

A Religious View of Assisted Dying

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There is a massive change going on in religious attitudes to assisted dying (by which a person is given a prescription for a lethal potion, which they themselves then order and take).

However, far from being a modern issue, the problem of having to endure a painful end to one's life has long been recognised. In the Apocrypha, for instance, the Book of Ecclesiasticus even expresses the view that 'Death is better than a miserable life, and eternal rest than chronic sickness' (30.17).

A key factor for those wishing to die is the desire to avoid pain. However, it is not just physical suffering that appals them, but a range of other situations: the humiliation (in their eyes) of failing powers; the limitation of their ability to enjoy life; their dependency on others; the lack of control over their bodily functions; the sense that they have nothing to look forward to save ever-worsening decline; the unwelcome image of being sedated into a state of narcotic stupor in their final days or with their bodies sprouting a forest of tubes.

Of course, there are many who regard the above as a regrettable part of the natural cycle of life, to be mitigated through medical care if possible and to be endured if not. That is entirely their prerogative and must be respected. The question is whether those who wish to avoid that pain and indignity should have the right to do so? And whether other people have the right to prevent them making that choice about their own life?

A biblical passage that - deliberately or accidentally - may be relevant to the challenge today is the famous line in the Book of Ecclesiastes: 'There is a time to be born and a time to die' (3.2). It is noticeable that it does not say who chooses that time. In previous eras it was assumed that both were pre-ordained by God, and that any human interference was sinful, but now it can

be read very differently. The time to die could just as well be our decision.

Some might claim that this is contradicted by the verse from Job - ‘God gives and God takes’ (1.21) - and we cannot usurp that prerogative. Yet the God-barrier has long been pushed aside both at the beginning and end of life, with humans acting in lieu of God, whether by doctors’ efforts to create life via test tubes or postpone death through heart transplants.

If the religious ideal is *imitatio dei*, then it is our duty to use our God-given abilities as much as possible. It can be argued, therefore, that assisted dying is part of the constant act of playing God in the sense that God wants us to help those in distress: to heal where possible, to comfort when needed, and to help let go of life when desired - that is what being religious means.

Belief in the sanctity of life - in other words, how precious it is - does not mean believing in the sanctity of suffering, or disregarding steps to avoid it. There is nothing holy about agony. If a terminally-ill person does not wish to live out his/her last few months in pain, for what purpose should they be forced to do so, and in whose interest is that life being prolonged?

One concern, though, is that the right to opt for assisted dying might have a deleterious effect on others, especially those in a similar condition but who do not wish to end their life. Might they feel pressurised to do so? The legislation currently being proposed permit assisted dying legislation has a wide range of safeguards that should allay such fears. They include the stipulation that any law would apply only to an adult who is terminally ill (defined as with six months or less to live), mentally competent and making the request of their own free will.

In addition, we are in the fortunate position of knowing in advance what will be the likely effects of permitting assisted dying, as a result of the experience in the State of Oregon, which has the closest system to the legislation being proposed for Britain. Since it was introduced in 1997, several thousand dying

patients per year enquire about assistance to die, but only around 0.2% opt for it.

Moreover, it is a static average figure that is not shooting up but stable. It indicates that many people wish to 'know it's there' and have the emotional safety-net of knowing they can resort to it if their situation makes life intolerable, but never find they reach that stage.

Furthermore, those who do take it up are people who are used to controlling the course of their life and want to determine the nature of their end too. This may not be everyone's choice, but why should they be denied it because others do not wish it?

The challenges posed by those dying in pain have led to significant developments within the religious world. Whilst many Christian and Jewish clergy- especially those in the hierarchy - still hold to the traditional opposition to assisted dying, there are a growing numbers of ministers who now favour it.

They come primarily from within Anglicanism, but there are a wide range of other denominations - Methodist, Baptist, Congregationalist, Unitarian - along with Reform and Liberal rabbis. They have linked together to form IFDiD - Inter Faith leaders for Dignity in Dying - to offer an alternative view and to show that there can be religious reasons for it.

IFDiD also seeks to provide guidelines for the pastoral care of individuals and their families before and after death, as well as to develop rituals for those undergoing the process of assisted dying.

At the same time, attitudes are changing within the laity too. Poll after poll have shown that not only do the vast majority of the population feel the same, but so do the majority of those who are religious (defined by attending a place of worship at least once a month)

It means that clergy who oppose assisted dying certainly have a right to their opinions, but do not speak for all believers. It also demonstrates that there is not a monolithic religious view - the 'no camp' - but a diversity of views, with a considerable number sympathetic to it.

There is no doubt that this is difficult territory, but it is religiously appropriate to try to navigate it. The right to live one's life to the very end does not imply the religious obligation to do so, especially if that end is a travesty of that person's life and everything that has gone before.

If there is a right to die well - or at least to die as well as possible - it means having the option of assisted dying, whether or not it is taken up. That, surely, is a truly compassionate, and very religious, response.

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