

“The Doctor Will Kill You Now”

The Bible and Euthanasia

by Chris Reeves

Put yourself into the not so distant future. You're looking for your aged parents and you think they may have gone to the doctor's office. You step into the doctor's office and find a waiting room full of aged people who are sick and dying. On a table is the latest issue of Hemlock Quarterly and Popular Pills. The sign above the desk reads: “Have your death certificate and living will ready.” In a moment a nurse steps through a door and you overhear her say, “Mr. Jones, thank you for waiting, the doctor will kill you now.” Unrealistic? Maybe not. Euthanasia is becoming more popular in our nation every year.

This issue of euthanasia is a by-product of 20th century medical success. People who formerly would have died are now kept alive by advanced medical treatments. Along with this prolonged life have come difficult ethical decisions, and a lot of slogans like “the right to die,” “the choice not to suffer,” “death with dignity,” “doctor-assisted suicide” and “living wills.” The time-honored Hippocratic oath upon which our nation's healing medical profession was founded, is slowly being discarded in favor of these slogans. A part of that oath reads: “I will neither give a deadly drug to anybody if asked for it, nor will I make a suggestion to this effect.” Some countries, including our own, allow the publication of instructions for do-it-yourself suicide! Derek Humphry's, *Let Me Die Before I Wake*, and recent bestseller, *Final Exit*, give instructions how to end one's life. Ian Gentles reports: “In 1990, 1,030 Dutch patients were killed without their consent. And of 22,500 deaths due to withdrawal of life support, 63 percent (14,175 patients) were denied medical treatment without their consent. Twelve percent (1,701 patients) were mentally competent but were not consulted.” The Netherlands has over 20 years of experience with euthanasia. It has not been decriminalized there, but the nation's law enforcers turn a blind eye to doctor-assisted dying. In Chinese hospitals, active euthanasia is practiced on neonates. To make matters worse, there are pro-euthanasia advocacy groups around the world. The Euthanasia Society of America was founded in 1938 by the Charles F. Potter (a “Reverend” no less). We also have the Hemlock

Society, Exit, Voluntary Euthanasia Legalization Society, and the Society for the Right to Die, Inc. The AMA even endorses euthanasia. In the past two decades the cases of Karen Ann Quinlan, Nancy Beth Cruzan and Baby Jane Doe have shown us the power of the courts to rule in favor of euthanasia. We may not bury alive our sick elderly like the Sandwich Islanders do, and we may not leave our aged parents to die on the banks of the Ganges River like children of India do, but it is clear that Americans have found an acceptable, clinical, high-tech, “humane” way of accomplishing the same thing. This article will explore briefly the nature, history and morality of the growing phenomena of euthanasia.

Defining Our Terms

Euthanasia, sometimes called “mercy killing,” literally means “good death” (from the Greek words eu, “well,” and thanatos, “death”). Beckwith and Geisler define euthanasia as “the intentional taking of a human life for some good purpose, such as to relieve suffering or pain. Commonly the word denotes the taking of an adult life, though it can refer generally to taking any life after birth for supposed benevolent purposes” (141). “Euthanasia is assisted suicide. [Joseph - chr] Fletcher states that the relationship between suicide and euthanasia is so close that 'to justify either one ... is to justify the other'” (Wallace and Eser, 87). Infanticide (killing an infant or child), euthanasia (killing an adult), suicide (killing self), and even genocide (killing an entire race) are the same in theory (killing for supposed benevolent ends); they differ only in application. Sometimes you will here the terms “active euthanasia,” and “passive euthanasia.” What is the difference between the two? Active euthanasia refers to taking a life (producing death), where as “passive euthanasia” refers to allowing a death to occur without intervening (permitting death). The former usually involves the injection of a death-inducing drug (like Jack Kevorkian's “suicide machine”), and the latter usually involves the withdrawal of medical treatment which results in a disease or sickness naturally leading to death. One must also be familiar with the terms “voluntary euthanasia” and “involuntary euthanasia.” In the former, the patient has requested a desire to end life, and in the latter, a third party, usually a close relative, decides to end life. When these four (active, passive, voluntary, involuntary) are combined, we get four classes of euthanasia.

Euthanasia In Recent History

According to legal scholars, the long history of American common law has not supported a patient's right to die, but our times and laws are changing. Like the ancient Greek world, America is now divided over the issue of euthanasia. Passive euthanasia is widely practiced in this country and active euthanasia is gaining popularity. More than 30 years ago, one doctor had a broad vision for euthanasia saying it was for “...a group of individuals who will soon be encountering death ... a group with such severe mental damage ... and ... a group with varying degrees of cognizance...” (John Waddey quoting Dr. Robert Williams of Washington State Medical School.) This doctor's vision is slowly coming true. An old 1970 survey of Seattle physicians showed that 75% of them

supported passive euthanasia if the patient had a chronic illness (Simpson, 18). In a recent article in *The New England Journal of Medicine*, Guy I. Berrubi, M.D., praised the idea of “a specialty of physicians who alone would be empowered to perform” active euthanasia, and “certified specialists skilled in relieving suffering and, when necessary, terminating life painlessly” (198). Dr. Kevorkian addressed the National Press club in 1992 and said that euthanasia was for cancer patients, quadriplegics, people with multiple sclerosis and severe arthritis! There is no question that this country is traveling down the slippery slope from abortion to euthanasia. The first paved the way for the latter when it gave up the sanctity of human life. Even the pro-euthanasia advocates admit this. Joseph Fletcher saw the connection between the two when he concluded that abortion is “fetal euthanasia” and infanticide is “postnatal abortion.”

Moral Questions Surrounding Euthanasia

There is doubt that this issue will affect many today. People will continue to seek medical treatment and live or die as a result of their choice of treatment. What am I to do when faced with such a situation? I must answer some difficult questions. The key questions in this issue include: “Am I preserving life, or prolonging death?” “Will the patient who dies be a victim of euthanasia, or a victim of a fatal ailment?” “Am I taking a life, or allowing a natural death?” “Am I providing the patient with natural means of sustaining life (food, water, air), or artificial means?” “What are my intentions, to end a life prematurely, or to avoid death?” “Do I desire the removal of nonbeneficial treatment, or death itself?” If you have to answer these difficult questions one day regarding the care of a loved one, you must remember your basic moral obligation: to prolong life, not to prolong death. This obligation is made clear in the next section.

Euthanasia, Is It Biblical?

When we turn to the religious community for answers to the problem of euthanasia we don't get much help. Both Catholics and Jews oppose the practice, but there are varying views among Protestants (Simpson, 18). Of course the religion of humanism is very much in favor of it, recognizing an “individual's right to die with dignity, euthanasia, and the right to suicide” (Claiborne quoting Humanist Manifesto II, 131). The answer to this difficult issue does not lie within medical, philosophical or theological theories, but within God's word. What we need to do in this case, as with any question, is go to the Bible for answers. We know that “it is appointed unto man to die once” (Hebrews 9:27). The question is, “When and how should man die?” It is clear from God's word that euthanasia is immoral. Why? Euthanasia, like abortion, infanticide, suicide or genocide, is intentional homicide or murder, and therefore immoral (Exodus 20:13).

First, let's take the case of King Saul who was mortally wounded in battle and begged his armor-bearing to take his life. When Saul's servant refused, Saul attempted suicide (1 Samuel 31:1-6). Later when an Amalekite passed by, Saul begged him to take his life

and the Amalekite did so with good motives. The Amalekite was later judged for “putting forth his hand to destroy” (2 Samuel 1:1-16). The case of Abimelech is similar (Judges 9:50-57). We find here that killing, regardless of the request by the one suffering, and regardless of the good motives of the one doing the killing, is immoral.

Second, we are given positive Biblical principles that address the specific situation of old age. We have a Biblical command to care for the aged and not abandon them (Deuteronomy 28:50; Leviticus 19:32; Isaiah 1:23; Matthew 15:3-5; Ephesians 6:2; James 1:27; 1 Timothy 5:4,8). We would do well to remember the words in the Psalmist's prayer to God: “Do not cast me off in the time of old age; Do not forsake me when my strength faileth” (Psalm 71:9). Remember also the wisdom of Solomon: “Deliver those who are being taken away to death, And those who are staggering to slaughter. O hold them back” (Proverbs 24:11).

Finally, let us remember the difference between “sanctity of life” and “quality of life.” The Bible teaches us that we must live on, even though our “quality of life” may be poor. Human suffering is not to be eradicated by death. We are to live with suffering, and learn from it (Romans 5:3-4; 1 Peter 1:6-9; 2 Corinthians 1:3-11). The pro-euthanasia advocates, on the other hand, believe that a life has value and should be prolonged only as long as it has some good “quality” to it. According to them, when the “good life” is gone, it's time to die. The bottom line justification for Dr. Kevorkian is: “the right not to have to suffer” (Bernardi, 1). “Disabled people all over the country have killed themselves ... The quality of their life is so bad that they see no hope, no future” (J.E. Tada quoting Ed Roberts, president of the World Institute on Disability). The “quality of life” argument was made back in 1973 by George Paulson: “How long shall life be preserved when there is no redeeming social value? If life has no apparent purpose, perhaps it is to the benefit of others that such lives not be salvaged” (quoted by Waddey). Christians, on the other hand, believe in the “sanctity of life.” That is, every life, young or old, healthy or sick, prospering or suffering, has value and should be prolonged because man has a soul and is made in the image of God (Genesis 1:26-27; 9:6). In other words, for the Christian, life does not stop when the “good life” stops; it does not stop when suffering sets it; it stops when God's time for it to stop comes (Job 1:21). Life must go on, not because of the good or bad of outward circumstances (quality of life), but rather because of its inward value (sanctity of life). Euthanasia, then, is a convenient way to remove suffering. Clarke Forsythe makes a good observation when he says we need more “compassion for life” and less “passion for convenience” (2). The end (relief from suffering) does not justify the means (euthanasia). We don't need more “mercy killing” for the those who suffer, we need more “mercy-service” to help them live with the pain. We need less of Job's wife -- “Curse God and die!” -- and more of Job -- “Shall we indeed accept good from God and not accept adversity?”

Currently in this country, we kill the unborn (abortion), we kill the new born (infanticide) and we kill the aged (euthanasia). Unless we do something drastic to reverse our moral

position on the sanctity of life, it will only be a matter of time before we, like Adolf Hitler, kill with impunity all those in between (genocide). It is really no wonder that we have the problem of euthanasia since we have a generation of doctors and moral ethicists weaned on evolution theory. We are just animals, according to that theory. We kill our domesticated pets; we kill our humans; no problem, we are all animals anyway. Animals kill their own, why shouldn't we? But shooting a horse trapped in a burning barn, and injecting a drug into an elderly patient trapped in suffering are not moral equivalents, because man is not an animal. The Russian poet Dostoyesky remarked: "If God is not, then nothing is morally wrong." May God give this nation time to come back to Him, back to the morals found in His word the Bible, and back to the sanctity of human life.

People in pain may come to us and speak like the prophet Jonah once spoke: "O Lord, please take my life from me, for death is better to me than life ... Death is better to me than life ... I have good reason to be angry, even unto death" (Jonah 4:3,8,9). When they do, let us not assist them in their death, but let us act like God did with Jonah; care for them, comfort them and communicate with them.

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CHREEVES@AOL.COM