

**SPECIAL BURIAL PRACTICES FOR SUICIDE IN NORTH  
AMERICA**

Anna Sorenson

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## **Abstract**

Extensive previous research has been done to compare methods of burial between societies, but little has been done to observe variation within a society as relating to one method of death: suicide. This paper will focus on the different patterns and rituals involved in different groups processing the body after death, focusing on suicide. A society's value of individuality and their view of life affect the manner in which a suicide is viewed. The values, morals, laws, and rules of the society are of importance when a person who has committed suicide is to be considered. The widest variation of societal views comes from separate religious groups. Often the religious majority or the make up of a group of people will affect the views and rules over them. This paper focuses on the largest religions in North America to determine how and why there are differing methods of burial using archaeology, forensic anthropology along with historical records in order to interperate suicide burials.

## **Introduction**

The study of suicide has been extensively researched in relation to why people commit suicide and how different societies view it. Burial customs and patterns have also been researched, but not quite as extensively as pertaining to graves. The combination of the two fields has barely been researched. It is most interesting to consider the fact that suicide is so highly discouraged by many societies and religions that most research seems to stop at the conclusion that it is not allowed. Simply because an action is not allowed by a society does not mean that it does not occur. It is important to study and acknowledge suicide throughout history by examining graves and historical records as well as considering opinions of professionals on burials, suicide, and religions in order to interoperate graves which are found with no explanation. An outline or standard for what a suicide grave could be is helpful in establishing a basis for which to support or refute what unknown or unmarked burials could mean. Most likely if societies disapprove of suicide-special actions will be taken to differentiate that burial from those of natural causes.

## **History of Religious Views on Suicide**

It is the collective thought in religions as well as the perspective of most societies, the suicide is wrong. It has been ingrained in our minds that suicide is against human nature and our most animal instincts. The common thread among religions is that a person who has committed suicide will not receive the traditional burial rites. The Judeo-Christian perspective is that “God gave us a wondrous gift and expects a responsible stewardship over it. It is His right to determine the time, place, and manner of our death” (Smith 2003). Suicide is a form of aggression and is deeply sociologically studied. Durkheim (1951) describes one of the factors in preventing suicide as being socially integrated, and religion as a source of such social integration. Most important in examining the differences in treatment of suicides is to observe the opinion and views of Catholicism, Judaism, Islam, and Native Americans.

### *Suicide and Catholicism*

In Catholic tradition suicide is seen as murder. It is “a rejection of God’s sovereignty and loving plan. Furthermore, suicide is also a refusal of love for self, the denial of the natural instinct to live, a flight from the duties of justice and charity owed to one’s neighbor, to various communities or to the whole of society” (Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of Faith)” (Corr, et. al. 2003). Common to the Jewish tradition, it is believed that we are stewards of our bodies, given to us as a gift from God, rather than owners. Interestingly enough, there is no evidence in either the New or Old Testaments of suicide being condemned. Suicide is mentioned in the Bible, but the occurrence is rare and only in times of great duress. In the Greco-Roman era, suicide was not viewed as evil, rather the idea was adopted later as the Catholic religion developed. Saint

Augustine's The City of God helped to vilify suicide in the church as well as the larger society by the fourth century. "In the 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> centuries, church councils officially adopted a negative attitude toward suicide. In fact, the Christian Church once persecuted those who committed suicide" (Oaks and Ezell 1993). Previously it was not condemned by the church and was perhaps even approved of as a manner of death (Lewis 1995). By the 13<sup>th</sup> century, Thomas Aquinas also facilitated the cementing of suicide as an act of sin in his Summa Theologica where "suicide was viewed as contrary to man's natural inclinations" (Lewis 1995). He stated suicide as antisocial and an act against God. Currently in the Catholic Church suicide is still considered a sternly negative act, and opposing the values of the Church and of self love. "God gave us a wondrous gift and expects a responsible stewardship over it. It is His right to determine the time, place, and manner of our death...the act of suicide is a usurpation of that right" (Smith 2003).

### *Suicide and Judaism*

Jewish tradition states that those who commit suicide are sinners; they are murderers. It is morally wrong. It is stated, in fact, by Eliyahu Teitz that "The only Jews excluded from Jewish burial are those who commit suicide" (Torah-Forum Digest 2006). It is believed that we are created in the image of God. If someone is going through difficulties, God will have given them the ability to survive. God has a plan for us and our lives, and life is divine, therefore, we should not be taking that lightly and destroying something that God has created. Your life is not your own to do with as you please. Judaism frowns upon anything that is negative towards the body. Often God's command to Noah in Genesis 9:5 is cited as "Surely your blood of your lives will I require." What this argument overlooks is the fact that suicide is never expressly forbidden in the Old

Testament. It is also not outlawed by the Talmud, though it is strongly expressed by religious leaders “that one may not wound his own body. All the more so, he may not take his own life” (Simmons nd). The Jewish Law Articles state that “One who intentionally takes one’s life has no share in the world to come.’ Even the mourning rituals of *shiva* are not observed and such persons are not buried in proximity to other Jews (though within a Jewish cemetery).” The booklet *Semachot* is quoted as saying “He who destroys himself consciously, we do not engage ourselves with his funeral in any way. We do not tear the garments, and we do not bare the shoulder in mourning, and we do not say eulogies for him; but we do stand in the mourner’s row and recite the blessing of the mourners because the latter is for the honor of the living” (Internet FAQ Archives 2007). King Saul is often referenced for his commitment of suicide in the Bible. This is said to be because he is under such stress and not of a right mind. Throughout the Bible he is described as not a well man, who wanted to kill his own son. He is decidedly not in control of his actions and therefore not at fault. Another example of suicide in the Bible is the fall of Masada, where some 900 Jews chose suicide over capture, torture, and murder. They did so to protect God’s honor and their integrity, and only as a last resort (Saul Probaum, personal communication 2007). These are justifications and a way to defend funeral rites, which would be performed for the family’s sake. Martyrdom was previously an option in three cases: when faced with the possibility of murder, forced adultery, or forced worship of a false god. These are manners in which a Jew can show their devotion to God by choosing Him over a longer life. These deaths were more revered than punished.

### *Suicide and Islam*

Those who believe in the Islam religion view it as a lifestyle rather than a following. Life is to follow the prayers and words of Mohammed in life and death. The traditional view of suicide in Islam is that it is forbidden. It is repeatedly stated in the Qur'an that suicide is not allowed. "You shall not kill yourselves. God is merciful towards you. Anyone who commits these transgressions, maliciously and deliberately, we will condemn him to hell. This is easy for God to do [4:29-30]" (Sura 4, Women 2002). There is not much mention of differential burial treatment for followers of Islam who commit suicide because it is so reviled. Suicide, however, can also be considered an alternative path and a greatly encouraged path to sacrifice or take your own life as a martyr. A martyr is one who believes they must use their own life to defend their family and their country in a holy war. In fact, one who acts as a martyr is seen as a hero and has gained entrance into heaven for their sacrifice, and thereby raises the stature of his or her family by giving their death meaning (Timothy Kullman, personal communication 2007).

### *Suicide and Native Americans*

There is an overwhelming sense of urgency to focus on suicide as a major concern in Native American cultures. Data has been greatly skewed in order to overemphasize the rates of Native American suicides. Suicide is an issue of great concern for many Native American tribes, but there are underlying factors which contribute to such actions. There is data supporting greater a rate of depression and alcoholism among Native Americans, which may lead to the rationalization of a greater tendency towards suicide. These factors have been linked to or are contributed to by a sense of a loss of culture or a

forced integration of the traditional Native American culture and a European culture (Cox 2002).

Mortuary practices of Native American differed substantially across North America, but generally each group prepared the body for the after world...

Traditionally the methods of burial was graves, pits, holes in the ground, stone graves, mounds, cabins, houses, lodges, wigwams, or caves. Bodies were mummified, and the remains placed in the earth in caves, mounds, boxes, and scaffolds. (Hirschfelder and Molin 2000).

Grave goods are also of importance to many Native American tribes and must be taken into consideration when analyzing an excavated burial.

There is also not as strict a stigma and consequences in the afterlife for many Native American cultures in regards to someone who commits suicide. There is not a great fear of death, but rather a fear of social stigma. "Despite the high rates that occur among some tribes, tribes generally reject suicide. The Lakota teach that those who commit suicide will wander the earth lost and lonely" (Cox 2002). Hirschfelder and Molin (2000) do point out that burials were to be performed properly in order to avoid ghosts. There is sometimes variation among tribes as to the burial preparation for age, gender, status, and manner of death. This all must be considered when examining an excavated burial. A common theme is the widely held believed that the Native American tradition is to view death as a journey, perhaps to the "Happy Hunting Ground" or some other form of afterlife. Though this is not universal among tribes, it is widely believed. Someone who commits suicide will have a much longer and more difficult journey to the land where everything is in abundance, or they may go to a place of less abundance, but

by no means the hardships that are believed to accompany the “hell” of Judeo-Christian beliefs. Kidwell’s (2001) study of Native American death and afterlife supports the idea that those who act against the norms and values of the tribe and society will have a more difficult journey. He notes a Choctaw story of those who are bad in life falling off the bridge while crossing to the next life, and those in the San Juan Pueblo who have a long journey to the good afterlife require more food in their burial preparation. There is more of a sense of balance among or within Native American tribes and burial differentiation may indicate actions against the society, rather than specific acts. The attitudes of Native American cultures are greatly tied to social relationships. Many ceremonies exist that teach about life and death and the events in between which create the relationships - personal and societal - and the values which to live by. “Today, many Native Americans observe Christian burial customs because of laws prohibiting traditional practices” (Hirschfelder and Molin 2000). This may lead to differential treatment of suicides in order to the forced conformation to society as a whole.

### **Collection of Information**

Through analysis of literature on current methods and treatment of individuals who commit suicide and the survivors, I have created a basis on which to compare treatment and burial remains from historical archaeological records. I have examined historical cases of suicides and the treatment of their remains by the society and their religion at the time. I have also spoken with religious leaders, including a Catholic priest, a Lutheran pastor, and a Jewish rabbi to get an evolution of the treatment of suicide cases from the past. These were not very good leads as often religious leaders are afraid or

embarrassed to discuss treatment of suicides in the past, though Pastor Ron Nowland did give a good contrast to Father Mark Pierce. I have interviewed Gerry Cox, the director for the Center for Death Education and Bioethics. He has given an overview of different instances for unique burial rites for suicide. He has also led me to more research on the topic and given me several papers and texts on the topic. I have spoken with Vincent Her for a Hmong perspective of suicide and with Tim Kullman for a Muslim perspective. Most of their knowledge is in current conditions, but has still been very helpful. I have interviewed Tim Thornton for more specific information on suicide. His specialty being in statistics he was only able to lead me to more sources. For Native American cultures I will look at current and historic literary texts and books, especially those provided by Gerry Cox. Religious traditions through history will be examined from religious documents and the interviews with religious leaders. Documents from online sources are also taken into account as they provide a readily accessible plethora of information. Current religious traditions will be used for comparison to archaeological remains. Not always can the cause or method of death be determined, but there are several factors which can lead to the assumption for cause of death. If a body is found or recovered in a strange state it is helpful to view other cases to which it is similar.

### **The Use of Forensics and Archaeology for Skeletal Analysis**

The entire focus of archaeology is to study past human activity and behavior. To better understand ourselves we must look at our past. When examining a burial, all manners of materials must be taken into consideration. Traditionally archaeologists recover “soils, articles of human manufacture ranging from stone tools to historic

artifacts like glass and nails, plant and animal remains reflecting what the people ate or used as materials for manufacture and skeletal remains reflecting what the people ate or used as materials for manufacture. They also of course study human skeletal remains and try to date a site by developing knowledge of such techniques as tree ring dating and trace element analysis” (Skinner 1983). Human remains are used in context to analyze and interpret data as far as sex, social stratifications, marriage and family ties, concepts of death between societies, and development and change of traditions. Also, “the condition, color, and shape of the skeletal material can indicate whether the remains are ancient, historic, or modern” (Nafte 2000). These ideas can be applied to forensic science as well.

Evidence from funerary contexts have allowed archaeologists to analyze survival profiles, variation in nutritional patterns, positioning of individuals of groups within a cemetery or settlement, and the distribution, quantity and quality of associated grave goods.... Moreover, the strong symbolic nature of burial patterns argues against any simplistic correlation between burial treatment and the lived experience of the individual.

(Rautman and Talalay 2000)

All manners of material must be considered when observing a burial. All grave goods and earthly disturbances must be taken into consideration. These can aid in defining the manner and cause of death, which are difficult to determine simply from bones or remains. Cause of death is the distinct event which resulted in the person’s death such as falling into a river and drowning. Manner of death is the most important in deciphering burial remains in order to interpret the context of the grave because it is the reason why the person died, such as jumping into the river vs. being pushed into the river (i.e. suicide,

homicide, accident, natural causes) (Skinner 1983). In contemporary society, coroners determine whether a death is the result of suspicious activity or not (i.e. suicide or homicide). The role of a coroner was originally to record deaths, keep track of criminal matters, and “relinquish property of felons, murderers, and suicides, hence the early association with crime” (Nafte 2000). They are the first link in establishing the cause, manner, and context in which a death occurred. Coroners are often reluctant to linking the cause of death to suicide because of the negative connotations within most societies which accompany such acts. A coroner may request a “psychological autopsy” to “improve accuracy of determining cause of death” by “interviews of victims family and friends regarding stressors, mental or physical illness, history of suicidal thought or attempts, and daily routines prior to death” (Oaks and Ezell 1993). Oppositely, a coroner may fail to link the cause of death to suicide due to the protection of the family. These are indications that the actual number of suicides are grossly underestimated (Corr, et. al. 2003). A pathologist would examine flesh remains of bodies found that are more intact. Pathologists have an easier time determining cause and manner of death because “vital organs, by their position in the body and their size, shape and/or contents can reveal, for example, whether an individual drowned, suffocated, was asphyxiated, poisoned, shot, stabbed, strangle, or struck by a vehicle” (Nafte 2000). “Forensic anthropologists normally deal with bodies devoid of flesh,” which leaves little evidence to distinguishing exact cause and manner of death (Skinner 1983). Characteristics of trauma caused by injury can be left on the bones and interpreted by forensic anthropologists; “identifiable marks on bone reflect the nature of a trauma, injury, disease, or illness” (Nafte 2000). They can include cuts and breaks and distinctive patterns and pieces missing, such as

from self inflicted gun shot wounds. The marks on bones must also be placed in the context of antemortem, perimortem, or postmortem. Antemortem marks are those made before death, such a broken bone which healed. Perimortem marks are those left from around the time of death. These are the most useful in determining cause of death. Postmortem marks are made after death and must be identified and ruled out when considering cause of death. Perimortem marks are of significance when looking at remains with self inflicted bullet wounds, blunt force injury, sharp force injury, and intentional dismemberment (Nafte 2000). It is very helpful in determining manner of death when the context of societal treatment of the dead is known. It is also important to establish the environment in which the body was found as well as the duration of time since which death occurred. "Some suicides retreat to secluded spots and the bodies are not likely to be discovered until skeletonized" (Skinner 1983). "Time, sun damage, fire, clothing, bacteria, fungi, water, acids, and erosion" must all be considered when examining bones (Quigley 2001). "Observations should be made of the slope, terrains, type and extent of vegetation or other cover, flood zone, river or creek flow rate through the year, prevailing temperature and moisture conditions, annual temperature and precipitation ranges, altitude and freezing levels, leaf litter and shade," as well as animal disturbances (Skinner 1983). Iscan and Kennedy (1989) review the potential damages to bones including "environmental hazards, inter- and intraspecies conflicts, and in rare instances, self-mutilation and suicide. Humans are able to use their superior hands and brains to create their own trauma-producing instruments, ranging from crude crushing and cutting weapons to the sophisticated ultra destructive weaponry of modern warfare." Also when considering remains found, it is much easier for a forensic scientist to

determine cause and manner of death if the process of decay has left more than bones. A very descript method of excavation of a cemetery is described by Kjoblye-Biddle (1975), which could be used in order to determine boundaries, significance of findings, and procedures. Ideally a cemetery such as was excavated in Winchester Cathedral (Anglo-Saxon and medieval) should be done stratigraphically in order to take into account the burial in layers and generations. “In order to extract this information, burials have to be excavated in accordance with contemporary field methodology, with careful recording of all the nuances of funerary ceremonial. The chronological and cultural attribution and the vertical and horizontal stratigraphy should be established for all excavated burial grounds” (Alekschin 1983).

### **Comparisons of Religious Burials**

The interesting information obtained from this study of special treatment as pertains to suicide is the refusal to notice or acknowledge the changes in burial practices, ceremonies and the treatment of surviving family. Many religious leaders may downplay that there is a differences between burials for suicide and those for natural causes. There is more of a manner of avoidance in describing burial differences or a changing of the reasoning or topic. I was told several times from the Catholic point of view that they had not herd of these special treatments for suicidal burials, or that there was not prescribed official ruling as the special treatment of suicides. This could be evidence of shame for special treatment of people who take their own lives. It was clearly stated that there may have been a difference or recognition of suicide in the past, but currently suicides are recognized no differently. Catholics have a much stricter stance when it comes to burials

which would lead to social scandal, such as those of murderers, heretics, manifest sinners, gangsters, and the socially or morally corrupt (Father Pierce, personal communication 2007). Many educational leaders and experts on suicide and death acknowledge the difference for suicide burials across cultures and religions in the U.S., though they may not know the exact details on how the treatment for suicide differs. They also illustrate the fact that many religions do not accept suicide as a form of death. This means that some religions, such as Catholicism and Judaism have historically not recognize suicides, and if someone has committed suicide they were or are not allowed the same rights as those who die of natural causes. Combined with historical records and burials in special conditions or places confirms many societies and religions unpleasant treatment of suicide. Jewish tradition does not allow a complete burial rite. Some documents state that a suicide shall receive no burial rites. This includes the mourning, eulogy, and all traditions. These would be hard to identify archaeologically as the remains would have a distinct place in which to be kept in order to signify that the death has been by suicide, they would simply be outside of the consecrated grounds, such as at a crossroads or a city cemetery. Lesser punishments for suicides would be a private mourning or the exclusion of a eulogy from the funeral rites. Rabbi Prombaum describes a possible corner burial outside the boundaries of the community (personal communication 2007). This is more of a community decision as to the harshness with which the suicide and their family is treated. Father Mark Pierce confirms this notion by also stating the same treatment of placing a suicide burial in unblest or unconsecrated ground, such as outside of the cemetery or in the corner. He and Pastor Ron Nowland have also heard the body not being allowed through the cemetery fence, so in order to enter, the body must be lifted

over the wall. This is symbolic of the suicide only being allowed into the cemetery by the grace and assistance of friends and family (Father Pierce and Pastor Nowland, personal communications 2007). A way around such a harsh exclusion is to rule that the death is only truly a suicide if the intent is explicitly expressed shortly before the act, and that person has to be of a clear mind. Rabbi Prombaum insisted on describing the definition of suicide when considering manner of death. The intention must be clearly defined such as in words or in note shortly before the act, which must be made with a clear mind rather than under duress or mental instability. Just because someone says they are of sound mind does not mean that they can be trusted; people do not self incriminate. It is believed that someone who commits suicide cannot possibly be normal and something has to be wrong mentally, so they are not responsible for their actions and may have the option of a partial or full burial. The Hebrew root of the word suicide means lost; therefore, someone who commits suicide is losing themselves or has lost something which makes them whole. Catholicism also uses a rationalization that the person must be of sound mind in order to fully determine the cause of death as suicide. Acting under extreme stress is an excuse to not hold the person who has committed suicide accountable. If someone commits suicide they are clearly not “normal” or of sound mind (Pastor Nowland, personal communication 2007). This holds true for children as well, as they are too young to understand the consequences of their actions. Most often in the Judeo-Christian tradition mourning rites or some type of service may be allowed for the family of the suicide. In today’s society, it is difficult to gain perspective on religion and treatment of suicide. The American culture has a very individualistic attitude toward success and relationships. Religion is a waning force; power and money are replacing

values, but it is still valid in understanding of historical special burial practices to look at religion. The focus on the effect of religion on suicide, as stated by Pastor Ron Nowland, is social integration (personal communication 2007). Native American traditions articulate this point when considering the manner in which a body is buried. The positioning of the body and the grave goods can help determine possible manners or causes of death and why that person was treated thusly. A person had to commit an antisocial or anti-communal act in order to deserve a disgraceful or different burial in Native American cultures. “The orientation of the body after death would be important in that it would direct the soul to the proper after life realm” (Crass 2000). It is more of the individual act than the general opinion toward suicide. A murderer can have a special burial, but if it was in self defense that is unlikely. If a person killed themselves under extreme conditions they are less likely to receive special treatment than if it was an antisocial act or one that deeply disturbed the community. It is pertinent to consider all of the variations within and among different tribes when excavating a Native American burial and determining possible special preparation. In Islam, suicide is considered a deep lack of faith and is strictly forbidden. Suicide for one’s country is considered a great martyrdom and is highly respected, valued, and honored. These burials or funeral services would not be punished, but rather celebrated.

Religion gives a structure and sense of belonging. It creates a hierarchy and, often, a system of fear. Depending on the intensity and the view of afterlife, punishment, and fear, there is variation for the probability for committing suicide. A strong negative opinion of suicide in a person’s religion and the fear of a painful afterlife could change the person’s actions and dissuade them from committing suicide. Corr (2003) states that

this may historically have led authorities to be dissuaded from determining the manner of death as suicide in order to protect the family and give them a chance at a religious burial. This point is further supported by the possibility of the coroner to request a “psychological autopsy” to determine the state of mind the person was in when they committed suicide by talking with their friends and family (Oaks and Ezell 1993). This supports the cause that if the person is found in an altered state of mind they may still receive burial rights as stated previously. Dublin (1963) states a lower statistical rate in the likelihood for a person to commit suicide if they associate themselves with the Catholic or Jewish traditions because of their highly structured organization and strict imposition of rules. As previously stated, Durkheim (1951) advocated religion as a factor which leads people away from suicide, but more in a social sense. Rather than fear, he states, it is the connection with the society as a greater whole and a sense of belonging. “What holds this group together is the existence of a certain number of beliefs and practices common to all its members, traditional, hence obligatory. The more numerous and the stronger these beliefs and practices are, the more compact the religious community” (Durkheim 1951). It is that much greater an opposition to religion if not only the values and rules of the faith are being broken, but also those of the social structure. Viewing these perspectives and the likelihood of a religious person to commit suicide, we must examine historical cases of suicides in order to interpret special burials found in religious contexts.

#### *Previous Cases*

Many of the traditions through a religions history are facts passed down or records kept, rather than the actual remains recovered, although there are several areas

which have been exhumed and studied. It is important to look at a variety of cases in several different social contexts in order to determine a possible pattern for burial practices and behaviors.

Wilson (1987) describes the harsh treatment of a suicide in England through the fear of the living; in order to avoid the ghost of an angered soul, the body was buried at a crossroads away from the general population and consecrated grounds, and a stake was driven through them so as to keep the ghost from walking. Puckle (1926) writes on the placement of a suicide on the north side of a cemetery. It is the place reserved for murderers (including self murder – suicide). The north side is where the Gospel is traditionally read in a church. The Gospel is used to call sinners; therefore that area of the consecrated ground is reserved for the worst kind of sinners. Puckle also states that disgraceful burials may have occurred at night, in the dark, or in agreeing with Wilson (1987) at a crossroads; burials recently were “without ceremony in the unconsecrated ground in the churchyard as we have seen, but the earlier practice was to take the body away from human habitation and bury it where four roads met” (Puckle 1929). This information must be considered when excavating a cemetery to aid in the determination of social positioning and cause of death. If there are visible injuries and the body is found in a distinctive place in the cemetery or outside of the consecrated grounds, this could lead to a better explanation of the remains and their treatment by society as a whole.

Two cases from Cox and Mays are on historically recorded suicide burials in St. Bride’s crypt and Christ Church Spital Fields. Both of these cases were documented suicides by shooting. The skeletal remains helped verify the records. At Christ Church Spital Fields “An entrance wound for the bullet was found in the right sphenoid and the

much larger exit would was situated just above lambda on the parietal bones...Documentary evidence was found for the cause of this individuals suicide in the newspaper of the day” (Cox and Mays 2000). This is a good demonstration of the combination of archaeological evidence with historical records.

Pastor Ron Nowland recounted a burial excavation that he was present at of a Native American woman who was buried face down. With the burials of this tribe a pot with food for the journey was packed. In this woman’s burial her pot was also face down. This indicated that this woman had done something to the tribe that was so socially punishable that she would not be headed toward the “Happy Hunting Ground.” In this case it cannot be certain, but this could be an instance of a special burial for suicide. (Ron Nowland, personal communication 2007).

The article by Michael MacDonald (1986) on suicide in England between 1660 and 1800 gave great insight on the treatment and punishment of suicide though history. He restates that “Their bodies were denied the usual rites of Christian burial...the corpses of suicides were interred at a crossroads or in some other public way, laid face down in the grave with a wooden stake driven through them.” Suicides were judged in a court by the coroner, who was in charge of estates, and a coroner’s jury. The state of mind was considered, and if the person was judged incompetent the suicide was not punished. However, if the death was ruled as a suicide it was punishable by law and religion. Financial obligations and punishments are more directly documented than are religious punishments. The church most likely had a stricter dealing with the suicide during the time due to the strict treatment and mandating from the king for strong financial

retribution. The jury and coroner over time developed a more subjective view in order to spare harsh treatment of suicides for their family's and community's sake.

### **Conclusions**

“By studying the health practices and the burial and mortuary customs, one can learn much of the philosophy and religion of a people” (Cox 2002). However, Cox also states

No analysis of mortuary and burial practices could provide a complete picture of the attitudes and values of a particular people toward dying and death. One would need to observe hundreds of funerals to uncover subtle practices that might distinguish one funeral from another even in the same culture.... factors would also include the cause of death, the time of year in which the death occurred, or the personality of the person who died. The attitudes of the survivors of the deceased could impact the type of funeral practices that emerges as well.

It is clear through historical record that there has been special treatment for funeral practices regarding suicides. In most religious traditions of today's world it is much more likely that the organization the individual belongs to will consider suicide in a different way. Judeo-Christian methods have moved from persecution, to a view of prevention and a change in the justification of the act. It is more likely that the mental state of the suicide will be considered and weighed before a final consideration in the funeral rites is made. Islam offers more of a way out of societal hardships by committing the act “for religion.” By becoming a suicide bomber it is in essence to become a martyr.

Native Americans punish acts against society more severely than acts against religion due to their view of life after death being less strict and punishing. Due to the rationalization of suicides in most religions today, it cannot be conclusively stated that a burial is that of a suicide on archaeological evidence alone. Perhaps there is an increased reluctance to persecute suicides as it is a more common act in today's society of high stress and longer life expectancy. A historical record must also be made of the person's demise in order to determine conclusive cause of death.

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