

Comment

Eugenics: the hidden agenda?

In early February of this year, the lower house of the parliament of the Netherlands approved a law which effectively allows voluntary euthanasia, sometimes called 'mercy killing', under certain circumstances. The decision brought to a temporary close a debate which had been going on for over twenty years. The law was passed by a sizable majority of 91 to 45 votes. Clearly, the legislation must enjoy some measure of popular support in the country. Nevertheless, these new measures represent a degree of compromise which provide definite guidelines to be observed by medical staff when honouring the wishes of terminally ill or seriously impaired patients. The law must still be approved by the upper house and receive the royal assent before it passes into law; both of these are considered formalities.

The Vatican's response to the Dutch move towards euthanasia was direct and swift. Some of the reported comments of Vatican officials appeared intemperate and drew an angry reaction from senior Dutch political figures. The secretary of the Pontifical Council for the Family is alleged to have compared the Dutch legislation to eugenic practices formerly associated with Nazism. The Papal nuncio to the Netherlands was summoned to the Dutch Foreign Ministry to receive a protest and to give an explanation of Vatican statements on the matter. Plainly, and perhaps understandably, what rankled with the Dutch was the comparison with Nazi policies; memories of the occupation are still fresh enough to render such comparisons offensive to the Dutch. However, it should be noted that in the recent House of Lords judgement given in the case of Tony Bland, their Lordships acknowledged that some disquiet might be expressed at possible parallels between arguments adduced in favour of permitting Mr Bland's death and eugenic practices connected with Nazi ideology. Surely, when such comparisons are made we are not being invited to dismiss euthanasia and eugenics because they were practised by the Nazis, we are being reminded that euthanasia and eugenics are wrong pure and simple. The Nazi comparison discloses the dangers of failing to realise where our well-intentioned actions might lead.

It cannot be denied that advocates of euthanasia in Britain have appeared to advance their case in recent months. Pressure to legalise 'medically assisted suicide', or 'medicide', are afoot in the United States. Curiously, when Americans have been polled on euthanasia propositions a majority has expressed itself in favour, yet when legislation has been

proposed to the electorate, even in relatively liberal states like Washington and California, it has suffered popular defeat. In September 1992, the California proposition 161 was defeated by 54 to 46 percent; a few weeks before the election a 60 per cent majority in favour was expected. When it comes to a final decision legislators cannot always presume that they have gauged the consensus correctly.

A worrying feature of the Dutch legislation is that various amendments have been proposed which would extend its scope to include the 'involuntary euthanasia' of the mentally ill and the deformed newly-born. Already, the abortion laws in this country allow for virtual termination on demand. The most recent amendment to the Abortion act, whilst reducing the time in which abortion was permitted, allowed for termination up to birth of handicapped babies. The eugenic agenda is not quite so hidden as it once seemed.

The growing burdens of an aging population, with an ever-increasing need for medical care and support, combined with a declining economic standard of living, provide incentives to 'rationalise' health-care costs by weeding out expensive treatments offered to those who appear to have little further to offer society. We risk reproducing attitudes to handicap, disability, and illness manifested to those who are beginning life, towards those for whom it is ending. The intention may be to limit suffering, but the effect is to promote a eugenically determined society in which there is no place for illness, dependence, or physical disability. In saying to the sick 'we have nothing further to offer you' we are telling them we have nothing to receive from them.

On 25 April 1991, the Committee on the Environment, Public Health and Consumer Protection of the European Parliament adopted a motion regarding care for the terminally ill which explicitly proposes the practice of euthanasia, albeit in restricted circumstances. If passed by the European Parliament it would not have the force of law. However, the appearance of such a motion in an international forum which has an influence on the application of notions of human rights within the community is very disturbing. May we see the European court intervening at some point in the future to encourage the enforcement of legislation permitting euthanasia as a 'right' throughout the community?

This March, Mrs Bottomley, the Health Secretary, will address a conference organised by the British Medical Association on the subject of 'Priority setting in the health service'. She will actually be talking about rationing available resources to cope with the greater demands being made on it by the public. Questions as to whether to treat one transplant patient or to offer hip replacements to many more are being weighed. Is it right to spend large sums of money on high-profile, attention-grabbing

and expensive treatments rather than to treat simpler, more mundane illnesses? Some public debate must be encouraged on these issues. Arguments about euthanasia or 'voluntary assisted suicide' are likely to have a bearing on this matter too. Even the most conscientious administrator must be aware of the cost benefits of the disappearance of expensive patients from the healthcare budget.

The secretary for the Pontifical Council of the Family might have been undiplomatic in his remarks about Nazi eugenic policies; the government of the Netherlands cannot be compared accurately to Nazi totalitarianism. However, the spectre of Nazism casts a long shadow. In 1933, it was the votes of the mainly Catholic Centre Party, under its priest-leader Monsignor Kaas, which gave Hitler the necessary two thirds majority in the *Reichstag* enabling him to gain power. Monsignor Kaas was not aware of the consequences of his action and spent the next years attempting to undo them. It was from the ranks of the bishops: von Galen, von Preysing, and Faulhaber, that the prophetic warnings of the iniquity of the eugenic agenda came. The question of the dignity of the human person is something on which the Church has something to say; history shows us the dangers that spring from not saying it.

AJW

The Way of the Void

Paul Murray OP

On the 30 March 1992 Damian Byrne, the former Master of the Dominican Order, wrote to Cardinal Ratzinger:

The Order of St. Dominic has obviously a very direct interest in Meister Eckhart's life, works and reputation. This is why the General Chapter of 1980 welcomed one petition concerning the great theologian and mystic. It originated in Great Britain from a group of Dominican laity and friends of the Order in that country headed by the late Mrs. Ursula Fleming who founded the association, Friends of Meister Eckhart.¹

If today the fundamental innocence and theological integrity of Meister Eckhart are generally acknowledged, both within and outside the Dominican Order, this is due in no small measure to the efforts of people