

Foundations for a Christian Perspective on Euthanasia

Humanity is made in the image of God

Then God said, "Let us make human beings in our image, in our likeness, so that they may rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky, over the livestock and all the wild animals, and over all the creatures that move along the ground." So God created human beings in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them. (Genesis 1:26-27)

Christians believe that human beings have been created in the "image of God" in order to reflect and represent God in the world. As such we are called to exercise wise stewardship and care over all the earth's many rich resources including the animal kingdom. Human beings are unique as they are the only creatures made in "the image of God." Because of this uniqueness, one cannot equate the "putting down of terminally ill animals" with "euthanasing terminally ill humans." Human beings are clearly distinct from the other animals. This difference is reflected in the laws of Moses where there were much more severe consequences in harming human beings than animals.

Human life is marked by both joy and sorrow

Remember your Creator in the days of your youth, before the days of trouble come and the years approach when you will say, "I find no pleasure in them" - before the sun and the light and the moon and the stars grow dark, and the clouds return after the rain; when the keepers of the house tremble, and the strong men stoop, when the grinders cease because they are few, and those looking through the windows grow dim; when the doors to the street are closed and the sound of grinding fades; when people rise up at the sound of birds, but all their songs grow faint; when people are afraid of heights and of dangers in the streets; when the almond tree blossoms and the grasshopper drags itself along and desire no longer is stirred. Then people go to their eternal home and mourners go about the streets. Remember him - before the silver cord is severed, and the golden bowl is broken; before the pitcher is shattered at the spring, and the wheel broken at the well, and the dust returns to the ground it came from, and the spirit returns to God who gave it. (Ecclesiastes 12:1-7)

Christians believe that all human beings belong to God: we were created by God and one day our spirits will return back to God. Our life is contingent upon God. He is not surprised by the pain of the later years. God wants us to enjoy what we can of life and is pained by our suffering, but ultimately he is in control of life and it is not for us to stop life when we stop enjoying it. God is in the process of redeeming and restoring this broken world and through the death and resurrection of Jesus he is establishing his kingdom where grief and pain will no longer mark the human existence.

Jesus puts an immense value on life

Another time Jesus went into the synagogue, and a man with a shriveled hand was there. Some of them were looking for a reason to accuse Jesus, so they watched him closely to see if he would heal him on the Sabbath. Jesus said to the man with the shriveled hand, "Stand up in front of everyone." Then Jesus asked them, "Which is lawful on the Sabbath: to do good or to do evil, to save life or to kill?" But they remained silent. He looked around at them in anger and, deeply distressed at their stubborn hearts, said to the man, "Stretch out your hand." He stretched it out, and his hand was completely restored. (Mark 3:1-5)

Christians believe that "doing good" and "saving life" are central to Jesus' teaching and this goes beyond any cultural or sociological boundaries. Jesus expects his followers to do likewise. He demonstrates the value he places on human life and dignity and his desire that people would be made whole. Whilst Jesus' followers are not always able to heal others when they ask, Jesus gives the command and strength to sit with people in their suffering. Mother Theresa displayed an understanding of the immense value on life in her work with the poor and dying in Calcutta.

God calls his people to protect and care for the vulnerable

Defend the weak and the fatherless; uphold the cause of the poor and the oppressed. Rescue the weak and the needy; deliver them from the hand of the wicked. (Psalm 82:3-4)

Christians believe that God has a particular concern for the vulnerable in society, and he calls us to share this concern. As we consider Euthanasia, this means that we need to stand up for people such as the profoundly disabled, mentally ill, elderly and infirmed, and to make sure that they are receiving the care that they require. What sort of message would the adoption of Euthanasia send to such people who already feel they are being a burden to their families and to society? How can Euthanasia do anything but increase ageism and ableism? Vulnerable people need to be defended and protected.

Dr Pollard writes,

All bills require the doctor to be “satisfied” that the patient’s request was freely made, though no one could ever know with certainty about coercion from sources of which he was totally unaware. But would coercion be likely? Brian Burdekin, a former Human Rights Commissioner, reported that in his experience, “The most vulnerable were the most likely to be abused and the most likely to be coerced.” Subtle degrees of coercion would be almost impossible to detect.

If a well person asks for death he will be referred for counselling. If a sick person asks, he is as likely to be supported in his “exercise of personal autonomy”. And what of autonomy in the presence of severe illness, especially terminal illness, with its frequent association with depression and unrelieved pain, which powerfully hinder careful evaluation of issues? More importantly, no matter what the patient decides, in every case it will be the doctor’s decision that determines whether euthanasia actually proceeds. Leon Kass, a lawyer and prolific author in this area, wrote that, in view of the totality of the impediments to clear reasoning in such patients, “the ideal of rational autonomy, so beloved of bioethicists and legal theorists, rarely obtains in actual medical practice”.

Doctors are experienced in persuading patients to follow their legitimate advice concerning treatment options, to the point where some have been heard to say, “I can get my patients to do anything I want.” Their power, relative to that of the patient, is large even when there is no intention to manipulate. Euthanasia draft bills require doctors to inform patients about the medical details of their illness and future alternatives. Since such discussions will usually occur in private, one could never know whether such information was accurate, adequate, non-coercive and impartial. If the doctor’s personal view was that euthanasia was appropriate for a patient, we may be sure some would not be deterred from advocating it.¹

The Christian response to a person facing terminal illness is not to ask “Would you like to consider Euthanasia?”, it is to ask questions like: “Are you receiving the care you need? Is your pain relief sufficient? Would it help to talk to a counsellor? Do you have people around you to support you so you don’t feel alone?”. God wants us to help others make the most of the life they still have, rather than encourage them to end it as quickly as possible.

Written by Peter Adlem, senior Pastor at the Anglican Parish of Kingston
padlem@netspace.net.au
mobile: 0407 880 384

¹ <http://www.quadrant.org.au/magazine/issue/2011/1/why-safe-voluntary-euthanasia-is-a-myth>