The Pastoral Counsellors: Journal of Nigerian Association of Pastoral Counsellors
(ISSN: Print 2971-5199; Online 2971-5202) Volume 5 January 2026
(In collaboration with the Department of Religious and Intercultural Studies and Department of Guidance and Counselling, Lead City University, Ibadan, Nigeria)

Conceptualisation of Suicide in Christian Thought: A Pastoral Approach

Ayomipo AMIOLA
ayomipoamiola@gmail.com, +447438124734

Ayodele Samuel ADEYEYE
Department of Christian Religious Studies, Redeemer's University, Ede, Nigeria
ayodele4eva@yahoo.com, +2347067281117

Abstract
This paper aims to conceptualise 'suicide' within Christian thought for 21st-century African Christianity. It explores its significance to Yoruba ontology, and its treatment within the biblical canon. Utilising a qualitative research design and employing a tripolar interpretive methods, the article underscores the widespread affirmation of the sanctity and dignity of human life within Christian traditions. It asserts that the contemplation of suicide in Christian thought across historical epochs candidly acknowledges the realities of despair and suffering in a broken world, while also presenting a redemptive vision through the person of Christ. The paper advocates for the Nigerian church, which is uniquely positioned to merge theological conviction with compassionate practice, to develop contemporary pastoral care and responses to the rising incidence of suicide in modern society.

Introduction
Suicide is defined as an act with a fatal outcome that is deliberately initiated and performed by the person in the knowledge and expectation of its fatal outcome (De Leo et al.,2004). Globally, suicide is the third leading cause of death among 15- to 29-year-olds (WHO, 2025) and it is among the ten leading causes of death in most countries around the world (Bertolote, & Fleischmann, 2002). Although often considered a problem of affluence, more than seventy percent of all global suicides occur in low- and middle-income countries (Bantjes et al., 2016). For every completed suicide, it is estimated that between twenty and thirty non-fatal episodes of self-harm occur or suicide attempts occur (WHO, 2025; Harmer et al., 2024).
In Nigeria, although suicide reporting is poor, the WHO has reported high suicide estimates (17.3 per 100 000) higher than both the African and global estimates of 12.5 per 100 000 and 10.5 per 100 000 respectively (Oyetunji et al., 2021). Suicides are very complex and while public media reporting of suicides often identify a major life event as the proximal cause of suicide (NUJ, 2024), studies have shown the significance of mental illnesses, psychological distress, social factors such as economic instability, unemployment, domestic violence, stigma, and the systemic lack of access to formal mental health services in the country (Okpalauwaekwe et al., 2025)
There is also a bidirectional relationship between media portrayals of mental illness and the sociocultural norms about suicide. For example, evidence suggests that in Nigeria, some forms of media coverage reinforce negative stereotypes about mental illness, such as linking mental illnesses and suicide to spiritual retribution, thus entrenching shame, stigma and fear rather than education in rural and semi-urban areas (Ogunwale et al., 2023). Furthermore, suicide is still an offence under Nigerian Law under both the criminal code and the penal code (used in Northern Nigeria) with stipulations of punishment including imprisonment up to one year and or the payment of a fine under the penal code (Ogunwale and Ojo, 2025). These, including other sociocultural, and religious factors, mean that suicide is underreported with many suicidal deaths shrouded in secrecy or described as accidental deaths.
Globally, there are sustained suicide-prevention efforts at multiple levels. In a country like Nigeria, with a strong Christian influence, sustained theological reflection has much to contribute to these efforts.

Literature Review
In the medical literature, suicide is recognised as a global phenomenon. Since the 1980s, however, there has been a gradual decline in overall global suicide rates (Stein, 2024). The picture is more mixed in Nigeria, with studies showing variable trends across regions and time periods (Abubakar et al., 2026; Abamara & Ozongwu, 2024). While suicide attempts are more common among women, suicide deaths are three times as common in men as in women, a global pattern that is also reflected in Nigeria (Harrison et al., 2017; Adeyemo et al., 2024). Mental illness is a significant risk factor for suicide, with one study reporting that around 90% of individuals who died by suicide had a mental health diagnosis at the time of death (Arsenault-Lapierre et al., 2004). Yet, although conditions such as depression play an important role, most people with depression do not die by suicide. Other complex social factors—

The Pastoral Counsellors: Journal of Nigerian Association of Pastoral Counsellors
(ISSN: Print 2971-5199; Online 2971-5202) Volume 5 January 2026
(In collaboration with the Department of Religious and Intercultural Studies and Department of Guidance and Counselling, Lead City University, Ibadan, Nigeria)

such as unemployment, poverty, divorce, and social fragmentation—also contribute meaningfully to suicide risk (Harrison et al., 2017).

In his recent paper, Ehusani (2024) a priest and psychologist working in Nigeria averred that "the rising cases of suicide in Nigeria are traceable in part to a crisis of meaninglessness". In this vein, beyond the adversities that people experience and their individual characteristics, it is the meaning they ascribe to these that play a major role in the evolution of suicidal thoughts and behaviour (Johnson et al., 2011). Meaning however is not individually construed. Belonginess is a core facet of human life and satisfaction.

Alienation occurs when an individual feels disconnected from meaningful social interactions. Since meaning arises from social relationships and an individual's positive contact with social institutions, alienation is thus related to perceived meaninglessness of life. This sense of alienation is worsened when an individual (due to mental illness or other psychosocial adversities) does not find fulfilment in social encounters, feels a break down in local social ties or loses the social roles that reflect such ties (Ifeagwazi et al., 2015).

In his lifework, Akiwowo (1983) grounded the notion of communality as central to the sociation of the African person. Important concepts such as *àjọbí, àjọgbé, àdágbé, àbágbé* describe various levels of sociation and basis of communality including blood ties and choice. This idea of choice is especially important for the Yoruba (Adekanye, 2020) who conceives of a person (Ènìyàn) as an individual (ẹni) who chooses (yàn). While the Yoruba cannot be seen as strictly deterministic, there is a sense in which life as it plays out (àdáyébá) is an interplay of destiny (orí), choice (àkúnlẹ̀yàn) and behaviour (ìwà).

Similarly, across the Niger, Okolo (1995) has posited that personhood in the African sense of it is "a community-derived status through the attitudinal disposition of 'being-with'". Since communitarian values are seen as absolute, recent social disintegration can be understood as undermining the very foundation of what it means for the African to be human (Alabi & Olonade, 2022; Machielse, A. 2024).

Although medical research locates suicide as a medical event, it does this within a complex web of biopsychosocial factors. The psychological element of grief, depression and suicide has been investigated by theologians from the patristic era to the modern period (Taylor, 2010; Schaff, 1890; Blázquez, 1985; Amundsen, 1989; Ortiz, 2019; Adamiak & Dohnalik, 2023). Exegetical approaches using trauma-informed framework has also been applied to the Biblical text (Garber 2015; Stulman, 2014).

Historically, amongst theologians, there has been a unanimous consensus on the sanctity of life however with a tension between a moral understanding of suicide as sinful and usurping of the divine prerogative on life on one hand and a more pastoral understanding that grounds empathy and compassion as critical in engaging with suicidal thoughts, actions and those left in the wake of suicide on the other (Aquinas, 1947, Amundsen, 1989). In the modern period, Bonhoeffer (2012), in particular, emphasized the futility of addressing suicide through legal or moral prohibition—whether imposed by the secular state or by framing it solely as a mortal sin.

Karl Barth (2009) further explicated this view by recognising that those who die by suicide are often deeply afflicted and overwhelmed. In such a condition, typical deterrents—moral arguments, biblical injunctions, or social and cultural norms—lose their power. Barth believed that only the Gospel—the grace of God, the cross and resurrection of Jesus Christ, and God's sovereign "Yes" to human life—can meet this darkness of despair. He believed that this divine affirmation, which overrules all human "Nos," makes suicide impossible where it is truly heard and received. We read Barth's view as aspirational, in that it is not a descriptive claim about all suicides but a theological affirmation of the centrality of the gospel in dealing with despair.

While the existing literature offers rich insights into suicide as a medical, psychosocial, philosophical, and theological concern, it remains marked by a degree of disciplinary and interpretive fragmentation. Suicide cannot be seen as a purely medical pathology or a straightforward moral transgression, but a complex human event with significant biological, psychological, existential, sociological and theological ramifications.

Aim

In this paper, we examine suicide within Yoruba ontology, engage biblical accounts of suicide and suicidal despair, and conclude with theologically grounded pastoral reflections for the Nigerian pastoral context.

The Pastoral Counsellors: Journal of Nigerian Association of Pastoral Counsellors
(ISSN: Print 2971-5199; Online 2971-5202) Volume 5 January 2026
(In collaboration with the Department of Religious and Intercultural Studies and Department of Guidance and Counselling, Lead City University, Ibadan, Nigeria)

Methodology

Regarding our theoretical framework, this study adopts a tripolar interpretive method (West, 2023; Boaheng 2024). We will attempt a canonical narrative reading of sacred Scripture, oriented toward reflective and contextual pastoral praxis, without the use of primary empirical data.

Conception of Suicide in Yoruba Ontology

The Yoruba view of suicide is somewhat complicated. While death is seen as a creation of *Olódùmarè* and a certainty; the Yoruba generally distinguishes between two different types of death- a good (or natural) death and a bad one, that is unnnatural. A good death is one that happens when an individual is old and have accomplished all the recognised milestones of life-marriage, childbirth, giving children out in marriage, raising grandchildren, et cetera. Such death would also occur in a time of peace, without a prolonged debilitating illness, loss of material resources and not via an accident. The Yoruba will describe such as a person as one who died peacefully ("*fi ọwọ́ rọ orí kú*"). Other types of death, of the young, from accidents, childbirth or suicides are considered bad deaths. Such deaths are called "*ikú gbígbóná*".

Specifically, people who die from suicides are denied full funerary rites and public mourning is refused since such deaths are considered a taboo or an abomination. In many places, rites and rituals will be conducted to "cleanse" the land and prevent a recurrence of such. As such many people will agree that suicide is discouraged among the Yoruba, maybe even forbidden. However, this is at best a simplistic view since some forms of ritual suicides are sanctioned and even commended. Olomola (1987) in his review listed some types of suicides sanctioned among the Yoruba: personal suicide which could be due to feelings of injustice and completed as a form of revenge, as a desire to escape from some adverse circumstances or motivated by psychological distress. There is a distinction to be made in the latter, suicides motivated by anguish and despair are often tolerated whereas those resulting from guilt were vilified. It is these types of suicides that are denied full funerary rites and, in the past, the corpses thrown away in the cultic grove (located on the outskirts of the town and often inaccurately called the evil forest) rather than buried.

Conventional suicides were obligatory. There are three types: those who accept to die as sacrificial victims, those who accepted to die due to loyalty to a master or benefactor such as the *abọbakú* and those whose institution demanded their deaths such as kings who would be asked to die by suicide once rejected by their people. This practice is referred to euphemistically as "opening the calabash" (*ṣíṣí igbá*). A central element common to all of these suicides is the concept of honour, either personal or the collective honour of a group (Olasunkanmi 2015). The colloquial expression *ikú yá ju èsín* (death before dishonour) describes such a mindset.

Due to the effects of Christian missionary work and the growth of the Christian faith among the Yoruba, many of the aforementioned cultural practices such as human sacrificial victims, dying with a master or benefactor, ritual suicides by kings, et cetera are now only of historical reference. Nevertheless, personal suicides in the present day as always are complex phenomena and it is not impossible that ideas of honour, agency, despair, and anguish contribute to these.

Conceptions of Suicide in the Bible: An Overview

The Bible is fundamentally a theological text, chronicling God's redemptive work across the grand narrative of creation, fall, redemption, and new creation. While it is not a psychiatric or psychological manual, it offers profound insights into the human condition, as it portrays God's interaction with real people facing real struggles. Many of the emotional and existential experiences recorded in Scripture resonate deeply with the challenges faced by individuals today. In this way, although the biblical narrative is embedded within specific historical, cultural, sociological, and literary contexts, its theological message transcends these boundaries, remaining relevant and applicable across time and cultures. Nonetheless, caution is needed when interpreting the biblical text through the lens of modern psychological categories. It is important to avoid uncritically imposing contemporary Western psychiatric constructs onto ancient texts, lest we obscure their intended meaning and theological depth. It has been suggested that there are eleven (11) biblical suicides and fifteen (15) descriptions of suicide in the Bible (Barraclough, 1992). If the Apocrypha accounts are excluded, and depending on the definition of suicide adopted, seven people in the bible died by suicide, six in the Old Testament (Abimelech, Samson, Saul, Saul's armour bearer, Ahithophel and Zimri) and one in the New Testament (Judas Iscariot). The Bible describes these suicides factually without any comments or moral condemnation specifically about the act itself (Stein, 2024). Nevertheless, for most of these people, the narrative suggests that suicide was the culmination of a life lived in disregard to the covenant.

The Pastoral Counsellors: Journal of Nigerian Association of Pastoral Counsellors
(ISSN: Print 2971-5199; Online 2971-5202) Volume 5 January 2026
(In collaboration with the Department of Religious and Intercultural Studies and Department of Guidance and Counselling, Lead City University, Ibadan, Nigeria)

Abimelech (Judges 9)

Consistent with the recurring "hero cycle" motif found throughout the book of Judges, a period of peace and stability under the leadership of Gideon is followed, after his death, by societal collapse and chaos. Abimelech, one of Gideon's sons, conspired with his maternal relatives to assassinate all seventy of his brothers—the other sons of Gideon—in a bid for power. Following this massacre, he had himself declared king.

Abimelech's three-year reign was characterized by violence and unrest. The biblical narrator explicitly attributes the ensuing conflict between Abimelech and the people of Shechem to divine intervention, portraying it as a judgment from God. A series of brutal encounters further revealed Abimelech's cruelty and unrelenting thirst for domination. His reign ultimately ended when a woman, from atop a tower, dropped a millstone on his head, fracturing his skull. Unwilling to bear the shame of being remembered as having been killed by a woman, Abimelech commanded his armour-bearer to thrust him through with a sword.

While the narrative does not offer an explicit moral evaluation of Abimelech's suicide, his death is presented as a just recompense for his earlier atrocities. Likewise, the destruction of Shechem is framed as divine judgment upon a people who had conspired in the heinous slaughter of Gideon's sons.

Samson (Judges 16)

Samson was another judge whose life began with great prophetic promise as a deliverer of God's people. Consecrated from birth as a Nazirite—a vow that entailed strict commitments to holiness—he repeatedly failed to uphold its requirements. Rather than fulfilling his role as a judge who governed and guided Israel under divine commission, Samson's life became a series of personal vendettas against the Philistines, driven more by wounded pride than by covenantal responsibility.

Notably drawn to foreign women, Samson was ultimately betrayed by Delilah, who handed him over to the Philistines. Blinded and imprisoned, his final act was consistent with the pattern of his life: he sought vengeance. In a climactic display of strength, he brought down the Philistine temple upon himself and his enemies, killing many but perishing in the process.

In contemporary suicide studies, the term "*Samsonic* suicide" is often applied to cases in which individuals take their own lives in acts motivated by revenge—typically against a rejecting partner, an excessively harsh employer, or another perceived oppressor. These suicides often involve the simultaneous killing of others and are sometimes carried out in the name of religion or a political cause (Stein 2024).

Saul (1 Samuel 31; 2 Samuel 1; 1 Chronicles 10)

Saul was Israel's first true king, divinely chosen and anointed by the prophet Samuel. Although he began his reign with promise, he was ultimately rejected by God due to repeated acts of disobedience. As a result, David was anointed as his successor, though he would wait many years before ascending the throne. There are three accounts of Saul's death in the biblical narrative. The primary account in 1 Samuel 31 describes Saul's final moments during a disastrous battle with the Philistines. Critically wounded and fearing capture and humiliation, he implored his armour-bearer to kill him. When the armour-bearer refused, Saul fell on his own sword and died. Upon seeing his master dead, the armour-bearer also took his own life.

A second version, found in 2 Samuel 1, presents an Amalekite's report to David. He claims to have found Saul still alive, leaning on his spear and in great agony. According to his account, Saul asked to be put out of his misery, and the Amalekite complied. He then brought Saul's crown and armlet to David—likely in the hope of receiving a reward. These two accounts have prompted different interpretations. One view holds that the Amalekite was lying: he discovered Saul's corpse, took the royal insignia, and fabricated the story to gain favour with David. The other view considers the Amalekite's account truthful, suggesting that Saul survived his initial suicide attempt and required the Amalekite's intervention to die.

This ambiguity is significant, especially when viewed through the lens of suicide studies. It raises the possibility—consistent with clinical data—that Saul's initial attempt may not have been immediately fatal. Notably, contemporary research shows that many individuals do survive suicide attempts. Positively, nine out of ten people who survive an initial suicide attempt do not go on to die by suicide. A systematic review found that among survivors, approximately 7% later died by suicide, 23% reattempted but survived, and 70% did not make any further suicide attempts (Owens, et al., 2002).

The Pastoral Counsellors: Journal of Nigerian Association of Pastoral Counsellors
(ISSN: Print 2971-5199; Online 2971-5202) Volume 5 January 2026
(In collaboration with the Department of Religious and Intercultural Studies and Department of Guidance and Counselling, Lead City University, Ibadan, Nigeria)

The third account, found in 1 Chronicles 10, offers a theological reflection on Saul's life and death. Like Abimelech, Saul's demise is portrayed as divine judgment resulting from his unfaithfulness, disobedience, and his consultation with a medium.

Ahithophel (2 Samuel 17)

The story of Ahithophel offers a compelling psychological case study. Once one of David's most trusted counsellors—renowned for his wisdom—he ultimately betrayed David by joining Absalom's rebellion. After his counsel was rejected, Ahithophel returned home, set his affairs in order, and subsequently took his own life. Though not explicitly stated in the text, the fact that he was Bathsheba's grandfather (cf. 2 Samuel 11:3; 23:34) invites speculation that he may have been scandalized and deeply hurt by David's shameful behaviour, which could have contributed to his defection to Absalom. As a man of great wisdom, the rejection of his advice was not only a personal and professional catastrophe but also effectively sealed the fate of Absalom's rebellion. Certain of Absalom's impending defeat, Ahithophel's despair and hopelessness likely intensified, culminating in his suicide—perhaps as a final attempt to preserve what remained of his dignity.

For our purposes, it is particularly significant that Ahithophel "set his house in order" before his death. While many suicides are impulsive, suicides among the elderly are often planned and involve highly lethal means. This interval between planning and action presents a crucial window for intervention and prevention.

Zimri (1 Kings 16)

After the division of the kingdom, Zimri became one of the many kings to rule over the northern kingdom of Israel. Following the assassination of King Elah, Zimri proclaimed himself king and proceeded to eliminate the entire royal household, thereby eradicating the dynasty of Baasha. However, his claim to the throne was swiftly rejected by the people, who instead declared his military colleague, Omri, as king.

Realizing he could not prevail against Omri's forces, Zimri retreated into the royal citadel and set it ablaze, dying in the flames. His reign lasted a mere seven days—one of the shortest in Israel's history. Once again, the biblical text offers no explicit moral evaluation of the act of suicide itself. Instead, Zimri's death is portrayed as divine judgment for his faithlessness and for perpetuating the sins of his predecessors.

Judas Iscariot (Matthew 27; Acts 1)

Like Ahithophel, Judas Iscariot betrayed a close friend—our Lord Jesus Christ. After some reflection, Judas became deeply remorseful and regretted his actions. Unfortunately, the religious authorities were not impressed by his change of heart. Overcome by despair, Judas went out and hanged himself. Many find it challenging to harmonize the differing accounts of his death in Matthew and Acts, but what is perhaps even more compelling is the role that money played in his story. According to the Gospel of John, Judas was a thief who failed to faithfully steward the finances of the apostolic community, his betrayal of Jesus also appears driven by pecuniary gains, these incidents add another layer of complexity to his tragic downfall.

Suicidal thoughts in the Bible

Several individuals in the biblical narrative expressed thoughts that bordered on suicidal ideation, particularly during periods of intense distress. In her plea to Isaac to send Jacob away to her people, Rebekah expressed her deep anguish over the strained relationships with her daughters-in-law and (Genesis 27:46). Moses, the man of God, offers a compelling portrait of the psychological weight that often accompanies leadership. Leading a frequently rebellious people through the wilderness to the promised land, he was subject to relentless pressure and emotional strain. At one point, overwhelmed by the incessant complaints of the Israelites and the unbearable burden of providing for them, Moses despaired and pleaded with God to take his life (Numbers 11:11–15).

Job, in the depths of grief after losing his children, property, and health, spoke in graphic terms of his desire for death over life (Job 7:15–16). Solomon, the wisest of Israel's kings, in his philosophical exploration of life's meaning and the fleeting nature of material possessions, fell into existential despair and confessed a hatred for life (Ecclesiastes 2:17).

Elijah, one of Israel's most powerful prophets, was also overwhelmed—not after failure, but paradoxically after a great spiritual triumph over the prophets of Baal and the return of rain following

a prolonged drought. When Jezebel threatened his life, he bid his servant goodbye, fled into the wilderness and prayed for death (1 Kings 19:4).

Jonah, another prophet, likewise asked God to take his life. Disheartened by God's mercy toward the repentant city of Nineveh, he viewed death as preferable to life and on three occasions verbalised this. (Jonah 4:3, 8–9). In the New Testament, the apostle Paul candidly shared about a ministry season when he and his companions were "under great pressure, far beyond our ability to endure," so that they "despaired of life itself" (2 Corinthians 1:8).

Importantly, none of these figures ultimately attempted suicide, suggesting that their outbursts may not have been suicidal gestures per se, but rather honest expressions of emotional and spiritual distress. Their cries reflect the reality that even deeply spiritual individuals can reach the limits of their endurance and long for relief from overwhelming burdens. For our purposes, these accounts offer vivid illustrations of profound psychological and spiritual anguish—even among the faithful—and the inner despair that can precede suicidal ideation.

Positively, while suicidal thoughts are quite common in the population, however, fewer than 0.5% of those who have these thoughts go on to act on them. Nevertheless, the rate of completed suicides amongst those who have suicidal thoughts is 45 times higher than in the general population. Therefore, expression of suicidal thoughts should be taken very seriously especially in those who have associated plans (Stein 2024).

Pastoral Reflections on Suicide: A Synthesis

When suicide occurs—whether within the church or beyond it—it often leaves communities reeling and burdened with painful, unresolved questions. While theological reflection may offer frameworks for understanding, such answers rarely alleviate the profound sense of desolation experienced by those left behind. Pastoral theology invites us to hold tenderly the tension between God's justice and mercy, recognizing that our doctrinal convictions about salvation and judgment profoundly shape how we minister compassionately to those affected by suicide. In this section, our aim is to explore some of these questions and offer pastoral insights that may help guide care, presence, and compassion in the face of such loss.

Is suicide a sin?

Throughout church history, Christians have wrestled over this question. Another similar issue is to wonder if Christians who die by suicide forfeit their salvation and go to hell. We believe the Bible clearly teaches that murder is sinful—both explicitly, through direct commandments against the unlawful taking of life, and implicitly, through the broader biblical witness to the sanctity of human life. This sanctity is grounded in the doctrine of the imago Dei—the belief that all human beings are created in the image of God—which undergirds the prohibition of murder in Genesis 9:6. The Decalogue explicitly forbids murder (Exodus 20:13; Deuteronomy 5:17), affirming this foundational moral norm.

In his teaching, Jesus deepens the commandment by revealing that murder is ultimately a matter of the heart, manifested in everyday realities such as anger and contempt (Matthew 5:21–22). Paul extends this understanding by locating the prohibition of murder within the broader ethic of love (Romans 13:9), and the apostle John links murder with a fundamental absence of God's transformative love. Indeed, John asserts that those who commit murder reveal that they have not been born of God (1 John 3:15).

This distinction becomes crucial when reflecting on suicide, particularly in the context of mental illness. In my clinical work, I have encountered many individuals who, though tormented by suicidal thoughts, refrain from acting on them because they believe taking one's own life is a sin. Theologically, it may be appropriate to distinguish between an act committed *in corporis mentis* (with full mental capacity) and one carried out during a state of impaired cognition or emotional overwhelm. In the latter case—where the person lacks the capacity for rational and moral judgment—it becomes far more difficult, and perhaps even theologically inappropriate, to label the act as sin in the same categorical way. A helpful analogy might be someone who, while asleep, inadvertently kicks their spouse: the action occurs, but moral culpability is absent due to the lack of conscious intent.

Luther's pastoral insight proves especially helpful in this regard. He recognized that those who die by suicide are often overcome by the devil's torment and not fully themselves, likening such deaths to murder by an external assailant—tragic, but not necessarily sinful in the strict moral sense, given the impaired agency of the person.

A related issue concerns the eternal consequences of suicide, a matter largely shaped by one's soteriological framework. The classic Pelagian view holds that salvation is maintained through ongoing human obedience; since one can "lose" salvation by sin or failure to persevere in righteousness, a person

who dies by suicide would be considered as having failed to persevere and thus lost. The Arminian perspective is somewhat less severe. It affirms that believers can fall from grace through wilful rejection of faith or persistent sin, and suicide may be understood as evidence of such rejection and unrepentance. However, in cases involving mental illness, full moral responsibility is questionable, rendering definitive judgment uncertain.

A more contemporary perspective, particularly influential in the Nigerian church context, is a "Holiness/Revivalist" emphasis associated with Charles Finney. While affirming that salvation is initially a work of God's sovereign grace, Finney emphasized human responsibility, the real possibility of falling from grace, and the necessity of continual sanctification. Accordingly, this view in addition, stresses the importance of ongoing spiritual vigilance to avoid becoming a "cast-away," vulnerable to the devil's deception. A Calvinistic framework offers much comfort and assurance. Since salvation is seen as dependent from start to finish on God's sovereign grace, nothing can separate the believer- God's elect from His love. So, suicide, while tragic and devastating does not impact the salvation of the elect. Their eternal state is ultimately dependent on God, His sustaining grace and His faithfulness rather than on their actions, whether good or bad.

Each view has distinct pastoral challenges and opportunities. The Pelagian view can lead to legalism or despair, the Arminian perspective calls for careful pastoral discernment, especially regarding mental illness and moral responsibility. Finney's emphasis on spiritual vigilance can lead to guilt and anxiety. Calvinism on the other hand offers deep assurance in God's sovereign grace. While I personally affirm this view, some have warned about the risk for complacency and spiritual pride. Nevertheless, regardless of one's soteriological emphasis, the reality of mental illnesses and their impact on one's thoughts, feelings and behaviours call the church to reflect sensitively on how emotional pain can often cloud human agency, leading to suicide. In such situations, it is crucial to avoid simplistic or harsh judgments, instead inviting those impacted by this death to trust in God whose judgements are faithful and true.

How can the church support the suicidal?

The evidence seems to suggest that church attendance and spirituality is associated with a lower incidence of suicide (Stein, 2024). However, it is crucial to recognise that Christians, like all people, can struggle with mental illnesses, including suicidal thoughts, plans and actions. For believers, suicidality can often be a sign of deteriorating mental health rather than a loss of faith. It is important in a church context that this is recognised as an early warning sign that requires compassionate attention. This means not only providing ongoing pastoral care grounded in prayer, scripture, and community support but also actively encouraging and facilitating professional mental health interventions.

The church must actively work to reduce the stigma surrounding mental illness. Historically, mental health care was often provided within religious contexts. However, many religious organizations propagate beliefs not firmly rooted in a robust, biblically informed anthropology. Unfortunately, this has led to stigmatization of those with mental illness and, in extreme cases, to physical, emotional, financial, and sexual abuse (Amiola et al., 2023). A sound understanding of the doctrine of the Imago Dei is crucial for shaping the church's pastoral response. This doctrine affirms the inherent worth and dignity of every human life, even amid suffering, and calls us to approach mental illness and suicide with deep compassion and respect.

The church has a prophetic role in the world — to speak truth to power, advocate for the vulnerable, and promote the flourishing of all people. This includes challenging unjust systems that sustain inequality and oppression. In contexts like Nigeria, churches often provide crucial practical support, offering material aid, hope, and community—contributions vital to psychological well-being. Rooted in a biblical call to justice, the church must uphold the dignity of the marginalized and confront abuses of political power that harm the vulnerable. By embodying God's justice and mercy, the church stands as a beacon of hope in a broken world, affirming that every person is created to thrive. Engaging missionally with political realities—advocating for just policies, holding leaders accountable, and ensuring power serves the common good, not selfish interests will be a step in the right direction.

How can the church support those grieving after a suicide

Another significant issue is the devastating impact of suicide on survivors. It is estimated that for every suicide, between six and sixty people are directly affected (Berman, 2011). Family members, friends, and fellow church members often experience a complex web of emotions—grief, guilt, confusion, anger—and for many, it may trigger deep questions about faith, God, and the world. The church has a unique and vital role in walking with those who grieve. Rather than offering simplistic theological

explanations, we are called to enter into lament with our brothers and sisters, bearing witness to Christ's compassion. Just as Jesus wept with Mary and Martha at the death of Lazarus, so too must the church embody the loving presence of God in moments of profound loss. In such times, the ministry of presence—alongside the assurance of our hope in Christ and the comfort of the Holy Spirit—becomes essential. The church must also be a safe and open space where survivors can access professional mental health support, without shame or stigma.

Conclusion

In conclusion, suicide remains a theologically and pastorally complex phenomenon, carrying cultural, psychological, and spiritual weight. This paper has examined its significance within Yoruba ontology, and its treatment in the biblical canon. Over the years, the Christian tradition has remained unanimous in affirming the sanctity and dignity of human life. At the same time, the biblical witness is honest about the realities of despair and suffering, offering a redemptive vision in the person of Christ—the man of sorrows who identifies with human pain. The Nigerian church is uniquely positioned to integrate theological conviction with compassionate praxis. Rooted in Scripture, informed by historical theology, and attentive to cultural realities, the church must offer pastoral care that is both truthful and tender—accompanying the suffering, supporting the bereaved, and bearing witness to the enduring hope of the gospel.

References

Abamara, N. C., & Ozongwu, O. E. (2024). The Rising Cases of Suicide among Nigerians: What Are the Risk Factors, Prevention, and Remedies?. Consortium psychiatricum, 5(3), 56–61. https://doi.org/10.17816/CP15497

Abubakar, A. K., Abioye, A. I., Yisa, M. N., Olofin, D. O., Okusanya, T. R., Olukorode, S. O., ... & Adewuya, A. (2026). Prevalence of suicidal behavior in nigeria: a systematic review and meta-analysis. Scientific Reports.

Adamiak, S., & Dohnalik, J. (2023). The Prohibition of Suicide and Its Theological Rationale in Catholic Moral and Canonical Tradition: Origins and Development. Journal of religion and health, 62(6), 3820–3833. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10943-023-01900-w

Adekanye, E. (2020). A CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF THE YORÙBÁ CONCEPTION OF PERSON.

Adeyemo, S. O., Olayinka-Aliu, D., Akindele-Oscar, A., Aborishade, R., Oyafunke-Omoniyi, C., Adeleke, O., ... & Adenuga, A. (2024). Gender differential in the choice of methods of dying by suicide in southwest Nigeria. Indian journal of social psychiatry, 40(2), 147-152.

Akiwowo, A. A. (1983). Ajobi and Ajogbe: variations on the theme of sociation (No. 46). University of Ife Press.

Alabi, O. J., & Olonade, O. Y. (2022). Complexities, dynamism, and changes in the Nigerian contemporary family structure. In Families in Nigeria: Understanding their diversity, adaptability, and strengths (Vol. 18, pp. 99-112). Emerald Publishing Limited.

Amiola, A.J., Khordabux, N., Peerally, M. F., Temple, P., Bunn, R., Kuruppuarachchi, K., & Alexander, R. T. (2023). Intellectual disability, spirituality, religion, and social inclusion across cultures in R. Alexander et al. (eds). Psychiatry of Intellectual Disability Across Cultures. Oxford University Press

Amundsen, D. W. (1989). Suicide and Early Christian Values: The Nature of the Problem and the Scope of this Essay. In Suicide and euthanasia: Historical and contemporary themes (pp. 77-153). Dordrecht: Springer Netherlands.

Aquinas, T. (1947). The Summa Theologica (Benziger Bros edition). Translated by Fathers of the English Dominican Province. http://www. ccel. org/ccel/aquinas/summa. html.

Arsenault-Lapierre, G., Kim, C., & Turecki, G. (2004). Psychiatric diagnoses in 3275 suicides: a meta-analysis. BMC psychiatry, 4, 37. https://doi.org/10.1186/1471-244X-4-37

Bantjes, J., Iemmi, V., Coast, E., Channer, K., Leone, T., McDaid, D., Palfreyman, A., Stephens, B., & Lund, C. (2016). Poverty and suicide research in low- and middle-income countries: systematic mapping of literature published in English and a proposed research agenda. Global mental health (Cambridge, England), 3, e32. https://doi.org/10.1017/gmh.2016.27

Barraclough, B. M. (1992). The bible suicides. Acta Psychiatrica Scandinavica, 86(1), 64-69.

Barth, Karl. *Church Dogmatics*. 4 vols. New York: T&T Clark, 2009.

Berman, A.L., 2011. Estimating the population of survivors of suicide: Seeking an evidence base. Suicide and Life-Threatening Behavior, 41(1), pp.110-116.

Bertolote, J. M., & Fleischmann, A. (2002). Suicide and psychiatric diagnosis: a worldwide perspective. World psychiatry : official journal of the World Psychiatric Association (WPA), 1(3), 181–185.

Blázquez, N. (1985). The Church's Traditional Moral Teaching on Suicide. Suicide and the Right to Die, 63-74.

Boaheng, I. (2024). An Essential Guide to Research Methodologies in Theology and Religious Studies. *Noyam, Accra*.

Bonhoeffer, D. (2012). Ethics. Simon and Schuster.

De Leo D, Burgis S, Bertolote J M.et al Definitions of suicidal behaviour. In: De Leo D, Bille-Brahe U, Kerkhof A, et al, eds. Suicidal behaviour. Theories and research findings. Cambridge: Hogrefe & Huber, 200417–40.

Ehusani, R. (2024). The epidemic of meaninglessness and the rising cases of suicide in Nigeria. International Journal of Research and Innovation in Social Science, 8(12), 24-37.
Garber Jr, D. G. (2015). Trauma theory and biblical studies. Currents in Biblical Research, 14(1), 24-44.
Harrison, P. J., Cowen, P., Burns, T., & Fazel, M. (2017). Shorter Oxford textbook of psychiatry. Oxford university press.
Harmer B, Lee S, Rizvi A, et al. (2024) Suicidal Ideation. In: StatPearls [Internet]. Treasure Island (FL): StatPearls Publishing. Available from: https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK565877/
Ifeagwazi, C. M., Chukwuorji, J. C., & Zacchaeus, E. A. (2015). Alienation and psychological wellbeing: Moderation by resilience. Social Indicators Research, 120(2), 525-544.
Johnson, J., Wood, A. M., Gooding, P., Taylor, P. J., & Tarrier, N. (2011). Resilience to suicidality: The buffering hypothesis. Clinical psychology review, 31(4), 563-591.
Machielse, A. (2024). Meaning in Life and Social Connectedness. In J. Duyndam, A. Machielse. (eds) Meaning and Aging. Studies in Humanism and Atheism. Palgrave Macmillan, Cham.
NUJ (National Union of Journalists). (2024) NUJ urges responsible journalism when reporting on suicide. https://www.nuj.org.uk/resource/nuj-urges-responsible-journalism-when-reporting-on-suicide.html
Ogunwale, A., Fadipe, B., & Bifarin, O. (2023). Indigenous mental healthcare and human rights abuses in Nigeria: the role of cultural syntonicity and stigmatization. Frontiers in public health, 11, 1122396.
Ogunwale, A., & Ojo, T. M. (2025). Decriminalising attempted suicide in Nigeria. The Lancet Psychiatry, 12(3), 170-172.
Okolo, C. B. (1995). What Is to Be African?: Essay on African Identity. Dialogue and Universalism, 5(4), 13-26.
Olasunkanmi, A. (2015). Suicide in yoruba ontology. International Journal of History and Philosophical Research, 3(1), 29-34.
Olomola, I. (1987). Suicide in yoruba culture. África, (10), 52-82.
Okpalauwaekwe, U., Enwerem, K. E., Audu, M., & Mela, M. (2025). A Retrospective Media Content Analysis of Suicide Reporting in Nigerian Print Media. Cureus, 17(9), e92406. https://doi.org/10.7759/cureus.92406
Ortiz, J. (2019). Saint Augustine contra suicide. The Catholic World Report.
Owens, D., Horrocks, J., & House, A. (2002). Fatal and non-fatal repetition of self-harm: systematic review. The British Journal of Psychiatry, 181(3), 193-199.
Oyetunji, T. P., Arafat, S. Y., Famori, S. O., et al., (2021). Suicide in Nigeria: observations from the content analysis of newspapers. General psychiatry, 34(1), e100347.
Pietsch, M. (2023). Dietrich Bonhoeffer's theology of self-murder. Lutheran Theological Journal, 57(2), 82-84.
Stein G. Suicide and Self Harm. In: Kingdon D, Rowlands P, Stein G, eds. Seminars in General Adult Psychiatry. College Seminars Series. Cambridge University Press; 2024:654-687.
Stulman, L. (2014). Reading the Bible through the Lens of Trauma and Art. Trauma and traumatization in individual and collective dimensions: Insights from biblical studies and beyond, 2, 177.
Taylor, J. (2010). Christian Theologies of Suffering across the Centuries: An Examination of Suffering and Grief in the works of Gregory the Great, Julian of Norwich (Doctoral dissertation, University of Exeter).
West, G. O. (2023). Liberationist Interpretation. The new Cambridge companion to biblical interpretation, 191-209.
WHO, 2025. https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/suicide/