

'In the Midst of Life we are in Death': Christian Perspectives on the Meaning of Death and Life in the Assisted Dying Debate

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This article lays out key aspects of the Christian understanding of death and dying, in order to cast new light on contested issues in the assisted dying debate.

Specification links:

AQA AS Component 1: Philosophy of Religion and Ethics, Section B: Ethics and religion

AQA A2 Component 1: Philosophy of Religion and Ethics, Section B: Ethics and religion

EDEXCEL Paper 2, Option 6: Medical Ethics, 1.b: Assisted dying, euthanasia, palliative care. Religious and secular contributions to all these issues, legal position, concepts of rights and responsibilities, personhood and human nature, options and choices

OCR, Section 3: Applied Ethics

SQA Component 1: Morality and Belief

WJEC Unit 2, Section A: An Introduction to Religion and Ethics

A house built on bones

In 2008, John Inge, his wife Denise and their two children moved into a house next to Worcester Cathedral. John had just been appointed the Church of England's Bishop of Worcester, and the property was set aside for the bishop to live in. The house, however, had one unusual feature: it was built on the

foundations of a charnel house. During the medieval period, hundreds of people who had died were laid to rest there, with a priest living on site to pray for the souls of those around him. Fascinatingly, the medieval bones remained underneath the Inge's new house, accessible through a trapdoor (Inge, 2014a).

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What would it be like, I found myself wondering when I heard this story, to live with such a physical reminder of death literally below your feet? This proximity to death is far from normal in our modern world: the recent growth in direct cremations (a cremation without a funeral service, which formed 20% of all funerals in 2023) brings many of us into even less regular physical contact with death.

Yet death remains an unavoidable reality, and one which touches on the entire question of how we are to live. Indeed, the Christian theologian Rowan Williams describes the overall task of the church as being twofold: to help people to pray and to help them to die. And, he continues, the two are deeply connected, since both concern how we learn to orient ourselves towards God and the world (Evans and Davison, 2014, p. 33). In other words, the work of dying well is a lifelong task.

Popular ethical discussion about death is currently focused on the question of the legalisation of assisted dying, with heartfelt contributions on both sides. In this article I raise some critical questions about the proposals for legalisation. To do so, however, I first take a step back and consider how mainstream Christian tradition has approached the subject of death more broadly. The widening of our focus to consider the significance of death more broadly helps to come from a different angle at some of the persistent points of controversy in the assisted dying debate. Finally, I briefly point to how this approach is in keeping with new methodological approaches being adopted in theological ethics, approaches that avoid some of the limitations of deontological and/or consequentialist frameworks. Overall, this way of thinking is well represented by the quotation in the title of this essay, itself a line from the historic Book of Common Prayer funeral

service of the Church of England. Far from being morbid, such sentiments reflect the interconnectedness of life and death – of our own and of others – that are central to the well-lived life.

The historic Christian approach to death

A first aspect of the Christian approach to death has been to recognise that it is a moment that requires emotional, mental and spiritual preparation – not just for the dying person, but for the whole community. During the fifteenth century, *Ars moriendi* (that is 'the art of dying') literature offered text and simple images to instruct individuals on the behaviours to show and prayers to pray in their final hours. In modern times, the modern hospice movement, providing palliative care for the terminally ill, has sought to accomplish a similar goal. This movement was launched by Cicely Saunders in 1967 and animated by her Christian commitments. The first children's hospice in the UK, Helen House in Oxford, was founded in 1982 by an Anglican religious order, the All Saints' Sisters of the Poor. One striking aspect of hospice care is that while its professionals do seek to alleviate physical suffering, such as through skilled use of pain medication, they are also strongly oriented towards supporting the dying and their loved ones through the emotional and spiritual challenge of death – for example in saying goodbye, giving thanks for past joys and offering forgiveness for past hurts. (The secular writer and palliative care specialist Kathryn Mannix movingly describes her work as being a 'death midwife': it mirrors the physical and emotional support offered by a midwife to a woman in labour (Mannix, 2017, pp. 7-8).) The dying person needs to be helped through this process. But so too do the friends

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and family of that individual, as they prepare for the forthcoming tear in their web of relationships.

Second, while recognising the significance of death as an ending, Christians have viewed the dead as remaining part of their community. While the Romans buried their dead outside the city walls, Christians placed the dead inside cities, immediately around their churches. They called those places 'cemeteries', from the Latin word *coemeterium*, meaning 'sleeping place' or 'dormitory'. The dead were not 'dead and gone': they remained part of the community. Visit almost any country church today, and many older city churches, and you will see the same pattern: you cannot enter the church without passing through the graveyard. And this burial practice reflects the Christian belief that death is not the end. The Nicene Creed of 325CE, accepted by almost all churches as a definition of orthodox belief, ends by stating: 'We believe in the resurrection of the dead, and the life of the world to come'. Christ's resurrection, in other words, is a mere foretaste of the new life with God that humanity will one day enjoy. Death is, in this view, not a failure (as seems the assumption in, for example, current Silicon Valley interest in 'extreme longevity' research that seeks medical advances to end aging). Rather, in the Christian view, death is an inevitable aspect of created human existence. And it is not the end of the story: rather, death is like the cliffhanger at the end of chapter one of a good book: we know the story will continue, though we struggle to say quite how.

Third, while holding to hope in the resurrection, Christians have affirmed both the pain and the importance of grief when facing death. When he came to the grave of his friend Lazarus, we are told

that 'Jesus wept' (John 11:35). One popular reading at funerals today downplays the significance of death with the lines, 'Death is nothing at all. It does not count. I have only slipped away into the next room.' And yet this is precisely the opposite of what the original author of those lines intended to communicate. For these words come from the sermon given by Henry Scott Holland at the funeral of King Edward VII. Holland described that view only to depict how it fails to stand up to the pain and dislocation of death, the 'king of terrors', in the face of which we might view 'all we do here as meaningless and empty' (Holland, 1910). Even in 1910, at a time when Victorian wariness about undue emotion (a wariness that continues in portions of British society) was at its height, Holland could not but recognise the raw pain of grief. 'Grief is the price we pay for love', said Queen Elizabeth II to families of the 9/11 victims. Grief, in Christian thought, acknowledges the imperfection of the created order while trusting in the enduring love of God.

Dying well in modern culture

This represents a very brief laying out of a traditional Christian framework – a conjunction of belief and practice, of intellectual understanding and emotional response – for understanding death. It is centred, certainly, on moments of death – and yet its assumption is that death is something that people at all stages of life should keep in mind if they are to live well.

Such broad reflections on death and dying may seem somewhat distant from the more focused questions that surround the assisted dying debate. Yet encoded within the views of both proponents and opponents of assisted dying are particular beliefs about the meaning of death and life, and about the relationship of the individual and the community – and

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consideration of the Christian tradition helps to set these other beliefs in sharper relief.

Debates over assisted dying often take the form of a competing rights-based appeal to the concept of 'dignity': does the dignity due to a dying person demand their ability to choose to end their life (the prominent campaign group 'Dignity in Dying' base their title on this position)? Or does (as the Vatican recently argued forcefully) every human being possess an 'inalienable dignity' which can never rightly be ended by human choice? (*Dignitas infinita*, 2024). The focus easily comes to lie on the decisions that might be made by the individual person. And yet the Christian understanding of personhood is that, as John Donne so memorably put it, 'no man is an island': we are bound in relationship to one another, both in the church as the 'body of Christ' and globally as a common humanity created by God. Many people facing old age and death express concern about being a 'burden' to loved ones: the Christian commitment to the gift of relationship, and of our inseparable connections, might well look to question the force of such a concern.

What is more, recalling the Christian tradition of *Ars moriendi* may help us recall the importance of how we narrate our own death, and the stories we tell as a society about how to die. The Christian ethicist Michael Banner refers to these stories as the 'scripts' we have for death. And, he argues, many arguments for assisted dying seek to create a new script for those affected by conditions such as cancer, with a moment of death that can be (roughly) anticipated. Yet, he observes, only about 20% of deaths result from such conditions; about twice as many are tied up with the slow debility of conditions such as dementia and Alzheimer's (Banner, 2014, p. 118). And it

is surely these latter situations that many of us fear most for ourselves and our loved ones: we fear (with more or less knowledge) what it might be like to live with such a condition; we fear for its toll (emotional and otherwise) on those close to the patient; we live within a wider societal script that this is a period of mental and physical 'dwindling' from the truest self that this person was at the peak of adulthood (Banner, 2014, p. 108).

On a wider scale, the refusal of multiple governments to find a long-term solution to the cost of social care reflects a similar lack of a 'script' for the implications of this new reality for how many of us will spend a not-insignificant percentage of our lives, which impacts on the dominant narrative that economic productivity is the highest good.

Christian theology offered one framework for how to approach death with its particular combination of grief and hope; our modern secular society has struggled to agree on an alternative.

Contemplating death in order to live

Inspired by her experience of living above a charnel house, Denise Inge began to write a book on the subject. She visited numerous similar sites across Europe, writing a memoir which is at the same time a meditation on the meaning of life and death. However, as she completed the book, aged only 50, she was diagnosed with incurable cancer. The book was published after her death (Inge, 2014a). Her approach is summed up by her lines, shaped by her Christian faith, that '[c]ontemplating mortality is not about being prepared to die, it is about being prepared to live' (Inge, 2014b). Her story is, to my mind, a living-out of the Christian commitment that true life is found in an appropriate awareness of death.

Ethical debates are sometimes

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conducted according to familiar principles; most famously, in the way that deontological and consequentialist approaches come into tension with one another. And yet ethics is fundamentally concerned with enquiry into the shape of the good life. In some circumstances this may be better approached not through philosophical principles but through a 'thick' description of the whole situation – in Michael Banner's case, for example,

by an ethnographic enquiry into death and dying.

As with the example above of assisted dying, this approach rarely yields simple answers. Yet it recognises the situational nature and cultural-conditionedness of all ethical enquiry into human life, and it brings us back to the bigger questions that may have become neglected in our focus on a specific ethical issue.

Glossary

consequentialist ethics: the ethical approach – most famously represented by utilitarianism – that what is right is whatever makes the world best in the future.

deontological ethics: the ethical approach that judges whether actions are right or wrong according to a set of rules (*deon* is Greek for 'duty'), as opposed to on the consequences of those actions.

Internet links

<http://www.dignityindying.org.uk/>
(Campaign for Dignity in Dying)
<https://www.churchtimes.co.uk/articles/2024/19-april/features/features/the-bishop-s-house-built-on-bones> (Pat Ashworth, 'The Bishop's house built on bones', *Church Times*, 19 April 2024)

https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_dcf doc_20240402_dignitas-infinita_en.html (The Roman Catholic Declaration, *Dignitas infinita*, 'On Human Dignity')

Discussion points

1. What meanings of death and life are encoded within your own cultural (national, local, familial) settings? At what points do these meanings come into tension with your own intuitions around assisted dying?
2. In what ways can consideration of broader traditions and behaviours help ethicists to respond to specific ethical conundrums?

References and further reading

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- Inge, Denise (2014a). *A tour of bones: Facing fear and looking for life*. London: Bloomsbury Continuum.
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