

Assisted Suicide

The Church of England bases its firm opposition to legalising assisted suicide on a number of key principles, as follows:

The sanctity of human life: This principle is crucial to Christians. It encapsulates their belief that life is in and of itself sacred because it is given by God. Life has an inherent value, not just a conditional one. The principle is enshrined in law in the form of an absolute prohibition on the intentional killing of innocent human beings. It protects each one of us impartially and recognises our fundamental equality. Rightly, it is not taken to mean that every life ought to be preserved at all costs.

The common good: The meaning of a human life is inextricably bound up with others. The strenuous requests of a small group of strong-minded individuals for assisted suicide or voluntary euthanasia are not made in isolation. They will have friends or family who will be affected; their request places demands on others, who have to accept the decision as valid and act on it; and finally their requests have wide repercussions for law and culture. A change in the law must be based upon the common good, not on the needs or wishes of a few or of an individual.

Autonomy: All human beings have a right to have their autonomy respected, but autonomy has limits, because human beings are not hermetically sealed individuals. The rights of the individual always go hand in hand with his or her duty to others.

Proportionality: A point may be reached in a patient's care when further life-prolonging treatment would be both futile and burdensome. At this point care switches from acute to palliative and a patient is allowed to die. Allowing someone to die is distinguished from killing. Administering doses of pain-relieving drugs that have the foreseen consequence of accelerating death is not intentional killing, if the actual intention is only to relieve pain. There is excellent understanding of palliative care in the UK. No one is required to prolong life artificially and treatment given to a patient against his or her wishes is unlawful.

Preventing avoidable suffering: Although many Christians and others can attest to the strengthening effect of going through periods of suffering themselves, no one would

argue in favour of inflicting suffering on others or refusing to prevent it if possible. However, legalising assisted suicide for unbearable suffering, which the Joffe Bill proposed, may have the effect that ending a life becomes a 'treatment option'.

Respect for dignity: Nobody wishes to face incontinence and other forms of loss of control. Nurses in particular can ensure that whilst such physical dependence may be unavoidable, it never brings with it a loss of dignity. This is crucial for patients and for their families and loved ones. Respect for dignity should not be translated into changing the law to allow people with 'strong personalities and a history of being in control of their lives' (HL 86-I p. 83) to end them. Rather, respecting the dignity of such people would require a range of support services to enable patients to face their fears.

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