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A Comparative Study of Religious Perspective on Euthanasia: Mercy Killing

ABSTRACT

Euthanasia, commonly known as Mercy Killing or Assisted Suicide of the terminally ill, has been one of the oft-debated issues regarding bioethics all over the world. This research article analyses how major religions of the world particularly Islam, Christianity, Judaism, Buddhism and Hinduism see the practice of Euthanasia that has resulted from the advancement of biotechnology. Based on references from religious books and some of the most prominent studies carried out on the subject of euthanasia so far, this study is a comparative analysis of religious perspective on Mercy Killing.

Key Words: Euthanasia, Mercy Killing, Assisted Suicide, Bioethics, Terminally ill.

Introduction

Euthanasia is a term used for mercy killing, that is, taking the life of the terminally ill to end their suffering. The word euthanasia literally 'a good death' is a combination of two Greek words *eu*, meaning well or good, and *thanatos*, meaning death. Its two major types include active and passive forms of euthanasia, which depend on the manner an incurable patient dies. For instance, withdrawing or withholding the life-prolonging treatment from the patients is known as passive euthanasia because death results from a lack of positive action. Active euthanasia or mercy killing, on the other hand is described as the intentional killing of a terminal patient with mercy as a motive. Assisted suicide is also a kind of active euthanasia. Euthanasia is further divided into three types: voluntary, non-voluntary and involuntary. Voluntary euthanasia is performed with the consent of the hopelessly ill person. Non-voluntary euthanasia occurs where the patient lacks the capacity to express an opinion. In case of involuntary euthanasia the person concerned is unwilling. The last form of euthanasia is a kind of homicide or genocide as was the case with Nazi regime which wiped out a whole section of society in the name of getting rid of incompetent members. The modern euthanasia movement began in the 1960s and 1970s with the introduction of life-prolonging medical science. According to Briggs statistical evidence also supports the popular perception that some doctors do sometimes engage in excessive treatment to prolong the lives of the terminally ill. As a result, recent years have seen repeated calls for legal reform to permit euthanasia and assisted death.¹ Torr observes that the liberals support the idea of right to die for the terminally ill. The right-to-die movement is primarily a response to what they call "the onslaught of medical technology"—the fear many people have that their death will be unnaturally prolonged by the use of invasive, unwanted medical treatments.² All the major religions including Islam, Christianity, Judaism, Buddhism and Hinduism reject outright the practice of euthanasia. Islam considers Euthanasia a form of suicide when it is voluntary and a murder when it is non-voluntary. The Qur'an clearly forbids killing except for justice:

وَلَا تَقْتُلُوا أَنْفُسَكُمْ الَّتِي حَرَّمَ اللَّهُ إِلَّا بِالْحَقِّ

¹ Hazel Biggs. *Euthanasia, death with dignity and the Law*. (Oxford-Portland Oregon Hart Publishing, 2001), 9.

² James Torr, D., ed. *Health Care: Opposing Viewpoints*. (San Diego, California Greenhaven Press, Incorporated, 2000), 74.

Nor take life - which Allah has made sacred - except for just cause.³ Both Christianity and Judaism prohibit killing in any form as Torr quotes the biblical commandment: 'Thou shalt not kill.'⁴ Buddhist scripture and tradition, like most religions, hold suicide and euthanasia are forms of murder.⁵ One school of thought in Hinduism believes that the doctor should not accept a patient's request for euthanasia as the soul and body will be separated at an unnatural time.⁶

Euthanasia is no more just a religious issue it has emerged as a social and political problem so different nations are trying to tackle it on humanitarian and legal grounds. This article presents a comparative study of mercy killing drawing on material from religious scriptures and other important studies carried out on this issue so far.

A Comparative Analysis of Religious Views on Euthanasia

Each religion has a set of bioethics. To understand the religious point of view on Euthanasia or Mercy Killing it is important to study how different religions see these end-of-life issues.

Islam and Euthanasia

There is no room for euthanasia in Islam. According to the Quran it is Allah who decides how long each of us has to live. As the Quranic words are:

فَإِذَا جَاءَ أَجَلُهُمْ لَا يَسْتَحْضِرُونَ سَاعَةً وَلَا يَسْتَقْدِرُونَ ﴿١٠١﴾

When their Term expires, they would not be able to delay for a single hour, just as they would not be able to anticipate it (for a single hour).⁷ Nobody can die without Allah's permission. The Quran says:

وَمَا كُنَّا لِنَقْصِرَ أَنْ تَمُوتَ إِلَّا بِإِذْنِ اللَّهِ كَتَبْنَا مُرَجَلًا

³ *The Holy Quran*.17:33 English Translation of the Meanings by Abdullah Yusuf Ali. From a version revised by the Presidency of Islamic Researches, IFTA, Call and Guidance. Formatting by William B. Brown. EBook. (Published and Printed by the King Fahd Holy Quran Printing Complex, 1987), 133.

⁴ Torr, ed. *Health Care: Opposing Viewpoints*.12.

⁵ James Hughes, "Buddhist bioethics." *Principles of health care ethics* 2 (John Wiley & Sons, Ltd, 2007), 129.

⁶ Namita Nimbalkar. "Euthanasia: The Hindu Perspective." (In *National Seminar on Bio Ethics*, pp. 24-25. 2007), 56.

⁷ *"The Holy Quran."* 16:61. Translated by Abdullah Yusuf Ali. From a version revised by the Presidency of Islamic Researches, IFTA, Call and Guidance. Formatting by William B. Brown EBook. (Published and Printed by the King Fahd Holy Quran Printing Complex, 1987), 127.

Nor can a soul die except by Allah's leave, the term being fixed as by writing.⁸ Islam categorically forbids suicide or voluntary form of euthanasia and sees no mercy in non-voluntary form. The Quranic injunction in this connection is:

وَلَا تَقْتُلُوا أَنْفُسَكُمْ إِنَّ اللَّهَ كَانَ بِكُمْ رَحِيمًا ﴿٦٩﴾

Nor kill (or destroy) yourselves: for verily Allah hath been to you Most Merciful!⁹ Islam considers life sacred therefore it guides to protect and uphold its sanctity as a blessing of Allah. Quran explicitly forbids killing in the Holy verse:

مَنْ قَتَلَ نَفْسًا بِغَيْرِ نَفْسٍ أَوْ فَسَادٍ فِي الْأَرْضِ فَكَأَنَّمَا قَتَلَ
النَّاسَ جَمِيعًا وَمَنْ أَحْيَاهَا فَكَأَنَّمَا أَحْيَا النَّاسَ جَمِيعًا

If any one slew a person - unless it be for murder or for spreading mischief in the land - it would be as if he slew the whole people and if any one saved a life, it would be as if he saved the life of the whole people.¹⁰ Quran further indicates about killing in the verse:

وَمَنْ يَقْتُلْ مُؤْمِنًا مُتَعَمِّدًا فَجَزَاؤُهُ جَهَنَّمُ خَالِدًا
فِيهَا وَغَضِبَ اللَّهُ عَلَيْهِ وَلَعَنَهُ وَأَعَدَّ لَهُ عَذَابًا عَظِيمًا

If a man kills a believer intentionally, his recompense is Hell, to abide therein (For ever): And the wrath and the curse of Allah are upon him, and a dreadful penalty is prepared for him.¹¹ Islam forbids being an accomplice in sin and considers suicide one of the greatest sins. Quran says:

وَلَا تَعَاوَنُوا عَلَى الْإِثْمِ وَالْعُدْوَانِ

Help ye not one another in sin and rancour.¹² Islam does not accept the argument of mercy to take life and nor does it recommend hopelessness.

⁸ Ibid., *The Holy Quran* 3:145-p.30.

⁹ Ibid., *The Holy Quran* 4:29-p. 36.

¹⁰ *The Meaning of The Noble Qur'an*:5:32 Translated by Abdullah Yusuf Ali. (www.pdf-koran.com. 2006) p.70.

¹¹ *The Holy Quran* 4:93-p. 41.

¹² *The Meaning of The Noble Qur'an*:5:2

As Yousuf and Fauzi put it: A Muslim is not supposed to become hopeless nor feel panic when afflicted with any sickness because of his belief in Allah's (s.w.t.) absolute mercy, his faith in destiny and his belief in the Hereafter.¹³ Hadith the second most reliable source of Islamic teachings directs against self destruction through suicide. The Holy Prophet Hazrat Mohammad (Peace be upon him) said: "Amongst the nations before you there was a man who got a wound and growing impatient (with its pain), he took a knife and cut his hand with it and the blood did not stop till he died. Allah said, 'My Slave hurried to bring death upon himself so I have forbidden him (to enter) Paradise'."

The Prophet (Peace be upon Him) has also said that:

قَالَ رَسُولُ اللَّهِ صَلَّى اللَّهُ عَلَيْهِ وَسَلَّمَ: "لَا تُقْتَلُ نَفْسٌ ظَلَمًا إِلَّا كَانَ عَلَى ابْنِ آدَمَ

الْأَوَّلِ كِفْلٌ مِنْ دِمَهِهَا لِأَنَّهُ أَوَّلُ مَنْ سَنَّ الْقَتْلَ"

Whenever a person is murdered unjustly, there is a share from the burden of the crime on the first son of Adam for he was the first to start the tradition of murdering.¹⁴

Narimisa refers to the popular Egyptian scholar Sheikh Yusuf al Qaradawi, who issued a fatwa, or religious ruling, equating euthanasia with murder, but allowing the withholding of treatment that is deemed useless.¹⁵ Shomali quotes two more Muslim jurists who gave their verdict against euthanasia: Ayatollah Khomeini declared that any measure for hastening death of someone is considered a murder. Also Ayatollah Makarim Shirazi declares: Killing a human being even out of mercy (euthanasia) or with the consent of the patient is not allowed.¹⁶ Langrial and Muslim believe that the act of killing in the name of mercy is actually a brutal action and could not be named as so called "Mercy Killing", as in the act of mercy one should try one's best to save life, to provide best treatment, to encourage the patient.¹⁷ Islamic Medical Association of North America (IMANA) opposes euthanasia and assisted suicide in case of terminally ill patients by healthcare providers or by patient's relatives but at the same time does not believe in prolonging the misery of dying

¹³ Mohammad Yousuf Rathor, , and Mohammed Fauzi AR. "Euthanasia and physician-assisted suicide: a review from Islamic point of view." *The International Medical Journal of Malaysia* 11, no. 1 (2012):65.

¹⁴ Sahih Bukhari, 4. 3335.p-133.

¹⁵ Mehran Narimisa. "Euthanasia in Islamic Views." *European Scientific Journal* (2014). 171.

¹⁶ Mohamamd Ali Shomali,. "Islamic bioethics: a general scheme." *Journal of Medical Ethics and History of Medicine* 1 (2008):7.

¹⁷ Altaf Hussain Langrial and Muhammad Muslim. "Legitimacy of Euthanasia (Mercy Killing) : An Islamic Perspective." 44.

patients who are terminally ill or in a persistent vegetative state (PVS). Therefore IMANA recommends that when death becomes inevitable, as determined by a team of physicians, including critical care physicians, the patient should be allowed to die without unnecessary procedures. While all ongoing medical treatments can be continued, no further or new attempts should be made to sustain artificial life support. If the patient is on mechanical support, this can be withdrawn.¹⁸ Islam does not allow any form of euthanasia but permits only withdrawing or withholding life prolonging treatment in case of incurable or hopelessly ill patients that leads to their natural and to some extent painless death. This approach puts an end to all chances of commercial gains and selfish motives in prolonging treatment of the hopelessly ill particularly done at expensive private hospitals.

Christian Views

Christianity does not support active euthanasia as it is treated as a murder and neither does it consider suicide a sensible act. According to Erickson and Bowers, as for passive euthanasia, that is, allowing the incurable person die, by withholding or withdrawing treatment, a larger number of Christians have no ethical objections to it, at least in principle.¹⁹ On the other hand the Church over the period of last fifty or sixty years has had a clear stand on this issue. In 1977 the Church of Scotland issued a statement based on the principle of the sanctity of life: While seeing no virtue in the prolongation of dying we (The General Assembly) are aware of no theological difficulty in allowing a patient in extremis to die naturally, disapprove of the deliberate termination of life, and see the alternatives as 'good terminal care'.²⁰ Lavi explains that for centuries, the deathbed in the Christian world was governed by religion, and euthanasia signified a death blessed by the grace of God. The dying person was encouraged to follow a certain course of behavior on his deathbed, which would constitute a holy way of dying and exemplify a holy way of living.²¹ Huxtable observes that the moral instructions associated with the inviolability of life are most clearly defended in

¹⁸ IMANA Ethics Committee. "Islamic medical ethics: the IMANA perspective." *Journal of the Islamic Medical Association of North America* 37, no. 1 (2005): 36-37.

¹⁹ Millard J. Erickson and Ines E. Bowers. "Euthanasia and Christian Ethics." *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 19 (1976), 15.

²⁰ Euthanasia: A Christian Perspective, accessed on Nov 8, 2016.
http://www.churchofscotland.org.uk/data/assets/pdf_file/0008/3878/euthanasia_book.pdf.

²¹ Shai J. Lavi. *The modern art of dying: A history of euthanasia in the United States*. (Princeton University Press, 2005), 5.

Judaeo-Christian, and particularly Roman Catholic, writings. These deserve serious consideration given their prominence in critical discussions of euthanasia and, as will become apparent, their influence on English law. The central injunction is that the intentional ending of human life is wrong, irrespective of whether this is achieved through action or omission. Why this is wrong can be explained on various theological grounds, including that life is a gift from God, which is for Him alone to dispose of, since we are merely the stewards of our lives.²² Since one of the forms of euthanasia is assisted suicide Gorsuch explains the Christian view about suicide: Though the Bible nowhere explicitly forbids suicide, from its earliest days Christianity taught against the practice. Addressing the question in the fifth century, Augustine argued that intentional self-destruction generally constitutes a violation of the Sixth Commandment: It is not without significance, that in the holy canonical books, no divine precept or permission can be discovered which allows us to bring about our own death, either to obtain immortality or to avert some evil. On the contrary, we must understand the Law of God as forbidding us to do this, where it says, “Thou shalt not kill.”²³ Yount believes that tolerance for suicide ended when Christianity became the dominant religion of the Western world. Although nothing in the Bible explicitly forbids suicide, Judaism condemns it (as does Islam), and such condemnation became part of the doctrine of the early Christians as well. St. Augustine, bishop of Hippo in the early fifth century, expressed the Church’s attitude very plainly when he called suicide a “detestable and damnable wickedness.”²⁴ Christian Life Resources Position Statement on Euthanasia is: God’s Word teaches that human life is to be protected throughout its stages of development, growth, and decline. Unless God has made an allowance for or commanded it to occur, human life is not to be ended actively or passively by anyone.²⁵ Keown observes that:

The moral and legal principle of the sanctity/inviolability of life is often advocated but much less often understood, even by senior judges who claim to uphold it. In Western thought, the development of the principle has owed much to the Judaeo-Christian tradition. That tradition’s doctrine of the sanctity of life holds that human life is created in

²² Richard Huxtable. *Euthanasia, ethics and the law: From conflict to compromise*. (Routledge, 2007), 10-11.

²³ Neil M. Gorsuch. *The future of assisted suicide and euthanasia*. (Princeton University Press, 2006), 25.

²⁴ Lisa Yount. “*Right to die and euthanasia*.” (Facts On File, Inc. An imprint of Infobase Publishing. 2007).6.

²⁵ Christian Life Resources Position Statement. (Adopted by CLR National Congress November 14, 2008), 11.

the image of God and is, therefore, possessed of an intrinsic dignity which entitles it to protection from unjust attack. With or without this theological underpinning, the doctrine that human life possesses an intrinsic dignity grounds the principle that one must never intentionally kill an innocent human being. The ‘right to life’ is essentially a right not to be intentionally killed.²⁶

According to Shuriye Christianity does not sanction suicide, and on the contrary recognizes that through religious rites the complex problems could become lighter. Christians in general are of the opinion that killing be it mercy killing, or self inflicted killing is an atheistic act against the dominant tenets of Christianity.²⁷ Killing hopeless patients or helping them commit suicide both being religiously unwise acts, euthanasia is not a fair option in Christianity. On the other hand creating favourable conditions for the incurable to die naturally and peacefully is highly recommended.

Jewish Views

Judaism, considering life infinitely valuable, does not allow euthanasia. As Halperin explains that the position of Jewish Law is unambiguous. Euthanasia is absolutely prohibited. Any action which actively leads to the ending of a human life is defined as murder. On the other hand, a passive influence – the withholding of an artificial device or procedure that is merely prolonging the ill person’s suffering – is not defined as murder and is permitted under certain circumstances.²⁸ Pointing out to Jewish beliefs about suicide and physician’s responsibilities Kinzbrunner states that:

Unlike suicide, which is the act of an individual, assisted suicide and euthanasia include the active participation of a physician. Based on the passage “Heal, he shall heal” (Exodus 21:19) Jewish law gives the physician the responsibility of providing beneficial care to patients. However, this responsibility does not extend beyond healing. Therefore, under no circumstances does Jewish law permit assisted suicide or euthanasia and deliberate

²⁶ John Keown. *Euthanasia, ethics and public policy: an argument against legalisation*. (Cambridge University Press, 2004),40.

²⁷ Abdi Omar Shuriye. "Ethical and religious analysis on euthanasia." *IIUM Engineering Journal* 12, no. 5 (2012).211.

²⁸ Rabbi Mordechai Halperin. "Modern Perspectives on Halachah and Medicine."134.

hastening of death, even if the patient is terminally ill as it is considered an act of murder.²⁹

According to Heyd the Jewish tradition about the morality of euthanasia does not refer to the dimension of individual will or wish. Indeed, the case of suicide and forms of death in execution do raise the question of the will of the subject of the imminent death but the Jewish laws do not take individual preference into account. In Jewish bioethics, there is no place for voluntary euthanasia.³⁰ Judaism like all other major religions is in favour of natural death. According to Jewish teachings respect of life does not mean a fatalistic approach only, and removing the surrounding impediments to let the soul peacefully depart is believed to be both permissible and desirable.

Buddhist Views

Buddhism does not approve of euthanasia as the Buddhist tradition is against both murder and suicide, as is the case with almost all other religions. As Harvey points out that Buddhism sees intention as crucial to the assessment of the morality of an act, however, it would not differentiate between active and passive means if these were intended to cause or hasten death. The Buddha's strong condemnation of a monk or nun praising or aiding a suicide is here relevant. To kill a person deliberately, even if he or she requests this, is dealt with in the same way as murder.³¹ Buddhism strongly condemns killing in any form and suicide is equally contemptible. Hughes observes that Buddhist scripture and tradition, like most religions, holds that suicide and euthanasia are forms of murder.³² Ratanakul explains that:

Buddhism is strongly against active euthanasia where direct killing is involved by doctors, relatives or friends. But in the case of passive euthanasia Buddhism draws the distinction between "letting go" of life and "killing". "Letting go" means neither hastening death nor unnecessary prolonging of life. Prolonging death unnecessarily means prolonging suffering while "letting

²⁹ Barry M Kinzbrunner. "Jewish medical ethics and end-of-life care." *Journal of Palliative Medicine* 7, no. 4 (2004), 565.

³⁰ David Heyd. "Jewish Bioethics and End-of-Life Issues." *Studia Bioethica* 2, no. 3 (2011). 26.

³¹ Peter Harvey. *An introduction to Buddhist ethics: foundations, values and issues*. (Cambridge University Press, 2000), 294.

³² James Hughes. "Buddhist bioethics." *Principles of health care ethics* 2 (2007), 129.

go", allowing death to come naturally, will lessen suffering as long as there is appropriate pain maintenance and total care of the patients and their families.³³

Harvey quoted Damien Keown who pointed out that one who follows the first precept 'does not kill a living being, does not cause a living being to be killed, does not approve of the killing of a living being'. To request that one is killed would be to 'cause a living being to be killed', and would thus break the precept. This would be the case even if the request were in the form of a 'living will'. If a doctor is requested to administer euthanasia, this does not absolve him or her from responsibility for the act of killing.³⁴ Buddhist teachings are totally against euthanasia as Buddhism teaches to be harmless. Keown explains that Buddhism opposes euthanasia (the intentional killing of a patient by act or omission) in all its forms on the grounds that it involves the deliberate taking of life. The Buddha forbade monks to take their own lives or to play a direct or indirect part in assisting or inciting others to commit suicide. Such acts were declared to be wrong even when motivated by compassion, in the light of which it seems that suicide whether assisted by one's physician or by friends or relatives is contrary to Buddhist ethics.³⁵ Buddhism clearly rejects the idea of euthanasia as it goes against the spirit of the teachings of Buddha which are based on love and compassion.

Hindu Views

Hinduism does not favour euthanasia on grounds that it brings premature death in both forms, that is, killing the terminally ill patients or helping them commit suicide. As Lakhan explains that suicide is considered a bad death because according to Hindu doctrine, bad deaths are violent, premature, and uncontrolled and occur in the wrong place and at the wrong time.³⁶ Hinduism offers two perspectives on euthanasia. According to Nimbalkar: from one perspective, a person who helps others end a painful life and thereby reduces suffering is doing a good deed and will gain good karma. From the other perspective, euthanasia interrupts the timing of the cycle of rebirth and both the

³³ Pinit Ratanakul. "The Buddhist Concept of Life, Suffering and Death, and Related Bioethical Issues." *Eubios Journal of Asian and International Bioethics* 14 (2004). 5.

³⁴ Peter Harvey. *An introduction to Buddhist ethics: foundations, values and issues*. (Cambridge University Press, 2000), 294-295.

³⁵ Damien Keown. *Buddhism and Medical Ethics: Principles and Practice* (University of London), 23.

³⁶ Shaheen E Lakhan. "Hinduism: Life and death." Article adapted from Student BMJ.

doctor and patient will take on bad karma as a result.³⁷ Referring to the concepts of *Dharma* and *Karma* Ganga observes that to a large extent the (Hindu) medical profession sees itself as the agents in the fulfillment of the karma of such patients. It is felt that it is their dharma (where dharma is interpreted as "duty") as agents to perform actions that restore order (where dharma is interpreted as "wholeness" or "goodness"). Suicide is also interpreted as the product of a person's karma.³⁸ Therefore one school of thought in Hinduism being the champion of love and care deems it unacceptable to allow killing the patients even if they are hopelessly ill. Instead it teaches to let the living naturally complete their lifespan.

Findings/Conclusion

No religion supports the killing of the terminally ill or helping them commit suicide whatever the motive, let alone mercy or escape from suffering. In the light of the teachings of all major religions it can be inferred that euthanasia is either murder or suicide therefore impermissible. All religions favour natural death and recommend creating favourable conditions for the peaceful departure of soul. In case of incurable patients withdrawing or withholding life prolonging treatment is not considered a sin; on the contrary it is highly desirable in hopeless conditions. In case of comatose patients, use of life supporting technology for too long is tantamount to making their death painful. Religions offer naturally ideal solutions to worldly problems and that goes for end-of-life issues as well.

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³⁷ Namita Nimbalkar. "Euthanasia: The Hindu Perspective." 57.

³⁸ Romilla Devi Ganga. "Hindu views on euthanasia, suicide and abortion in the Durban area." PhD diss., 1994.

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