

## FALSE MEDIA CLAIMS

It is not unusual to come across a statement in the print media to the effect that voluntary euthanasia is condemned by the churches, or at the very least does not enjoy Christian support. For example the following appeared in *The Australian* in June 1995: "So far not one dissident Christian voice has been raised in favour of any form of euthanasia". The remarkable thing about this statement is not just that it is false but that so many people think that it is true. Both inside and outside the churches there is a general ignorance of the diversity of Christian opinion on the morality of voluntary euthanasia. For contrary to the journalist's confident assertion, the fact is that there have been Christian voices raised in support of forms of euthanasia. Simple honesty, as much as the integrity of the church, requires that they be recognised.

## CHRISTIAN SUPPORT

As it happens, Christians have always been active in the modern voluntary euthanasia lobby. Among the founders of the American Euthanasia Society, in 1945, were prominent Christians such as the New York divines Henry Sloan Coffin, the President of Union Seminary, and Harry Emerson Fosdick, the minister of Baptist Riverside Church. Contemporary organisations such as the South Australian Voluntary Euthanasia Society call attention to clerical supporters of their cause- such as Michael Hare Duke, the Episcopal Church in Scotland's Bishop of St. Andrews, or Lord Soper, a former president of the English Methodist Church, or Jacques Pohier, the eminent though controversial Catholic theologian - by printing and distributing their essays and addresses in support of voluntary euthanasia.

When Australian Christians have been asked to indicate anonymously their attitude to some form of euthanasia, there have been no shortage of supporters.

According to the 2002 Morgan Poll in South Australia, 81% respondents nominating as

Anglicans, 66% of Presbyterians, 69% of Catholics and 74% of those identifying with the Uniting Church supported voluntary euthanasia. The national Church Life Survey of church attenders (1991) found lower, but still high levels of support for some form of euthanasia - 51% of Anglicans, 37% of Presbyterians and 59% of Uniting Church attenders. Among other factors, the difference between the levels of support in these surveys is related to the fact that the Morgan Poll included *nominal* Christians whereas the NCLS focussed on church *attenders* only.

Caution is needed in comparing the findings of unrelated surveys, but two comments seem worth making. From one perspective it could be said that the difference in results of the two surveys shows that the more contact people have had with their church the less likely they are to support voluntary euthanasia. That is, something about the church and its teachings runs against the current in society which supports the cause of voluntary euthanasia. But from another perspective it could be said that the NCLS findings show that involvement in the church and adherence to its teachings is quite compatible with support for voluntary euthanasia. The numbers are smaller among attenders than among nominal Christians, but the numbers are still strikingly large, showing majority support among *active* Anglicans and Uniting Church people. Of course we don't do ethics on a show of hands, "Thus said the Lord: the ayes have it"! But especially in Protestant churches, we do take seriously the considered opinions of our sisters and brothers as we struggle to discern God's will together. The body of lay opinion in support of some form of euthanasia has to be engaged, respected, and taken seriously in that process of discernment. It ought not to be ignored, talked round, or bullied into silence by the churches", "experts" or "authorities".

## THEOLOGICAL SUPPORT

Even among the "experts" and "authorities" there is a diversity of opinion. Catholicism has an official position of unqualified opposition to any form of euthanasia. According to the catechism, "Intentional euthanasia, whatever its form or motives, is murder. It is gravely contrary to the dignity of the human person and the respect due to the living God, his (sic) Creator". But there are Catholic voices expressing disagreement with that position.

The Australian philosopher, Max Charlesworth, is one. He takes a position which has been characteristic of Christian supporters of voluntary euthanasia, affirming that God has created human beings to make their own decisions and to accept responsibility for themselves and their neighbours. There is nothing faithful about relinquishing that responsibility in the face of the power of nature or history. "It's not playing God' to seek freely to control the direction of my life," Charlesworth writes, "and is not playing God" to seek freely to control the mode of my dying. For a Christian, God is not honoured by a person (made in the 'image' of God) abdicating her autonomy and freedom of will and passively submitting to 'fate'.

Hans Küng, a well known Catholic theologian, has taken a similar position. In his view, "God, who has given men and women freedom and responsibility for their lives, has also left to dying people the responsibility for making a conscientious decision about the manner and time of their deaths. "This is a responsibility which neither the state, nor the church, neither a theologian, nor a doctor can take away". For Küng, "precisely because I am convinced that death is not

the end of everything. I am not so concerned about an endless prolongation of my life - certainly not under conditions that are no longer compatible with human dignity".

Similar views have been expressed by Protestant Christians. Kenneth Ralph, a Uniting Church Minister, has argued that, "self-determination is central to what it means to be a human being, or a person", and resists the arbitrary removal of the responsibility of self-determination in the manner of one's death. His views summarise a characteristic emphasis in the doctrine of the human person as it has been stated in the twentieth century western theology. The paramount value of the person is given by God and was central to the ministry and teachings of Jesus. The interests of the individual therefore have priority over any social, political, or religious project to which he or she might be conscripted. In particular, there is no religious value in requiring extreme and hopeless suffering of individuals against their will, subsuming their "good" to the "good of society" or the "common good". Indeed, such use of persons defaces the "image of God" in them and is to that extend irreligious.

John Cobb, a Methodist theologian, has made a similar point in a more careful way. He maintains that, "Theologically, few would now accept the view that one range of actions belongs wholly to the sphere of human free will and another wholly to God. God is at work everywhere, but in a way that does not set aside the decisions of the creatures. Instead God makes such decisions possible and works in and through them". It is his contention that God does not lay exclusive claims to decisions about ending one's life. It is not a special case. In this, as in all things, we may find ourselves having to be in partnership with God.

### **CHRISTIAN SUPPORT FOR VOLUNTARY EUTHANASIA IS STRONG**

The belief that Christians and churches are united and unambiguous in their opposition to voluntary euthanasia is false. There is in fact strong support for voluntary euthanasia among both nominal and

active church members. There are also numerous Christian thinkers and theologians who have shown that the holding of the Christian faith and doctrine is consistent with supporting voluntary euthanasia, identifying *autonomy and personal freedom* as integral to the "image of God" in the human person, and emphasising *human partnership with God* in decisions about death. More recently some post-liberal constructions of Christian faith have introduced new emphasis in the patterns of Christian support for voluntary euthanasia, especially the inherent *rationality* of the human person and the *communal* nature of Christian existence.

In so far as the Christian contribution to the public debate on voluntary euthanasia matters, it is important that the *diversity* of sincere well-informed Christian opinion be acknowledged.

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Based on a paper by the Rev. Dr. Andrew Dutney published in the Monash Bioethics Review Vol. 16 No. 2 dated April 1997, and approved by the author. A section on LIBERALISM AND CHRISTIAN SUPPORT and 26 references, have been omitted.

Further information is available from:  
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**VOLUNTARY EUTHANASIA**



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