

## Suicide in the Middle Ages Volume II, The Curse on Self-Murder [nid:1227]

**Review Number:**

211

**Publish date:**

Monday, 1 October, 2001

**Author:**

Alexander Murray

**ISBN:**

9780199553181

**Date of Publication:**

2000

**Price:**

£0.00

**Pages:**

662pp.

**Publisher:**

Oxford University Press

**Publisher url:**

<http://ukcatalogue.oup.com/product/9780198207313.do#.Ui7zScakpbU>

**Place of Publication:**

Oxford

**Reviewer:**

David d'Avray

This volume is long, and it is the second out of three. Some books are long because it is expected. That was the case with the old *thèse d'état* in France, and the tradition lives on under different administrative arrangements. Murray's opus magnum is like a *thèse d'état* in that he has taken all the time he needs and cut no corners, but unlike a *grande thèse* it is not the product of the first decade or so of research. Murray's first book, *Reason and Society in the Middle Ages* (Oxford, 1978), was an astounding synthesis of insights. In the two decades and more that have elapsed since it appeared, his scholarship and unusual mind have matured, so that this is a study *hors de catégorie*. It is true that one senses a reluctance to leave out any of the insights acquired along the way. Still, this is not one of those books that grow because the author has accumulated a lot of material and does not want to jettison it. Murray's powers of synthesis protect him from irrelevance. Above all, he has a unifying argument, with many subsidiary arguments that support it rather than detract from it. He tries to persuade honestly, without manipulating the reader, and this means taking the reader through all the arguments and source problems. He has tried to set them out clearly enough for any educated person to understand. Too much compression would have excluded the combination of reasoned demonstration and clarity which characterise Murray's enterprise.

The unifying argument of the volume is that harsh treatment of suicide in the Middle Ages does not derive from the specific rationality of the dominant religion. This argument could have been distilled into a slim controversial book. It could have been received as a polemic. Instead, Murray sets his data and his reasoning

out in clear daylight. That could have made the book laborious to read, but the quality of mind averts the danger of drudgery. Much of the empirical data on actual suicides in the Middle Ages was marshalled in volume one. Like a master chef, Murray had set out his *mise* in advance. In this volume he sets to work on it, allowing us to watch.

The argument is in fact several arguments, distinct in type. One type is chronological. It is known that the bodies of suicides were treated with extreme harshness in the Middle Ages. Murray shows that this was mainly a late- or post medieval phenomenon. Consequently, 'the influence of the medieval Church' cannot adequately explain it. He draws the obvious parallel with the chronology of witch persecutions.

Another strand of reasoning centres on the philosophy and law of the ancient world. Ancient pagan philosophy and Roman Law could show a tolerant face to suicide. Nevertheless, both traditions (they were imperfectly distinct) developed a less tolerant attitude, and this development seems to have come from an internal dynamic, rather than simply from Christian influence. In setting out his argument, Murray provides in passing a fine analysis of the rationalities of Stoicism and of Roman Law.

Analysis of coherence is another of Murray's methods. 'Though theological in apparent idiom, many medieval ideas on suicide lacked the coherence of real theology, and indeed any coherence sufficient to account for the curse in all its vigour. The rationale for the curse must therefore be sought, not just in these explicit testimonies but in their context.' (p. 395). Murray is in effect developing a method for deciding whether the a set of attitudes in the past can be explained by the inner rationale of a belief system, or whether they have a separate origin, but come to colour and overlay the belief system. This method is widely applicable.

Careful linguistic analysis shows that the specific method of suicide was emphasised in legal discourse, irrelevantly, one might think. Murray can explain this: it was the vivid horror of particular cases that provided the reaction, more than the act *per se*.

Attempted suicide was treated leniently. Morally, logically, the sin should have been the same. Yet there was a gulf between the attitude to the successful and the unsuccessful self-murderer.

Perhaps the most powerful chain of inference is from comparative religious law. In the ancient world Romans, Greeks and Jews all showed a horror of suicide like that of the Middle Ages. In some cases Murray has to excavate these attitudes through careful source analysis: he has to bring to light some data that pushes against scholarly assumptions. Then, in the final chapter, the most impressive of all for this reviewer, he looks further afield, to the anthropology of 'primitive' peoples, to ancient India, and to Islam, finding everywhere phenomena similar to those of the medieval West. Granted the generality of the 'curse on self-murder, Murray's virtuoso reconstruction of a chain linking ancient Egyptian attitudes to early medieval synodal law is superfluous to the logic of his argument, though dazzling enough in its breadth of learning.

All these lines of evidence point towards the conclusion that the medieval horror of suicide and the harsh treatment of suicides' bodies represent a crude but overpowering pollution fear liable to manifest itself in any place or time. Pollution is distinguished 'by its adhesion to a tangible, unmistakable material even without consideration for the mental state involved, and . by its function in supporting the norms that protect a community.' (427).

When these arguments are stated baldly, they seem quite rejectable. Not so when one works through the patient and lucid presentation of the evidence. For those who have the time to do so there are many added attractions. Medievalists will be full of professional admiration for the technical expertise deployed without apparent effort. Murray takes manuscript discoveries in his stride, convincingly restoring damaged words in an unpublished sermon by Pope John XXII. He is comfortable with medieval vernaculars. It is one thing to use easily accessible sources, another to exploit evidence whose structure seems designed to repel all but the most determined. Most serious scholars who do pioneering work have mastered the technical structure of one such genre of source, but Murray has made a determined effort to learn the ins and outs of a whole range

of them. The expertise acquired for the project extends far beyond the Middle Ages, so that we have something not far off a comparative cultural history of suicide. Infallibility when far from his medieval base is too much to expect. He mistakenly reports (p. 336) the majority solution to the synoptic problem, making Matthew share the lost Q-source with Mark, rather than Luke. Yet it is an intellectual feature of Murray that he continues to show great originality when far from the central medieval period with which he is primarily associated. Despite his small slip, Biblical critics would do well to pay attention to what he has to say in his section on 'The Historical Judas', just as specialists in the world of late Antiquity should reflect on his arguments for restoring for some purposes the 'two tier' model of piety, elite and popular, which Momigliano had criticised. In fact, not only historians of many periods, but also scholars in many disciplines ought to study this rather amazing book.

The author is pleased to accept the review and will not be responding further.

**Other reviews:**

[2]

---

**Source URL:** <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/review/211#comment-0>

**Links**

[1] <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/item/1227>

[2] <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews>