Aberration of Mind

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Chapter 8
Cumberer of the Earth

The Secularization of Suffering and Suicide

In destroying the instinct of self-preservation, creating it into self-destruction, the suicide is brave. We may well imagine how life—so sweet to all—may become unbearable. We may easily conceive how the mind, sapped of its strength by some misfortune, may become so weak as not able to bear even the ordinary burdens incident to life. But the fear to die is never lessened, and when the suicide overcomes the principle it is an act of courage.

—New Orleans Times, May 25, 1866

The most famous suicide of the American Civil War was undoubtedly that of Edmund Ruffin, the fire-eating secessionist from Virginia whose actions bookended the Civil War. Ruffin fired the first shot of the war—he received the honor of detonating the first volley at Fort Sumter—as well as the last, when on June 17, 1865, he blew his brains out with a silver-plated rifle. Most historical treatments, and virtually all popular ones, have fixated on the Confederacy’s loss and impending subjugation by Yankee rule as the impetus for Ruffin’s suicide. Ruffin was a high-profile public figure, well known outside the South as well as within as an ardent supporter of secession and independence, so a tidy, political, pro-Confederate explanation for his suicide aligns with perceptions of the man and his cause. Most accounts of his suicide focus only on a brief portion of the lengthy twelve-page suicide note—his final diary entry—in which he excoriated “the Yankee race” and defiantly declared his refusal to live under “Yankee domination and despotism.” Even Ruffin’s son and namesake, Edmund Ruffin Jr., assured his own sons, Ruffin’s grandsons, that “the subjugation of our country has weighed heavily on his mind and determined him to take the final step.” Although the dreaded prospect of living in a defeated South contributed greatly to Ruffin’s depressive state and his decision to end his life, a closer examination of his rather extensive, researched, and contemplative explanation of that decision reveals myriad personal and philosophical reasons. His unorthodox views on suicide stood out from mainstream secular and religious attitudes toward self-murder in the antebellum South but augured the relaxation of dogmatic, stringent proscription against suicide that the war greatly hastened.
Ruffin’s thoughtful exploration of suicide in religious and historical texts is typically overlooked in discussions about motive that instead privilege his hyper-Confederate nationalist rant as evidence that his death was a response to Southern defeat. Well aware of prevailing moral and theological taboos against self-murder, he sought to justify his decision by challenging biblical interpretations condemning the act as sinful. In fact, Ruffin’s reflections on self-murder as represented in his suicide note mark at least two decades of ruminations about the so-called mortal sin. His wartime experiences, including death, dislocation, loss of property, and defeat, left him hopeless and despairing, not unlike millions of other Confederates, and played no small role in his decision to take his life. While Ruffin unquestionably was the most well-known Confederate to kill himself in the wake of civil war, thousands of ordinary Southerners, gripped by unprecedented anguish and hopelessness, considered or acted on suicidal thoughts. Ruffin’s meditations on suicide and suffering, therefore, serve as a useful lens for observing the ways in which the Civil War compelled white Southerners, awash in pervasive and unprecedented despondency and destitution, to reconsider their harsh attitudes toward self-murder and embrace a more sympathetic, compassionate view of suicide and those who killed themselves.

Before the war, the vast majority of American Christians walked in lock-step, in varying degrees, with Christian theological doctrine that condemned suicide as a mortal sin, though a few isolated voices, Ruffin’s among them, occasionally dissented. By the Civil War, though, and certainly after, many more white Southerners had begun to challenge the church’s harsh denunciation of suicide, ushering in a sea change in attitudes toward suicide. The war proved an important catalyst in reorienting the way white Southerners viewed suicide and those who ended their own lives. For generations, the church had admonished the faithful to countenance suffering, but the onslaught of misery, death, and destruction bared the limits of what Christian Confederates were able to sustain physically and psychologically. Southerners, no longer able to reconcile the theological demand for stoic forbearance with the profound suffering, came to realize that anxiety and depression, commonly interpreted by the faithful as manifestations of insufficient faith, were reasonable consequences of war and worthy of empathy, not condemnation and judgment. Suicide had occurred before the war, but sporadically, and was committed by individuals in response to personal circumstances and conditions. Evidence abounds that after the war Southerners, drowning in suffering, were turning to self-murder in record numbers. Newspapers reported on scores of suicides committed by soldiers and their loved ones left at home. Suicidal Southerners, male and female, populated the region’s lunatic asylums. Suicide was no longer episodic, hidden, and exotic; it had
emerged from the shadows. As more Southerners contemplated self-murder during and then after the war, popular views on suicide, long shaped by ecclesiastical condemnation and reinforced by Scriptures, gradually gave way to greater understanding and tolerance that spurred the tendency to decouple suicide from its religious moorings. Suicide in the postbellum South came to be viewed less as a sin or a sign of moral weakness and more as the result of tragic circumstances, a sad but expected result of war-generated suffering. And by the late nineteenth century, manifestations of war-generated suffering, including suicide, became a badge of honor for white Southerners, emblazoned onto their new refurbished identity. (See figure 13.)

Edmund Ruffin readily conceded in his suicide note that popular opinion was “almost universal” in believing suicide to be a sin against God, forbidden by the Bible, a belief he rejected as “mistaken.” A thorough, methodical analysis of relevant texts in both Old and New Testaments revealed, to his mind, no such proscriptions. Ruffin emphatically rejected the Christian definition of suicide as a form of murder, the most common explanation offered.
by religious authorities in denouncing suicide as sinful. Because the act is voluntary and directed toward one’s self, Ruffin asserted, it fails to rise to the level of either sinful or criminal. To make this point, Ruffin employed the analogy of fasting. A person who fasts does so voluntarily, which is not criminal, yet if forced upon another, constitutes a crime. Finding no explicit biblical prohibition of suicide, Ruffin then surveyed ancient Jewish history, a time when Jews, according to Ruffin, were “fanatically devoted to every requirement of God’s law.” Yet devoted Jews often committed suicide. In fact, Jewish law mandated suicide under some conditions, such as after defeat or rather than surrender, as in the case of the siege of Masada, during which nearly a thousand Jewish warriors committed mass suicide rather than surrender. “Suicide is not simply, of itself, a crime, or even a sin,” Ruffin concluded.

Despite insisting that killing one’s self did not constitute an affront to God (Ruffin was determined to soften the blow of his act of self-destruction on family members by alleviating their concerns for his spiritual well-being that he had committed an unpardonable sin), Ruffin did not embrace a fully libertarian view of suicide. He differentiated between good suicides and bad suicides based on circumstances and motives. Suicide was bad when intended to duck duties and obligations to family, like providing financial and material support, and to the state, such as offering defense. In these cases, “suicide would be cowardly and base as well as criminal in high degree.” In contrast—and here he described what he saw as his own circumstances—when death would not deprive family or country of service or duty, or would not contribute to losses or the physical suffering of anyone, then suicide was neither criminal nor an act of disobedience to God. Suicide might actually “remove incumbrances [sic], lessen evils, or ward off dangers to others,” in which case the act of self-destruction might even be “commendable.” Ruffin then laid out a case for his own “commendable” suicide. He inventoried the significant things he had done for family (generously provided for and dispersed property among his children) and nation (promoted agricultural reforms in the region and sustained the Southern secession and independence cause), and he laid bare his dependent, helpless condition, arising out of losses related to the war. Having satisfactorily fulfilled his duties as father and countryman, and no longer able to contribute to his own or anyone else’s support, Ruffin had become “merely a cumberer of the earth, and a useless consumer of its fruits.” His, he concluded, was a good suicide.

A rehearsal of sorts for Ruffin’s suicide and its justification occurred a quarter century earlier when his close friend and aging mentor, Thomas Cocke, killed himself in February 1840. In the days before his death, Cocke opaquely
discussed the topic of suicide with Ruffin. News of Cocke’s death by his own hand deeply shook Ruffin, made worse by the gruesome scene. Ruffin assisted with the cleanup, which required collecting the remains of Cocke’s skull and brain matter after Cocke had fired a gun into his mouth. Yet, Ruffin refused to rebuke Cocke for killing himself. Although he would not go so far as to excuse Cocke’s decision—what Ruffin termed the “greatest offence of his life”—he resisted joining the “universal cry of condemnation.”

Ruffin’s tentative and inchoate reflections on Cocke’s 1840 suicide expose an inner conflict about the act that, by the end of the Civil War, had congealed into a fully researched justification for taking one’s life.

Ruffin’s tolerant views on suicide in 1840 made him an outlier on the matter of suicide, in stark opposition to official denominational Christian doctrine, which entertained no extenuating circumstances. To take but one example, the Presbyterian Church’s catechism, published in the 1850s but written by two eighteenth-century theologians, forbade suicide—“self-murder”—under any circumstances. The tract condemns suicide as an unnatural act, “opposed to the natural principle of self-preservation implanted in us.” Citing the Old Testament account of Job, the catechism denounces self-murder as an act of the “highest impatience,” a reflection of “discontent with our lot in the present world.” Furthermore and perhaps paramount, suicide represented an encroachment on God’s authority, for only God determines when a life ends: suicide “is an impious invasion of the prerogative of God, as the sole author and disposer of life.” What made suicide a unique and especially heinous act was that, unlike all other sins, a suicide victim ended his or her time on earth, thus denying the sinner an opportunity for redemption. Consequently, those who died at their own hands suffered “an awful eternity,” for they were unable to ask for and receive forgiveness.7 Presbyterians, like most other mainstream Protestants, unequivocally denounced suicide as a form of murder and hence a sin, and a mortal one at that.8

Clerical consensus on the anathema of suicide carried the day in antebellum America. In the years of the early republic, theologians regularly delivered harsh, unambiguous denunciations of suicide. The ministers’ tenor on the topic of suicide was often strident, their positions rigid and intransigent. One of the most expansive and thorough theological ruminations on the topic of suicide was delivered in 1805 by a Presbyterian minister in New York City. Samuel Miller’s widely disseminated treatises on suicide left no doubt where organized religion stood: “suicide is really a crime”—a crime against God, a crime against human nature, and a sin against society. Miller considered but rejected the common reasons given for suicide: feelings of uselessness, depression and melancholy, embarrassment, physical suffering. In truth, he countered, “pride, vanity, impatience, cowardice, a criminal love of the world,
a false estimate of happiness, the most unworthy and degrading selfishness” stood as the real causes of suicide.9

Ministers like Miller espoused draconian views on suicide built on a theological and cultural foundation of orthodoxy. But three overlapping developments in the early republic contributed to further entrenchment by clergy on the subject of suicide. The first was a post-revolutionary move to decriminalize suicide, as well as a growing reluctance by coroners to issue verdicts for suicide. Virginia’s early suicide statutes, to take one example, required confiscation of the victims’ property. None other than Thomas Jefferson decried the severity of the laws and called for their repeal. Ministers pushed back against the sentiments that undergirded the secular relaxation of harsh suicide law. Second, clergy also launched strident missives against suicide in response to a perceived wave of post-revolutionary suicides. Miller and other theologians urged extreme measures to stave the rising number of victims in an ostensible suicide epidemic.10

Third, the first half of the nineteenth century witnessed an intransigence by mainstream Protestant sects on suicide doctrine in the face of a growing Universalist challenge, a good deal of which refracted over the issue of self-murder. Universalists proved irksome to Protestant denominations, not merely because they competed for souls, but because Universalism embraced radical doctrines anathema to mainstream churches, like universal salvation and anti-slavery, and rejected foundational tenets of Protestantism, like the Trinity and original sin. Universalism adopted a loving, inclusive theology premised on a belief that all people, sinners of all sorts, would be reconciled with God. Universalists denied that suicide victims would suffer eternal damnation. Embracing a more compassionate view of God, they believed He would save all, including those who died at their own hands. A veritable print war between Universalists and virtually everyone else broke out in the first half of the nineteenth century, much of it debating the sinfulness of suicide. Mainstream theologians attacked dissenting Universalist views on suicide, reinforcing long-standing, intractable positions on the sinful nature of self-destruction.11 Thus, when a Northern Methodist minister in 1861 delivered a sermon equating the start of the Civil War with suicide and noted as an aside, “Suicide has always been considered, by Christian moralists, the most culpable form of murder,” he was affirming a long-standing religious tradition of anti-suicide thought that permeated the sensibilities of most laypeople, including antebellum Southerners.12

Religious proselytization on the subject of suicide proved effective and greatly influenced popular ideas about the sinfulness and immorality of self-murder. The admonition that those who took their own lives faced eternal damnation certainly deterred many antebellum Southerners from such a
path, as it was intended to do. Newly apprenticed lawyer Enoch Faw of North Carolina wrote despairingly over his future prospects for employment in 1858, even contemplating suicide, which he admitted “would be eternal death.”

Like Faw, a suicidal H. T. Brown well understood the stigma of cowardice attached to suicide in the antebellum period. The planter/land speculator from Wilkesboro, North Carolina, confessed, “[I often feel] weary of the long monotonous road before me and I have often felt an inclination to voluntarily abandon it but then every one who reflects on such a subject must know that it is base and cowardly to do so and then if there is any truth in the Bible what comes after death is a weighty consideration.”

Church doctrine and clerical scorn over suicide, notably the threat of eternal damnation, contributed significantly to the stigma of suicide that pervaded antebellum Southern society and shaped popular attitudes toward self-murder. Occasionally, religious and popular derision of suicide resulted in the community’s revocation of burial rites for suicides, which most religious Southerners held as sacred.

Mississippi planter Thomas Dabney, while away from home, learned that his children’s tutor had killed himself following a failed attempt to live a life of sobriety. Although Dabney had regarded the young man as a son, he grew outraged upon hearing that the teacher had been buried alongside Dabney’s two deceased sons. Dabney ordered the disinterment of the tutor’s body, insisting that no suicide should rest by the side of his “pure children.”

Dabney’s disapproval of the tutor’s burial beside his sons is in keeping with the customary practice of “profane” burials for suicide victims, usually the purview of clergymen. Ministers typically refused to bury a suicide victim on church grounds or with religious rites, a form of ecclesiastical ostracism.

William H. Taylor, for many years the coroner of Richmond, relayed a childhood memory of a suicide victim who was denied a Christian burial by local ministers. Suffering from delirium tremens, the “poor creature” had jumped from a window of a Richmond building and killed himself. The victim’s friends, Taylor relayed, appealed to a number of ministers to perform a Christian interment. All refused. Out of desperation, the friends turned to an ostracized clergyman recently arrived in the city and propagating “the heterodox tenets of so-called Universalism.” The Universalist minister mortified the more mainstream ministers in town when he performed what “he believed to be Christian rites” and had the “effrontery” to speak of the pathetic drunk as “our brother.”

Despite considerable animus expressed by many clergy and some followers toward the act of suicide, lay attitudes showed signs of relaxing by the late antebellum period. In William H. Taylor’s account of ministers who refused to perform Christian burial rites for the suicidal drunk, the response of
clerical leaders stood in contrast to that of community leaders who “applauded” the unconventional funeral performed by the Universalist preacher, not so much because they approved of the Universalist doctrine on suicide, but because they saw that in treating the suicide victim with compassion, the itinerant minister showed himself to be “more Christ-like than were others who had arrogated to themselves the Christian name.” Although official church teachings on the sinfulness of suicide remained unchanged throughout the long nineteenth century and persisted well after the war, laypeople and even some ministers began to show greater compassion toward suicide victims, while expressing displeasure with draconian and condemnatory church canon on self-murder, exposing a fissure between theological doctrine and churchgoers. For example, in 1867, a group of Masons of Missouri denounced as barbarous the action of any “church or order” refusing “respectable sepulture to a suicide.” The Grand Lodge counseled that the decision to bury a Mason who had committed suicide should be based on the life he led, not on the mode of his death. A fraternal brother suffering from a “fearful calamity” that had “produced a ‘disease’ called insanity” deserved to be buried with full Masonic rituals.

Writing in 1847, a man self-identifying as “a Southern physician” penned a thoughtful essay on suicide, drawing on historical, religious, legal, medical, and philosophical treatments of suicide. He observed a “sentiment of profound pity for the unhappy suicide” and expressed confidence that God, “most merciful, and most just Judge,” will “abundantly pardon” those who die at their own hands. Mirroring Ruffin’s refusal to condemn the suicide victim, the anonymous essayist implored others to act compassionately: “Say to our most unhappy brother, ‘Neither do I condemn thee!’” A Georgia newspaper in 1876 published a reflection on suicide written in 1848 by a “young lawyer” who had died before the war but wrote eloquently about the need to extend sympathy and compassion to suicide victims. He admonished others, “Think not harshly of the suicide—we seldom if ever understand, or appreciate the feeling, that impell[s] him to the commission of so sad and rash an act.” Those who voluntarily end their own lives, he penned, “should be met with all fortitude and patience.”

By the outbreak of the Civil War, a small but growing divide between official church doctrine and lay beliefs on the sinfulness of suicide could be detected. Clergy in the early nineteenth century had launched a vigorous counterattack against the tide of Enlightenment thought, Universalist dissent, and the decriminalization of suicide. They failed, however, to stem the tide entirely and, as evidenced by the preceding anecdotes, unforgiving popular attitudes about suicide showed some signs of giving way by mid-century.
The widespread suffering in loss of life, anxiety about the war’s outcome, and eventual loss of the war, prompted many more white Southerners to change their minds about suicide. Confederate veterans returned home, many thousands of them afflicted with emotional, physical, and psychological damage. More than a few contemplated suicide to put an end to their suffering. Those who considered ending their own lives through self-murder no doubt weighed the religious proscriptions and social taboos attendant to suicide. When Southerners did take their own lives, relatives, friends, admirers, and neighbors were left to make sense of the deaths; increasingly, they rejected the long-standing religious denunciations of suicide. The gap between the church’s position on suicide and the attitudes of laypersons, shaped by personal experience, grew. Although the war did not change the doctrinal proscription against suicide or its definition as a form of murder, it did affect the attitudes of ordinary Southerners, who in the midst of unprecedented and pervasive suffering began to reconsider its depiction as sinful.

Southerners’ evolving views about suicide cannot be understood without first considering the context of the Civil War and the emotional and psychological toll exacted by war and loss, as well as the failure of religion, so integral to the lives of nineteenth-century Southerners, to satisfactorily address the mental anguish experienced by many soldiers and civilians. White Southerners’ religious convictions were put to the test on multiple fronts as a result of the Civil War. As historian David Blight has contended, “death on such a [large] scale demanded meaning.” George C. Rable, too, has noted, that the “scale of the suffering and sacrifice in turn raised large and difficult questions about the providential meaning of slaughter on such a massive scale.” Suicide was one such question.

Theological tenets about suffering also were tested as a result of civil war. The pervasiveness and inevitability of human suffering and the religious assurance that with sufficient faith one would survive life’s most challenging trials implicitly reinforced doctrinal taboos against suicide. Christian churches taught that, because of the fateful decision of Adam and Eve to eat of the forbidden fruit and thereby invoke God’s wrath, man was destined to a path of suffering and misery. Because of original sin, all must suffer. To escape earthly misery and affliction through self-murder subverted God’s will. Moreover, the coming of Christ brought a new contract with God’s people, one that required a painful and tortuous end to his life in order to provide Christian followers with salvation. In the New Testament, Christ serves as a model of suffering, a source of inspiration for those who, like him, faced considerable tribulations in life. Jesus, like any other mortal, dreaded his trial and sought to avoid it, even praying to God to allow him to escape the suffering that he prophetically knew awaited him: “My father, if it be possible, let
this cup pass from me.” As the son of God, though, he recognized that his
path of intense sorrow and anguish was required to save God’s people and so
resigned himself to the misery that would follow.28 “How the people reviled
him and persecuted him! See him in the anguished writhings of Gethsemane
as his ‘soul is exceedingly sorrowful, even unto death!’ Behold him con-
demned, though innocent, at the bar of Pilate, and mark the crown of
thorns, the mock scepter, the spitting and scourging, the toilsome, fainting
ascent of Calvary, and the horrible tragedy on the cross!”29 Eternal life for
God’s followers could only be achieved through Christ’s suffering and sor-
row; had Jesus avoided his fate, the cost to Christians would have been their
path to eternal life. As one Georgia minister extolled, God “laid upon him
the iniquity of us all—that by his stripes we may be healed.”30

By exalting Christ’s fortitude and resignation in the face of suffering, theolo-
gians and ministers provided their anguished and tormented flock a model for
Christian comportment in the face of war-related adversity while reminding
them they were the direct beneficiaries of his suffering.31 Christ bore his chal-
lenges bravely and stoically; so should they.32 Christ’s example of forbearance
provided solace to the afflicted and served as an important source of spiritual
consolation in nineteenth-century America, as displayed by a North Carolina
woman who offered condolences to “Aunt Sade,” a relative of William Lenoir,
who committed suicide in the spring of 1861. The author shares how she took,
and by implication Sade should take, solace in Christ’s example: “It was the
greatest comfort to me to feel that Jesus had suffered grief.”33 A book of reli-
gious reflections published assured readers, “[Jesus] knows my sorrows, for
he has felt them!”34 No audience was more in need of such assurances than
soldiers. In a sermon prepared for Confederate soldiers, Reverend C. T. Quintard
implored his audience to remember that “whatever be the intensity of sorrow
that bows and presses the heart of man, remember that, for every grief you
suffer, the meek and Holy One suffered a thousand.” The preacher urged soldiers
to garner strength from Christ’s example: “Wherever we turn, whatever be our
shade of grief, we are but feeble copyists of the great sufferer, who, in His own
person, exhausted every variety of human sorrow.”35

Nineteenth-century Protestant ministers regularly counseled parishioners
on suffering and its requisite place in the Christian schema, reminding them
that faith alone would not stave off pain. Echoing the convictions of many,
one Southern Baptist clergyman cautioned that faith alone was no inoculation
to affliction: “Immunity from trial is not guaranteed or promised. Rather the
reverse.”36 God’s followers understood that the inevitable and ubiquitous trials they faced served a godly purpose. “It is a good schooling of the heart
to visit the couch of suffering and pain, to come into contact with sorrow,”
countenanced the Reverend William McKay, a Presbyterian minister who
served Georgia churches in the late nineteenth century. “Sorrow is one of the world’s greatest teachers,” he counseled. Adversity instilled in Christians the virtue of piety. Earthly trials sweetened the fruits of paradise in the afterlife, a time that would usher in “praise and love and joyous gladness for the very things which had brought weeping and sorrow upon earth.” Confederate soldiers were reminded that God required two things of them: the “strength to bear and to suffer.”

In this conception of suffering, self-murder constituted a deliberate effort to escape divinely sanctioned trials. Tormented Christians should, therefore, reject the temptation to terminate their suffering through self-inflicted death and instead shoulder their earthly tests with the same resilience and resignation as Christ their savior had. Suffering was an integral part of God’s plan for salvation. Christians considering suicide as a response to physical or emotional suffering should instead model themselves after their Lord, who persevered in the face of torment and sorrow. Such was the sentiment behind the rebuke delivered by the eminent Presbyterian minister from South Carolina James Henley Thornwell to his brother-in-law, A. J. “Jack” Wisperspoon, also a minister, who felt so despondent about his feeble health that he considered taking his own life. Thornwell sternly warned him, “You have no right to commit suicide.”

Christian theology even denounced the basis for much suicidal thought, melancholy or despair, as antithetical to scriptural precepts. Ministers implored congregants not to give in to despair, “a cowardly sort of refuge from misfortune—a sort of moral suicide, which disgraces manhood.” To the contrary, Christians should find bliss in life. “We must be joyful,” preached a Presbyterian minister before the war. “We have no business to go mourning all our days . . . It dishonours him [the Lord] when we are downcast and sad.” Among early nineteenth-century Christians, then, melancholy or nervousness was symptomatic of spiritual failing. Christians under emotional strain simply needed to turn to God. “When your heart is heavy you must return to the Lord,” advised an antebellum Southern minister. “Pray to him to comfort you, to take away your sin, and to make you rejoice.” Melancholy was equated with spiritual weakness. Those who succumbed to their gloomy thoughts were giving in to temptation; they needed to pray for greater inner strength to face life’s struggles. In fact, colloquial phrases used to describe melancholy, “the blue devils” or “devils in the heart,” signify the vestiges of the historical association of depression with temptation and the influence of Satan.

Southerners internalized religious views of suffering and suicide and viewed the resulting depression and anxiety as signs of weakened faith, not mental strain. A Methodist preacher’s daughter, Mary Jeffreys Bethell of
North Carolina, for example, confessed on the eve of the war that she was “miserable” and “surrounded by darkness, doubts and gloomy fears.” The dismal political horizon, sending two grown sons off to the military, and the lengthy absence of her husband from home account for much of her personal despair. Bethell saw her slip into depression, though, not as a natural response to crises and stress in a war zone; rather, she viewed it through a religious lens. These feelings represented spiritual shortcomings, so she sought comfort in the Lord, whom she confessed seemed as if he had forsaken her. “I wept and prayed to Jesus Christ to remove my burden of fears, and gloom.” A year later, the war and the sacrifices it demanded from Bethell tried her faith. “The Lord’s face is hid from me. Darkness and gloom surrounds me,” she wrote. Two years into the war, she confessed that “severe and fiery trials and temptations” left her “low-spirited” and feeling like a “poor, helpless sinner.”

Another Confederate mother, Julia Cumming, a month into the war that eventually called on all four of her sons, similarly lamented that she felt wracked with anxiety despite efforts to keep it in check. She blamed her weak faith: “A true Christian faith should give me more confidence and serenity than I now feel.” Octavia Otey in the spring of 1876, too, confessed to experiencing emotional struggles: her heart was “still full of trouble.” Reflexively, she pivoted to her faith for relief, determined to “cast all my care on God for he careth for me; he is able to help me in all things.”

Anguished diary entries such as these that would strike modern readers as manifestations of a compromised mental state instead represented to these Southern women and their contemporaries sinfulness and faltering faith, the balm for which was greater reliance on and faith in God.

The Civil War, and the extensive suffering it unleashed, tested Christian tenets on forbearance and exposed Christianity’s inability to comfort and sustain the multitudes of distraught and afflicted defeated Southerners. Religious authorities after the war, sensing a crisis in faith, reproached Christian Confederates to buck up. A Baptist newspaper, cognizant of the despairing mood in the region after the war, admonished defeated Southerners that “manliness and Christianity forbid the indulgence of a despondent, gloomy spirit.” The magnitude of loss and death, though, enveloping the region, precluded many from heeding the call to resist succumbing to despair. To be certain, Christian teachings on suffering and the admonition to remain stalwart in the face of earthly troubles sustained many Southerners during the war. A New Orleans woman wrote to her husband during the war: “If it were not for . . . religion that keep[s] me up, I would kill myself.” But increasing numbers of Southerners lost faith in assurances that suffering served a purpose or that God was merely testing them and, in the process, became more amenable to suicide as a palatable alternative.
As the war progressed, and especially in its aftermath, suicide became a real possibility for some anguished Southerners, many of whom were very religious and took seriously the church’s condemnation of suicide. Not all of the faithful under emotional siege considered suicide; nor did all those who contemplated suicide follow through. But the war left many Southerners questioning their religious convictions and therefore willing to rethink suicide as a viable alternative to end the suffering. One South Carolina woman’s evolution of thought regarding suicide played out over the waning days of the war. Twenty-four-year-old Grace Brown Elmore of Columbia grew increasingly worried about advancing federal troops. Despair over recent Confederate military setbacks, apprehension over Yankee raids, the death of two cousins in the war, and the prospect of living in “the Yankee nation” prompted her to consider suicide. “I have almost determined suicide in such circumstances would be justifiable [sic].” But she could not quite get herself there. The best she could do was to pray for God to bring about her death, taking the choice away from her: “God grant me death sooner than a life amongst the abomination of abominations, the Yankee nation.” Two months later, still awaiting the arrival of Sherman’s army and clearly worried about the prospects of rape, she again broached the topic of suicide, but this time openly as she considered that God might permit the act of self-murder in the face of such trying conditions: “Would to God I felt sure that life could be destroyed without sin, under such circumstances. That God would justify the self destroying hand, when life had become a burden and a shame through the wickedness of man.” If robbed of what she “values more than all things”—her virginity—death by her own hand was preferable to living with the dishonor. “God forgive me, if I had to choose between death and dishonor, I could not live. . . . That which was taken could never be restored. God will, God must justify the deed.”

Elmore was a deeply religious woman brought up in the Episcopal Church and well understood that suicide constituted an affront to God. She struggled with what she knew to be the teachings of her church. Yet, the war-related trials she faced were unprecedented and overwhelming. In a leap of faith, quite literally, she came to believe that God would forgive her for choosing to take her own life rather than live with the taint of Yankee rape. Her reasoning was less intellectual than Ruffin’s but nonetheless ended up at the same place: under some circumstances suicide was a reasonable response. Elmore did not commit suicide; she merely contemplated it. But the war and its consequences had brought her face-to-face with the taboo of self-destruction as a way to end suffering.

Psychological crises, like the one that enveloped Grace Brown Elmore, grew in the wake of war and enveloped thousands of Southerners, many of whom manifested symptoms of mental illness, including suicidal behavior,
during and after the war. Asylums quickly filled to capacity with men and women, many of whom had attempted or threatened self-injury.\textsuperscript{55} A clergyman ministering to Confederate troops in Wilmington, North Carolina, in May 1861, concerned about the increase in soldier suicides in just the first weeks of hostilities, preached: “And, already, men heretofore of firm and well-ordered character, have committed suicide from the pressure of this one distracting thought, the troubles of the country.”\textsuperscript{56} Another Southern minister delivered a sermon to soldiers titled “It Is a Fearful Thing to Live,” a rebuke, it would seem, to those who might be considering taking their own lives rather than face battle. “He who \textit{lives} in this world, must live forever. \textit{Live we must.”}\textsuperscript{57} Southerners during and after the war faced the juxtaposition of a religious culture that denounced suicide as sinful and embraced suffering as instrumental to salvation, with the stark new reality of war trauma that had ushered in unprecedented suffering and increased the specter of suicide.

The moderation of harsh attitudes toward self-murder during and after the Civil War was furthered, paradoxically, by a theological intervention to make death more palatable among wartime Southerners. Ministers delivered sermons to soldiers headed for the front instructing them not to fear death. They counseled bereft wives, mothers, and sisters that deceased loved ones were in a better place. In preparing Confederates for the inevitable loss of life in battle, religious leaders focused more intently on assuaging the shock of death by depicting the afterlife as welcoming. Protestant orthodoxy denouncing suicide as sinful had long rested precariously alongside the theological glorification of death as a peaceful destination where suffering and sorrow no longer existed. Death was not to be feared but rather embraced. “To die will be thy eternal gain. . . . Death hath no terror for thee. . . . Come, welcome death.”\textsuperscript{58} The Christian view of an afterlife devoid of suffering was intended to persuade the faithful that death was a portal to eternal life and not to be feared. The depiction of heaven as a place “where suffering and sin shall never more be either felt or feared” was meant to pacify Christians’ concerns about the fate of loved ones’ death, notably dead soldiers.\textsuperscript{59} For example, an hommage to a fallen Confederate captain that appeared in a Christian newspaper in 1867 depicted his new afterlife home as “that sweet land of pure delight [where] the happy spirit moves, ’mid scenes of bliss and heavenly light, and joy, and peace, and love.”\textsuperscript{60} Conceptions of “heaven” certainly predated the war. The image of heaven during and after the war, however, transformed from a vague, distant place to a comforting, blissful home away from home, a conceptual construction intended to comfort those who lost or stood to lose loved ones in war. Representations of a peaceful paradise soothed worries
about the departed’s state in the hereafter: “No sickness there—No weary wasting of the frame away. . . . No hidden grief, no wild and cheerless vision of despair. . . . No tearful eyes, no broken hearts are there! . . . The storm’s black wing is never spread athwart celestial skies!”

Depicting death as a serene retreat from the misery of an earthly life—notably, the carnage and torment of war—inadvertently risked making suicide a tempting alternative to human suffering. Soldiers heading into battle were directed not to fear it. One typical soldiers’ guidebook advised, “In an unsinning and unsorrowing heaven, war, tumult, pain, sickness, battle, bloodshed, shall be words unknown.” Ministers consoled those who had lost loved ones in the war by describing the afterlife as an ethereal haven devoid of pain and anguish. Southern believers whose capacities for enduring the trials wrought by war were sapped could take solace in the promise that in death all “our sorrows are coming to an end.” Although institutional religion roundly condemned suicide, insisting that only God determined the timing of one’s death, ministers preached that death should be welcomed because it brought escape from suffering. Messages intended to bolster those reeling from loss perhaps offered severely depressed Confederates an avenue to peace, unintentionally enticing weary Confederates to end their earthly torment and become one of “the blessed dead! . . . those who no longer suffer and are tried.”

Taking her cues from her faith, the widow Octavia Otey, enveloped by a deep depression after the war, fantasized about death as a way to extricate herself from extraordinary suffering, but worried how her death would affect her children. Eventually she resolved that her family should not grieve for her because she would be “at peace, at rest, and never know trouble any more.” Ironically, Christian tenets extolling the afterlife and its promise of solace to the sick and troubled may have lessened the resistance to self-destruction by offering an appealing escape through death.

Suicide during and after the Civil War, and in the wake of vast and unprecedented suffering, became a more understandable, reasonable option for those afflicted with emotional distress. It was no longer merely the act of the insane or impious. Self-murder had become a rational, more common, if sad option in the wake of vast and unprecedented suffering in the postwar South. Condemning fellow Southerners for ending their own lives or castigating the tormented as spiritually weak no longer resonated among a war-ravaged people. A more compassionate response was required. The few voices like Edmund Ruffin’s before the war increasingly constituted a chorus of calls for a non-judgmental, sympathetic reaction to instances of suicide. Strident, judgmental denunciations of suicide in the years before the war were eclipsed by greater restraint and expressions of empathy. A poem—“At the Grave of a Suicide”—published in 1886 by Sarah Morgan Bryan Piatt, a Kentucky
woman, reflects the softening attitude toward those who died by their own hands:

You sat in judgment on him,—you, whose feet
Were set in pleasant places; you, who found
The Bitter Cup he dared to break still sweet,
And shut him from your consecrated ground.

Come, if you think the dead man sleeps a whit
Less soundly in his grave,—come, look, I pray:
A violet has consecrated it.
Henceforth you need not fear to walk this way.67

The poetess upbraids those who dare judge victims of suicidal deaths after the war. In particular, she chastises those who denied suicides burial rites in church cemeteries. Piatt also emphatically rejects the church’s long-standing belief that self-murder destined one to eternal suffering—to the troubled soul, symbolized by the sprouting of a solitary humble flower, the violet, which serves to “consecrate” the grave when heartless mortals would not.

Further evidence that draconian antebellum attitudes on suicide gave way to a more tolerant view is discernible in the reporting of suicidal deaths in Southern newspapers during and after the war. At the beginning of the nineteenth century, newspaper accounts of suicide often condemned the deceased.68 Later, deaths by suicide—whether by war participants or not—more often elicited sympathetic commentaries; condemnation all but disappeared. When an unidentified ferry passenger threw himself overboard in April 1865, the New Orleans Daily Picayune acknowledged that, while the action defied “canon against self-slaughter” and was “generally regarded as a cowardly act,” it nonetheless had been sanctioned by such historical luminaries as Saul, Hannibal, Brutus, and Mark Antony.69 After the wife of an abusive, alcoholic veteran took her own life in 1871, the Atlanta Weekly New Era printed a letter that recounted the details of the woman’s death and included thoughts on suicide that the victim had shared with friends after a failed attempt. She defended “its moral right, saying that there were some wrongs, some miseries, which only a self-inflicted death could end.” The piece then ended with a line from the victim’s own suicide note: “Judge not, that ye be not judged.”70 The wartime obituary of an unidentified woman who intentionally drowned herself in New Orleans also elicited empathy, commiserating that “perchance she sought relief from an
unbearable load of poverty.” If so, the obituary opined, “let the sinless blame her: sinners should not judge her harshly.”

Encapsulating this new attitude was a short editorial that ran in the *Atlanta Weekly Sun* in 1871 advocating a more tolerant view of the suicide victim: “There come to every one of us times when society palls upon us, when we find no happiness either in the crowded assembly or in the quiet parlor, when companionship is rather an annoyance than a pleasure. . . . Life is burdensome, existence is tasteless. Not knowing whither to turn, is it any wonder he dreams of suicide, and is it any matter if his dream ‘comes true’? These same sentiments are evident in an 1880 obituary of a newspaper editor from South Carolina who died by his own hand. The obituary lamented the premature loss of a “young man of more than ordinary brilliancy and talent” while demonstrating empathy for his condition. Preston Mood, “in the moment of some dark despair, which we believe at times haunts us all,” gave way to the impulse of self-destruction.

Sympathy, not condemnation, became the more typical published response to suicidal acts in the postwar South. The Civil War’s human and material sacrifices had cost the South dearly; many Southerners could not see an end to the emotional and financial suffering that enveloped the region. War-weary Southerners, who well understood how life could become unbearable, more easily understood a rational decision to end one’s life in an effort to stem the pain. “We may well imagine how life—so sweet to all—may become unbearable,” opined a New Orleans newspaper just a year after surrender. “We may easily conceive how the mind, sapped of its strength by some misfortune, may become so weak as not to be able to bear even the ordinary burdens incident to life.” In fact, the author offered, suicide might actually be considered a brave act, given the herculean effort needed to conquer the instinctive fear of death.

In addition to editors treating suicide victims with greater sensitivity and acceptance in their reporting, postwar obituaries of suicides regularly related displays of sympathy for the victims and their families, such as in the case of twenty-nine-year-old John M. Parkman, a former president of the First National Bank of Selma who reportedly drowned himself in 1867. Parkman left a wife and two children “overwhelmed with the sad calamities of a few weeks” and “excit[ed] the tenderest sympathies of the entire community.” An eighteen-year-old Georgia woman’s suicide by drowning in 1879 prompted the local paper to remark that her parents had the sympathy of the entire community. Postbellum obituaries document tangible expressions of empathy by community members for those who died by self-inflicted wounds, acknowledging that extenuating circumstances could (understandably) lead one down the path of self-destruction.
Changing attitudes signaling a more secular understanding of suicide can be seen in postwar coroners’ reports as well. In the early nineteenth century, inquests on dead bodies that resulted in a finding of suicide typically ended with a turn of phrase pointing out the deceased’s lack of religiosity. For example, an 1808 coroner’s investigation into the drowning of Simon Taylor of Virginia led to a finding of suicide, an act understood to be the result of Taylor’s “not having God before his eyes.” Similarly, after Robert Wimm, an inmate of the Frederick County poorhouse, cut his throat with a razor in 1839, the coroner attributed the suicide to Wimm’s “not having the fear of God before his eyes but being . . . seduced by the instigation of the Devil.”

After the war, religious references all but disappeared from coroners’ suicide findings. A shift in language from the sacred to the secular is in evidence in postbellum coroners’ reports that depicted the act of suicide as an affront to the state, not God. When Fred Dollfender, a storeowner from Charleston, shot himself to death in his backroom in 1883, he did so “against the peace and dignity of the state.” There was a striking absence of religious condemnations in verdicts in the postwar years. For example, John Black, a South Carolina magistrate, presented the jury’s findings on the hanging death of Hutson B. Sullivan in August 1866 and concluded that he had come to his death by “self murder” and “voluntarily and feloniously himself did kill against the peace and dignity of the state.” The act of suicide was still considered a crime, a felony in fact, and so was denounced by officials, but no longer did coroners’ juries bother themselves with the religious condemnations. One suicide verdict in 1875 concluded that Joseph Pearman died from a gunshot wound by his own hand and further admonished that “no one is to be censured.”

Evidence that Southerners after the Civil War exhibited much greater tolerance of suicide than before the war coincided with a growing chorus of voices critical of church authorities who continued to toe the harsh line on suicide; some even challenged church leaders to take positions more “Christ-like.” William H. Taylor, the Richmond coroner, criticized the church’s harsh attitude toward suicide by invoking the Shakespearean tragedy of Ophelia’s suicide and her brother’s rebuke of the priest for conducting “maimed” funeral rites, that is, withholding a full burial ceremony for those who died at their own hands. Taylor acknowledged that it had only been “within a period quite recent that society has sympathized” with Ophelia’s brother, an indication that “society” was moving toward a sympathetic view of suicide victims that rejected the “barbarities inflicted under the sanction of the Christian religion upon the bodies” of suicide victims. As Taylor saw it, one of the chief duties of the Christian church was to console “the wretched,” to serve as their “rock of refuge in a sea of troubles.” By denying Christian
suicide victims full burial rites, the church had “perverted its office” and was “painfully at variance with the attribute of tender compassion we intuitively ascribe to it.” As Edmund Ruffin had done in 1865, Taylor scoured the Bible for an explicit proscription against suicide and found none. Taylor concluded that there now existed a “large number who do not sympathize with their authorities of the Church in their harsh treatment of suicides.” In fact, he noted that “in recent times, some Christian denominations have, in their attitudes toward suicide, become liberal.”

In fact, there is evidence that even some Southern ministers after the war treated suicide victims more compassionately than theological doctrine dictated. The Reverend George J. Hobday, for one, presided over the funeral services for Adolphus Herzog at the Byrne Street Baptist Church in Petersburg in 1877 following the man’s suicide, a ritual that sometimes was withheld from those who died by their own hands. When twenty-seven-year-old seminary student Thomas Westcott cut his throat in October 1870, professor and Baptist minister Basil Manly Jr. conducted funeral services that were held in the Baptist church. And in 1870, George Howe, a Presbyterian minister and professor at Columbia Theological Seminary in Decatur, Georgia, published a two-volume history of the church in South Carolina, in which he drafted a sympathetic biographical account of William Richardson, a late-colonial minister of a Waxhaw, South Carolina, congregation who likely committed suicide. Richardson had struggled with melancholy his whole life. Howe used the biographical exercise as an opportunity to express a softened attitude toward suicide victims. Howe explained that since youth Richardson suffered from a disease of the mind every bit as real as those of the body, and he concluded that Richardson “died the victim of a mental malady which had been gaining strength . . . for some time.” Howe’s sensitivity to what we today would recognize as Richardson’s history of mental illness and the role it played in his possible suicide is significant. As a Presbyterian minister and an instructor at a theological seminary, Howe would have been painfully aware that his empathetic stance on death by suicide contradicted official Presbyterian doctrine. Nonetheless, his dissenting remarks appear in an official church publication after the Civil War.

William H. Taylor, a coroner who saw firsthand the tragic consequences of suicide and castigated church leaders for their un-Christian treatment of suicide victims; the Reverend George Howe, a minister who flouted the theological dogma demonizing self-murder by recognizing the symptoms of mental illness of a suicide victim; Edmund Ruffin, a religious man who searched in vain for a scriptural basis for the stigmatization of suicide—they all numbered among the many postwar Southerners who expressed more open-minded views about suicide and challenged church orthodoxy on the
issue. Like thousands of other Southerners, these men had witnessed or experienced the consequences of four years of brutal warfare, the mounting cost in human casualties and material wealth, and the despair and suffering that hung over the postwar South like a dark cloud. By defying and disputing church orthodoxy on self-murder, these men and others like them, helped rescue suicide from ecclesiastical authority and control and situate it in the secular world. Secularizing suicide diminished the threat of divine punishment, making it less odious and more fathomable. Once a signifier of moral weakness and cowardice, suicide, in the hands of Southerners, became a vehicle for martyrdom.