

CHRISTIAN VIEWS ON EUTHANASIA

(Note: 'euthanasia' is here used as an umbrella term for assisted dying. A distinction is usually made between *assisted suicide*, where the individual carries out the act which ends his own life, and *euthanasia*, where someone else carries out the act (and possibly even takes the decision) to end a person's life.)

Background

Pressure for the liberalisation of the law on assisted suicide and euthanasia has grown considerably in recent years.

In some ways this is odd given that palliative care has actually developed by leaps and bounds such that most pain can now be managed and controlled.

When one presses those who champion euthanasia or assisted dying, however, and highlight the fact that it is now more not less easy to manage pain, they make it plain that their fundamental objective is not concerned with pain but rather with a very individualistic, philosophical commitment to human autonomy and the belief that if I am sick and want to end my life I should have the freedom to do so via euthanasia or assisted dying.

Christian Views

From a Christian perspective, liberalising the law on euthanasia would be hugely problematic for at least three reasons:

1. **Human life bears God's image** and it is not for us to terminate.
2. According to the Christian worldview **we are part of community** joined to each other. We are not autonomous. The decisions we make impact other people.
3. If the law was changed there would be a **great risk that people would feel pressured into accessing assisted suicide or euthanasia**. At present if you are a burden on your family and the state and have a sensitive conscience you don't need to feel guilty about being a burden in the sense that there is nothing you can do about it. If assisted suicide or euthanasia became available, though, there would then be a mechanism, sanctioned with legal approval, that you could use.

Rather than liberalising the law on assisted suicide we should invest more in palliative care. At present the level of provision remains inconsistent due to lack of funding.

Exploring the key issues in the euthanasia debate

Theologian Rev John Stott notes that there appears to be three basic issues in the euthanasia debate:

- **Value** – What value has a human life?
- **Fear** – What are the main fears which euthanasia is intended to relieve?
- **Autonomy** – What right do we have over our own life?

Value

It is the belief of many contemporary non-Christian writers that there is no inherent absolute or intrinsic value to human life.

On the other hand there are still some non-Christian scholars such as Professor Dworkin who still recognise and support an intrinsic importance and value to human life. Dworkin develops a view of human 'value' based upon 'best interests'. He draws a distinction between:

Experiential interests – what causes pleasure or pain.

Critical interests – what gives life meaning.

In many respects this kind of viewpoint is an attempt to create a secular understanding of human value. Alternatively, the Christian worldview understands the fact that we have intrinsic value because God has created us in his own image. Human beings possess a range of faculties (rational, moral and social) which distinguish us from animals. In particular, there is the capacity for us to establish and maintain relationships of love because we are made in the image of God, who is love.

Fear

One of the strongest incentives of those campaigning for euthanasia is that they are fearful of seeing those they love enduring a horrid, distressing and lingering death.

The question of fear could be broken down further into three distinct areas:

- Fear of uncontrollable and unbearable pain.
- Fear of indignity – the fear of being subjected to the dehumanizing effect of modern medical technology resulting in a multitude of tubes and wires running in and out of the body.
- Fear of dependence – we want to avoid the humiliation of total helplessness by taking control and dictating what happens to us at every stage of the process.

There is a further fear that could be added to this list. This fear is probably more likely to be exhibited more by those at the point of death rather than those advocating euthanasia: it is the fear that their doctor may well become their killer.

Autonomy

Advocates of euthanasia passionately believe that all human beings (provided that they are rational and competent) have the right, and should be able to exercise that right, to make their own decision as to how they want to dispose of their own life. They believe that no other individual or institution should have the power to infer or circumvent this right.

However as John Donne said, 'No man is an island, entire of itself; everyone is a continent, a part of the main.' The fact is that when an individual decides to take his or her own life it has a profound and unavoidable effect on the lives of those around them.

Conclusion: Christian views on Euthanasia

There are a number of religious views on euthanasia, but from a biblical perspective, God has made us rational and volitional beings. As such we have a God-given mind and will through which we are to live our lives by choice and not coercion. We are accountable to God for our decisions. Whilst choice is good, we need to qualify it with an understanding and appreciation of freedom, dependence and life.

(Taken from the CARE website)