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Apostles of Suicide: Theological precedent for Christian support of ‘assisted dying’

David Albert Jones

Abstract

This paper examines the claim of Paul Badham that there is theological precedent for ‘a Christian case for assisted dying’. The writings of Rev William Inge and Joseph Fletcher do indeed advocate forms of assisted dying. However, this precedent is deeply problematic for its ugly attitude towards people with disabilities.

Assisted dying, Assisted suicide, euthanasia, eugenics, disability, Paul Badham, William Inge, Joseph Fletcher

A voice crying in the wilderness?

In 1998 the Lambeth conference passed a resolution stating that euthanasia, defined as ‘the act by which one person intentionally causes or assists in causing the death of another who is terminally or seriously ill in order to end the other’s pain and suffering’ is ‘neither compatible with the Christian faith nor should be permitted in civil legislation’.¹ This position was reaffirmed at the General Synod of 2005 by 293 to one against.² Of all the submissions from Christian organisations to the House of Lords in 2005, only one was in favour of legalizing assisted suicide. This was written by Paul Badham, Professor of Theology and Religious Studies at the University of Wales, Lampeter.³

If Badham’s theological position seemed isolated in 2005, a voice crying in the wilderness, it was given high profile support in July 2014 by George Carey, former Archbishop of Canterbury, Desmond Tutu, former Archbishop of Capetown and Alan Wilson, Bishop of Buckingham.⁴ However, these exceptions were newsworthy precisely because they were exceptional; there remains a significant ecclesial consensus across Anglican, Catholic, Orthodox and Non-conformist churches in opposition to legalizing assisted suicide or euthanasia.

In public discourse most Christians involved in the debate tend to prefer practical arguments which have general secular appeal. Badham is right, however, to argue for the importance of ‘exploring euthanasia as a theological issue’.⁵ Overtly theological inter-Christian discussion is pressing for a number of reasons. Without access to a well-developed Christian account, there is a danger that those unsympathetic to the faith might concoct a caricature of Christianity and impute this caricature to others. There is a further danger that Christians may accept such a caricature as accurate.

¹ Lambeth Conference 1998, Resolutions I.14.

<http://www.anglicancommunion.org/media/76650/1998.pdf?author=Lambeth+Conference&subject=Euthanasia&year=1998>

² General Synod 2005 (GS 1575) <http://anglicansonline.org/news/articles/2005/CofEsynod0705.html>

³ <http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/ld200405/ldselect/ldasdy/86/5020342.htm> reprinted as P. Badham ‘MCU Submission on the Assisted Dying Bill’ *Modern Believing* April 2005 46(2), pp. 46–51.

⁴ Hansard 18 July 2014 : Column 825

<http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/ld201415/ldhansrd/text/140718-0002.htm>

⁵ P. Badham *Is there a Christian Case for Assisted Dying?* (London: SPCK, 2009), p. 3.

An adequate Christian theological response to the question of whether to legalize euthanasia or assisted suicide requires many parallel lines of enquiry, including Scriptural,⁶ doctrinal,⁷ historical, philosophical, legal, psychological, and sociological aspects. The present paper examines only one element of this response and that is the element of Christian tradition.

Acknowledging that support for 'assisted dying' is a minority opinion among contemporary Church leaders, Badham appeals to the precedent of prominent theologians who have advocated euthanasia, not least William Inge, Lady Margaret Professor of Divinity in Cambridge, Dean of St Pauls Cathedral and 'the founding father of the British Voluntary Euthanasia Society'.⁸ Another prominent theologian of the past whom Badham cites in his defence is Joseph Fletcher, 'formerly Professor of Christian Ethics at Harvard and founder of the very influential school of Situation Ethics'.⁹ Among contemporary theologians to whom Badham appeals is Hans Küng, 'probably the best-known and most widely read theologian in the world'.¹⁰ It is noteworthy that Küng, writing in 1995, also sought support from 'other theologians who have expressed themselves even more clearly on this question'.¹¹ The earliest theologian¹² Küng cites is, again, Joseph Fletcher.

This paper aims to explore the history of Christian support for euthanasia and assisted suicide. It will both identify some key theological arguments that have been developed in favour of this position and provide insight into these arguments by placing them in a historical context. This, in turn, will help determine whether there is theological precedent for 'a Christian case for assisted dying'.

Scientific myth and religious history

Throughout history there have been occasional references to mercy killing among Christian writers¹³ as well as recurrent attempts to provide a moral justification for suicide under exceptional circumstances.¹⁴ However, prior to the nineteenth century, these had never amounted to a concerted movement to develop a medical practice or a legal framework for euthanasia or assisted suicide. The modern euthanasia movement can be dated from the establishment of the Voluntary Euthanasia Legalisation Society in London in 1935. The intellectual roots of that movement can, in turn, be traced back to popular intellectual discussion in the 1870s.¹⁵ Such discussion was the product of speculative and literary societies and conducted in periodicals such as the *Spectator* and

⁶ See, amongst others, A. Fisher *Catholic Bioethics for a New Millennium* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

⁷ See, amongst others, D.A. Jones, *Approaching the End: a theological exploration of death and dying* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

⁸ Badham, *Is there a Christian Case*, p. 3, see also Badham 'MCU Submission'.

⁹ Badham, *Is there a Christian Case*, p. 4

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ H. Küng and W. Jens, *Dying with Dignity: A plea for personal responsibility* (New York: Continuum, 1998), p. 37 (German original 1995).

¹² Küng also quotes Barth (p. 37) but this is in relation to how suicide is defined, not in relation to whether to legislate for assisted suicide or euthanasia.

¹³ Probably most famously in Thomas More's *Utopia*, though it should not be thought that More was advocating this practice.

¹⁴ The title of the present paper is taken from a response to one such attempt: 'The apostles of suicide tell us that it is quite allowable to quit one's house when one is tired of it. Agreed, but most men would prefer sleeping in a mean house to lying in the open air' (Voltaire, 'On Suicide, and the Abbe St. Cyran's Book legitimating Suicide' in *A Philosophical Dictionary*)

¹⁵ I. Dowbiggin, *A Concise History of Euthanasia: Life, death, God and Medicine* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2005); N.D.A. Kemp, 'Merciful release': *The history of the British euthanasia movement* (Manchester: Manchester University press, 2002); E.J. Emanuel, 'The history of euthanasia debates in the United States and Britain.' *Annals of Internal Medicine* 121.10 (1994), pp. 793-802.

the *Fortnightly Review*. This culture was by no means uniformly antagonistic to Christianity, but it allowed the expression and exploration of secular, anti-clerical and anti-Christian ideas.

Prominent among the secular ideas prevalent at that time was the myth of a perpetual warfare between science and religion. The two most influence expressions of the 'conflict thesis' were John William Draper's *History of the Conflict between Religion and Science* (1874) and Andrew Dickson White's *A History of the Warfare of Science with Theology in Christendom* (1896). The conflict thesis is often associated with assertive atheism such as that espoused by T.H. Huxley or, more recently, by Richard Dawkins. Nevertheless, the conflict thesis has also been held and promulgated by liberal believers who are antagonistic not to religion as such but to forms of religion which give authority to Scripture, tradition or the clergy, rather than the experience of lay Christians in the modern world. Draper belonged to the former category but White to the latter.¹⁶

The conflict thesis came to particular prominence following the famous Oxford evolution debate of 1860, in which Draper took part. This explains the presence, in the earliest strand of writing in favour of euthanasia, of the claim that Christianity had consistently opposed medical progress and that it had opposed the alleviation of suffering. One example, offered as early as 1870,¹⁷ and invoked repeatedly by Badham,¹⁸ is the claim that Christians had initially opposed the use of chloroform in childbirth as contrary to the text of Genesis 3.16. Such examples served to discredit received Christian belief as a source of opposition to suicide or mercy killing.

A fatal flaw in such arguments is that they are typically based on false premises, both in general and in particular. The general thesis of a warfare between science and religion is now regarded as poor intellectual history.¹⁹ It is a myopic reading of history which tells one more about the historian than about events as they were understood at the time when they were happening. Indeed, in relation to the progress of medicine and healthcare, it is difficult to overstate the positive contribution of Christianity as even White was compelled to acknowledge.

This spirit [of Jesus of Nazareth] then poured into the world, flowed down through the ages, promoting self-sacrifice for the sick and wretched. Through all those succeeding centuries, even through the rudest, hospitals and infirmaries sprang up along this blessed stream. Of these were the Eastern establishments for the cure of the sick at the earliest Christian periods, the Infirmary of Monte Cassino and the Hôtel-Dieu at Lyons in the sixth century, the Hôtel-Dieu at Paris in the seventh, and the myriad refuges for the sick and suffering which sprang up in every part of Europe during the following centuries.²⁰

More particularly, there is simply no evidence for Christian opposition to chloroform for childbirth. James Young Simpson, the physician who pioneered this practice, was a devout Christian and what

¹⁶ 'My conviction is that Science, though it has evidently conquered Dogmatic Theology based on biblical texts and ancient modes of thought, will go hand in hand with Religion... [and] the love of God and of our neighbor.' A.D. White, *A History of the Warfare of Science and Theology* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard, 1955 [1896]), Introduction.

¹⁷ S.D. Williams, 'Euthanasia', *Essays by Members of the Birmingham Speculative Club* (London 1870) cited by Kemp *Merciful release*, p. 14.

¹⁸ P. Badham, 'Should Christians accept the validity of voluntary euthanasia?' *Studies in Christian Ethics* 8.2 (1995), pp. 1-12, p. 7 (citing White, *A History*, vol. 2, pp. 36ff), reprinted in R. Gill, *Euthanasia and the Churches* (London: Cassell, 1998); P. Badham, 'Euthanasia and the Christian Understanding of God', *Studies in Christian Ethics* 11.1 (1998), pp. 1-12, p. 4; Badham, *Is there a Christian Case*, p. 89.

¹⁹ See, for example, J.H. Brooke, *Science and Religion: Some Historical Perspectives* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991).

²⁰ White, *A History*, p. 3.

opposition he faced came primarily from other physicians concerned about patient safety. Chloroform for childbirth was not opposed by any Christian tract or Christian Denomination or prominent Churchman. Widespread Christian opposition to anaesthesia is a 'myth', in the pejorative sense: it never happened.²¹ Similarly there is no evidence, to cite another example invoked repeatedly by Badham,²² that Pope Leo XII opposed the practice of vaccination in 1829. This alleged event is again a later fabrication.²³ If a Christian case for euthanasia or assisted suicide is to be made it cannot be made on the basis of an alleged history of antagonism between medical progress and Christian theology. Such arguments are trite.

Clerical euthanasiasts and Christian eugenicists

The beginning of the twentieth century saw the first discussion of euthanasia among physicians. This coincided with the rise of eugenic ideas as developed by Francis Galton, among others. It is within this new context that Dr Charles Goddard advocated not only voluntary euthanasia for those with incurable diseases, but also involuntary euthanasia for 'idiots, beings having only semblance to human form... unable to enjoy life... [and incapable] of serving any useful purpose in nature'. He declared that such creatures were 'an insult to God's beautiful creation', and that 'their existence surely should not be tolerated in this, a more enlightened time!'²⁴

Goddard was an obscure figure, a local doctor, and is cited here only as evidence of what someone could say and believe at the time. Far more influential in the early euthanasia movement was William Inge. He was not only a Professor in Cambridge and thence Dean at St Paul's Cathedral but for twenty five years he was a regular columnist for the *Evening Standard*. He is rightly cited by Badham as exemplifying the first generation of overt Christian support for voluntary euthanasia.

One aspect of Inge's support for euthanasia which is not mentioned by Badham, however, is how it illustrates the influence of eugenic ideas on the emergent euthanasia movement. More than twenty years before advocating a change in the law on euthanasia, the gloomy Dean had already become the most vocal of all Christian eugenicists. He held it as 'incontestable' that 'if nature is not allowed to take her own way of eliminating her failures, rational selection must take its place'.²⁵ The Eugenics Education Society was founded in 1907 and Inge was a founder member and on the first governing board of the Society. When the *Eugenics Review* was established, in 1909, Inge contributed an essay in the first issue on the morality of eugenics. There he expressed his view that it was quite compatible with Christian ethics to 'hurry out of the world' degraded specimens of humanity where this was for the welfare of the community as a whole.

Christian ethics does not (as is often supposed) teach the duty of preserving and multiplying life at all hazards. Once convinced that so-and-so was an undesirable citizen, the Church, while it believed in itself and had the power, lost no time in hurrying him out of the world.

²¹ A.D. Farr, 'Religious Opposition to Obstetric Anaesthesia: a Myth?' *Annals of Science* 409 (1983), pp.159 - 177.

²² Badham 'Euthanasia and the Christian Understanding', p. 4; Badham, 'MCU Submission'.

²³ D.J. Keefe, 'Tracking a Footnote,' *Fellowship of Catholic Scholars* 9, no. 4 (1986), pp. 6-7; see also Humphrey 'Pope Leo XII and the Vaccination Ban' *Quodlibeta* 5 March 2009, <http://bedejournal.blogspot.co.uk/2009/03/pope-leo-xii-and-vaccination-ban.html>

²⁴ C.E. Goddard 'Suggestions in favour of terminating absolutely hopeless cases of injury or disease' (17 May 1901), Wellcome Institute for the History of Medicine CMAC/SA/VES/c.4, p. 8, cited by Kemp, *Merciful release*, p. 49.

²⁵ W.R. Inge, 'Some Moral Aspects of Eugenics', *Eugenics Review* April 1909, 1.1: 26-36, at 29. See also W.R. Inge 'Eugenics and Religion' *Eugenics Review* January 1921, 12.4: 257-265; F. Hale, 'Debating the New Religion of Eugenics' *Heythrop Journal* 52.3 (2011): 445-457.

No doubt they usually burnt the wrong people, which was very unfortunate; and you must not suppose that I want to see *autos da fe* even of our most degraded specimens; but my point is that there is nothing inconsistent with Christianity in imposing as well as enduring personal sacrifice where the highest welfare of the community is at stake.²⁶

The same attitude to categories of people whom Inge labelled 'degraded specimens' was later expressed by Ernest Barnes, Anglican Bishop of Birmingham. In a lecture at Oxford University in 1937 he stated that,

The cost of social derelicts, and especially of the feeble-minded, is harmful in that indirectly it presses upon all cases. I cannot think it right to keep alive individuals whom doctors know to be doomed from birth to a sub-human existence.²⁷

Writing after the Second World War, it is noteworthy how close Joseph Fletcher's views in regard to euthanasia and disability were to those of earlier theologians such as Inge and Barnes. The following quotation is from a Magazine called *The Atlantic Monthly*: in this passage Fletcher is replying to the father of a child born with Down's syndrome.

People... have no reason to feel guilty about putting a Down's syndrome baby away, whether it's 'put away' in the sense of hidden in a sanitarium or in a more responsible lethal sense. It is sad; yes. Dreadful. But it carries no guilt. True guilt arises only from an offense against a person, and a Down's is not a person. There is no cause for remorse, even though, certainly, there is for regret. Guilt over a decision to end an idiocy would be a false guilt... There is far more reason for real guilt in keeping alive a Down's or other kind of idiot, out of a false idea of obligation or duty, while at the same time feeling no obligation at all to save that money and emotion for a living, learning child.²⁸

The 'humiliation' of dependency

These quotations are not unrepresentative or taken out of context. They represent a very clear and distinctive strand of thought within that minority Christian tradition that embraced what would later be termed 'assisted dying'. While arguments for legalization focused on voluntary euthanasia, it was a commonplace among Christian eugenicists and supporters of euthanasia that those Christians who objected to 'hurrying... out of the world' children with intellectual disabilities were moved by a false humanitarianism. Jonathan Glover, discussing similar views expressed by Virginia Wolfe, states that 'the Nazis have made such ugly attitudes now impossible to express and, one hopes, to have'.²⁹ However, the quotation from Joseph Fletcher was written in 1968, showing that it was still quite possible for a Christian theologian to express such ugly attitudes, even twenty years after the war.

A common contemporary argument against legalizing voluntary euthanasia is that it can lead to non-voluntary euthanasia, especially in the case of disabled infants and cognitively impaired adults.³⁰

²⁶ Inge, 'Some Moral Aspects', page 43.

²⁷ .T. Merricks ' "God and the Gene": E.W. Barnes on Eugenics and Religion', *Politics, Religion & Ideology*, 2012, 13:3, 353-374, p. 361. Barnes, not mentioned by Badham, is cited here as a rare example of episcopal approval of euthanasia.

²⁸ J. Fletcher 'The Right to Die'. *The Atlantic Monthly* April 1968: 59–64.

<http://www.riverbendds.org/index.htm?page=fletcher.html>

²⁹ J. Glover 'Nazi eugenics, Virginia Woolf and the morality of designer babies' *Guardian Comment is free* 6 May 2006. <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2006/may/06/comment.health>

³⁰ D.A. Jones 'Is there a logical slippery slope from voluntary to non-voluntary euthanasia?' *Kennedy Institute of Ethics Journal* December 2011, 21.4: 379-404. R. Cohen-Almagor 'First do no harm: intentionally shortening lives of patients without their explicit request in Belgium' *Journal of Medical Ethics* (2015): medethics-2014.

This historical enquiry has shown the reverse relationship. At least in some cases, the belief that children with intellectual disabilities were 'subhuman' and 'an insult to God's beautiful creation', and that the lives of unproductive or feeble-minded people were not worthy to be lived, *preceded* Christian advocacy of voluntary euthanasia. Voluntary euthanasia was thus seen as deliverance for people whose lives had been reduced, by incurable illness, to the negative status *already accorded* to those with inherited disabilities: those who were not worthy of life or of a place in God's beautiful creation.

Badham is right, therefore, to focus on the importance of dignity and autonomy in the debate over euthanasia. He points out that the great majority of requests for euthanasia or assisted suicide, in those jurisdictions that have legalized such practices, stem not from untreated pain or even from the fear of future pain, but from what Badham describes as 'the humiliation of total dependency on others'.³¹ However, to accept this description is perforce to equate the very fact of dependency and disability with 'humiliation', a life *sans* dignity, a life not worthy of respect or self-respect.

It is noticeable that through the history of the euthanasia movement there has been a confusion between a negative assessment of worth based on the alleged '[inability] to enjoy life' and one based on 'serving no useful purpose' to others. Nevertheless, from a theological perspective both these assessments, whether taken separately or in combination, are open to criticism. Neither valuation accepts the dignity of every human life as created in the image of God and as redeemed by the blood of Christ. The problem here is not only in relation to non-voluntary euthanasia. Even in relation to assisted suicide the implied or overt linking of dignity with independence or economic productivity is a threat. It threatens both the sustaining of a person's sense of self-worth and their worth in the eyes of others, as is evident from the witness of many people with disabilities.

As a chronically ill person I know well what it is to feel that one is a burden to others, to both family and community, how isolating illness and disability can be, and how difficult it is to maintain hope in the circumstances of illness, disability and severe pain, especially chronic pain... If euthanasia were lawful, that sense of burden would be greatly increased for there would be even greater moral pressure to relinquish one's hold on a burdensome life.³²

Repudiating a bad precedent

There is clearly a need for further historical research in this area, but even this brief foray has shown how important it is to place theological arguments within their historical context. It has been demonstrated that there is precedent for support for 'assisted dying' in the views of prominent theologians of the past. However, when this precedent is examined, it is shown to be deeply problematic for its ugly attitude towards people with disabilities. This attitude is not accidental but is an essential feature of that tradition. Christian support for eugenics *preceded* Christian advocacy of voluntary euthanasia.

This historical enquiry does not show that a contemporary Christian case could not be made in support of legalizing 'assisted dying'. However it does show that the *sine qua non* of such a case, were it possible to make one, would be the explicit repudiation of the precedent represented by Inge and Fletcher, among others, lest 'their stark expression... raise the question as to whether some milder version lingers on today'.³³

³¹ Badham, *Is there a Christian Case*, p. 96.

³² N. Tonti-Filippini *About Bioethics: Volume 2* (Ballan VIC: Conor Court Publishing, 2012), p. 112. See also A. Davis, 'A disabled person's perspective on euthanasia.' *Disability Studies Quarterly* 2004, 24.3.

³³ Glover 'Nazi eugenics'