

Euthanasia and the Good Death

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The arrival of the Greens as a real political force in Australia has meant, among other things, that euthanasia is going to be promoted in Australian parliaments, both state and federal. Like all evils, euthanasia is presented to us in a good light. The word literally means ‘good death’, and is invariably portrayed in terms of ‘mercy killing’. Dr Peter Baume, a medical professor and a former Liberal senator, has argued: ‘We do not let dogs and horses suffer as we allow humans to suffer.’ Phrased like that, euthanasia seems the only compassionate thing to do, but in reality it is all reminiscent of the serpent in the garden who promised Eve wisdom but only delivered sin and misery.

It is already every person’s common law right to refuse any medical treatment (except for food and fluids), and doctors may not provide treatment without express consent. For example, it is not euthanasia for a cancer patient who is very ill to refuse any more chemotherapy. What is being demanded now is much more than the right to refuse treatment; it is the right for someone else to kill you. The Bible’s answer to this is clear: ‘You shall not murder’ (Ex.20:13). When the emotionally drained Elijah asked for death, God twice refused his request (1 Kings 19). It is God who has appointed a time for us to die (Heb.9:27). Our bodies are not our own to do with them as we will (1 Cor.6:19 20). At the basis of the push for euthanasia is humanism. It is inevitable that those who hate God love death (Prov.8:36). The Christian has the promises of the Lord to uphold those who trust Him, even in old age (Psalm 71; Isa.46:3 4). The wearing out of the body can go hand in hand with spiritual growth (2 Cor.4:16). An old and incapacitated person, for example, may have a valuable prayer ministry, and we have seen no greater example of that in recent times than the final years of J. Graham Miller. Even on his death bed, he maintained his practice of praying through a list of hundreds of people.

At its most benign, the call for euthanasia is still beguiling and dangerous. Dr Linda Mayer has recently recorded her experiences: ‘During my early medical post-graduate years I was a strong supporter of end-of-life patient requests for euthanasia. Now, in my middle years, with more wisdom and having worked for more than 20 years in government health facilities, I am quite sure no amount of safety nets, protocols or regulations would protect patients from deleterious personality types that are not uncommon within the various professions. Even one life ended by use of medical misappropriation, deception or abuse of power should remain unacceptable.’

Geoffrey Robertson, a lawyer who is hardly media-shy, has assured us all that safeguards are effective against abuse. Not even the Sydney Morning Herald believes him. On 21 September 2010 it warned against chasing the Greens’ rainbows of ‘highly contentious measures with dangerous and unpredictable consequences.’ It made the realistic and common-sense assessment that ‘The measure could be abused in obvious ways by greedy or indifferent relatives, or by bureaucrats running a health system which is short of funds.’

Holland and Belgium have lived with euthanasia – if we can put it like that – for long enough to know that abuses have become the norm. A well-known case in the USA concerned Terri Schiavo who was finally starved to death in a Florida hospital over 30-31 March 2005. The

next day her husband, Michael, claimed the insurance which would not have been his had he divorced her. The whole event was a media circus – worse than usual – and has left a bitter legacy. Her parents, brother and sister have asserted, with good reason: ‘We believe that Terri was nothing less than the victim of judicial murder.’ The legal and medical professions are supposed to maintain as much justice and healthy well-being as is possible in a fallen world, but the Terri Schiavo case revealed new depths of human callousness. Five years after Terri’s death – or murder – Fox’s TV show, The Family Guy ran a sketch titled ‘Terri Schiavo: The Musical’ where she was mocked as a vegetable.

We have become increasingly insensitive and foolish in all this. There is a deep perversion and a determined death push at work today. The oft-quoted statistic that 85% of Australians favour euthanasia was in answer to the loaded question, carried out in a phone poll: ‘If a hopelessly ill patient, experiencing unrelievable suffering, with absolutely no chance of recovering asks for a lethal dose, should a doctor be allowed to provide a lethal dose, or not?’ A good statistician knows how to get what he wants. The euthanasia lobby actually provide ammunition against their own cause. In March 1999 a cancer patient named June Burns was used in political advertisements to advocate euthanasia. On television, she fought back tears and pleaded for people to end her suffering. All this was financed by the Voluntary Euthanasia Society of NSW. However, by the end of the year she had unexpectedly recovered a fair measure of health, and wanted to go on living. She only died in November 2007.

Choose life, for God is the God of life.

With warmest regards in Christ,