

## BIRTH AND DEATH

Until about 200 years ago, medicine did not present many moral problems. Couples who could not have children never became parents. Others often had 10+ children as there was no proper contraception. Serious diseases, illnesses or accidents often led to death. People could die peacefully or in pain. There was not very much anyone could do about life and death. Life and death were left in God's hands, because there was no other choice.

Medicine has made huge progress since Bible times. People can control the number of children they have by using contraception. Couples unable to conceive can have medical help. Pregnancy can be ended safely by abortion. Serious illnesses can often be cured. Illness can be slowed so that sufferers live for much longer. People can be kept alive artificially on life-support systems. Drugs can ensure that most people die painlessly.

All of these advances may raise moral issues, for Christians and others. Should we now make our own decisions about life and death, or let God decide "the time to be born and the time to die"?

### "Playing God"

Some believe that when doctors make life and death decisions, they are "playing God". Should they step back and "let God decide?" But if we do this many would die even though doctors could help them. When should we help life? When should we end life? When should we leave it alone?

Christians believe it is important for people to use medical knowledge, and not just let nature take its course every time someone is ill. In the Gospels, Jesus healed people, not just let them suffer.

**"While Jesus was in one of the towns, a man came along who was covered with leprosy. When he saw Jesus, he fell with his face to the ground and begged him, 'Lord, if you are willing, you can make me clean.' Jesus reached out his hand and touched the man. 'I am willing,' he said. 'Be clean!' And immediately the leprosy left him."**

Christians see medicine as something positive, and healing is believed to come from God. However, Christians also believe that some aspects of medicine raise moral problems. Christians do not always agree about the right answers to these problems.

### Christians and Ethics

See notes on "Sanctity of Life". The Sanctity of Life affects the way Christians approach medical issues, e.g. contraception, abortion and euthanasia. However, not all Christians agree on these issues.

Some Christians base their ethical decisions on rules that are either written in the Bible or part of the way God designed us (Natural Law). According to Natural Law it is wrong to kill - a **moral absolute** (a principle that applies in all circumstances), which explains the Catholic Church's rejection of Abortion and Euthanasia.

Other Christians are more interested in the consequences of their actions. They follow Jesus' example in trying to act in the most **loving** way in any situation (a theory called Situation Ethics). This explains why many churches accept abortion in the case of rape - even though abortion is an 'evil' act, it may be the lesser of two evils when you look at the consequences of not having an abortion.

## THE SANCTITY OF LIFE

There are few people, religious or not, who do not value the gift of life. People value life even though at times it seems very difficult. Sometimes people may curse at life, especially when they are ill or have disabilities. However, the belief in the importance of preserving life is worldwide

Christians believe in the "sanctity of life": There is something special and holy about life. For Christians, human life is different because we share something of the nature of God. Genesis describes how God made Adam, and "breathed into his nostrils the breath of life." (*Genesis 2:7*).

This did not happen with the animals and the plants, but only with the humans.

Genesis also says that people are made "in the image of God":

**"So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them."** *Genesis 1:26-27*

This means people are in some way reflections of God. In humans, something of God himself can be seen. Christians believe that humans have a soul which lives on after the body has died. The soul will be judged by God, and can join God for ever in Heaven. Because people have souls, they must be treated as special; they are different from other species.

Some Bible passages teach that God plans each individual human life, and knows everyone completely. This quote says God has an intimate knowledge of each person, even before they are born:

**"You created every part of me; you knit me together in my mother's womb. When my bones were being formed, carefully put together in my mother's womb, when I was growing there in secret, you knew that I was there - you saw me before I was born. The days allotted to me had all been recorded in your book, before any of them ever began."** *Psalms 139:13-16*

- Christians believe that human life is sacred - it is more special than other kinds of life.
- Other animals do not have souls, and are not made in the image of God, although they deserve to be treated with kindness and respect.
- Christians believe that God knows and plans every human life.

### Valuing human life

- God makes and loves each person, so everyone has value: new-born, elderly, healthy, ill, useful members of society or in need of care. So Christians should treat all human life with respect. Some Christians become doctors or nurses because of their Christian Faith: they want to put into practise their beliefs about the value of human life.
- Because God has given life, this means that Christians have a responsibility to take care of themselves. They should do something useful with their lives, not just waste it, and they should take care of their own health and other people's. Some Christians, therefore, will not smoke, overeat, drink or take drugs, because it shows ungratefulness for God's gift of life.

**"Don't you know that you yourselves are God's Temple and that God's spirit lives in you?"**

*1 Corinthians 2:16*

Jesus showed in his actions and teaching that all people should be valued.

**"Love your neighbour as yourself."** *Mark 12:31*

**"A new commandment I give to you : love one another as I have loved you."** *John 13:34*

Christians believe that when considering issues on life and death such as abortion, genetic engineering, embryo technology, contraception, euthanasia, suicide and life support, their belief in the sanctity of life should influence their decisions.

# SUICIDE

Suicide - a person intentionally ends his or her own life. In the UK over 5000 people kill themselves each year. Suicide drastically affects families and friends left behind. Men are 3 times more likely to commit suicide. Suicide rate among young people is rising. People sometimes attempt suicide but hope they will be discovered before they die - this is called a "cry for help".

## Main reasons for committing suicide:

1. Depression, schizophrenia or other mental illness.
2. Serious difficulties coping with life, e.g. drink, drugs, money - the person cannot see any other solution.
3. Bereavement: a loved one dies and someone feels they cannot carry on without them.
4. Bullying: someone feels so insecure and frightened they would rather be dead.
5. Old age: a person is unable to live independently and feels it would be better if death came more quickly.
6. Serious or incurable illness, or someone is in so much pain or is deteriorating quickly, they would rather die with dignity than let it drag on.
7. Pressure: they feel they are not living up to other people's expectations

**Christian attitudes to suicide** : In the past, the Church taught that suicide was a serious sin; suicides were not allowed a Christian funeral, or buried in holy ground. Survivors were severely punished. They believed it showed a deliberate rejection of God's gift of life.

Today, the Church has changed. Much more is known about depression, stress, grief and other causes of suicide. Instead of condemning victims, the Church tries to understand, and support the relatives. Most Christians believe it is wrong to commit suicide, but understand why people try it. The right response to suicide is to be loving and forgiving. People should be helped, not condemned.

## Christian arguments against suicide:

1. God chooses when we are born and when we die, not us.
2. Pain, loneliness or depression might be for a reason: Christians believe that by suffering they become closer to God, and share in the suffering of Christ. They believe God sometimes allows suffering so we can learn. Suicide is a refusal to learn the things that God is trying to teach.
3. Suicide is selfish: it causes much pain to those left behind. They may blame themselves. It is harder to get over the death of a suicide, than someone killed in an accident.
4. **"You shall not kill"**. Suicide is murder of yourself.
5. **"Don't you know that you are the temple of God?" 1 Corinthians 3:16**  
Christians have a responsibility to look after and respect their bodies, because God lives in them.

### A Christian responses to suicide: The Samaritans

Christians might support the Samaritans. Started by Christians but open to anyone. Provides confidential emotional support to anyone who needs it, in the hope of preventing suicide. Increases public awareness of suicide and depression, so that people will be more understanding and better able to help others.



**Started:** 1953 **By whom?** The Rev. Chad Varah, Church of England vicar. **Where?** London.

**Why?** He was the vicar at the funeral of a 14 year old girl who had committed suicide. She had her 1<sup>st</sup> period, but did not know what was happening. She thought she had a disease, but had no one to talk to. Chad Varah was upset, and felt there was a need for an organisation where people could talk about their problems in confidence.

**When it is available?** Any time, day or night, 365 days of the year.

**How does it operate?** A network of volunteers on the end of a telephone or e-mail.

**What do the volunteers do?** They do not give advice or tell the caller what to do. They listen and help the caller to work out their own solutions. Volunteers are from any background or religion, but can not express their own opinions or beliefs to a caller. They work voluntarily, and this saves £10,000,000 a year.

**Where are they now?** Branches all over the country, overseas, drop in centres for people who want to talk face-to-face, email service, telephone lines.

### **Why would a Christian support the Samaritans?**

Not a Christian organisation now, but Christians might support the Samaritans because:

1. It is a good way of putting into practise their beliefs about the sanctity of life.
2. It is a good way of showing agape, unconditional love, to those who need it.

Some Christians become Samaritans volunteers as a way of putting their Christian beliefs into action, or might raise funds, donate money, etc.

## EUTHANASIA

**Euthanasia** - "A good death" - from the Greek "eu" meaning good, and "thanatos" meaning death.

Euthanasia is related to suicide because people choose how and when a human life should end, either their own or someone else who is unable to make the choice.

**Difference between euthanasia and suicide:** Euthanasia involves more than 1 person. Someone else is needed to perform the killing, provide drugs, or withhold life-saving treatment because someone is unable to commit suicide on their own.

**Voluntary Euthanasia:** "Assisted suicide": Someone chooses to end their life but needs help to commit suicide.

**Involuntary euthanasia** - Other people decide it is best if someone's life ends, because s/he can not make that decision. E.g. they have been in a coma for a very long time.

**Active euthanasia** - Action is taken to bring a life to an end, e.g. a lethal dose of drugs is given.

**Passive euthanasia** - Decision is made to stop giving treatment, even though death will result. This happens often in hospitals. Many do not accept this as euthanasia, because all you're doing is letting nature take its course.

In 1992 Dr. Nigel Cox was found guilty of attempting to murder a terminally ill patient. Sentenced to 1 year's imprisonment, suspended for twelve months. His patient had been in hideous pain which did not respond to pain killing injections. Dr Cox and the patient's family were devastated by the sentence; they said his action was solely in the dying woman's interests. He was lucky not to be struck off the Register by the Medical Council.

## Euthanasia and the Law

**1961 Suicide Act:** Suicide became legal in UK, but it is still an offence to "aid, abet, counsel or procure" such an act. Anyone who helps to end a life risks being charged with murder or manslaughter.

In some cases, passive euthanasia may be allowed, but permission must first be obtained from the courts. Tony Bland, a teenager injured in Hillsborough 1989, was left in a Persistent Vegetative State. As there was no hope of recovery, the courts gave permission for his life-support machine to be turned off.

However, Voluntary Euthanasia is not permitted in Britain. Diane Pretty, a 43 year old woman with motor neurone disease, asked for legal permission to have help in ending her life. The courts said no, and a moving documentary broadcast after her death showed her last months of agony.

In the Netherlands euthanasia is now legal, from 1.1.2002. For some time the courts in Holland have turned a blind eye to the practice of euthanasia and the law has been changed to acknowledge this - with the majority of the public in full support.

**The Voluntary Euthanasia Society (EXIT)** believes that faced with terminal illness, pain or a useless existence, for which there is no cure, everyone should be able to turn to ".....the mercy of a painless death." They hope that the law will change to allow doctors to end the lives of people who have made it clear, in writing, that this is what they want. As a safeguard, the patient should sign a request to make this possible at least 30 day in advance.

EXIT works to change the law so people can make "Advance Directives" - statements telling others of the patient's wishes, in case they reach a stage when they cannot speak for themselves but want to be allowed to die.

Quality of Life is a main issue. If someone is enjoying happy relationships, can communicate, and is not in unbearable pain, then most people would agree that euthanasia is wrong. But, if the patient cannot communicate or is suffering so much they cannot enjoy life, then some would argue that euthanasia might be the best option.

### Arguments FOR Voluntary Euthanasia

1. Can quickly and humanely end a patient's suffering, allowing them to die with dignity.
2. Can help to shorten the grief and suffering of the patient's loved ones.
3. Everyone has the right to decide how they should die.
4. Most people would have their pets put down if they were suffering - this would be regarded as kindness. Why can't the same kindness be given to humans?

### Arguments AGAINST voluntary euthanasia

1. Many pain killing drugs can now help a patient die with dignity.
2. A dying patient may not be able to make a rational decision.
3. A patient may have said they want euthanasia when they were nowhere near death; however, when faced with death they may change their mind but be incapable of telling anyone.
4. Many people recover after being "written off" by doctors.
5. Euthanasia makes life disposable - it could be the first step on a slippery slope.
6. Hippocratic Oath: doctors must try to preserve life. If euthanasia was legalised, the relationship of trust between doctors and patients can be destroyed.
7. If there were better facilities for caring for dying, there would be less need for euthanasia.
8. People might be pushed into saying they want euthanasia by relatives who do not want to look after them.

## Euthanasia raises some awkward questions for Christians...

- Is euthanasia sinful, or merciful and loving?
- If God decides whether we live or die, are we "playing God" just as much by healing people as by quickening their deaths?

### How might Christians respond to euthanasia?

#### Some Christians would support euthanasia.

- God is love. Christianity is love and compassion. Keeping someone in pain and suffering is not loving, it is evil. Euthanasia can be the most loving action, and the best way of putting agape love into practice.
- Humans were given dominion over all living things by God (*Genesis 1:28*), i.e. we can choose for ourselves.
- Jesus came so that people could have life "in all its fullness" *John 10:10*: this means quality of life. If someone has no quality of life, then euthanasia could be good.
- God gave humans free will. We should be allowed to use free will to decide when our lives end.
- "Do to others as you would have them do to you". How would you want to be treated?
- **For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven: a time to be born, and a time to die.** *Ecclesiastes 3:1-4*

#### Other Christians are against euthanasia. They argue it is dangerous to make euthanasia legal.

1. "Thou shall not kill". It is wrong to take away God's sacred gift of human life.
2. "God made man in his own image" *Genesis 1:27* - human life is a sacred gift from God.
3. "God gives and God takes away" *Job 1:21*, not us!
4. "Don't you know that you are the temple of God?" *1 Corinthians 3:16-17*
5. Jesus healed the sick and dying, he did not kill them. Christians have a duty to help others who are suffering, not kill them.
6. Humans have a responsibility to use God's gifts to the full, not end it! Suicide denies our responsibilities to our neighbours, society, family, etc..
7. Everyone is created by God and offered salvation through Christ - killing is always wrong.
8. Killing a life opposes God's love for that person.

Christian beliefs about life after death may affect the way Christians think about suicide and euthanasia. They believe that after death they shall be judged and then enter heaven or hell. Some Christians argue that God would be merciful and understanding with someone who has taken their life.

Others say that a person will have to account for their deeds at the judgment. People may think they are acting for the best, but are in fact doing something which God disapproves of.

Christians may find themselves in a difficult situation. They may be stuck between their Christian beliefs that euthanasia is wrong, and their love for someone dying painfully of a terminal illness.

**Macmillan Nurses** - Special nurses who visit patients and their families in Hospices and at home. Trained to care for the terminally ill. The patient sees a familiar face rather than different nursing shift every day.

Christians may support the Hospice movement and Macmillan nurses by:

- Raising money, goods, or other necessary items.
- Volunteering to do work at the Hospice.
- Working in a charity shop which gives its proceeds to the Hospice.

Other Christians choose to spend their lives working in Hospices or train as Macmillan nurses.

### The Roman Catholic Church

1. Totally against euthanasia. Any act which deliberately brings about death is the same as murder.
2. Does accept using pain killing drugs which are meant to relieve pain, but may shorten someone's life.
3. "Ordinary" treatments, e.g. feeding a patient must always continue, but "Extraordinary" treatments such as a complicated operation that is unlikely to succeed need not be given.

Euthanasia is always wrong, but it is also wrong to keep a patient alive at any cost. People should be allowed to die, but only when nature, or God, decides.

**'Euthanasia is a grave violation of the law of God'** *Pope John Paul II, 1995*

**The Church of England** has been involved in discussions about euthanasia for 30 years, and has reported:

- Sanctity of Life is very important, but doctors should not have to keep people alive for the sake of it, regardless of the quality of life.
- Making the old and the ill feel wanted and valuable is more important.
- Church should do all it can to make the elderly feel important members of society.

**God himself has given to humankind the gift of life. As such, it is to be revered and cherished. Those who become vulnerable through illness or disability deserve special care and protection. We do not accept that the right to personal autonomy requires any change in the law in order to allow euthanasia.**

*Church of England 1999*

**Baptist Church** is generally against euthanasia. All human life is sacred and worth preserving. Euthanasia is similar to abortion, and raises the same issues - whether people have the right to take away human life.

Baptists agree that when a person is brain dead and experts agree there is no chance of recovery, then it is acceptable to stop treatment and allow the patient to die naturally.

Baptists do not agree with actions that make death come more quickly, e.g. a lethal dose of drugs.

### Methodist Church

"We need to provide better care for the dying rather than kill them off 'early.'" Methodist Conference 1974

"I sincerely believe that those who come after us will wonder why on earth we kept a human being alive against his will, when all the dignity, beauty and meaning of life had vanished; when any gain to anyone was clearly impossible and when we should have been punished by the state if we had kept an animal in similar conditions." *Dr. Leslie Weatherhead (leader of the Methodist church)*

**Hospice Movement** The strongest argument against euthanasia. Hospices help people to die with dignity.

### The aim of the Hospice Movement

Care and support for patients, relatives and friends at the most difficult stage in their lives.

1. Relieve pain - whether caused by the illness or by the stress and fear it creates. Hospices specialise in pain control and lead the way in palliative medicine (pain control by drugs). They say all pain, no matter how severe, can be brought under control.
2. Enable patients, families and friends to face up to death by allowing them to talk a free and open way. This is one of the main facilities offered by Hospices.
3. Care for the emotional needs of relatives - before, during and after the patient's death. In most hospitals, the needs relatives are largely ignored. Hospices seeks to fulfil those needs.



### How did the Hospice Movement begin?

**Late 1900s:** A group of Irish nuns, Sisters of Charity, set up a home in Dublin to care for the dying.

**1900:** 5 of the nuns travel to the East End of London and continue the work.

**1967:** Cecily Saunders, a nurse, helped to create St. Joseph's Hospice in London, 1 of the most famous.

**Now:** 100+ hospices in England. At any one time, they care for 2000+ patients.

Hospices are not just for Christians, and not everyone who works there is a Christian. They do not try to make anyone believe in God, but provide opportunities to talk to ministers / priests if the patient wants.

Hospices support relatives, even after the patient has died. Some Hospices are for children, with facilities for children and families, with play areas, gardens, and rooms for brothers and sisters to stay.