

Islamic Perspective

Euthanasia (*Qatl al-rahma*)

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Abstract: Euthanasia can be effected at the request of the terminally ill or in their interest by medical practitioners. However, euthanasia remains a controversial issue because of its proponents' claim that it is an act of mercy despite its ending human life. This article examines Islam's stance on the sanctity of life and pain and suffering. It also discusses the various types of euthanasia and the motivations for euthanasia in the light of Islamic teachings.

Key words: Islam, medical ethics, euthanasia, suicide, terminally ill.

The word "euthanasia" comes from the Greek *euthanatos*, derived from the words *eu* and *thanatos*, meaning "good" and "death" respectively.¹ Therefore, euthanasia means allowing an easy and good death. It is also defined as "mercy killing" (*qatl al-rahma*) of the hopelessly ill, injured, or incapacitated and the ending of the life, as painlessly as possible, of the patient who is suffering from a terminal illness and extreme pain. Euthanasia thus includes the following:

- Administering an overdose of barbiturates or another lethal injection with the aim of terminating the life of the patient with or without the patient's explicit request,
- A decision to withhold or withdraw potentially life-prolonging treatment so

as to hasten the patient's death, and

- Alleviating pain with large doses of opioids, allowing for a probability of causing death, but not explicitly intending to cause death.

Euthanasia is in essence the termination of the life of the terminally ill at their request or in their interest. Euthanasia continues to pose a religious, legal, and moral problem in all cultural and religious traditions. Before tackling the issue of euthanasia in the light of the *shari`a* (Islamic moral law), it is imperative that we deliberate upon Islam's attitude to the sanctity of life.

Sanctity of Life

Islam, like other religions, upholds the sanctity of life.

لَئِنْ بَسَطْتَ إِلَيَّ يَدَكَ لِتَقْتُلَنِي مَا أَنَا بِبَاسِطٍ يَدِي
 إِلَيْكَ لَأَقْتُلَكَ إِنِّي أَخَافُ اللَّهَ رَبَّ الْعَالَمِينَ

If you do stretch your hand to slay me, it is not for me to stretch my hand to slay you for I do fear God the cherisher of the worlds.²

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However, the Islamic penal code, based on divine injunctions, advocates the death penalty for those who commit certain grave crimes. It is for the sake of curtailing crime and ensuring peace, security, and tranquillity that Islam prescribes preventive measures and just punishments for acts that tend towards terminating life without reasonable justification.³ The Qur'an permits the death penalty for willful murder:

يَا أَيُّهَا الَّذِينَ آمَنُوا كُتِبَ عَلَيْكُمُ الْقِصَاصُ فِي الْقَتْلَى

O you who believe! *al-Qiṣāṣ* (just retribution) is ordained for you in respect of the murdered.⁴

The Arabic equivalent for the punishment of the person guilty of committing murder is *al-qiṣāṣ* (just retribution). This measure ensures that if the death sentence is to be carried out, only the one guilty of the crime will lose his life. However, the family of the one who has been murdered has the option to forgive the murderer or to accept compensation.⁵

Active Euthanasia

Active euthanasia is the deliberate act undertaken by the attending physician to cause the death of a patient. It could be voluntary, i.e. fulfilling the patient's wish, and it could be involuntary if it involves ending the patient's life without his explicit approval. This is carried out on the basis of a paternalistic decision to do what is best for the terminally ill. The Qur'an warns:

وَلَا تَقْتُلُوا النَّفْسَ الَّتِي حَرَّمَ اللَّهُ إِلَّا بِالْحَقِّ

And do not take any human being's life — (the life) which Allah has made sacred save with right (justice).⁶

It is evident from this verse that human life is sacred and, therefore, cannot be disposed of except for a just cause, that is, in execution of a legal sentence, or in a just war, or in legitimate self-defense.⁷ To terminate the life of the terminally ill does not fall within the gambit of "a just cause". Therefore, if a medical practitioner were to deliberately end the life

of a patient, he would be guilty of homicide. Life and death are the prerogatives of Allah ﷻ as categorically stated in the Qur'an:

وَاللَّهُ يُحْيِي وَيُمِيتُ وَاللَّهُ بِمَا تَعْمَلُونَ بَصِيرٌ

Allah gives life and death, and Allah sees well all that you do.⁸

One may safely infer from this verse that even if the physician chooses to increase a medication dose, being fully aware that this would in effect cause death, he would then be held liable for terminating the life of his patient, which equates to murder under the *shari'a*. While it is true that intention (*niyya*) of the physician is beyond the jurisdiction of the judge or the court of law, his intention cannot escape the ever-watchful supervision of Allah ﷻ. The Qur'an states the following in this regard:

يَعْلَمُ خَائِنَةَ الْأَعْيُنِ وَمَا تُخْفِي الصُّدُورُ

[Allah] knows the treachery of the eyes and what the hearts conceal.⁹

Hence, although the physician may not be convicted by the court of the land, he would nevertheless be answerable to Allah ﷻ for his part in terminating the life of the terminally ill.

In the event that a terminally ill patient requests the attending physician to terminate his life as a result of his excruciating pain and suffering, such a request would be termed voluntary euthanasia or assisted suicide. The Qur'an explicitly censures such an action and categorically states:

وَلَا تَقْتُلُوا أَنْفُسَكُمْ إِنَّ اللَّهَ كَانَ بِكُمْ رَحِيمًا

Do not kill yourselves: for verily Allah is to you Most Merciful.¹⁰

Suicide, self-inflicted or assisted, is a crime according to the *shari'ah* and hence constitutes a sin in the sight of Allah ﷻ. The following hadith discloses the fate of a person who terminates his life:

كَانَ فَيَمِنُ كَانَ قَبْلَكُمْ رَجُلٌ بِهِ جُرْحٌ فَجَزَعَهُ
فَأَخَذَ سِكِّينًا فَحَزَّ بِهَا يَدَهُ فَمَا رَقَأَ الدَّمُ حَتَّى مَاتَ
قَالَ اللَّهُ تَعَالَى بَادِرْنِي عَبْدِي بِنَفْسِهِ حَرَمْتُ عَلَيْهِ
الْجَنَّةَ

There was a man before you who was wounded. The pain became unbearable and so he took a knife and cut his hand. Blood began to ooze out profusely leading to his death. Almighty Allah said: 'My servant hurried to bring death upon himself and so I made Paradise unlawful for him.'¹¹

From this hadith we gather that while voluntary euthanasia may end the terminally ill patient's pain and suffering in this world, his problem would be further compounded in the hereafter by being excluded from inheriting a place in Paradise.

The Concept of Pain and Suffering

According to the Islamic philosophy of life, there is a transcendental dimension to pain and suffering. The Qur'an tells us that those who claim to believe in Allah ﷻ will not be left alone after proclamation of their belief (*Īmān*):

أَحْسَبَ النَّاسُ أَنْ يُتْرَكُوا أَنْ يَقُولُوا آمَنَّا وَهُمْ لَا
يُفْتَنُونَ

Do people reckon that they will be left (in ease) after saying 'We believe', and (that) they will not be tried with affliction?¹²

The Qur'an further asserts that the believers will be put to the test in various ways:

وَلَنَبْلُوَنَّكُمْ بِشَيْءٍ مِّنَ الْخَوْفِ وَالْجُوعِ وَنَقْصٍ مِّنَ
الْأَمْوَالِ وَالْأَنْفُسِ وَالثَّمَرَاتِ وَبَشِّرِ الصَّابِرِينَ

Be sure that We shall test you with something of fear and hunger, some loss in goods or lives or the fruits of your toil, but give glad tidings to those who patiently persevere.¹³

Thus, we find that Muslims in general view affliction with a disease, fatal or otherwise, as a test of their faith and true resignation to their Creator. In fact, such tribulation contributes in their favor in that it helps to expiate their sins. This is evident from the following hadith:

ما من عبد يتلوه الله عز وجل يبلاء في جسده إلا
قال الله عز وجل للملك اكتب له صالح عمله
الذي كان يعمله فإن شفاه الله غسله وطهره وإن
قبضه غفر له ورحمه

When a Muslim is tried with a disease in his body it is said to the angel: Write for him the good actions which he used to do. If He (Allah) cures him, He (Allah) absolves him (of all sins); and if He (Allah) takes his life (as a result of this disease), He (Allah) forgives him and shows mercy upon him.¹⁴

There is, therefore, no justification for ending the life of a person so as to relieve suffering. The Qur'an says:

لَا يُكَلِّفُ اللَّهُ نَفْسًا إِلَّا وُسْعَهَا

Allah does not tax any soul beyond that which it can bear.¹⁵

Muslims believe in the hereafter, the real and everlasting life, and it is this belief that enables them to bear their pain and suffering with what the Qur'an terms *ṣabr* (perseverance).

Passive Euthanasia

Passive euthanasia is an omission on the part of the attending physician to resuscitate the terminally ill, which results in the death of the patient. In this context, the physician would be absolved of liability in causing the death of the patient on the basis of the Islamic legal principle of *lā ḍarar wa lā ḍirār* (no harm and no reciprocating harm). This principle justifies one to allow death to take its natural course.

Moreover, while the physician is obligated to provide medical care at all times, treatment may be discontinued if in his opinion, as a member of *ahl al-khbra* (experts in the field of medicine), there is little or no hope of the patient's recovery. The same argument would justify the nonutilization of nasogastric tubal feeding if recourse to such form of artificial feeding would, according to medical experts, not benefit the patient. Likewise, it would be permissible for the attending physician to switch off the life-support equipment, once his patient has been diagnosed as brainstem dead and medical experts have confirmed that cessation of the patient's brain activity is irreversible.¹⁶

Motivations for Euthanasia

Advocates of euthanasia justify their stance on the basis of the following:

- Economic factors,
- Considerations of hospital space, beds, staff, and therapeutic equipment that could otherwise be used by other patients; and
- Death with dignity.

Let us now examine each one of these motivations so as to ascertain their validity in the light of Islamic teachings.

Economic Factors

As a student in America, I noticed that people were afraid of becoming ill in view of the high cost of medical care. It always baffled me as to how this great nation that in the recent past reached the moon was unable on earth to solve the problem of reducing the extremely high cost of medical care. The situation in South Africa is not very different. People tend to become sicker when they learn of the high cost of medicine and medical care. Economic factors are of no consideration in Islam's censuring of euthanasia. In a Muslim state, it is the responsibility of the executive head, whether caliph or king, president or prime minister, to secure funds from *bayt al-māl* (the public treasury) in order to assist the needy in meeting their medical expenses or other needs. Islam has left a rich legacy in this regard, and Muslim rulers are known to have taken personal interest in alleviating the suffering of the sick. For

example, in the Mansuri hospital in Cairo, built by the Mamluk ruler, al-Manṣūr Sayf al-Dīn Qalawūn in 1284, everyone was treated without financial cost to the patient.¹⁷

Considerations of Hospital Space, Beds, Staff and Therapeutic Devices

The argument for justifying euthanasia in these instances is centered upon the logic of preference given to one individual over another on the basis of the quality of life. This proposition would seem plausible if it were related to a terminally ill patient in comparison with another younger patient who had a better prognosis. However, for a Muslim, the problem becomes acute when faced with the issue of opting for one life at the expense of another. This is so because the Qur'an emphatically states that death comes about by Allah's ﷻ will:

وَمَا كَانَ لِنَفْسٍ أَنْ تَمُوتَ إِلَّا بِإِذْنِ اللَّهِ كِتَابًا
مُّؤَجَّلًا

And no human being can die save by Allah's leave, at a term preordained.¹⁸

Thus, there is no guarantee that a patient who is not suffering from a fatal disease will outlive one who is terminally ill. Both are equally important members of the human race. The solution is certainly not to get rid of one (the terminally ill patient) in order to accommodate the other. The answer to this problem perhaps is to allocate more funds in order to increase hospital space so that more beds may be made available, more staff may be employed, and more therapeutic devices may be procured.

Death with Dignity

The concept of death with dignity is what gave birth to the hospice movement in England. According to the Hopsice Foundation of America, hospice is a special concept of care designed to provide comfort and support to patients and their families when a life-limiting illness no longer responds to cure-oriented treatments, with a special emphasis on controlling a patient's pain and discomfort.¹⁹

According to proponents of euthansia, such as

Dr. Christiaan Barnard, the pioneer of heart transplant surgery, suffering causes a patient to become depersonalized. In fact, his brother, Dr. Marius Barnard, the founder of critical care insurance, and he vowed to help each other in the event that either finds himself in circumstances that they thought would justify euthanasia. This “could be done either with the administration of a fatal overdose if the sufferer was incapable of helping himself, or by leaving within reach enough tablets so that the sufferer could take his own life.”²⁰ Islam’s position is that the suffering that one undergoes as a result of any disease does not rob one of one’s dignity, but rather benefits one spiritually, as can be deduced from the following hadith:

عن عبد الله رضي الله عنه أتيت النبي صلى الله عليه وسلم في مرضه، وهو يوعك وعكاً شديداً وقلت إنك لتوعك وعكاً شديداً قلت إن ذاك بأن لك أجرين قال أجل ما من مسلم يصيبه أذى إلا حات الله عنه خطاياها كما تحات ورق الشجر

‘Abd Allah ibn Mas‘ūd reported: I visited the Prophet ﷺ while he was having high fever. I said, ‘You have a high fever. Is it because you will have a double reward?’ He said, ‘Yes. No Muslim is afflicted with any harm but that Allah will remove his sins for him as the leaves of a tree fall down.’²¹

At the same time, Islam allows pain control.²² According to Anas ibn Mālik, the Prophet ﷺ gave his followers the following advice:

لا يتمنين أحدكم الموت من ضر أصابه فإن كان لا بد فاعلاً فليقل اللهم أحيني ما كانت الحياة خيراً لي وتوفني إذا كانت الوفاة خيراً لي

None of you should wish for death because of a calamity befalling him; but if he has to wish for death he should say: ‘O Allah! Keep me

alive as long as life is better for me and let me die if death is better for me.’²³

A Muslim should therefore place his trust (*tawakkul*) at all times in Allah ﷻ, and despair must not be allowed to set in during adverse times. While accepting the eventuality of death one may not lose hope of Allah’s mercy ﷻ:

وَلَا تَهِنُوا وَلَا تَحْزِنُوا وَأَنْتُمُ الْأَعْلَوْنَ إِنْ كُنْتُمْ مُؤْمِنِينَ

Do not lose not heart nor grieve for you must gain mastery if you are true in faith.²⁴

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