

# Euthanasia from a Christian perspective

---

In the text below, we want to give more insight into the Christian dimension of the vision statement on euthanasia in mental suffering in a non-terminal situation of the Brothers of Charity Group in Belgium.

## ***A testimony***

The discussion that recently arose in the wake of the vision statement that was publicized not only highlighted the differences in views on this topic, but also yielded a lot of testimonies of people who were directly or indirectly confronted with euthanasia. We heard a moving story of family members of deeply religious people who regarded life as a gift from God, but at one point it had become so heavy to bear, and they wanted to return this gift to their Creator in good faith with sincere hope and the belief that He would understand the choice for euthanasia. This confrontational story convinced us even more that the new vision statement of the Brothers of Charity Group in Belgium also shows a Christian-inspired dimension. Usually, it is said that returning a gift to the one who gave it is evidence of ungratefulness. But why does it have to be so and can it not be seen otherwise? From the idea of stewardship, in which you are not the owner of life but bear responsibility for handling it with care, we can imagine that you return the gift of life with gratitude if you are of the opinion that, in your stewardship, that you have properly assumed responsibility for it. In any case, we come from God and return to God.

## ***Recognition of the exceptional***

God calls us to show love and mercy, including mercy to the psychiatric patient. Of course, that is why we always put life first. We must not lose that last shred of hope for recovery. Nevertheless, exceptional situations can occur with persistent and hopeless mental suffering, which is why we, from a Christian personalism, can understand the choice for euthanasia. These are exceptions to the exceptions.

## ***Proportional view of ethics***

In the new vision statement, we opt for a proportional view of ethics. This means that a multitude of values are at stake and that these values are weighed, taking into account the situation, the motives, the action, and the consequences. This view also originates in the Christian tradition. Not only is the inviolability of life a Christian-inspired value, but also autonomy and solidarity. The value of autonomy is also rooted in the Creation, particularly in the stewardship, the freedom and responsibility that God gives man to deal with Creation, and in the freedom of conscience, the freedom to make a responsible decision according to man's own conscience. The value of solidarity or the care relationship is also rooted in the Christian tradition: God, as the Trinity, is relationship between Father, Son, and Spirit; man is created in God's image and is thus relationship, both relationship with the Divine Creator and with other people as brothers and sisters; after all, the history of salvation is conceived as a covenant relationship between God and man. Inviolability of life, autonomy, and solidarity or care relationship are all three rooted in Christian tradition and are therefore Christian-inspired values. In concrete situations, these three values are weighed against each other. According to the teachings of the 'sources of morality' in Christian ethics, the intention or

motives, the act and its consequences, and the circumstances or situation are taken into account. It is therefore fully in line with the Christian tradition not only to take account of the inviolability, but also of the autonomy and solidarity or care relationship, and not only to take account of the act itself but also of the situation, the motives, and the effects.

### ***Deontological view and ideologization***

There are, of course, other Christian-inspired views such as the deontological view presented by the Catholic Church's magisterium. For the assessment of an action, this view only looks at the action itself, without regard for the situation, the motives, and the consequences. Certain acts are considered as 'inherently evil', improper anywhere and anytime because they go against the fundamental value of the inviolability of life.

Invoking absolute inviolability of life is an argument from the ideologization of the debate. Saying that something is absolute is exactly positioning a claim above each argument. No arguments for or against it are needed, it's just how it is. At all times, in all circumstances, whatever any other considerations may be. And that's what ideology is exactly. An idea in a suit of armour, with which you can go to battle, well-protected against any argument, reason or debate. And the latter is radically contrary to one of the core points of biblical Christian tradition, in particular the first commandment: you shall give praise to God, He is one, there is no other. That means that there is only one absolute, and that is God himself. Anyone who makes something else absolute, makes something else God, which is not reconcilable with giving praise to the God of the Bible. Levinas devoted his entire philosophical life to the struggle against something else being made absolute other than the God of the Bible. If you make something else absolute other than the God of the Bible, you are on the path of a totalizing dynamic that subjugates everything to that one idea with a suit of armour.

Furthermore, ethics that only take into account the inviolability of life and the action lead to strict ethics of rules. These ethics contrast strongly with the Gospel in which Jesus makes the Sabbath and other Jewish rules subordinate to man and not man to the rules. Putting the rules above man is a failure to appreciate love, and God is precisely the source of love.

### ***Bible commandment: "You shall not kill"***

The deontological view refers to the well-known Bible passage of the 10 commandments: "You shall not kill". We are no exegetes and therefore we will not hazard an exegetical analysis of this commandment, which is one of the foundations of our society. However, we want to draw attention to the fact that in the Bible, the commandment is described as "You shall not murder". This correct description has finally been phrased in the New Bible Translation (Nieuwe Bijbelvertaling - NBV) of 2004. It has never been the Bible's intention that, under no circumstances, a fellow human being could be killed. This particular commandment does not speak of killing in general, but of murder, of deceitful killing for personal gain. Christians, Jews, and Muslims have accepted legitimate forms of killing, but also condemn what they regard as murder. History shows how strongly the context can influence the view when we look back at, for instance, the crusades, the application of the death penalty... Today, some forms of killing are still accepted, for example in warfare, in legal self-defence, in the killing of a foetus in a medical abortion... The Bible does not provide us with ready-to-use recipes for topical ethical issues and does not build a dam to hold off the difficult journey to the

future. The big challenge is to put the Bible commandment “You shall not kill” in a context. As Christians, we are called to hold up the context against the light of the Bible. That is what we have done in good conscience and after very much deliberation as the Brothers of Charity Group in Belgium with regard to euthanasia for mental suffering in a non-terminal situation.

### ***Choice of conscience***

A person who applies for euthanasia will make that decision according to their conscience. We should not judge a person’s choice of conscience too quickly. The final judgment belongs to God alone.

Using the ideological view as a starting point often stands in the way of a conversation and a support pathway in which there may be a chance of improvement which could eliminate the euthanasia request.

On the basis of the two pathways and the due care requirements, the new vision statement reflects the explicit choice to be close to the patient, seeking ways of hope for them, and guiding them in their euthanasia request, even if it ultimately leads to euthanasia being carried out. We do this without imposing any obligation on caregivers to participate in the performance of euthanasia. Treatment and counselling will not be stopped if we receive the request for euthanasia. Neither can we refuse the last rites or the anointing of the sick before euthanasia is carried out. The prophet Isaiah is very clear in this matter: God does not abandon his people, no matter how sinful (cf. Is 49:14-15). It reminds us of two other Gospel texts that are very dear to us. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus says not to judge that we may not be judged (Mt 7:1-3). We also recall the beautiful story where Jesus does not condemn the woman taken in adultery: let him who is without sin cast the first stone, and further on: neither do I condemn you (Jn 7:53-8:11). Lytta Basset, a Swiss practical theologian, developed it wonderfully in her book ‘Moi, je ne juge personne: l'évangile au-delà de la morale’.

In conclusion, we would like to emphasize that, with the new vision statement, we do not fall into the trap of making the value of self-determination absolute, and that we do not agree with the requirement to consider euthanasia as a right or to extend the Act of Euthanasia in case of life completion or for persons suffering from dementia.

The location where euthanasia is ultimately carried out is subordinate to the view. Again, we follow the patient who will choose the most appropriate location in consultation with the physician. More than half of the times when euthanasia is being carried out, it takes place in a home environment. Patients clearly prefer a context of trust. For a limited number of patients, the psychiatric hospital may serve as a replacement home environment. It takes courage and humility to do the utmost when putting the patient's interests first, even if it means that euthanasia needs to be performed in the facility. In the spiritual tradition of the Brothers of Charity, this could also be referred to as meekness. Indeed, it takes courage to face your own powerlessness in great suffering and humility to not impose your own ideas and your own will on the person who suffers. Stating in advance that, at the end of the support pathway, the patient must submit to the ideological choices of the healthcare provider no matter what, or else they will be forced to leave, makes an authentic care relationship, which the patient fully takes seriously as an equal partner, impossible. Resisting euthanasia being carried out in Christian-inspired care institutions drives those requesting it into the hands of parties

who value self-determination more highly than the inviolability of life or who are perhaps not very strict when it comes to the due care requirements. That is no inviolability of life, it is forsaking the inviolability of life.

Dirk Beirnaert - Raf De Rycke - Axel Liégeois