

Analysing the religious views on euthanasia philosophy essay



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When it comes to religious point of views on issues, euthanasia is one of the most controversial moral topics of all time. Euthanasia comes from the Greek word *εὐθανασία* meaning 'good death'. Euthanasia can be defined as "the practice of ending a life in a technique that reduces pain and suffering" (Eike-Henner 11). Religions such as the Roman Catholics and Orthodox Judaism oppose euthanasia on the grounds that it invades God's territory of life and death. Life is considered a gift from God and should only be taken back by God. There are different forms of euthanasia: voluntary/involuntary and active/passive. Active euthanasia is the inducement of death by taking specific steps such as overdose of painkillers or sleeping pills. Passive euthanasia, on the other hand, is the discontinuation of medical treatment in a terminal case so as to allow the patient have a natural death. Voluntary euthanasia is killing a person for the purpose of relieving pain from terminal or incurable illness or injury with their consent. Finally, involuntary euthanasia is killing a person for the purpose of relieving suffering without first obtaining the person's consent. "This paper will examine the ethical views of the Roman Catholics and the Orthodox Jews on the act of euthanasia."

The Roman Catholic teachings have a precise definition for euthanasia. Pope John Paul II describes it as "an act or omission which of itself or by intention causes death, with the purpose of eliminating all suffering" (Evangelium vitae [Ev], 1995, n. 65). The Church teaches that it is morally unacceptable and constitutes it as a murderous act, which is contrary to what they call the dignity of a person. Namely that every individual is born with dignity, and they are an estimable value. They value the human life, because a person

indeed is priceless, for they are created by God. Euthanasia is an act that denies respect of God, the creator. Even if a person is acting on good faith, nothing changes the nature of what euthanasia is; at the very base euthanasia is an act of murder. When it comes to physicians assisted suicide the Roman Catholics describe it as a grave sin against God, because it suggests that a person is in charge of their body instead of God the creator. Physicians assisted suicide can be defined as “ a doctor or medical staff person prescribes a lethal amount of medication with the intent of assisting a person commit suicide (John 151). The patient then takes the dose or turns the switch. Since preserving life is the greatest good for Catholics, they believe that the 5th commandment in the Old Testament of the Bible says it all “ Thou shall not kill” (John 14). They believe this applies to killing oneself or killing someone else who has asked to die such as a terminally ill patient. No human being has the authority to make life and death decisions. Killing denies the victim something that he or she values greatly, continued life or a future. Moreover, since continued life is necessary for pursuing future endeavors, killing brings the suppression of all of these plans. Therefore, Catholics believe that doctor assisted-suicide deprives an individual of a future that they potentially could've had.

In the case of sustaining life, it is said that one is obligated to use ordinary means, but one is not always obligated to use extraordinary means. The term ordinary means refers to “ all medicines, treatments, and operations, which offer a reasonable hope of benefit for the patient and which can be obtained and used without excessive expense, pain, or other inconvenience.” By contrast, extraordinary means refers to” all medicines,

treatments, and operations which cannot be obtained or used without excessive expense, pain or other inconvenience, or which, if used, would not offer a reasonable hope of benefit.” (John 30). These two concepts are derived from the general distinctions between avoiding evil and doing good. Thus, the duty to preserve life is a duty to do good which has reasonable limits, whereas euthanasia or mercy killing is evil and hence must be avoided. The Catholic position is a firm no to active euthanasia, but passive euthanasia could be acceptable in certain limited cases. For example, a therapy which was only prolonging death in a hopeless case and is morally acceptable, since the ultimate purpose is not suicide or euthanasia, but rather, an act whose moral object may be precisely described as allowing the patient to die for legitimate reasons. According to Roman Catholics, everything happens for a reason, by trying to control life or death, we would be interfering with God’s will. The “ sanctity of life” principle, which rests on the human person’s unique relationship with God, is the basis of the Church’s honoring of human life as a basic value. Under this principle, direct intervention to end the life of a patient in a terminal condition would not be condoned. This negative position also follows from the religious principle of divine sovereignty, the idea that God has the right over life and death, and the end of human life is not subject to a person’s free judgment (Eike-Henner 32). Catholics believe that the end of life is a very spiritual time, and euthanasia happens to interrupt this spiritual moment. As stated in the bible “ So God made man to his own image, to the image of God he created him: male and female he created them.” (Genesis 1: 27). (Eike-Henner 37).

Saying that God made man to his own image, does not mean that human beings look like God, but rather human beings have distinct capacity for

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rational existence that permits them to see what is good and want what is good. As people flourish these capabilities, they live a life that is equivalent to God's life of love. The Roman Catholic Church affirms man's basic unity and his living in this world for God and for others. More than simply living in this world, the Church affirms life as a participation in the life of God in such a way that earthly life makes it possible and prepares one for participation in eternal life. Everyone faces death in its inevitability, a reality occurring only once. Catholics however, believe that death, like birth and life, is part of the same human condition. One is born in order to live and eventually die, having made the very best one could of all three conditions in one continuing totality. Death comes at the end of life so that one may go forward and meet in fullness having completed that life.

Judaism is, in its essence, a life affirming faith. ' And Thou Shall live by them God's Commandments,' (Leviticus 18: 5) is the central imperative of Torah. Orthodox Judaism is one of the modern Jewish movements who believe that both the Written and Oral Torah are divine and represents the word of God. (John 37) When it comes to the topic of euthanasia, Orthodox Jews believe that man is charged with preserving, dignifying and hallowing his life. But he is not given the absolute title over his life and body, only its caretaker, for life is a gift from God, to whom the individual is responsible for its preservation. " My God, the soul with which Thou hast endowed me is pure. Thou hast created it. Thou hast formed it. Thou has breathed it into me...So long as there is soul within me, I give thanks before Thee, Lord my God." (John 99) Man is never called upon to determine whether life is worth living. According to Orthodox Jews life is a gift of infinite value. Since infinity is, by

definition indivisible, it clearly makes no moral difference whether one shortens life by many years or by a few minutes, or he was old and physically or mentally disabled. In such cases, suicide is no less culpable than murder.

When it comes to physician assisted suicide, one aspect needs to be taken into consideration, The Hippocratic Oath. The physician derives his ethical warrant from the Hippocratic Oath, which on one hand, requires that he desist from supplying deadly medicine to his patients for the purpose of hastening their demise, or even from offering advice which may lead to suicide, and on the other, that he relieves suffering. The discontinuation of artificial life supporting therapy is determined by the halakhic status (Jewish Law) of the terminally ill patient. A person who is regarded as having no chance of survival beyond 12 months, in spite of the application of all unknown therapeutic techniques is called a treifah (Eike-Henner 87). Therefore, regarded as a living being, and its ephemeral life has full halakhic value. However, if one kills a treifah is guilty of murder. However, if death is imminent, in consequence of loss of a vital organ or massive arterial bleeding it is termed a neveila me-hayyim (Eike-Henner 87) and is not considered as already dead, because recovery is possible in exceptional cases. The final phase for terminally ill patients is called goeses, (Eike-Henner 88) which is the inability to swallow own saliva. According to Judaism it is generally held that most patients in this condition cannot recover and that death will come within 3 days. If that's the case, then, the physician may discontinue medication for the existing condition and does not need to initiate treatment of an unrelated and possibly fatal complication. In all

cases, nutriments as well as painkillers should be supplied. “ Among rabbinic ethicists, Rav Moshe Feinstein holds that “ when a patient is gripped by unbearable pain and suffering, nature should be allowed to take its course. Thus when a patient is on a respirator and the machine is temporarily removed for servicing, if the patient shows no sign of life the machine need not be restored” (John 87). However, Orthodox Jews do allow for the termination of artificial means of the patient if such means does not enhance the patient’s state and are the only things keeping the patient alive. It is also acceptable to take strong painkillers, even if they hasten death, as long as the drug is not the cause of death and the intention is to alleviate pain and not to cause death. Orthodox Jews do recognize the pain and suffering a patient experiences and the effect it has on the family, however, the Jewish faith has always responded against the termination of a person’s life, even in the most severe cases when it may become evident to them that life is meaningless.

Roman Catholics and Orthodox Jews have similar ethical views when it comes to the termination of one’s life. They believe that suffering is used to purify one’s soul, and God has the only right over a person’s body. Dr. Kavorkian also known as Dr. Death is an American pathologist that performed assisted suicide in 1990’s. From an Orthodox Jew’s perspective, Dr. Kavorkian is known as a murderer, because under the Jewish law, any form of active euthanasia is strictly prohibited and condemned as plain murder. Murder is one of the 3 fundamental sins prohibited by the Torah, and anyone who kills a person is guilty to the death penalty as a common murder. Similarly, the Roman Catholics disapprove physician-assisted suicide

or euthanasia, on the grounds that it invades God's property and to assist some in committing suicide is to commit murder, which goes against God's unequivocal commandment "Thou Shall not Kill."

Euthanasia is one of the most controversial topics facing religions. The Bible and the Torah both state that human life is the property of God, and as humans we are only caretakers of that property, and have no consent of destroying something that does not belong to us. Every human life is valuable, regardless of their age, sex, or race. Catholics and Orthodox Jews would state that anybody who insists that they have the choice to terminate their life is denying the truth of their intrinsic relationship with God. People should not ask for euthanasia because no one knows the significance of each human being, for every human life is priceless