1. Theoretical Introduction

Modern declarations of human rights have frequently repeated that human life and dignity are inherently connected. The concept of human dignity refers to the inner spirit of Human Rights. Most states consider it their duty to advocate the dignity of man. As stated in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) the recognition of the inherent dignity is the foundation of freedom, justice and peace in the world (preamble). All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights (art 1) and everyone has the right to life, liberty and security of person (art 3). The European Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms (1950) pronounces in article 2 that everyone’s right to life shall be protected by law. The International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (1966) argues that every human being has the inherent right to life, that this right shall be protected by law and that no one shall be arbitrarily deprived of his life. The Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court (1998) deals with the protection of life and requires that killing of persons either by direct murder or by inflicting conditions which bring about their death, e.g. deprivation of food, water and medication, has to come under the jurisdiction of a court. – With regard to different thematic issues the right to life is elaborated in a multitude of treaties. Nevertheless the right to life is not as inviolable as it might seem at first sight, for instance regarding the death penalty or in cases of self-defense from unlawful violation. There are surely various ethical dilemma situations concerning this topic and the international community allows some exceptions. However, the basic value of human rights is that human life has to be protected at all costs and that only very few reasons allow a consideration of this conviction.

This chapter deals with two special cases in which the strict protection of life is a topic of debate: firstly euthanasia where death occurs on demand and secondly abortion where a pregnant woman decides to terminate
her pregnancy. The research question of this chapter is whether the religious commitment of young people in Germany (Christians and Muslims) affects the attitude on euthanasia and abortion. We assume that this will be the case because of the religious tenets in both Christianity and Islam. Therefore our research question is: How do young Christians and young Muslims living in Germany reflect on the protection of life when it comes to euthanasia and abortion?

In the following we refer to Christian and Muslim teachings on euthanasia and abortion and reflect on secular challenges within the modern world – which, taken together, is the frame of socialization that influences the worldview of young people.

Euthanasia in the Christian Theology

In the Catechism of the Catholic Church\(^1\) (no 1930) it is stated: “Respect for the human person entails respect for the rights that flow from his dignity as a creature. These rights are prior to society and must be recognized by it. They are the basis of the moral legitimacy of every authority: by flouting them, or refusing to recognize them in its positive legislation, a society undermines its own moral legitimacy. If it does not respect them, authority can rely only on force or violence to obtain obedience from its subjects. It is the Church’s role to remind men of good will of these rights and to distinguish them from unwarranted or false claims.” This statement can be understood as a general umbrella for the concrete cases euthanasia and abortion.

In regard to euthanasia the teaching of the Roman Catholic Church makes the distinction between direct and indirect euthanasia. The catechism states clearly that direct euthanasia is morally unacceptable, regardless of any motives and means. Any acts to eliminate suffering that cause death are regarded as murder and are a grave violation contrary to human dignity and God as the creator of life. Compassion is no excuse for direct euthanasia that is regarded as an error of judgment. The nature of this act is still murderous and forbidden on all accounts (Catechism no 2277). Indirect euthanasia does not cause death of a person, but is aware of the medical incapability to save life. The view of the catechism on indirect euthanasia is the following: “Discontinuing medical procedures that are burdensome, dangerous, extraordinary, or disproportionate to the expected outcome can be legitimate; it is the refusal of ‘over-zealous’

\(^1\) http://www.vatican.va/archive/ENG0015/_INDEX.HTM.