Religious Traditions and Aid in Dying
By Rev. Madison Shockley

The majority of religious traditions regarding aid in dying have an unsurprising consensus that leans against any ecclesiastical endorsement of the practice. It is also clear that many individual churches, clergy, lay leaders and members struggle mightily to balance their visceral inclination for aid in dying with their commitment to theological purity. Certainly death and dying is one of the most important theological categories of any faith. Particularly, how a given tradition understands what happens to us after we die has a great impact on how that tradition might view aid in dying.

The premise for many religions, of course, is that life is a gift from God and that we belong to God, and therefore we presume upon God to take the life that is God’s gift. This is most clear in the case of murder. The murderer not only takes the life of an individual, but also takes a life that was given by God. It is not much of a leap from there to understand that we do not even have such a prerogative regarding our own lives, inasmuch as while they are our lives to live, they remain a gift of God to us. When that life is coming to an end, do we have any spiritual authority to hasten that ending? Is it ours only to remain still and silent in the face of unrelenting pain and suffering? These are the questions with which a contemporary theology must deal to be of much use to the adherents of its faith.
The official position of the Roman Catholic Church is that aid in dying is killing a human being. Even an act of omission to cause death violates divine law and offends the dignity of the human person. Because of its size, historical dominance and hierarchical discipline, the Roman Catholic position has had the greatest impact on our culture at large. The other various religious traditions do however give us a glimpse of what a more nuanced approach might yield.

Next in size, though not a hierarchical discipline, is the Baptist Church. For them, aid in dying violates their understanding of the sanctity of life. There is no distinction and no quarter for compassion; it is a hard bright line between God’s prerogative and the human prerogative.

In Islam assisted dying is forbidden. Physicians must not take active measures to terminate a patient’s life. The Koran states, “… take not life that Allah has made sacred, otherwise than in the course of justice.”

Judaism teaches that suicide is an offense against the deity who is the author of life. Conservative and reformed leaders have called for an expanded discussion of end-of-life issues but have not issued official positions. Judaism places the highest importance on the palliation of pain, particularly in the case of terminally ill patients.

The Orthodox Church has a very strong pro-life stance, which in part expresses itself in opposition to doctrinal advocacy of euthanasia.

Unitarian Universalists advocated aid in dying before any other religious community. They passed a national resolution in 1988 affirming the right of terminally ill patients to control their end of life. Characterized by a wide diversity of backgrounds and beliefs, Unitarian Universalists support self-determination in dying as well as legislation to protect the right to die according to one’s own choice.

Buddhists are not unanimous in their view of aid in dying. There was some tolerance exhibited by the Buddha himself in regard to the parable of the three monks Channa, Godhika and Vakkali. When presented with each case of a monk suffering unbearably, the Buddha confirms the decision of each to “take the knife.” Buddhist scholars are at pains to explain that the Buddha’s affirmation only pertained to the highest order of monk who would not experience rebirth. For any unenlightened person, the suffering they experience in this life would carry over—and even be magnified by this act—into their next life. For the unenlightened, death is not an end of life but a transition to another life.

The Buddhist discussion of aid in dying is not different than the nuanced theology of scholars in almost every tradition that struggles with the question. Often a lack of distinction in language causes the discussion to devolve to suicide because we have not allowed other terminology a place in the conversation. The control of language is very important. Aid in dying is the term of art I believe connotes an act that does not change or presume upon divine prerogative, but functions more like a midwife to death.

Some Hindus say that by helping to end a painful life,
a person is performing a good deed and so fulfilling their moral obligations. Other Hindus believe it to be bad karma to participate in or request aid in dying, and that it will show up in your next life. Thus, we find support in their tradition for both behaviors.

The National Association of Evangelicals opposes aid in dying, yet it believes that in cases where patients are terminally ill, death appears imminent and treatment offers no medical hope for a cure, it is morally appropriate to request the withdrawal of life-support systems and allow natural death to occur. In such cases, efforts should be made to keep the patient free of pain and suffering, with emotional and spiritual support being offered until the patient dies.

In a 1992 statement on end-of-life matters from the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA), the church council declared its support for what they termed passive euthanasia. Healthcare professionals are not required to use all available medical treatment in all circumstances. Medical treatment may be limited in some instances and death allowed to occur. They oppose active euthanasia, deliberately destroying life created in the image of God, and consider it contrary to Christian conscience. However, they do acknowledge that physicians struggle to choose the lesser evil in some situations, as in severe unrelenting pain, which can make life indistinguishable from torture.

In the United Church of Christ, several resolutions have come before the General Synod to study and affirm aid in dying. There is great sympathy in that direction within the church. But because of its decentralized nature, the pronouncement is advisory but does give guidance to be considered the voice of the church.

For many mainline clergy and congregations, physician-assisted dying is something they would support quite strongly. Many of the mainline denominations are also moving in that direction. The first step is honestly struggling to reconcile their visceral compassion with their intellectual and theological teachings. Then we must articulate a clear and compelling theology of compassion that can rival the historic leanings against any suggestions that human beings, having become drunk with medical prowess, would now presume upon the divine prerogative to determine the end of one’s life.

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