

EUTHANASIA - A SYMPOSIUM

DONALD ROBINSON

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My contribution to this subject is limited to the background of Christian thought as derived from the understanding of God and mankind to be found in the holy scriptures, the foundation of Christian theology and the source of principles governing inter-relations. The application of these principles in our modern world is a complex task, not only knowledge and sound judgement but also pastoral sensitivity. But it is the principles themselves and their source in God's word that I wish to speak about now.

The revelation of God which we have in the Bible does not consist of a mere collection of laws or precepts, although it includes both. God's revelation of himself is set in a context of human life and experience covering some two thousand years in particular. In other words, it is worked out in innumerable human lives and situations. I turn now to the scriptures for an example of the kind of 'euthanasia' or request for it which has prompted the moral debate, although the question of the taking of life at the request of someone asking for assistance to die is raised once. But we are looking for more than precedents.

The legal or regulatory elements in the Bible are focussed in the two great commandments: first, love of God, and secondly, love of neighbour; set out in the law of Moses and by Jesus. These emerge from the context of God and his relation to the world and his people with mankind from the beginning. While we cannot commend ourselves to God on the ground that we have fully kept his commandments, they do indicate our obligation, and so we should live in response to his invitation to us to put the question in whether or not you may terminate the life of your neighbour involves not only what we owe to our neighbour but also what we owe to God.

The broad principle which militates against direct action to terminate the life of a patient can be called "the sanctity of life". That is not a biblical phrase, and indeed it is

used to mean that life has justification in itself and should always be revered. By sanctity of life I mean rather that life is holy to God. God the creator is the author and giver of life, and it is he who withdraws what he has given. Speaking of all the animal world, the Psalmist says: "you send forth your spirit (breath), they are created" and "you take away their breath, they die, and return to their dust" (Psalm 104.29ff). Or as Moses represents God as saying in Deuteronomy 32.29: "See now that I, I am He, and beside me there is no god: I put to death and I keep alive, I inflict wounds and I heal. There is no rescue from my grasp."

Let me take this sovereignty of God in matters of life and death a little further. The breath of life in man comes from God, according to the creation narrative in Genesis 2.7. Also God has given to man dominion over the works of his hand. But the mastery over the earth and the other animals which God conferred on man does not include a general right to take human life, although it does include the mandate to procreate life. The 'delegated' nature of this power was emphasized in the law of Moses by the requirement that the firstborn be redeemed by an animal sacrifice; the life is God's.

The Bible makes clear that it is wrong for man to spoil or destroy life without a divine mandate. The command "You shall not kill" comes in the section of the Decalogue setting out the duty to a neighbour, and relates to the conduct of an individual, i.e. homicide or murder. There is in fact a mandate for the taking of human life in particular circumstances and by certain persons and means, where offences against God and neighbour (i.e. against the divine law) have been committed (capital punishment, and certain wars), but there is no sign of any mandate or approval in the case of a sick or disadvantaged person. Although the Bible recognises that pain and tribulation is the lot of man from the fall of Adam onwards, and although there are many who cry for relief, and even some who request God himself that he might take their life from them because of their distress, the prerogative to kill, as to heal and make alive, remains with God.

It is worth noting that there is also a mandate for man to take the lives of animals, for food or for sacrifice, provided the divine prerogative is acknowledged. That was done by pouring the blood on the ground and not consuming it. (The blood represents "the life of the flesh".)

This awareness of the complete sovereignty of God over life and death pervades the whole Bible. St Paul ascribes the civil government's power of "the sword" ("for the punishment of evil doers") to God (Rom. 13.3f.). When Pontius Pilate threatened to crucify Jesus, Jesus replied "you would have no power at all against me, except it were given you from above".

An important feature of the biblical understanding is that life is essentially good, whereas death is a negation of life, and a curse: "the last enemy" (1 Cor 15.26⁶). Despite the ills of life, and the observation that "man is born to trouble as the sparks fly upwards", life is essentially a good thing. "It is good that the eye should behold the sun". Jacob might tell Pharaoh that the days of the years of his life had been "few and evil", but he blessed God for his goodness throughout his life nevertheless, and perceived his life as the opportunity of knowing God and enjoying his blessing. But death is finality, and represents judgement and sealed fate. "It is appointed unto men once to die, and after this comes judgement" (Hebrews 9.27).

Suffering diminishes the enjoyment of the pleasures of life, but not its essential goodness. Elijah, in depression, asked God that he might die. However God responded by sustaining and restoring him, and Elijah lived to see God's further glory (1 Kings 19.4). Jonah also asked that he might die, but God provided shade for him and "delivered him from his evil case" (Jonah 4.38⁶). The Bible accommodates suffering within life, and while recognising it as "grievous", claims that it yields "the peaceable fruits of righteousness for those who are exercised thereby" (Hebrews 12.11). This, of course, is within the context of trust in God and his sovereign goodness.

Another aspect of the concept of life in the Bible is this: the unique integrity of human life is in that man bears the image of God. This is stated at the beginning (Genesis 1.27) and is asserted particularly in connection with the prohibition of murder in Genesis 9.5: "from human beings also I shall require satisfaction for the death of their fellows", or, more literally, "at the hand of every man's brother I will require the life of man". The sanction for this decree of God is that "in the image of God made he man". This occurs in a passage about blood feuds, which sets protective bounds around the life of man. The various biblical references to man as bearing the image of God show "his distinctness from, and dominion over, the rest of

creation". His life is thus "a unique entity in the Creator-creation relationship, and is not an ordinary part of that creation over which man holds sway" (Stephen Wilcockson, *Last Rights - Christian Perspectives on Euthanasia*, Cove Books 1981, p7). Man's dignity lies in his having God's image, not in any kind of independent self-determination or claim of autonomous rights over his own life or future. To die with dignity should mean to die facing God with full assurance and mutual recognition.

The few instances of suicide in the Bible may throw light on our subject, since terminating life at the request of a patient is in the category of suicide in all but the form of the deed. In all the biblical suicides, I think, from King Saul to Judas Iscariot, the person concerned is seen as, in one way or another, having already put himself outside the purposes and blessings of God, and, in effect, under God's condemnation. Saul fell on his sword to avoid capture by the Philistines, his armour-bearer having refused his request to kill him (1 Sam 31. 4f). But God had already rejected Saul, and ceased to communicate with him. An Amalekite who came to David claiming to have killed Saul at his request - because, he said, "I was sure he could not live after he was fallen" - was himself executed by David for his presumption: "How were you not afraid to raise your hand to kill the Lord's Anointed?" Being the Lord's Anointed was a special role within the dominion God had given to man, a special aspect of his bearing God's image. Although God may already have departed from Saul, David had no authority to act against Saul's life, even though he was Saul's anointed successor, nor did he recognize any such authority in the Amalekite, even though the latter acted, or claimed to act, at Saul's request.

One cannot consider the biblical understanding of life and death without taking into account the death of Jesus. He "tasted death for every man". He was fully and deliberately identified with all our pains and sorrows. Though shrinking from the agony of death, and praying to be spared it, he accepted the cup the Father gave him to drink. His request to be spared was not granted, but he was sustained by the presence of divine messenger. Faced then with death, he deliberately surrendered his life to God: "Father, into thy hands I commit my spirit", my breath of life. Did Jesus die with dignity? The circumstances were horrific. But we are told that when the Roman centurion saw how he died, he said "Truly this man was the son of God".

The saving benefits of Jesus' death are the very foundation of the salvation of mankind. But, as well as that, his suffering has always been seen as the model to which Christians conform in their own suffering and approach to death. Job's cry "Let me die the death of the righteous and let my last end be like his" takes on a new meaning in the light of Jesus and his relation to the will of God in the acceptance of his suffering.

I must again make it clear that I have made no attempt in this short paper to draw out the pastoral implications of all this today, I have simply tried to point out some of the features of the biblical view of God and the world, and of our relation to God in the matters of life and death.

But perhaps I may refer to the Order for the Visitation of the Sick in the Book of Common Prayer, which, out of date as many think it - it was composed in the mid 16th century, does seek to put a biblical doctrine before the sick person. There is an exhortation which begins: "Dearly beloved, know this, that Almighty God is the Lord of life and death, and of all things to them pertaining, as youth, strength, health, age, weakness, and sickness. Wherefore, whatsoever your sickness is, know you certainly, that it is God's visitation". Then later it invokes the example of Jesus. "There should be no greater comfort to Christian persons, than to be made like unto Christ, by suffering patiently adversities, troubles, and sicknesses. For he himself went not up to joy, but first he suffered pain; he entered into his glory before he was crucified. So truly our way to eternal joy is to suffer here with Christ; and our door to enter into eternal life is gladly to die with Christ; that we may rise again from death, and dwell with him in everlasting life". (This paragraph was not ready).

I do not suggest that the full cogency of the position I have outlined is widely appreciated in our community. However, the basic concept of the sanctity of life is recognised not only by Christians but also by Jews and Moslems, and indeed by many others. Moreover, our laws regarding the taking of life have always been based on the biblical law and its proper application to the life of human communities. The proposal to permit the taking of life

without divine mandate must be viewed with alarm and dismay as a threat to human security and welfare, and as an affront to God our creator.