

CRISES OF CONSCIENCE - EUTHANASIA

STUDENT NOTES

Introduction

More than ever before, we are facing **crises of conscience** in the West and in the world in general. What are crises of conscience? The phrase refers to difficult moral and ethical issues that society has to deal with - issues like abortion, euthanasia, homosexuality, racism, sexism, pornography, violence, etc. As Muslims we believe Islam has practical and moral answers to these issues, and has had these answers for over 1400 years. These moral dilemmas have generally existed since the beginning of time, and all major religions share common values and ideals. This is part of a universal set of values that are shared by these faiths, and these values, by definition, are unchanging. Moving from century to century or from country to country does not change the nature of what is good and evil. This handout will focus on the subject of euthanasia.

Life & Abortion

In our previous discussion, we focused on the nature of abortion. We discussed Islam's perspective on this issue, and discussed why abortion has become so common in the West. Fundamental to the definition of abortion is the definition of the beginning of life. We also began to discuss the Islamic perspective on life itself, and the significance of life. Today we will focus on euthanasia, which is related to abortion because it deals with the end of life. First, we need a few definitions.

Euthanasia - A Definition

The word euthanasia is derived from Greek roots, from *eu thanatos*, meaning "a good death". In modern medico-ethical discussions, euthanasia refers to the intentional termination (ending) of another human being's life with the express purpose of ending (perceived) suffering. Again intention is important in the action of euthanasia. Euthanasia is often divided into passive and active euthanasia.

Active Euthanasia - an intentional act that is committed to bring about death (for example, a lethal injection).

Passive Euthanasia - an act of withholding (not giving) or withdrawing (stopping) medical therapy to bring about death (for example, unplugging life support machines).

The End of Life

Before we can discuss Islam's approach to euthanasia, we need to return to the issue of life itself. First, we defined the beginning of life (at the latest) as the time when the foetus attached itself onto the wall of the uterus (implantation). Hadith suggest that the soul enters the foetus at approximately four months of age (the authenticity of these hadith have been confirmed by Imam Seestani, among others, in a recent response to a question (see also ref. 1)). Thus, at four months of age the foetus has a soul and is a human being. Euthanasia deals with the end of life, not the beginning. Life ends, from a religious perspective, when the soul leaves the body. However, this definition is not very useful to modern science for several reasons.

First, we have no way of measuring the soul or monitoring when it leaves the body; there is no "soulometer". So this is not very helpful to physicians and society.

Second, the next step would be to look for other things that occur medically (and can be measured or observed) when the soul leaves the body. This is also not very practical, for reasons which are beyond the focus of this discussion.

Third, the standard method of defining death, up until several decades ago, was when the heart stopped beating and the body began to decompose. In the era of modern medicine, we have technology that can artificially keep hearts beating and the body functioning for long periods of time (weeks, months, or even years). We also have cardiopulmonary resuscitation (CPR), which can help to bring back people who have had their hearts stop suddenly (the "newly dead", as some would call them). These technologies were not available a few decades ago. When a person's heart stopped, s/he died. That was that. Now, things are more complicated. In essence, we can **save** their lives, but have we brought them back from death? Did they **die** for five minutes until we revived them with CPR and modern technology?

Fourth, there is now an entity that we recognize called **brain death**, where the brain no longer has any measurable electrical activity. Yet the heart is still beating and the rest of the body is functioning. Is the person dead or alive at this point? These are some of the difficulties we face when defining death.

The Significance of Life

We also need to consider the significance of life. According to Islam, along with other major monotheistic religions and other philosophies, life is a fundamental good. This means that it is a good thing in and of itself to be alive, and we should try to preserve and prolong life in general. Fundamental goods should be protected because they are important to all humans. Life is such a priority that almost all religious rules are waived if life is to be preserved. In Islam, for example, rules of modesty and najasat are both ignored in order to save life. If one needs to drink alcohol or eat pork to live, so be it. If one is forced to remove one's hijab or die, life is chosen over modesty. This was seen in the powerful example of Bibi Zaynab (AS) and the ladies in Kerbala. The Holy Qur'an states:

"For this reason did we prescribe to the children of Israel that he who slays any one (man), without (that being for) murder, or for mischief in the land, (it shall be) as though he has slain mankind as a whole; and he who saves it (a human life), shall be as though he has saved mankind as a whole... " (5:32)²

"And kill you not any one whom God has forbidden but for a just cause; and whoever is slain unjustly, then indeed have We given his heir the authority, but he shall not be extravagant in slaying; Verily he is aided (by God). " (17:33)²

The Holy Qur'an clearly illustrates the importance of saving life and of not killing human beings. In a similar vein, suicide is forbidden in Islam. Only He can decide when life is to begin and end, not human beings. Our bodies are trusts to us from God, and we are expected to look after them and return them to Him **when** He asks for them, but **not before**. There are exceptions to the general rule of not killing others. As evidenced by the above ayah, Islam allows one to kill another human being for (a) punishment for several major crimes; (b) in self-defence. In the former situation, it is not a single human being killing another; it is a society passing judgement on one of its own members who has forfeited his/her right to life by the crime that was committed. In the latter situation, one is protecting one's own life. Consider the following rulings from Imam Gulpayghani, a very recent Mujtahid (Islamic Jurist):

"Saving the Patient's Life: The patient is in the intensive care unit without hope of a cure, and the only way to extend his life and to revive the heart is through an artificial respirator, massage or similar things. In this case, if administering any of these treatments can extend his life, even for a short time, it is obligatory to do so and is not permissible to abandon this."¹

Furthermore, Imam Seestani has also commented:

"349. It is not permissible for a doctor to switch off medical apparatus providing a Muslim patient with oxygen, even if he is brain dead, i.e. in vegetative state. This is because human life in Islam is sacrosanct."³

Suffering

People who support euthanasia argue that human beings have the right to take another human being's life in one other major circumstance. This involves the relief of suffering. These supporters argue that there comes a time when medicine has nothing else to offer a person in terms of cure of disease, and that prolonging life at this stage merely lengthens the period of suffering until the person dies. Thus, we should kill the suffering person to relieve his/her suffering - a "mercy killing". Imam Gulpaygani has commented:

"Euthanasia: When a person is near death and is suffering from acute pain, injecting the patient with a fatal substance in order to speed up his death and to relieve him from the agony is not permissible. If death results in such a case, then the person who acts thus has committed murder and is subject to the penalty of *diyah*, which is elaborated in the section on *diyah*."¹

According to Islam, this is murder, and is unacceptable. If suicide and murder are both forbidden, as discussed above, then euthanasia cannot be permissible. The role of a society is to help its weakest and most vulnerable members. However, this is not done by killing them. Relief of suffering is an important goal, but it does not supersede the prolongation of life. All life is holy and good, no matter how much we might not think such a life is a good life or a worthy life or a life of quality. This last point is important, because supporters of euthanasia argue that we should end the lives of those who are suffering because there is no quality or meaning left in their lives,

especially those who are in intensive care units, unable to speak, unconscious, etc. Islam's answer to this is that God decides when life should end, and He decides what life is quality and worthy. On what basis can we, as human beings, say whose life is quality or worthy?

Is Islam Cruel?

Why does Islam seem so cruel in terms of prolonging suffering? Like the abortion issue, in euthanasia it has nothing to do with cruelty. God decides when the person's life should end. We leave that decision to Him. Our goal in this life is to try to live a good and healthy life, and help others who are suffering. Islam does not suggest abandoning people who suffer. Furthermore, Islam argues that suffering is not in and of itself bad. It is not comfortable, but because of our belief about reward, punishment, and the Justice of God, suffering is one form of trial or test for human beings. It may also be a punishment from God for our sins. Either we suffer here or in the afterlife. So suffering is not always a bad thing, although we should still try to help those who are suffering. But we do not kill them to prevent suffering, for the end of life is left in God's hands.

The Slippery Slope

One other argument, primarily ethical rather than religious, deals with the concept of the *slippery slope*. This argument states that if we begin to allow people to be killed to relieve what WE think is *unbearable* suffering in the face of an *incurable* illness, we will soon begin to slip down a slope and start killing people who may otherwise be undesirable, or have less than unbearable suffering, or who may not have an incurable illness. For example, we might kill people who are severely physically or mentally challenged. We might kill the frail elderly. We might kill people who have incurable suffering but are not going to die any time soon. An analogy comes from lying. Once we tell our first lie, the next lie becomes much easier. In time, bigger lies will seem just as easy to tell as smaller lies (or even white lies). This is the danger of the slippery slope.

In summary, the religion has clear beliefs regarding euthanasia. Euthanasia is equivalent to murder. One human being has no right to take another human being's life, with few exceptions. Life is a fundamental good. Our goals, therefore, are to prolong life where possible, minimize suffering, and make people as comfortable as possible when they are dying.

One final comment should be made about brain death. This is a state whereby there is no measurable electrical brain activity anywhere in the brain. In other words, the brain is no longer active and is *dead*. Physicians and modern ethicists around the world consider this state to be equivalent to death, even though the heart may still be beating naturally for a short time after brain death has occurred, or for a prolonged period of time after brain death through artificial means. Although there is a growing consensus among Muslim scholars, both Shi'ah and Sunni, in the last five years that brain death is equivalent to death, the ruling by Imam Seestani quoted above demonstrates that things are not completely clear.

References:

1. A Guide to Islamic Medical Ethics. Transl. Hamid Mavani, Organization for the Advancement of Islamic Knowledge and Humanitarian Services, Montreal, Canada, 1998.
2. The Holy Qur'an, transl. by S.V. Mir Ahmed Ali, V ed., Tahrike Tarsile Qur'an, New York, USA, 1988.
3. al-Hakim, Abdul Hadi. A Code Of Practice For Muslims In The West. Transl. Sayyid Muhammad Rizvi, Imam Ali Foundation, London, UK, 1999.