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Faith

Christians back change in assisted suicide law, poll finds

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There is overwhelming public support for euthanasia including among many churchgoers, according to a new poll. More than 70 per cent of Anglicans, and more than half of Roman Catholics, support assisted suicide for the terminally ill, with the overwhelming reason given that individuals should have the right to choose when they die.

Substantial numbers in other religious groups also support change, against the teachings of their religious leaders, believing that patient vulnerability outweighs the religious argument in favour of the “sanctity of life”.

The poll by YouGov found 70 per cent of adults support a change in the law on assisted suicide to make it possible to help someone with an incurable disease to die without risk of prosecution for doing so.

The survey, commissioned for the last of this year’s Westminster faith debates on Thursday, found only 16 per cent of the public oppose a change in the law and 14 per cent do not know.

This compared with 72 per cent of Anglicans who back change, 56 per cent of Catholics, 62 per cent of Methodists and 69 per cent of Jewish and Sikh people surveyed. But only 26 per cent of Muslims backed change.

Besides backing assisted suicide because they believe in the right to choose, high proportions also said that it is preferable to drawn-out suffering and agreed that those assisting suicide should not fear prosecution.

Those who were opposed cited the potential for harm and abuse of the person who dies and those who assist as among the main reasons.

Almost 60 per cent of those who are opposed to a change in the law agreed that “vulnerable people could be, or feel, pressured to die”. More than half those opposed said it places too much of a burden on others to help someone to die and nearly half thought that enough safeguards could not be guaranteed.

However, being strictly religious, defined by the pollsters as people who take authority from religious sources such as scripture

or “God”, was the main factor which predicts opposition to assisted suicide.

Linda Woodhead, Professor of Sociology of religion at Lancaster university and organiser of the Westminster faith debates, said: “Both the secular and religious support for assisted dying is higher than I thought it would be. I was surprised that the sanctity of life did not count for most people.”

A spokesman for the Church of England said: “This study demonstrates that complex discussions on topics such as assisted suicide and euthanasia cannot be effectively conducted through the medium of online surveys. The survey failed to provide accurate and universally agreed definitions of the terms it used, it spoke of right’ without any understanding of the nature of human rights law and it introduced terms such as the sanctity of life which have specifically religious connotations rather than terms such as inherent value of life which are faith-neutral.”

The Church also criticised the definition of euthanasia used in the survey as “emotionally skewed”. The survey defined it as “the termination of a person’s life, in order to end suffering”. The Church spokesman added: “This survey adds nothing of value to the current complex debate on assisted suicide, but seeks to reduce to ‘sound-bites’ issues that deserve proper and full consideration.”

YouGov surveyed 4,437 people online.

The survey comes as pressure for a change in the law to allow assisted suicide builds two fronts. A paralysed man [is taking up the challenge](#) previously mounted by the late Tony Nicklinson for the right to die with the help of a doctor.

Paul Lamb, 58, from Leeds, has joined forces with the family of Mr Nicklinson, [who died last year](#), in a case that will be heard in the Court of Appeal later this month.

At the same time, Lord Falconer of Thoroton, the former Lord Chancellor, is promoting another Private Member’s Bill in the House of Lords next month.

In line with recommendations of his [Commission on Assisted Dying](#), Lord Falconer will press for doctors to be given the power to help mentally competent adults who have under one year to live to kill themselves. Two doctors’ signatures would be needed.

There have been three failed attempts to legalise assisted suicide in Britain in the past six years, in 2006, 2009 and 2010.

Lord Falconer’s Bill would decriminalise assisted suicide in certain circumstances, enabling relatives to be helped to die at home or to travel to the Dignitas clinic in Switzerland.

In England and Wales it is an offence to encourage or assist a suicide or a suicide attempt. The law is almost identical in Northern Ireland. In Scotland there is no specific law on assisted suicide, although in theory someone could be prosecuted under homicide legislation.

Related Images



The Court of Appeal is due to hear the case of Paul Lamb, who was paralysed in a car accident

Times photographer, David Bebbler

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