

BIOETHIC PREMISES IN SPIRITUAL ADVICE OF PRISONERS WITH SUICIDAL ATTEMPTS

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ABSTRACT. The suicides problem concerns several categories of specialists. It becomes a psycho-social problem with spiritual tangents. In prison environments suicides prevail, as a result of an immoral habitat, a private environment and the compulsion of a different lifestyle. A recovery warrant for people with suicide attempt was assigned to the spiritual adviser, which highlights the value of life. The spiritual counseling of the prisoners with suicide attempt proves necessary both for prison environments as well as for the free society.

Key words: *Moral, Consulting, Spirituality, Prison System, Ethics*

REZUMAT. Premise bioetice în consilierea spirituală a deținuților cu tentative de suicid. Problema sinuciderilor trebuie să fie abordată de mai multe categorii de specialiști deoarece devine o problemă psiho-socială cu tangențe spirituale. În închisori rata sinuciderilor este cu mult mai crescută ca urmare a unui habitat imoral, a unui mediu privat de liberate și a existenței unui stil de viață diferit. Consilierului spiritual, care are rolul de a scoate în evidență valoarea vieții, îi revine sarcina de a recupera persoanele care comit tentative de suicid. Consilierea spirituală a deținuți cu tentative de suicid se dovedește necesară atât din perspectiva lor înșiși, aflați la închisoare, cât și din perspectiva celor aflați în societatea liberă.

Cuvinte cheie: *Morală, Consiliere, Penitenciare, Spiritualitate, Etică.*

Introduction

The problem of the persistence of the spiritual-moral climate within the penitentiary institutions remains a taboo element for the contemporary society. The individual sentenced to deprived of liberty imprisonment faces, from beginning, two types of problems: firstly the accommodation to the norms and

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values of the environment specific to the prison and secondly the evolution or involution of his personality in the penitentiary system. For both aspects, the individual needs moral support and counseling as each stage in the complex deprivation of liberty has risks of moral fall. Behaviorally, the prisoner quickly passes from the conformist morality focused on guilt to the moral frustration, based on group beliefs, explaining the cases of the crimes, his attitude towards work, family, law, future etc. In both periods, the convict goes through moments of risk, either created by him, or favored by the entourage. The most dangerous moments are those ended with self-harm and sometimes leading to suicidal attempts.

Starting from the idea that the bioethics is the science that has an inter and trans-disciplinary approach, from sciences capable of offering the contemporary society methods forms of prolonging the life, quality of life, diminution of sufferings etc. The approach of the proposed topic starts from this premise, wishing to highlight the beneficial and acceptable effect for all of the spiritual advisor's effort in solving the suicidal attempts. The form and methods by which the advisor restores the meaning of life (psychic and physical), the confidentiality and trust have changed and kept the lives of many prisoners. The need of spiritual advisor, especially of those ignoring their own lives, can be observed from relationships build between advisor and prisoner, doctor and prisoner.

The problem of suicide is recorded as one of the most incomprehensible human actions. It was analyzed and researched by various specialists: doctors, sociologists, priests, psychologists, jurists etc. Many writings about this scourge have not come to meet the true causes of the contemporary society, as the number of suicides is increasing. Moreover, there is an increase of the young's interest to read novels or other works that illustrate the stages and the "fruits" of suicide. Most TV channels, internet posts etc. propose viewing artistic sequences or documentaries that bring glory to self-murderers.

In most European countries, the suicide is considered a public health problem since the statistics classify it among the top ten decease causes [9, p.142].

What suicide means?

The well-known Romanian explanatory dictionary describes suicide as "the action by which the man takes his own life" [4, p.1814]. Jurists define suicide as a "deadly self-harming that involves the absence of a judicial conflict" [5, p.213]. Therefore, from the penal point of view, nobody is responsible for this crime – it is easy to assign a murder as a suicide. We are witnesses to the

idea that suicide is differently defined by the scientific domains. From a bioethics point of view suicide is “intended suppression of life” [8, p.315]. The Orthodox Church moralists define suicide as an irreparable method by which we consciously voluntarily destroy our own life without a real reason [12, p.217-218]. The researchers who have closely studied this phenomenon claim that suicide is not necessarily seeking the death or abolition of one’s person, but the escape from life, from problems, the way in which the victim represents [8, p.215]; or emotional blackmail [2, p.68] – often found in the penitentiary environment.

Suicide is considered as a moral disease that can be contagious, for example true epidemics of voluntary deaths are sometimes registered as specific to a certain time and place. Nowadays, a special place is presented by the penitentiaries. In the penitentiary institutions around the world are known the self-harm and self-mutilation phenomena. These intentions are characterized by a certain deviant behavior. These are the reaction to some crisis situations to intolerable stresses including: vein cuts, superficial wounds, swallowing of objects that cause serious injuries to the esophagus, hanging attempts or impulsive poisoning. The prisoner’s behavior is a significant and persistent clinical problem in the penitentiary environment. In the penitentiaries all the directions in the institution are responsible of this phenomenon. It has been proven that the best way to counteract is the teamwork. Here, a special contribution can have also the spiritual advisor of the institution, who brings to the administration’s knowledge the decisive factors in the evolution of the problem. The spiritual advisor in the penitentiary institutions is also called chaplain, no matter the religion.

How does this “epidemic” manifest in a deprived of liberty environment?

The risk factors that cause this self-aggression among detainees are different from case to case, but there are some predominant:

- The fact that *he/she was deprived of liberty* – whether is under a long-term imprisonment or is already sentenced - destroys his/hers future intentions, it produces a rupture from the society and family. These types of suicide are found in the preventive penitentiary institutions or in the temporary holding cells of the municipal or district police stations. Those taking such drastic decisions are the melancholic ones.
- In the penitentiaries, suicide is most often due to the break of the *link with the family*. The Family Code of the Republic of Moldova states that

a person may seek divorce if the other one is deprived of liberty for more than 3 years [3]. Breaking the links with the family and children, relatives and friends causes solitude in facing the penitentiary problems and creates a strong impression of uselessness in the society. Also, in this situation, the stigmatization probability of the prisoners in post-detention period increases.

- Risk factors are also the *socio-economic status, the disadvantages, diseases (depressed neurotics, hormonal imbalance, weakening of certain neurotransmitters)* [9, p.141], *psychic and anxiety disorders, depression etc.*
- Sometimes, we find a *family predisposition for suicide or hereditary transmission*. Most convicts with suicide attempts come from families with law conflicts.

The real suicide attempts must be distinguished from the manipulative acts of self-harming or self-mutilation, which actually aim to receive attention or to force the achievement of some personal benefits. At this point the role of the spiritual advisor can be noticed, which after the personal discussions with the prisoner may distinguish the motivations of his acts. Most suicidal persons from the penitentiaries have a period of time with repeated attempts, until they actually do it. These attempts are often hidden by the cellmates so that they will not be seen as provocative or persecutors, even if things really are that way. Group spiritual counseling of those in cells is not possible, since it requires an intimate and private moment.

The role of the spiritual advisor in recovering the prisoners with suicidal attempts

In the penitentiary, the spiritual advisor plays the role of a parent and friend to most deprived convicts. His success in this context depends on his ability to initiate and to maintain a personal relationship with the prisoner with the obligation to respect the confidentiality. He does not distinguish between age, social status, religion, sex or the severity of the act for which he was convicted. He engages in solving the behavioral problems and as a result he can identify the prisoners with suicide attempts or problems. The detainee' behavior with this type of tendencies does not depend on the seriousness of the crime he was convicted for. All prisoners have the right to a moral life focused on ethical principles, which transforms them from delinquents into exemplary individuals. The frequent meeting of the advisor with the prisoner favors by increasing the confidence also the sincere openness for the spiritual advisor.

From the idea that suicide is considered first of all a crime against human beings and life, a crime against society, the disobedience is the most serious violation of the divine rules. At the beginning of the spiritual counseling of the prisoners with suicidal problems, the most successful approach is the one based on the premise that human's life is the greatest gift that God gave us [10, p.321]: The Creator and the Sustainer of the human bios, Creator of the human being in general, God is the only one to decide the end of our earthly existence. The human does not have the right to intervene in this chapter and neither in the birth one. In religious thinking, the value of life in the body is irreplaceable, since the body is the temple of the Holy Spirit (I Corinthians 3,17), and "the suicide is an act of insurrection against the life giver, a destruction of the Holy Spirit temple, which is the body" [1, p.184].

From the experience during the activity as a spiritual advisor in the penitentiaries from the Republic of Moldova, maintaining a profound spiritual life can be considered a very efficient method to keep the bios in the physiological and psychological norms. Its results are everyone's benefit. A profound spiritual life is not a random phenomenon because the man is isolated from the society, family, job etc. It is in this environment that the religious feeling is updated; the individual having great hopes on the possibilities of the divine intervention in solving his/hers problems. These hopes are strictly related to his/hers own behavior, both in relation to himself/herself and in relation with divinity, cellmates, family, guardians and doctors.

Three theses of Christian morality that condemn the suicidal act are on the basis of the spiritual counseling of the prisoners with suicidal attempts:

- a) suicide is a crime against life and human nature;
- b) suicide is a crime against society and family;
- c) suicide is a crime against God.

On the other hand, the human being is endowed with a powerful defense instinct and uses the most unexpected methods of prolonging the life. The human body has defense instruments, using them when its existence is threatened by others. In many cases, the man is using all the means to prolong its existence, being also visible the progress of the techno-scientific treatment of incurable diseases. Or, in this context, suicide is a defiance to the human nature, and it transcends the barriers of the right on human life. Human's call is superior to the problems and troubles of this life, therefore the advisor will bring real examples of individual who have saved their own human nature by serving the good. The good is highly expected in a penitentiary and the spiritual advisor will support the prisoner's initiative to do good to its colleagues by initiating this process. To have a healthy spiritual life in the penitentiary we have to help the detainees to set moral principles of existence that prolong and sustain the life.

A successful counselling method and with prompt positive feedback is the explanation that suicide is a crime against society and family. Regardless the context, each person is useful to the society. The existence of a person is the basis to the existence of another one, but those who don't value their own life are indifferent of other individuals [9, p.143]. Updating and remembering the beautiful events from childhood or with the family, of those with positive social impact, gives greater value to the prisoner's counselling. This chapter is included in the widest forms of counselling and it represents important subject by which the prisoner can recover from depression. By remembering the glorious and beautiful moments of his life will sensitize him to the pain of the family, relatives and society. On long term, the spiritual advisor can support the re-establishment of the relationship with the family, relatives and friends who will visit the detainee during sentence and will justify his social utility.

The strictly spiritual method the advisor will use is to explain the detainee that suicide is a crime against God. The suicide is one of the most serious sins that ever existed; if in the case of other sins there is a possibility of returning and restoring the relationship with God, with suicide there is no chance of change. The pious Iustin Popovici states that "suicide is, in fact, the inevitable result of God's killing" [7, p.15]. The severity of this act is that the self-murderer gives up to the possibility of return, repentance and transformation of the human nature. The post-mortem encounter with God is inevitable for every person.

Life is the most beautiful gift God gave to us [6, p.210] and this gift must be protected. The spiritual advisor uses the Word of Life which offers the desperate prisoner the helping hand of the Creator's love. To justify the above, the spiritual advisor can read to the prisoner the word of the Bible, which give:

- the absolute forgiveness through Christ's sacrifice on the Cross, the forgiveness of any confessed sin (I John 1, 7-2);
- the exclusive right of the Savior to give or to take the life (Deuteronom 32, 39);
- God's vision on the sanctity of life (Acts 1, 26-27);
- God's care for those depressed and desperate (Psalm 27, 10).

All these scriptural arguments represent the basis of the spiritual counselling of the prisoners. The Holy Scripture is of great value for prisoners as a written act and their return to the status of a pure individual before God is the opportunity long awaited by many. The moment of human nature's redemption, in which God sacrificed His own Son, is the most beneficial means of returning the condemned from the hardest sufferings they face in the penitentiary. The immortality problem in religion and anthropology can justify advisor's approach. Suicide can be considered a violation of human's life

sanctity, which, “according to the bioethical beliefs, is inalienable, sacred, unique and inviolable, both physically and spiritually” [11, p.90].

The provision of examples of human’s nature resistance in penitentiaries is an efficient means of the spiritual counselling of the prisoners. In the public counselling of the convicted, the most successful examples of Christian behavior in penitentiaries are the lives of self-taught persons, who have self-enlightened in prisons. After each discussion and offerings of books, describing these moments, the prevention of suicide in the penitentiaries will be facilitated. The most impressive events are those with politically convicted intellectuals during the communist period in Pitești, Gherla or Aiud. Their works are requested not only in the penitentiary, but also by the whole society.

A problem that cannot be kept under strict control is the post-detention suicide of the convicted. The newly released convict who has unfunded illusions about society faces major problems after it. Even the fact that the family is insufficiently prepared to receive the new member carrying the moral and penal sequels makes the detainee feel useless. But the most serious problems are the stigmatization from the society that creates obstacles in the individual’s achievements post-detention: he/she cannot get a job, his family and relatives reject him/her, his/her old friends avoid meetings etc. All of these factors lead the newly released individual to attempt suicide. If close relationships with the spiritual advisor have been created during detention, these moments can be easily overcome through periodic counseling and psycho-emotional support, but if these aspects are missing, the suicidal probability is higher. The most successful method to control suicide in the post-detention individuals’ case is the context in which the spiritual advisor manages to create a large supporting family from former detainee or a club in which they meet and support each other, in which can also take part persons from different domains who will show solidarity.

Conclusion

The successes of an exceptional counseling are necessarily related to the behavioral therapy of the advisor. The moral value of the word in the spiritual counseling is enormous, but it can be infertile if the behavior does not meet the intentions. The best example of counseling is represented by the facts of the advisor. We also mention that the detainees have great reluctance to the free persons who want to help them. Therefore, the entire behavior of the advisor is what can guarantee the success or failure in collaboration with the prisoner.

An adequate spiritual counseling takes into account the contemplation in the meaning of life. For the convicted with suicidal problems, the spiritual advisor is a true lifeline. Educating the moral norms and principles of life is beneficial both for the individual deprived of liberty and the entire society.

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