



## Religions and Death

Death is one of the most important things that religions deal with. All faiths offer meaning and explanations for death and dying; all faiths try to find a place for death and dying within human experience. For those left behind when someone dies, religions provide rituals to mark death, and ceremonies to remember those who have died.

Religions provide understanding and comfort for those who are facing death. Religions regard understanding death and dying as vital to finding meaning in human life. Dying is often seen as an occasion for getting powerful spiritual insights as well as for preparing for whatever afterlife may be to come. So it's not surprising that all faiths have strong views on euthanasia.

## Religions and Euthanasia

Most religions disapprove of euthanasia. Some of them absolutely forbid it. The Roman Catholic Church, for example, is one of the most active organisations in opposing euthanasia. Virtually all religions state that those who become vulnerable through illness or disability deserve special care and protection, and that proper end of life care is a much better thing than euthanasia.

Religions are opposed to euthanasia for a number of reasons:

### God has forbidden it

Virtually all religions with a supreme God have a command from God in their scriptures that says, 'You must not kill.' This is usually interpreted as meaning 'you must not kill innocent human beings', so this rules out euthanasia (and suicide) as well as murder, as carrying out any of these would be against God's orders, and would be an attack on the sovereignty of God.

### Human life is sacred

Human lives are special because God created them, therefore human life should be protected and preserved, whatever happens. We shouldn't interfere with God's plans by shortening human lives.

### Human life is special

Human beings are made in God's image; therefore they have a special value and dignity. This value doesn't depend on the quality of a particular life and taking a life violates that special value and dignity, even if it's one's own life and even if that life is full of pain and suffering.

## Eastern religions

Some Eastern religions take a different approach. The key ideas in their attitudes to death are achieving freedom from mortal life, and not-harming living beings. Euthanasia clearly conflicts with the second of these, and it interferes with the first.

## Freedom from mortal life

Hinduism and Buddhism see mortal life as part of a continuing cycle in which we are born, live, die, and are reborn over and over again. The ultimate aim of each being is to get free of this cycle, and so be completely liberated from the material world. During each cycle of life and death human beings make progress towards their ultimate liberation, therefore how they live and how they die play a vital part in deciding what their next life will be, shaping their journey to liberation. Shortening life interferes with the working out of the laws that govern this process (the laws of karma), and so interferes with a human being's journey to liberation.

## No harm: The principle of ahimsa

Hinduism and Buddhism regard all life (not just human life) as involved in the process of reincarnation; therefore they say that we should try to avoid harming living things. This generally rules out killing people, even if they want to die.

## The sanctity of life

Religious people often refer to *the sanctity of life*, or say that human life is sacred. They usually mean something like this:

God gives people life, so only God has the right to take it away.

You can look at that sentence in several ways:

- God gave us our lives and we owe our lives to God.
- God is the final authority over our lives so we must not interfere in the ending of our lives.
- God is intimately involved in our lives - He was intimately involved in our births and will be intimately involved in our deaths. It would be wrong to try and shut God out of our dying.
- We should not interfere in the way God has chosen for our lives to end as we are only stewards of our bodies, and are responsible to God for them. We must use our bodies as God intended us to and must allow our lives (our stewardship) to end at the time and in the way God wants.