

How may the
christian faith inform
the debate over
euthanasia?



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The concept of “ free will” is one of the defining characteristics of Christianity and therefore the ability that Christians possess to make choices about their lives is sacrosanct. It is also pertinent to note in introduction that Christians believe that death is not the end of life but the beginning of life with God and as a consequence it can be argued that from a Christian point of view death is not to be feared. On the other hand it can be argued that it may be better to die in peace and with dignity than to live with terrible pain which is likely to transfer in the form of extreme anxiety to your friends and relatives.

It is submitted that in order for euthanasia to take place it is necessary to engage the assistance of a third party. This is the fundamental difference between euthanasia and suicide. One essential problem with this, in terms of Christianity in particular, is that the sick individual may not have the right to ask another person to help take his or her life. The sixth commandment is straightforward:

“ Thou shall not kill.”

On the strength of this *first touch* analysis euthanasia appears to contradict the Christian faith. Many Christians would argue that the suffering party must have faith and trust in God and in the future that he has for him or her. The Bible informs and guides Christians as to the moral and religious decisions they must take as they live their life. Although it is true that the Bible does not expressly state that euthanasia is wrong it does stipulate, as stated above, that *thou shall not kill* and another commandment sets down

the rule that one should *love ones neighbour* . At first sight these fundamental rules imply that euthanasia is contrary to the Christian ethic.

However, the rule *love thy neighbour* was addressed by Jesus himself in his answer to the Pharisees, the chief religious sect of the day, when He was questioned about the greatest commandment in the Law. The Pharisees had strenuously classified all the various laws and accorded them relative degrees of importance and their aim was to test Jesus. His answer was glorious in its simplicity:

Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: Love your neighbour as yourself. All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments.

Therefore, Christianity dictates not just that we are to love our neighbour, but that we should love our neighbour *as we love ourselves* . It is submitted that this would appear to open the door to euthanasia on the grounds of pure Christian dogma, because there are many among us that would choose a dignified death for ourselves rather than deteriorating life in great pain. However, despite these putative interpretations of the words of Jesus Christ himself, the present day thinking of the mainstream Christian church appears to oppose assisted suicide in all its forms.

Christianity and Euthanasia

The modern majority or mainline Christian attitude to issue of assisted suicide is relatively straightforward. Euthanasia is opposed. As is the case

with regards to the abortion issue, most Christians would agree that it is wrong to take the life of another human. Christians believe in the sanctity of life from the moment of conception until the intervention of natural death. Something in excess of sixty passages of scripture in the Bible refer to the sanctity of life, in particular the aforesaid “Thou shalt not kill.”

Christians believe that God is the giver and taker of life. As a consequence they believe that God’s will in matters of life and death takes precedence over any desire that man may express. The fact that the so-called *right to die* movement would change laws so that doctors or relatives could directly and intentionally terminate another person’s life flies in the face of this basic Christian belief in God’s authority.

The Christian view is that God has endowed mankind with certain unalienable rights, and that the first and most important of these is the right to life itself. From a Christian perspective all other God-given human rights are worthless, unless the right to life is held supreme.

There is an argument that everyone has a right to do with their own body as they see fit, but the majority Christian view appears to be that this is not persuasive. Although euthanasia might be seen to be a private, victimless act it is not committed in a vacuum and Christians believe that the act would have far reaching “spill-over” effects for society at large. Given that euthanasia affords one person the power to engineer the death of another person it is a public matter which, in line with mainline Christian thinking, could well result in abuse and/or the steady erosion of care for the most vulnerable people.

It is a Christian belief that today's society values only healthy and comfortable life and faith dictates that this is a narrow-minded attitude.

Christians assert that God's plan to make us *whole* is such as to ensure that we experience all aspects of life, from good to bad in health and in sickness, from the springtime and opportunity of youth to the austerity and trials of the winter that old age inevitably brings.

Christians argue that modern medical treatments for pain reduction offer most dying patients effective relief which renders the avoidance of pain as a reason for mercy killing nugatory as a medical or moral argument. It is submitted that it is central to the Christian ethos that God has a reason for everything that man can experience, *including* pain and suffering. Christians would contend, for example that many people given time to contemplate as they ail on their deathbed have been brought closer to Christ, and that the experience of seeing someone in such a position may bring the observer closer to Christ.

It is a trite observation that the terminally ill and often, merely the elderly, may be concerned about becoming a burden to their family or to the greater community and those with responsibility for delivering care may come to resent the time, effort and expense entailed in the discharge of their duty. However, the Christian perspective on this is very clear, and steels the debate on euthanasia generally. The Christian view is well articulated by Gilbert Meilaender in the following extract:

“ Learning not to resent the claims on our time and energy is likely to be the work of a lifetime. If we decline to learn the lesson, however, we cease to live

in the kind of community that deserves to be called a family, and we are ill prepared to live in the community for which God has redeemed us – a community in which no one stands on the basis of her rights, and all live by that shared love Christians call charity”

Christians may also contend that ‘ quality of life’ should not to be measured by physical health but only by a person’s relationship with God. The natural inference is that sickness is an irrelevant consideration and one which should not be used as a justification for killing.

Euthanasia, unlike abortion, is referred to, albeit tangentially, in the Bible. There are two such instances in the Old Testament. In *Judges* Abimelech pleaded with his armour-bearer to put him to death after he had been hit on the head by a millstone because he did not want to suffer the shame of being killed by the woman who had dropped the stone on him. In the second reference in *Samuel* , Saul, the first king of Israel, asked to be put to death after he had attempted suicide:

“ Stand over me and kill me! I am in the throes of death, but I am still alive. So I stood over him and killed him, because I knew that after he had fallen he could not survive.”

The Amalekite narrator of this story is then put to death by David, Saul’s successor and the point is made that Saul had contradicted the word of God and lost the right to lead his people as a consequence. In neither instance is the notion of euthanasia treated with approval, but no specific lesson is clarified.

The Roman Catholic Perspective

It is submitted that the Roman Catholic Church opposes the practice of euthanasia. Roman Catholics apply the principle of Natural Law to assisted suicide just as they do in the case of abortion, where a similar prohibitive stance is taken. As a consequence Catholics believe that all life is regulated and ordered by God and that all events (including episodes of great suffering) occur just as God intends.

The Roman Catholic Church thus teaches that euthanasia runs contrary to God's will on the rationale that such human intervention in the process of death is unnatural. Indeed assisted suicide is deemed to constitute a sin. The Catechism of the Catholic Church sets down the following implacable principle:

' Thus an act, or an omission which, of itself or by intention, causes death in a order to eliminate suffering constitutes a murder greatly contrary to the dignity of the human person and to the respect due to the living God, his Creator. The error of judgment into which one can fall in good faith does not change the nature of this murderous act, which must always be forbidden and excluded.'

This stance is softened to a small degree by the provisions made in 2278 and 2279 of the Catechism.

2278 Discontinuing medical procedures that are burdensome, dangerous, extraordinary, or disproportionate to the expected outcome can be legitimate; it is the refusal of " over-zealous" treatment. Here one does not

will to cause death; one's inability to impede it is merely accepted. The decisions should be made by the patient if he is competent and able or, if not, by those legally entitled to act for the patient, whose reasonable will and legitimate interests must always be respected.

2279 Even if death is thought imminent, the ordinary care owed to a sick person cannot be legitimately interrupted. The use of painkillers to alleviate the sufferings of the dying, even at the risk of shortening their days, can be morally in conformity with human dignity if death is not willed as either an end or a means, but only foreseen and tolerated as inevitable Palliative care is a special form of disinterested charity. As such it should be encouraged.

However it is submitted that these provisos, while well rationalised and well founded, do not alter the fact that in terms of general principle the Catholic church stands fore square against the concept of euthanasia.

Current Fears of Christianity: From the Right to Die... to a *Duty* to Die?

In March 2004 Lord Joffe introduced the Assisted Dying for the Terminally Ill Bill into the House of Lords. The Bill aims to empower competent adults suffering a terminal illness to obtain medical assistance to die at his or her own considered and persistent request. In simple terms, the Bill aims to legalise voluntary euthanasia in the United Kingdom.

In October 2005 leaders of the primary faiths of the United Kingdom sent a joint letter to both Houses of Parliament in an attempt to set out their position against the legalisation of any form of euthanasia prior to a

scheduled debate on the proposed Assisted Dying for the Terminally Ill Bill in the House of Lords.

As indicated above, signatories to the letter included not just Christian leaders but leaders of other faiths. The Bishop of Southwark of the Church of England the Rev. Tom Butler was joined by, among others, His Eminence Archbishop Gregorios of Thyateira and Great Britain, the Chief Rabbi Sir Jonathan Sacks, Principal of the Muslim College and Chair of Muslim Law Sharia Council Sheikh Dr M. A. Zaki Badawi, General Director of Evangelical Alliance UK Joel Edwards and the Archbishop of Cardiff of the Catholic Church in Great Britain Peter Smith. The letter stated that:

“ We, the undersigned, hold all human life to be sacred and worthy of the utmost respect and note with concern that repeated attempts are being made to persuade Parliament to change the law on intentional killing so as to allow assisted suicide and voluntary euthanasia for those who are terminally ill,”

The central message of the letter was, as has been discussed above, that the very sick are often vulnerable and they may well feel that they are a burden to their family and friends. The signatories to the letter wanted to make the point that legalising assisted suicide and euthanasia might have the effect of putting pressure on such individuals to ‘ do the decent thing’ and request early death for the sake of the convenience, economic well being and happiness of those left behind. The letter warned that the so-called *right to die* could thus evolve subtly over time to become an unspoken *duty to die* in

which considerations such as those described above could come to exercise undue influence over the decision-making process.

The religious leaders argued in the alternative that the focus should be on improved palliative care, stressing that medical science is taking great strides in relieving the range of symptoms endured by those suffering from a terminal illness and emphasising the increasing sophistication of support systems for families. Moreover the letter suggested NHS reforms and innovations to buttress these developing areas.

After a full debate in the House of Lords on 10 October 2005, Lord Joffe tabled a further Bill to introduce so-called physician assisted suicide. The Christian Charity CARE (Christian Action Research and Education) has launched a high-profile campaign, known as the “ Life Valued” campaign, to oppose this suggested legislation.

CARE Chairman Lyndon Bowring has proffered a biblical foundation for the campaign. He stated: ‘ We have been given a duty to be God’s stewards... It’s right to care for creation – and even more so to care for the pinnacle of his creation...Stand with those in Parliament who are speaking out in God’s name for the sanctity of human life.’

Concluding Comments

It appears that the majority view among the modern custodians of the Christian faith, or at least the view that is most forcefully expressed, is that euthanasia is to be opposed in all its forms as contrary to the fundamental tenet of the sanctity of human life. There is a view that the rule that one

must *love one's neighbour as oneself* can be interpreted to mean that an act to limit the suffering of another could be justified because the same decision might well be taken on one's own behalf and in one's own interests.

Moreover the rule that *thou shalt not kill*, which appears to set down a clear and simple prohibition, must also be subject to contextual interpretation. If the rule is to be followed to the letter then the Christian practice of killing animals for food must be thrown into question. In the words of Jesus: 'Thou shalt not kill any living thing, for life is given to all by God, and that which God has given, let not man taketh it away.' However, this rule must surely be subject to caveats since even Jesus Himself fed his followers with fish. It could be argued that killing to relieve suffering is a far higher motive than killing for food, given in particular that it is possible to survive without consuming animals.

Indeed the words expressed by Jesus are impossible to follow to the letter, because even plant life is living matter. We cannot eat rocks or sand and we cannot survive on thin air, therefore there simply *must* be room for the practical interpretation of the sixth commandment. It follows that if we can justify killing to fill our dining table, we can surely justify killing to alleviate pain and suffering, where such is motivated by nothing but love and compassion for the victim.

This is a personal conclusion. Although it is one drawn direct from the stated words and actions of Jesus Christ Himself, it is conceded that it is not the majority view of Christian church today. The principle of the sanctity of human life is one of the highest of human civilization, and it is easy to see why guardians and proponents of the Christian faith wish to strive so hard to <https://assignbuster.com/how-may-the-christian-faith-inform-the-debate-over-euthanasia/>

protect it from erosion in any and all circumstances. In a perfect world this commentator would agree with this view but this is not a perfect world and there are no perfect rules – at least it is submitted there are no rules perfect in application in every conceivable instance. Two thousand years ago, when Jesus delivered his teachings and the Christian faith was born, medical science was in its infancy. In those days terminal illnesses progressed at a far more rapid pace and the fraught questions that now confront twenty first century society, which has acquired the technology to prolong life over long periods, were seldom if ever posed. As a consequence, it is perhaps a pregnable exercise to seek moral or ethical guidance from teaching and faith established in an age that predates the issue now under debate and cannot possibly accommodate it. In plain terms, the Bible is a contemporary text. It simply was not written with the issue of euthanasia, in the context of twenty first century technological progress, in mind.

The foregoing analysis illustrates the depth, sensitivity and difficulty of the issue of euthanasia. Such is only amplified when one considers religious perspectives, such as the Christian teachings and ethical framework discussed in this paper. The Christian faith can be applied to inform and enrich the debate on euthanasia in multifarious ways, and it can in theory be invoked with force by each opposing camp.

Given the difficulty in interpreting God's word, perhaps it is time for man to take sole responsibility for the decision, and perhaps it is man's justification, not a faith-based rationale that should prevail. That is not to say the decision should not be guided by Christian principles, the question of euthanasia is one deserving of the utmost good faith and scrutiny, but perhaps mans' <https://assignbuster.com/how-may-the-christian-faith-inform-the-debate-over-euthanasia/>

ultimate assumption of responsibility is part of God's overarching plan. This could be said to be the flowering of the free will that, in the Christian tradition, He gifted to us. One thing is certain: it lies within God's power to intervene to guide the debate on euthanasia to His favoured conclusion. In the face of a morally and ethically challenging issue such as assisted suicide, Christians can draw solace and sustenance from that fundamental belief.

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