

In Bad Faith: the facts about how religious groups are campaigning on assisted dying

Presentation at the launch of the British Humanist Association's report, 8 May 2006

Before saying anything about the detailed content of this report, I think it is important to say something about the background, and why the British Humanist Association (BHA) has decided to publish a report of this kind.

The BHA, as the largest organisation representing the views of the non-religious in the UK, works alongside various religious groups, including the Christian Churches and other Christian groups, in a number of different forums.

We agree with religious organisations on some issues, and disagree on others – but where we disagree, we usually find that we can discuss issues constructively, and we can often find common ground, even if we sometimes have to agree to differ. We do not believe in criticising or attacking any religious group, unless we genuinely believe that what they are doing actually causes harm.

We think that the way that various Christian groups are campaigning against the Assisted Dying for the Terminally Ill Bill is not only dishonest and unethical, but that it is harmful. And we want people to know what they are doing.

Assisted dying is an important, but also a highly emotive issue. What we need more than anything else is an open and honest public debate about it, but these Christian groups are pouring huge resources into a campaign that seems designed to ensure that open and honest debate is impossible.

Why are they doing this? I have to assume that it's because they know that, with around 80% of the UK population, including some 80% of Christians, wanting an Assisted Dying Bill, they cannot win that debate. And it seems that if they cannot win the debate honestly, they have no compunctions about trying to win it dishonestly.

The BHA has lobbied for many years for a law that would allow terminally ill patients who are suffering unbearably to be helped to die. We have debated the issues in various forums, responded to consultations, and given written and oral evidence to the House of Lords Select Committee on the Assisted Dying Bill.

Our report is not about the Bill or why we support it. It deals with how Christian groups are campaigning against the Bill. But I think I should quickly lay out where the BHA stands.

We firmly believe in individual autonomy: that people have the right to make decisions about their own lives, and indeed their own death, as long as their decisions do not harm other people. So we believe that if someone who is terminally ill and suffering unbearably wants their life to end, but is physically unable to make that happen, the law should allow a doctor to assist them. And we firmly believe that the current Assisted Dying for the Terminally Ill Bill has sufficient safeguards to prevent abuse of the law.

We do of course recognise that not everyone agrees with this, and specifically that some people reject the idea of assisted dying on the basis of their religious beliefs.

We do not have any problem with religious groups, or indeed anyone else, campaigning against the Assisted Dying Bill. But we do have a problem – a very serious problem – with groups that campaign dishonestly; that hide the real reason for their opposition to the Bill; that deliberately mislead people about the content of the Bill and its effects, and that use scare-mongering tactics to try to gain support for their position. That is why we have produced this report.

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We think that people who read this report will be as shocked as we are about the campaigning methods such groups are using, and we hope that Christians in particular will speak out about this.

These campaigning groups claim to represent the views of Christians, and often go out of their way to hide the fact that many Christians hold opposing views – completely disregarding the fact that around 80% of Christians support legislation to allow assisted dying. If I were a Christian I would object very strongly to that.

These campaigning groups, which include, I regret to say, the Church of England, including Bishops in the House of Lords, and the Catholic Church, also claim to speak for elderly people – in spite of the evidence that 78% of people over 65 support a change in the law (that's from an NOP poll quoted in the report).

In fact they are doing no such thing. What they are doing is pre-empting any say that such people may themselves wish to express. If even a minority of elderly people disagree with the Bishops, for example, then that minority is being coerced and patronized. The reality is that most elderly people disagree.

I would now like to pick out some of the key points in our report. I won't have time to cover everything, but all the quotes I use are in the report, along with additional information and many more examples.

We believe this report condemns these Christian campaigners out of their own mouths.

Our research shows firstly that various Christian groups, including Christian pro-life groups but also the Church of England and the Catholic Church, regularly claim that a "right to die" would become a "duty to die". There is no evidence for this.

They tell the elderly that their relatives will want them to die (either because they are a burden, or to gain their inheritance), and that the health service will want to polish them off to save money or to free up hospital beds. There is no evidence for this.

John Gummer, writing in the Catholic Herald, tells us that "after a Euthanasia Act, no old person will be safe from the lethal injection". Note the language he uses: he doesn't say "assisted dying" (which is what the Bill is about), or even "voluntary euthanasia" (which the Bill would not actually permit); he talks about "a Euthanasia Act" - which I think is clearly intended to imply that people will be killed whether they want to die or not. That is not just scare mongering, it is downright dishonest.

Christian campaigners also tell us that suffering is good for us: "the suffering that God sends us has a profound and sublime meaning with which it is to be embraced", or speak of "the obligation to face existential terror". I don't know about you, but I certainly do not embrace suffering, and neither do I feel any obligation to face existential terror, or feel that I should expect other people to. There may well be some Christians who would agree with those opinions, but if they do, I am sure that does not give them the right to impose such beliefs on other people.

They claim that we will soon be killing babies (I am quoting again): "... implicit in the legislative proposals is the possibility that assisted dying could eventually apply to children". That's the Bishop of Manchester.

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In Section 1 of our report you will find a large number of quotes from Christian campaigners against the Bill, and not only from the more extreme so-called 'pro-life' groups. (That's an interesting phrase isn't it? I am very pro-life, not least because, unlike Christians, I believe that I only get one life. Some of these 'pro-life' campaigners are very happy to contemplate killing people, for example by capital punishment – but not to allow people who are terminally ill and suffering a choice about when and how they die.)

The examples of scare mongering that we quote in the report include Catholic and Church of England Bishops, and Archbishops, and Peers, and respected religious newspapers.

One of the things we have found most disappointing in this whole thing is the way that the Churches have aligned themselves with, and seem to be using the same tactics as 'pro-life' and sometimes rather extreme religious lobbying groups.

Their combined campaigning is nothing less than a concerted attempt to scare the public about an extremely safe and very compassionate Bill. And then they have the audacity to accuse the "pro-euthanasia groups" of trying to frighten people!

We have also been shocked by the insensitivity of many of these Christian campaigners: the lack of compassion, not only towards the terminally ill, but also towards their relatives – towards people who are deeply distressed after facing harrowing end of life dilemmas. (I am now in Section 2 of the Report, by the way.)

I personally think that one of the very many good reasons for having an Assisted Dying Bill is that it would spare relatives from having to make quite appalling decisions about whether to break the law by helping someone they love – someone who is begging them to help them to die – or by supporting them (sitting with them and holding their hand) while they end their own life.

It's worth noting that a 2004 NOP poll found that 51% of people would want a doctor or a relative or friend to break the law if they were terminally ill and suffering, and an even more striking 55% said they would break the law to help a loved one. They may not actually do it if the situation arises, but those figures do show that people would think about it – that people do find themselves having to make these dreadful decisions. (That poll isn't quoted in the report, by the way – I'll repeat the figures at the end if anyone wants them.)

But our Christian campaigners do not seem to care about that: they seem only to be concerned about making sure that people who may have broken the law are prosecuted.

And these groups do not hesitate to abuse and insult those who disagree with them, with, for example, references to what happened to the elderly and disabled in Nazi Germany.

Moving on to Section 3:

We have been very struck by the way that many Christian campaigners against the Bill do their utmost to avoid anything that implies that they are arguing from a Christian or any kind of faith-based position.

A few years ago, the main arguments from religious groups tended to be based on 'the sanctity of life': God has given us life, only he has the right to take it away (I'm paraphrasing an argument one used to hear a great deal).

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But these arguments, or indeed any kind of faith-based arguments, are rarely used now, and in fact many campaigners take a great deal of trouble to ensure that they are not identified as Christian campaigners at all: they write to the press or insist on being introduced in the broadcast media without any mention of their involvement with such organisations as the Christian Medical Fellowship, for example.

And then we discover that Christian Peers speaking in the debate have been advised not to mention their faith.

We have no objection to people expressing their sincere faith-based reasons for opposing this Bill, but we do rather object to people deliberately disguising where they are coming from. Why are they doing this? Well, it seems to be at least partly because they have been taught by an American religious campaigner that they will get more support if they avoid faith-based arguments.

Then, in Section 4 of our report, we look at bias in the religious media: an interesting topic when you bear in mind that Christian opponents of the Bill quite often accuse other media, not least the BBC, of bias against them.

Our research, in which we examined reporting in a number of Christian newspapers over a 2 year period, found that 82% of the coverage about this Bill was biased – that's biased when judged on the standards that are used by religious groups to assess other media. The worst offender was the Catholic Times.

If you read the Christian media you could easily end up having no idea that opposition to the Bill is actually a minority view amongst Christians – that around 80% of Christians support an Assisted Dying Bill. The views of millions of Christians are being ignored by their own religious leaders and by the religious press

I think this is important – and I think it should be important to the Churches and other Christian groups – because there will be many Christians out there who support an Assisted Dying Bill, but think they are on their own – out on a limb – because they do not hear Christian spokespersons supporting the Bill.

I wonder how many Christians who feel strongly about this issue will have begun to have doubts about their faith or about their Church.

More important from my perspective is that some of them must feel very isolated – especially if they are terminally ill themselves, or if someone they love is terminally ill and suffering unbearably – if they have been led to believe that Christians are, or should be, against this Bill.

We have discovered that only two of the ten religious publications we looked at are covered by the Press Complaints Commission (PCC). We have made a complaint to the PCC about the Church Times, and we have also sent a copy of the report to the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport, and asked her views about the religious media's accountability. Copies of those letters are in your packs.

Finally (in Section 5 of the report) – and only because some of these Christian groups have claimed that groups supporting the Assisted Dying Bill are very well-funded – we did what we could to establish what resources are available to religious groups campaigning against the Bill.

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Using only information that is in the public domain, and excluding the Catholic Church and the Church of England, we found that the faith-based campaigning groups we've been looking at have an annual income of at least £11.8 million; and probably quite a lot more, as we couldn't find any figures for some groups.

This figure is far, far higher than the combined income of groups supporting the Bill. And when you add the resources that the Catholic Church is devoting to what has been described as "the biggest political campaign by the Church", and also think about what Church of England groups must be spending, it becomes clear just how hypocritical these claims about the well-funded opposition are.

This has been a very quick run through of just some of the key points in our report.

I hope you will bear in mind that what we are talking about is a Bill that, with very strict safeguards, would allow terminally ill patients who are suffering unbearably and simply want to die, to be helped to die by a doctor, if, and only if, they are physically unable to end their own lives without help.

Some people, including some religious people, are opposed to this. That is their right. And if they are terminally ill and suffering, they would presumably make their choice accordingly. No one is seeking to force assisted dying on anyone.

But many of these Christian campaigners are determined to deny other people (including other Christians) who are terminally ill and suffering unbearably, the right to choose to die peacefully if they have decided that they do not wish to suffer any more. Some of these groups are doing this with a totally unacceptable combination of scare tactics and misinformation, with a good dose of hypocrisy thrown in. They should not be allowed to get away with it - and that is why we have produced this report.

We hope that everyone who reads it will reflect on the tactics being used and on the integrity of these Christian groups, and we do also hope that Christians will challenge their own religious leaders' campaigning position and methods.

People who are terminally ill and suffering unbearably, now or in the future, deserve an open and honest debate. Not a campaign based on fear mongering and dishonesty.

Hanne Stinson
Executive Director, British Humanist Association
8 May 2006