many nurse the spark of life in huts and prisons ; keep it and guard it through years of misery and want ; support it by beggary, by eating the crust found in the gutter, and to whom it only gives days of weariness and nights of fear and dread. Why should the man, sitting amid the wreck of all he had—the loved ones dead, friends lost—seek to lengthen, to preserve his life ? What can the future have for him ?

Under many circumstances a man has the right to kill himself. When life is of no value to him, when he can be of no real assistance to others, why should a man continue ? When he is of no benefit, when he is a burden to those he loves, why should he remain ? The old idea was that God made us and placed us here for a purpose, and that it was

our duty to remain until he called us. The world is outgrowing this absurdity. What pleasure can it give God to see a man devoured by a cancer? To see the quivering flesh slowly eaten? To see the nerves throbbing with pain? Is this a festival for God? Why should the poor wretch stay and suffer? A little morphine would give him sleep; the agony would be forgotten, and he would pass unconsciously from happy dreams to painless death.

If God determines all births and deaths, of what use is medicine, and why should doctors defy, with pills and powders, the decrees of God? No one, except a few insane, act now according to this childish superstition. Why should a man, surrounded by flames in the midst of a burning building, from which there is no escape, hesitate to put a bullet through his brain or a dagger in his heart? Would it give God pleasure to see him burn? When did the man lose the right of self-defence?

So, when a man has committed some awful crime, why should he stay and ruin his family and friends? Why should he add to the injury? Why should he live, filling his days and nights, and the days and nights of others, with grief and pain, with agony and tears?

Why should a man, sentenced to imprisonment for life, hesitate to still his heart? The grave is better than the cell. Sleep is sweeter than the ache of toil. The dead have no master.

So the poor girl, betrayed and deserted—the door of home closed against her, the faces of friends averted, no hand that will help, no eye that will soften with pity, the future an abyss filled with monstrous shapes of dread and fear, her mind racked by fragments of thoughts like clouds broken by storm, pursued, surrounded by the serpents of remorse, flying from horrors too great to bear—rushes with joy through the welcome door of death.

Undoubtedly there are many cases of perfectly justifiable

suicide—cases in which not to end life would be a mistake, sometimes almost a crime.

As to the necessity of death, each must decide for himself. And if a man honestly decides that death is best—best for him and others—and acts upon the decision, why should he be blamed?

Certainly the man who kills himself is not a physical coward. He may have lacked moral courage, but not physical. It may be said that some men fight duels because they are afraid to decline. They are between two fires—the chance of death and the certainty of dishonor, and they take the chance of death. So the Christian martyrs were, according to their belief, between two fires—the flames of the fagot that could burn but for a few moments and the fires of God that were eternal. And they chose the flames of the fagot.

Men who fear death to that degree that they will bear all the pains and pangs that nerves can feel rather than die cannot afford to call the suicide a coward. It does not seem to me that Brutus was a coward, or that Seneca was. Surely Antony had nothing left to live for. Cato was not a craven. He acted on his judgment. So with hundreds of others who felt that they had reached the end—that the journey was done, the voyage was over, and, so feeling, stopped. It seems certain that the man who commits suicide, who “does the thing that stops all other deeds, that shackles accident and bolts up change,” is not lacking in physical courage.

If men had the courage, they would not linger in prisons, in almshouses, in hospitals; they would not bear the pangs of incurable disease, the stains of dishonor; they would not live in filth and want, in poverty and hunger; neither would they wear the chain of slavery. All this can be accounted for only by the fear of death or “of something after.”

Seneca, knowing that Nero intended to take his life, had no fear. He knew that he could defeat the emperor. He

knew that "at the bottom of every river, in the coil of every rope, on the point of every dagger, Liberty sat and smiled." He knew that it was his own fault if he allowed himself to be tortured to death by his enemy. He said: "There is this blessing, that while life has but one entrance, it has exits innumerable; and, as I choose the house in which I live, the ship in which I will sail, so will I choose the time and manner of my death."

To me this is not cowardly, but manly and noble.

Under the Roman law persons found guilty of certain offences were not only destroyed, but their blood was polluted, and their children became outcasts. If, however, they died before conviction, their children were saved. Many committed suicide to save their babes. Certainly they were not cowards. Although guilty of great crimes, they had enough of honor, of manhood, left to save their innocent children. This was not cowardice.

Without doubt many suicides are caused by insanity. Men lose their property. The fear of the future overpowers them. Things lose proportion, they lose poise and balance, and, in a flash, a gleam of frenzy, kill themselves. The disappointed in love, broken in heart—the light fading from their lives—seek the refuge of death.

Those who take their lives in painful, barbarous ways—who mangle their throats with broken glass, dash themselves from towers and roofs, take poisons that torture like the rack—such persons must be insane. But those who take the facts into account, who weigh the arguments for and against, and who decide that death is best—the only good—and then resort to reasonable means, may be, so far as I can see, in full possession of their minds.

Life is not the same to all—to some a blessing, to some a curse, to some not much in any way. Some leave it with unspeakable regret, some with the keenest joy, and some with indifference.

Religion, or the decadence of religion, has a bearing upon the number of suicides. The fear of God, of judgment, of eternal pain, will stay the hand, and people so believing will suffer here until relieved by natural death. A belief in eternal agony beyond the grave will cause such believers to suffer the pangs of this life. When there is no fear of the future, when death is believed to be a dreamless sleep, men have less hesitation about ending their lives. On the other hand, orthodox religion has driven millions to insanity. It has caused parents to murder their children, and many thousands to destroy themselves and others.

It seems probable that all real, genuine orthodox believers who kill themselves must be insane, and to such a degree that their belief is forgotten. God and hell are out of their minds.

I am satisfied that many who commit suicide are insane, many are in the twilight or dusk of insanity, and many are perfectly sane.

The law we have in this State, making it a crime to attempt suicide, is cruel and absurd, and calculated to increase the number of successful suicides. When a man has suffered so much, when he has been so persecuted and pursued by disaster that he seeks the rest and sleep of death, why should the State add to the sufferings of that man? A man seeking death, knowing that he will be punished if he fails, will take extra pains and precautions to make death certain.

This law was born of superstition, passed by thoughtlessness, and enforced by ignorance and cruelty.

When the house of life becomes a prison, when the horizon has shrunk and narrowed to a cell, and when the convict longs for the liberty of death, why should the effort to escape be regarded as a crime?

Of course, I regard life from a natural point of view. I do not take gods, heavens, and hells into account. My

horizon is the known, and my estimate of life is based upon what I know of life here in this world. People should not suffer for the sake of supernatural beings, or for other worlds, or the hopes and fears of some future state. Our joys, our sufferings, and our duties are here.

The law of New York about the attempt to commit suicide and the law as to divorce are about equal. Both are idiotic. Law cannot prevent suicide. Those who have lost all fear of death care nothing for law and its penalties. Death is liberty, absolute and eternal.

We should remember that nothing happens but the natural. Back of every suicide and every attempt to commit suicide is the natural and efficient cause. Nothing happens by chance. In this world the facts touch each other. There is no space between—no room for chance. Given a certain heart and brain, certain conditions, and suicide is the necessary result. If we wish to prevent suicide, we must change conditions. We must, by education, by invention, by art, by civilisation, add to the value of the average life. We must cultivate the brain and heart—do away with false pride and false modesty. We must become generous enough to help our fellows without degrading hem. We must make industry—useful work of all kinds—honorable. We must mingle a little affection with our charity—a little fellowship. We should allow those who have sinned to really reform. We should not think only of what the wicked have done, but we should think of what we have wanted to do. People do not hate the sick. Why should they despise the mentally weak—the diseased in brain ?

Our actions are the fruit, the result, of circumstances—of conditions—and we do as we must. This great truth should fill the heart with pity for the failures of our race.

Sometimes I have wondered that Christians denounce the suicide ; that in old times they buried him where the

roads crossed, and drove a stake through his body. They took his property from his children and gave it to the State.

If Christians would only think, they would see that orthodox religion rests upon suicide—that man was redeemed by suicide, and that, without suicide, the whole world would have been lost.

If Christ was God, then he had the power to protect himself from the Jews without hurting them. But, instead of using his power, he allowed them to take his life.

If a strong man should allow a few little children to hack him to death with knives, when he could easily have brushed them aside, would we not say that he committed suicide?

There is no escape. If Christ was in fact God, and allowed the Jews to kill him, then he consented to his own death—refused, though perfectly able, to defend and protect himself, and was, in fact, a suicide.

We cannot reform the world by law or by superstition. As long as there shall be pain and failure, want and sorrow, agony and crime, men and women will untie life's knot and seek the peace of death.

To the hopelessly imprisoned—to the dishonored and despised—to those who have failed, who have no future, no hope—to the abandoned, the broken-hearted, to those who are only remnants and fragments of men and women—how consoling, how enchanting, is the thought of death!

And even to the most fortunate death at last is a welcome deliverer. Death is as natural and as merciful as life. When we have journeyed long—when we are weary—when we wish for the twilight, for the dusk, for the cool kisses of the night—when the senses are dull—when the pulse is faint and low—when the mists gather on the mirror of memory—when the past is almost forgotten, the present hardly perceived—when the future has but empty hands—death is as welcome as a strain of music.

After all, death is not so terrible as joyless life. Next to eternal happiness is to sleep in the soft clasp of the cool earth, disturbed by no dream, by no thought, by no pain, by no fear, unconscious of all and for ever.

The wonder is that so many live, that, in spite of rags and want, in spite of tenement and gutter, of filth and pain, they limp and stagger and crawl beneath their burdens to the natural end. The wonder is that so few of the miserable are brave enough to die—that so many are terrified by the “something after death”—by the spectres and phantoms of superstition.

Most people are in love with life. How they cling to it in the arctic snows—how they struggle in the waves and currents of the sea—how they linger in famine—how they fight disaster and despair! On the crumbling edge of death they keep the flag flying, and go down at last full of hope and courage.

But many have not such natures. They cannot bear defeat. They are disheartened by disaster. They lie down on the field of conflict, and give the earth their blood.

They are our unfortunate brothers and sisters. We should not curse or blame—we should pity. On their pallid faces our tears should fall.

One of the best men I ever knew, with an affectionate wife, a charming and loving daughter, committed suicide. He was a man of generous impulses. His heart was loving and tender. He was conscientious, and so sensitive that he blamed himself for having done what at the time he thought was wise and best. He was the victim of his virtues. Let us be merciful in our judgments.

All we can say is that the good and the bad, the loving and the malignant, the conscientious and the vicious, the educated and the ignorant, actuated by many motives, urged and pushed by circumstances and conditions—sometimes in the calm of judgment, sometimes in passion's storm

and stress, sometimes in whirl and tempest of insanity—raise their hands against themselves, and desperately put out the light of life.

Those who attempt suicide should not be punished. If they are insane, they should, if possible, be restored to reason ; if sane, they should be reasoned with, calmed, and assisted.

R. G. INGERSOLL.

MONSIGNOR DUCEY'S REPLY.

COLONEL INGERSOLL has asked, "Is Suicide a Sin?" I do not know how Colonel Ingersoll can put such a question. He does not believe in sin, for he ignores and denies the existence of the supernatural ; and sin is defined as a crime against the law of God.

Many people are very severe against Colonel Ingersoll. They seem to be unwilling to recognise that he has any good qualities, for the reason that he is a professed Agnostic and Atheist. I am willing to admit that Colonel Ingersoll is a first-class know-nothing when he deals with anything

supernatural ; but I am unwilling to recognise Colonel Ingersoll as a know-nothing when his sympathies are called upon in the interest of suffering humanity. I know that Colonel Ingersoll is a man of large sympathies, and that he is most kindly disposed to relieve generously the afflicted whose suffering is brought to his notice. I know this, not from hearsay, but from numerous cases where I have been called, and to the relief of which cases Colonel Ingersoll has contributed with his mind, his heart, and most generously from his pocket.

The knowledge of his conduct broke down my prejudice against the man. When I reflected on the goodness of his conduct I could not help giving to him my recognition and sympathy ; but I give to him my unqualified condemnation when he attempts the part of the destroying angel against the virtues of Faith, Hope, and Charity.

I was once present at a public dinner where Colonel Ingersoll was to be the speaker of the evening. The presiding officer and toastmaster came to me and asked : " Will you say a few words before Colonel Ingersoll ? He has requested me to ask you to give him some inspiration." I smilingly answered : " Colonel Ingersoll does not believe in inspiration, and I absolutely refuse to give him intellectual direction." When the Colonel delivered his address he had the good sense and the good taste not to offend the clergy. There were two Presbyterian ministers at the principal table, and we were fearing that the Colonel might give us a little of the hell in which he did not believe, and force us to make a scene for self-protection and retire from the Colonel's flames. We saved ourselves, and were saved by the Colonel. But I had great fun with him, and so did the audience, when I was asked to speak. The Colonel did not have the chance to review my language. Now I shall imperfectly review him as reported in the *New York World*.

Colonel Ingersoll regards life from a natural point of view.

He says he does not take God's heavens and hells into account. His horizon is the known, and his estimate of life is based upon what he knows of the life here—in this world. He says that people should not suffer for the sake of the supernatural beings or for other worlds, or the hopes and fears of some future state, and that our joys and sufferings and our duties are here. It seems to me that Colonel Ingersoll's great fault is that he is a destroyer, and not a constructor. He robs poor humanity of the only hope that gives it comfort and makes its afflicted existence endurable, and, having robbed it of the bread of hope, he reaches out to it the stone of despair.

Another bad point about the Colonel's propagandism of destruction is, that he always gives his interesting lectures for a large financial retainer. Perhaps the good Colonel spends this one or two or three thousand dollars a night, that he is said to receive, for the benefit of the poor and despairing, and not for the comfort and luxury of those who are near and dear to him. The religion against which he fights is not without its compassion and devotion to humanity, and the suicide which he justifies is condemned by that religion which holds out to humanity hope and encouragement.

The *World* will, no doubt, be pleased to print the condemnation which the Holy Father, Leo XIII., in his encyclical on labor, passes on the trusts and monopolies of the day, which have driven honest labor to the verge of despair and suicide. Leo XIII. says: "The elements of conflict to-day are unmistakable. The growth of industry and the surprising discoveries of science; the changed relations of masters and workmen; the enormous fortunes of individuals, the poverty of the masses, and the general moral deterioration cause great fear to every honest and thoughtful man. The momentous seriousness of the present state of things fills every mind with painful apprehension. . . . All

agree, and there can be no question whatever that some remedy must be found for the misery and wretchedness which press so heavily at this moment on the large majority of the very poor. . . . the concentration of so many branches of trade in the hands of a few individuals, so that a small number of very rich men have been able to lay upon the masses of the poor a yoke little better than slavery itself."

If Colonel Ingersoll and others whose chief aim seems to be to pull down that reverence and religion which seeks fearlessly to teach all men the obligations of justice would spend the talent and time they devote to destruction to the proper adjustment and construction of society upon equitable bases, there would, in my judgment, be few temptations to suicide, and only the insane and morally irresponsible would flee from "the ills they have and fly to others they know not of." If the Colonel would preach this doctrine of justice and adjustment to the railroad wreckers and trust corrupters who seek through the evil use of money to increase their capital for luxurious indulgence, and to create a society of despair among the honest and struggling brain and brawn workers of humanity, I think he would be doing a nobler work for his fellow man than contributing his luminous brain as a capitalistic trust to rob his fellows of the hope of a higher and happier realisation than they find here below.

If death means oblivion, Colonel Ingersoll is right. Colonel Ingersoll's policy would make men cowards. A man might abandon wife, children, and the obligations of justice to his fellow man simply because he felt the pangs of disappointment and suffering, and, freeing himself from his portion of the burden, leave an additional burden to others.

As to the outcast who has abused every faculty of head and heart, I cannot agree with the Colonel that he has a right to take his life. I cannot agree with the Colonel, for

I view natural and supernatural obligations, and the Colonel has no regard for this view of the case.

Such a creature has, in my judgment, ceased to be a moral agent, and I might say of him what I have heard of a Yankee saying in a court of justice when asked by the presiding judge, "What do you think of this man's moral character?" "Well, yer honor, I don't know nawthin' about his moral carrikter, but his immoralals are first-class." This picture of the Colonel strikes me in the same way.

The Colonel's classic historical examples are prescribed in very bad chemicals. I don't think his camera was in very good order when he focussed the pictures. I do not think that the cases of Seneca, Brutus, and Antony help his argument. The historical reasons given for their self-destruction convey no notion of heroic example, and I think the Colonel has been most unhappy in presenting these creatures as heroes. In naming Antony he left out Cleopatra. I presume he was afraid to insult the memory of the classic Cato by grouping him with two such immoral associates.

THOMAS J. DUCEY.

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