

# Voluntary Assisted Dying

## Theological Reflections

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# Outline

Rationale

Context

History

- The Christian art of a 'good' death

- Suicide

Theological tensions

VAD and the big picture

# Rationale

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# Context

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Theology is always personal

What makes for a 'good' death?

# History

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“ This dramatizing of the deathbed occurs when the last judgment is relocated from some point in the future when the world will end, to the here and now of each individual death. Only as eschatological expectations of general resurrection give way to more immediate and individual ‘final reckoning’ and death and judgement are fused, does the deathbed become a scene of a crisis...<sup>1</sup>. ”

*Michael Banner*



# *Ars moriendi*



# Contemporary Christian dying: two scripts

1. hospice
2. assisted dying

“ . . . the wise man will for reasonable cause make his own exit from life, on his country's behalf or for the sake of friends, or if he suffers intolerable pain, mutilation, or incurable disease. ”

*Diogenes Laertius*

“ For it is clear that if no one has a private right to kill even a guilty man (and no law allows this), then certainly anyone who kills himself is a murderer, and is the more guilty in killing himself the more innocent he is of the charge on which he has condemned himself to death. We rightly abominate the act of Judas, and the judgment of truth is that when he hanged himself he did not atone for the guilt of his detestable betrayal but rather increased it, since he despaired of God’s mercy and in a fit of self-destructive remorse left himself no chance of a saving repentance. How much less right has anyone to indulge in self-slaughter when he can find in himself no fault to justify such a punishment! For when Judas killed himself, he killed a criminal, and yet he ended his life guilty not only of Christ’s death, but also of his own; one crime led to another.<sup>2</sup> ”

*Augustine*

“ Suicide is always as morally objectionable as murder. The Church’s tradition has always rejected it as a gravely evil choice.<sup>3</sup> ”

*Pope John Paul II*

“ The freedom to risk and to give one's life as a sacrifice is the counterpart of the right to life'.<sup>4</sup> ”

*Dietrich Bonhoeffer*

“ The freedom to risk and to give one's life as a sacrifice is the counterpart of the right to life'.<sup>6</sup> ”

*Dietrich Bonhoeffer*

“ ...when an incurably ill person cannot help but see that continued care would result in the material and emotional breakdown of the family and therefore decides and acts to liberate them from this burden.<sup>7</sup> ”

*Dietrich Bonhoeffer*

# Theological tensions

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- Sanctity of life and acceptance of mortality
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- Suffering and compassion

## VAD and the big picture

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1. Scripture
2. Tradition
3. Reason
4. Experience

# VAD and Scripture

“Saul said to his armor-bearer, “Draw your sword and run me through, or these uncircumcised fellows will come and run me through and abuse me.”

But his armor-bearer was terrified and would not do it; so Saul took his own sword and fell on it. When the armor-bearer saw that Saul was dead, he too fell on his sword and died with him.

*1 Samuel 31:4-5*



## Further reading

- Michael Banner, “Dying and ‘Death before Death’: On Hospices, Euthanasia, Alzheimer’s, and on (Not) Knowing How to Dwindle” in *The Ethics of Everyday Life: Moral Theology, Social Anthropology, and the Imagination of the Human* (Oxford University Press, 2014).
- Jason Goroncy, “Euthanasia: Some Theological Considerations for Living Responsibly”, *Pacifica* 29(3), 2016: 221-243.
- Jason Goroncy, “Dying Without a Script: Some Theological Reflections on Voluntary Assisted Dying.” *Colloquium* 51(1), 2019: 25-39.

“ For Christians, it offers the opportunity to die accompanied by those who have already for many years been rehearsing for this moment through the sacrament of Baptism, that symbol of death with which the Christian journey begins, and the celebration of the Eucharist, where Christians remember and anticipate that the tragedy of the grave is not territory of which God is unfamiliar, and where receiving the cup commits Christians to practices of patience and of caring, and of living and of dying, unto God.<sup>8</sup> ”

*Jason Goroncy*

“

Death—whatever its forms or modes—may indeed be life's enemy. But it is an enemy that, like the strange promise of resurrection, is woven into the warp and woof of life in God's world. Whereas it sometimes may be an enemy from which to flee, at other times death may be the enemy we might embrace as an embodied parable of love's final hope. And because God is the God of life, then not only are all of life's experiences of concern to God but also all of life's experiences are in some sense constitutive of God's own experience with the world. In every experience, in everything, in every decision, God is waiting for us. This means that death is not, in the final analysis, the contradiction of life but that it is mysteriously and inescapably bound up with the movement of life in the world and in God, for whom voluntary death is not unfamiliar territory. The Christian hope is that whatever our manner of dying, we die into God's care, and into God's knowing.<sup>9</sup>

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# Notes

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<sup>1</sup>Banner, *Ethics of Everyday Life*, 110

<sup>2</sup>Augustine, *City of God*, 1.17

<sup>3</sup>Pope John Paul II, *Evangelium Vitae*, 1995.

<sup>4</sup>Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, ed. Clifford J. Green, trans. Reinhard Krauss, Charles C. West, and Douglas W. Scott, Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works 6 (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2005), 197.

<sup>5</sup>Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, 197.

<sup>6</sup>Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, ed. Clifford J. Green, trans. Reinhard Krauss, Charles C. West, and Douglas W. Scott, Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works 6 (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2005), 197.

<sup>7</sup>Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, 197.

<sup>8</sup>Goroncy, *Dying Without a Script*, 38.

<sup>9</sup>Goroncy, *Dying Without a Script*, 39.