

Euthanasia: Some Views

The dominion of God over all life

David Hume, writing in the 1750s, rejected the idea that suicide was a challenge to God's sovereignty: **'All events, in one sense, may be pronounced the action of the almighty; they all proceed from those powers with which he has endowed his creatures ... When the passions play, when the judgement dictates, when the limbs obey - this is all the operation of God ...'** (David Hume, writing in 1757)

The **Judeo-Christian** outlook has always been to see God as the author of Creation and, therefore the owner of life, particularly the life that is in God's very image - human life. The Catechism of the Catholic Church expresses this: **'We are stewards, not owners, of the life God has entrusted to us. It is not ours to dispose of ...'** Also, suicide is seen as an offence against the Great Command to love self, neighbour and God: **'Suicide is gravely contrary to the just love of self. It likewise offends love of neighbour because it unjustly breaks the ties of solidarity with family, nation and other human societies to which we continue to have obligations. Suicide is contrary to love for the living God.'** There appears to be a general agreement between the various Christian traditions about the moral issues raised by euthanasia and suicide.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the **Protestant** Pastor and Theologian famous for his opposition to Hitler and the Nazi regime, wrote about suicide thus: **'Man must not lay hands upon himself, even though he must sacrifice his life for others. But if his earthly life has become a torment for him, he must commit it intact into God's hand, for in dying he falls again into the hand of God, which he found too severe while he lived.'** (cited in R.G. Jones, Groundwork of Christian Ethics)

'The Everlasting has ... fixed his canon against

self-slaughter ...' (Hamlet, A1, S2)

Dr Jack Kervokian, nicknamed 'Dr Death' by the American media because of his strong support of assisted suicide and euthanasia, said the following during an 1997 interview: **'All life is sacred? Are they kidding? ... I hate dishonesty and hypocrisy. Religion is founded on the fear of death, nothing more. When I die, I have no idea what happens next: nobody does.'**

The sanctity of human life

What does 'life is sacred' or 'the sanctity of life' mean? For Christians, it means that human life not only has its origin in God but also is in the image of God. Humans have the capacity to reflect their Creator in their intellect, self-consciousness, free will to choose, to love, to delight in, to relate to God and others ... to be a person. Other people may not have a firm belief in God but may still believe that 'life is sacred' - special, to be preserved, to be treated as an intrinsic value (cf. Kantian ethics on the treatment of persons). Generally, the 'life is sacred' stance upholds the notion of 'human life' as involved in, and yet somehow independent of, the various circumstances of 'human lives'. Humanists, on the other hand, see that all moral values derive from the circumstances 'on the ground' of particular human lives - and so implicitly reject notions of life being sacred.

The sanctity of human life prescribes that ... (human life) may thus not be terminated or shortened because of considerations of the patient's convenience or usefulness, or even our sympathy with the suffering of the patient ... In Judaism suicide and euthanasia are both forms of prohibited homicide ... (Judaism (US), 1984)

In certain **Hindu** traditions, to suffer patiently the final pains leading to death can be of great merit,

leading to a better reincarnated state in the future.

Peter Singer, the renowned utilitarian philosopher, has claimed that the 'sanctity of life' ethic has died along with the Judeo-Christian beliefs that gave it life: **'To revive the 'sanctity of life ethic' is no longer possible; instead we need to develop a new ethic ...'** (1996)

The **Hippocratic Oath** contains a certain appeal to the sanctity of life; it raises the valuing of human life and its preservation above situations, coming out clearly against certain acts (eg. to procure abortion, to help someone to die, and so on). Interestingly enough, when it was felt that human life had been grossly abused (after World War II, for example), solemn declarations by groups of nations tended to chime with the values expressed in the Hippocratic Oath.

Arguments relying on Christian belief

In the Christian understanding, suffering can have meaning if united to Christ's redemptive suffering. This is not to make light of suffering, simply to accept it as a feature of human life and to see it as potentially positive. As Bernard Haring, the Catholic moral theologian and medical ethicist, put it: **'The .. hours of Christ on the cross were the most significant moments of human history.'**

Through Christ and in Christ, the riddles of sorrow and death grow meaningful. Apart from his Gospel, they overwhelm us.
(*Gaudium et Spes*, Vatican II, 1965)

In the absence of any clear belief in God, great suffering and anguish may be taken to be an *absolute* evil, something to be avoided at all costs - even to the ending of life. This mentality is common in **humanist** thought: **If the individual says that life is bad, then it is bad. The sufferer has the moral right to request that it be ended.** (British Humanist Association, 1996).

Contrast this with the Catholic Church's view of suffering (expressed in the Declaration on Euthanasia, 1980): **'According to Christian teaching ... suffering, especially suffering during the last moments of life, has a special place in God's saving plan; it is in fact a sharing in Christ's Passion and a union with the redeeming sacrifice which he offered in obedience to the Father's will.'**

Voluntary euthanasia denies the patients the final stages of (spiritual) growth ... (Christian Medical Fellowship, 1995)

Christians believe Christ achieved a victory in which all previously 'deathward' experiences (suffering, disease, dying itself ...) may receive a 'lifeward' dimension: **'Death is swallowed up in victory. Death, where is your victory? Death, where is your sting?'** (1 Cor 15:54-55). This reversal follows as a result of Christ's victory over death (and all things tending towards death).

This may be called a 'resurrection mentality' in which earthly life comes to an end, but not life itself: **'Lord, for your faithful people life is changed, not ended.'** (from one of the rites of a Christian funeral).

For many Christians, then, a 'death with dignity' would involve the opportunity to remain as free as possible from crushing, dispiriting pain, to be able to face the onset of death, prepare for it, be reconciled with God and others, to be surrounded by loved ones ... in short, the kind of experience that **hospices** provide for their dying patients. Haring saw the free acceptance of death as the expression of man's creatureliness before God, whereas the various forms of euthanasia would seem to be usurping ('seizing power from') God's sovereignty over life.