

Reverend Dr Scott S. McKenna

In Support of Assisted Dying: a Christian Perspective

Religion is often used as a reason for opposing the principle of an assisted death. In fact, the principle is supported by people who belong to the Church of England, Church of Scotland, Church of Wales, Catholicism, Baptist Church, Methodist Church, URC and, more widely, Quakerism, Liberal and Reform Judaism, and Sunni Islam.

For myself, Jesus embodies love, compassion, tenderness, forgiveness, dignity, respect, humanity, and humaneness. These traits are to the fore in the practice of Christian faith, and because of that, I am drawn to supporting assisted dying legislation, at least in some form: for those terminally ill who are mentally sound. Assisted dying legislation is centred on personal choice, the relief of suffering, the avoidance of indignity, and the honouring of humanity. Our understanding of what it is to be a human being underpins the possibility of choice; in part, our understanding is culturally determined.

I argue that there is nothing in the Bible which explicitly excludes the principle of assisted dying. The ethical issue of a physician-assisted death on a patient who is mentally competent and terminally ill is not in the Scriptures, either the Hebrew Bible (Old Testament) or New Testament. Biblical texts may be stretched one way or another but assisted dying, as we understand it, was not an issue of the ancient world. From first-hand experience at his brother's bedside, the late Hans Küng, witnessed intolerable suffering and asked, 'Is this the sort of death God wants?'

As a society, we must face the legal and moral ambiguity that people in the UK travel abroad for an assisted death. People of faith, individuals within faith communities, have travelled abroad for an assisted death. Clergy have supported people who have chosen an assisted death. We also need to be honest about the medical practice of 'double effect'.

Excellent palliative care ought not to be under threat by the introduction of assisted dying legislation. Moreover, in all areas of medical practice, medical practitioners need to be aware of their own value systems so as not to impose, consciously or unconsciously, their value system onto patients. It is also true that that things may go wrong in the procedures of an assisted death, but mistakes and unforeseen consequences happen in most medical procedures: risk is unavoidable. Made in the image of God, we are moral decision-makers and this includes in matters of life and death.



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A minister in the Church of Scotland for over 29 years, Revd. McKenna has served in three parishes: Uddingston, Edinburgh, and Ayr. In addition to pastoral care in his congregations, he has an interest in Biblical scholarship, the relationship of science and religion, interfaith work, and the mystical tradition of Christianity. In Edinburgh, he served as Co-Convenor of Edinburgh Interfaith Association.

Spiritual practice is an important part of his personal and professional life, including Ignatian spirituality and meditation and contemplation. His PhD thesis on the life and work of the blind minister, the Revd George Matheson DD, was published in 2022. Matheson stands as a mystic in the Scottish Presbyterian tradition. In the past he has publicly supported the right of LGB people to serve as ministers in the Church of Scotland. He has also publicly supported the introduction of assisted dying legislation to the Scottish Parliament.