

ISSUES IN PERSPECTIVE

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“DIGNICIDE:” CAN EUTHANASIA EVER BE DIGNIFIED?

The debate over the ethics of euthanasia within western civilization has taken a new turn. In London, a musical in the British theater scene has received rave reviews over the last year or so. It is “Assisted Suicide: The Musical,” created by Liz Carr, who suffers from a genetic disorder that prevents her from extending her muscles, among other impairments. That “Assisted Suicide: The Musical” is being received so well (often to standing ovations) is puzzling, for western civilization is embracing assisted suicide with a passion. For example, medically assisted suicide is permitted in Belgium, Germany, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Switzerland and six US states. It is being considered for legislative adoption in Australia, Finland, Portugal and Sweden. The Netherlands and Belgium have the most permissive laws, for both nations routinely euthanize patients for dementia and depression.

In a recent interview with Sohrab Ahmari of the *Wall Street Journal*, Liz Carr made a number of profound observations about euthanasia and how her musical is challenging the arguments for widespread euthanasia in western civilization. Here are a few of her salient observations:

- Concerning media coverage of euthanasia, Carr argues, “I was really, really angry at the media portrayal of this subject matter and the amount of bias and the amount of propaganda. I’d say, ‘But it’s not that simple! Why is nobody looking for alternatives or talking to other people?’”
- “Assisted suicide has become a part of the narrative of death, of illness, of disability.” Of euthanasia proponents, Carr observes correctly “it takes 15 to 20 years to get social support and to get the culture to change—then you pass the law.”
- She contends that the main watchword of the euthanasia movement is dignity. The argument is that disability, terminal illness, senility and the like rob from their victims of dignity. Assisted suicide allows people in such circumstances to die on their own terms, before their conditions erase their sense of personhood. In making their pitch, some proponents have begun using the term “dignicide”—dignified suicide. Carr ridicules that term. The truth is, she argues, “Your state of health, mental or physical, has no bearing on your dignity.” If dignity derives from good health and ability, “then all sorts of weak and vulnerable people can be discarded.”
- She also examines the other slogan used in the euthanasia movement—self-determination. That phrase was used 97 times in the various government hearings that produced the 2002

euthanasia law in Belgium. Autonomy and self-determination are at the heart of the euthanasia argument, Carr reasons: “Legalizing euthanasia doesn’t empower you. It empowers doctors.” And in the modern welfare state that means it empowers agents of the government. Ahmari writes in response: “Legalization hides a dramatic action—the taking of life—behind the veil of the patient-doctor relationship, with all the power imbalances inherent in it.”

- Since the 2002 law in Belgium was passed, over 13,000 assisted suicides have taken place. In the 2014-2015 reporting period, 15% of the nearly 4,000 cases were nonterminal, and 3% involved people in mental or behavioral anguish, with what the commission described as a “notable increase” in dementia cases.
- Carr also maintains that the line between “exercising autonomy” and feeling goaded into assisted suicide is blurry, especially for vulnerable people “who are already made to feel they are a burden.” She concludes, “We don’t applaud healthy people deciding to kill themselves in the name of autonomy . . . We conveniently herald choice and autonomy as concepts that should be supported for people who are disabled and ill but not for everyone else.”
- To give the state the power to facilitate assisted suicide is to invite pressure on people like her: “How do you decide who qualifies? Why do we say that being disabled or ill—why is that OK justification, but being in anguish because you’ve been dumped by your boyfriend, or lost a child isn’t?”
- Perhaps most poignantly, Carr observes that “we don’t have anywhere to discuss death. . . Assisted suicide holds those fears and allows people to have this outpouring of concern and worries that are human but that have nowhere to go.” This is all the more critical because, with the secularization of western civilization, religion, especially Christianity, used to be the place where we could discuss and process death. Sadly, Carr adds that she herself is an atheist, so she understands the vacuum that results from no religious moorings.

This last point made by Carr establishes the most profound reason for investigating genuine biblical Christianity and thereby the revelation of God found in His Word. Within that framework there can be an honest open discussion about death, anguish, pain and suffering. Within that framework one can establish the absolute reason why humans have dignity, value and worth. And her point leads to the most glaring weakness in her opposition to assisted suicide, namely the absence of a criterion for establishing true human dignity. One of the most fundamental of all biblical propositions is that humans are created in God’s image: That humans both resemble God (e.g., attributes such as intellect, emotion, will) and represent God (i.e., as His theocratic stewards, Gen. 1:26ff) provide the basis for the worth, value and dignity of humanity. In this Postmodern era, western civilization is currently struggling with how to affirm human dignity without the biblical premise of God’s image. We have no absolute, all-encompassing basis for establishing and affirming human dignity. Further, with the Darwinian hypothesis now the widely accepted view, humans are merely products of exactly the same

force that produced all life—natural selection. Thus, life is a product of vast amounts of time, random chance and an impersonal force called natural selection; it is a “cosmic accident.” If human beings are simply another more developed primate and a cosmic accident anyway, then why does it matter how we treat human life at any stage in its development?

As a Christian, I find the growing accommodation to assisted suicide within western civilization repugnant. This is not about human dignity, for it defies comprehension that doctors would sanction such practices. Former psychiatrist in chief at Johns Hopkins Hospital writes: “The reasons for opposing . . . doctor-assisted suicide never went away. The reasons have been with us since ancient Greek doctors wrote in the Hippocratic oath that ‘I will neither give a deadly drug to anybody if asked for it nor will I make a suggestion to that effect.’ The oath is a central tenet in the profession of medicine, and it has remained so for centuries.” Indeed, Dr. Leon Kass, former chair of President Bush’s Bioethics Commission, wrote on the Hippocratic Oath that “Medicine and surgery are not simply biological procedures but expressions, in action, of a profession given to helping nature in perpetuating and enhancing human life. The doctor is the cooperative ally of nature not its master. It should not need saying, but the exercises of healing people and killing people are opposed to one another.” For that reason, the hospice movement, especially the Christian hospice movement, offers what the advocates of euthanasia can never provide—death with dignity. The Christian hospice movement manages pain through drugs, ministers to the person through Scripture reading and the singing of hymns, thereby preparing the saint for heaven. Hospice care preserves human dignity even at the end of life. As Paul McHugh writes, “The doctors, nurses, and social workers committed to hospice care demonstrate how an alliance with nature [i.e., with God] at life’s end plays out in just the way that the medical profession intends.” Human dignity is therefore preserved and maintained, something of eternal significance to our God.

See Sohrab Ahmari’s interview with Liz Carr in the *Wall Street Journal* (4-5 March 2017); Paul McHugh in the *Wall Street Journal* (25-26 May 2013); and Charlotte McDonald-Gibson in www.world.time.com (17 February 2014).