CHAPTER 11

On the Brink of Death

Euthanasia from the Angle of Law, Morality and Religion: A Cross-Cultural Perspective

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This article is the outcome of personal and scholarly interest. Euthanasia has fascinated me for some time, as I have come across it several times in my teaching and research, counselling practice and private life. In the current medical and legal sense in the Netherlands I understand euthanasia to be the termination of life at the patient’s free, well considered request in the case of hopeless and unbearable suffering. My scholarly interest as a comparative scientist of religion is to clarify euthanasia and its meaning for human self-identity, both conceptually and empirically. It includes the existential and religious implications, legal and moral aspects, arguments by proponents and opponents, and its grounding in the dialectics of life and death. I have substantiated my views in a book published in Dutch: Ondraaglijk lijden zonder uitzicht. Euthanasie vanuit religie, moraal en mensenrechten (Unbearable suffering without hope. Euthanasia from the angle of religion, morality and human rights) (Van der Ven 2010a).

Life and death are intimately interwoven. Paul Ricoeur, a leading 20th-century philosopher, looked at life in the perspective of death. He distinguished between four modalities. Is life a life for death in the sense of a preparation for it, he asked, a life towards death (Sein zum Tode), a life despite death, or a life until death? Ricoeur himself opted for the last modality: enjoying life until death (vivant jusqu’à la mort). But what about life after death? For religious people this last question requires, Ricoeur says, a cathartic process of mourning in order to let go of all preconceived representations, while simply hoping to enter into God’s memory (Ricoeur 1995; 2000a; 2007).

In the perspective of the interwovenness of life and death the question is how to deal with human beings on the brink of death who seriously and freely ask for mercy killing to put them out of their hopeless and unbearable suffering. This is a complex question, especially because of the growing insistence on self-determination among articulate citizens on the one hand, and an aging

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1 This article has been published earlier in E. Venbrux et al. (Eds.). Changing European Death Ways, Lit, Münster, pp. 25–70.
population sometimes all but breaking down under the burden of life and suffering on the other. It makes a substantial difference whether one thinks of euthanasia in relation to one’s own life and death (I-perspective), that of one’s significant other(s) (you-perspective) or that of some other (maybe anonymous) person or persons (he/she/they-perspective) (Ricoeur 2000a; Van Knippenberg 1987, 8–21). In this article I focus on euthanasia from the he/she/they-perspective, sometimes switching to the you-perspective, but refrain from adopting an I-perspective. As a result I do not deal with the other side of life care approaches such as palliative care, palliative sedation, assisted suicide, auto-euthanasia and duo-euthanasia. I only focus on euthanasia in the sense mentioned before.

In this article I first consider the Dutch act on euthanasia of 2002, a description of which may clear up, I hope, some misunderstandings in foreign literature and press articles (1). Then I give a qualitative outline of some nonreligious and religious arguments from present-day public debate in the Netherlands, both for and against euthanasia, on which I elaborate conceptually and reflect critically (2). Next I briefly report on quantitative empirical research into attitudes towards euthanasia among Christian, Muslim and nonreligious students in six countries in north-western Europe (3). In conclusion I present some reflections on these findings in terms of three themes: life course, self-identity and prudence (4).

1 The Law on Euthanasia in the Netherlands

In international literature and press articles the term ‘euthanasia’ has several meanings, from switching off futile medical devices to killing a patient without her consent. Sometimes it is associated with horror stories of terminating thousands of patients’ lives against their will or memories of large-scale Nazi extermination. In February 2012 the former republican presidential candidate, Rick Santorum, spread untruths about frightened, elderly Dutch people wearing armbands saying ‘don’t euthanize me’, and claimed that 10 percent of all deaths in hospitals were people who were euthanized against their will. In June 2006, following earlier allegations of euthanasia by the Vatican, former Italian Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi accused the Netherlands of Nazi practices. In the same month a German Christian-Democratic Party MP called the Dutch euthanasia act ‘a copy from the time of national-socialist inhumanity’. All this is the result of either plain misinformation, culpable misunderstanding, or – even worse – deliberate distortion.

Everybody knows that in many countries physicians apply palliative measures, not only to alleviate unbearable pain, but also with the intention of